



Some Savors Can Break You (River's End Rescues #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: ** Previously published as Cocky Savior, part of the Cocky Hero Club World, no substantial changes have been made to the story or characters **

He saved her life and now he thinks he gets a say in it.

Florence Harris thought if she ever fell in love it would be with someone sweet, dependable, boring. Nope. Turns out she likes arrogant, annoying, ego so big it wouldn't fit in the ocean Eli Lennox. Just because he saved her life he thinks it gives him permission to meddle in it. He's determined to save her from herself. Problem is she thinks she's beyond saving.

Eli Lennox always gets what he wants. What he wants is the cop whose life he just saved. She's beautiful, intelligent, and the sexiest woman Eli has ever laid eyes on, and she turns him down flat when he asks her out. That doesn't happen to him often. Or ever. And it makes him determined to prove to her she's worth every ounce of effort he's going to put into winning her heart.

If he can keep her alive long enough to do so.

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Chapter

One

The dumpster smelled awful.

It wasn't that she was surprised, it was just that she had a bit of a weak stomach and a strong gag reflex, and the smell of garbage was one thing that always set her off.

Thankfully, the sight of dead bodies and the smell of blood and decaying flesh wasn't something that made her want to throw up. If it did, she would be pretty ineffectual as a homicide cop.

Detective Florence Harris opened her mouth and tried to breathe through it to eliminate some of the stench as she put her hands on the rim of the dumpster and boosted herself up.

It must have been fairly recently emptied because there were about a dozen bags of trash scattered across the bottom, maybe enough to fill it a quarter full.

But enough bags to cover a body if one was in there.

This particular killer she was hunting liked to leave his victims in dumpsters after he'd strangled them and left his particular calling card behind.

Over the course of the last eighteen months, he'd killed over a dozen young women between the ages of twenty and thirty.

All were beautiful, all had long hair—although he didn't appear to have a preference in color, he'd killed blondes, brunettes, and redheads—all were Caucasian, and all had longer than usual eyelashes.

It was an odd detail, but one she had found to be true with every single one of the fourteen victims.

Each woman had been missing for forty-eight hours, and while Florence wasn't sure exactly what that meant, it was obviously important to the killer that he keep them alive for two days before killing them.

All the women lived alone, although some were involved with someone and others were single, all were killed in their own homes, their bodies dumped in random dumpsters around Manhattan.

Only Florence was positive that the dumps weren't actually random.

There had to be a pattern, she just hadn't managed to figure out what it was yet.

She would though.

She'd find the pattern and then she'd find this killer. Just like she found every other killer in every other case she worked.

Her job was the most important thing she had in her life.

Well, besides her older brother, but since she left the small town where they had grown up to move to New York City, she didn't see him much anymore.

They talked probably once a week and texted daily unless she was consumed by a case she was working, which happened more often than it should.

Florence had friends, she was close with her partner and his wife, and there were several women from her gym that she would catch up with for the occasional coffee at a café or night out at a club, but she took her job seriously, and she gave it every ounce of herself that she could.

While she had never once regretted her decision to get out of River's End—too much had happened there and the place was full of bad memories everywhere she turned—sometimes life in the city got to her.

She felt like a mouse stuck in a wheel, constantly running in circles.

Hunting one killer after another after another, letting the darkness that had infected her when she was a little girl seep further and further into her soul until she wasn't sure anymore whether she could ever extricate it.

With a sigh, she pushed away thoughts of her depressing childhood before they could consume her.

That was a rabbit hole well worth avoiding going down.

Unlike Alice, she wouldn't end up in a Wonderland full of singing flowers, grinning cats, talking rabbits, and crazy queens, she'd end up in a place full of pain and fear and heartbreak.

A place that she couldn't just wake up and walk out of because for her, it wasn't a dream, it was the reality of a messed up childhood worthy of a book or a movie.

Swinging a leg up and over the side of the dumpster, Florence gingerly lowered herself down. If there was a body in here, she didn't want to stand on it and compromise any evidence the killer had left behind.

Not that he ever left any forensic evidence behind.

After killing his victims and leaving his calling card on their body, he very carefully washed them down in their own bathrooms. Washing away any fingerprints or DNA he might have accidentally left on their bodies, he then wrapped them in a tarp, drove them to a dumpster somewhere in the city, and tossed them away like garbage.

But they weren't garbage.

They were human beings who had parents, siblings, friends, people who loved them, and who were grieving them. They had jobs, pets, and hobbies. They had lives. Lives that had been cut short by someone with a complex about himself that he felt the need to take out on others.

The Dumpster Killer—as he'd been dubbed by the press—was escalating. There had been just under four months between his first and second kill, but now that time had diminished to only eight days between the last two victims.

Four days had passed now since victim number fourteen had been discovered in a dumpster on the Upper East Side, and Florence knew that any day now, victim number fifteen would be discovered.

Already the killer might have chosen his next victim and have her holed up in her apartment, doing whatever he did to her in those missing forty-eight hours.

He didn't rape his victims, that much they knew, so what did he do with them for two days?

Her booty covered shoes stepped carefully on the bags of trash as her gloved hands lifted each bag, both hoping and dreading that she might find the body of a beautiful young woman whose life had been cut short.

One after the other, she moved each of the garbage bags to search underneath them, but her search turned up empty. There was no tarp-covered body lying in here. Frustrated, Florence groaned, this was the second dumpster she'd tried tonight, and the second time she'd come up empty.

Not that she was giving up.

It was only nine-thirty, she'd drive around the city, checking random dumpsters, trying out some of the patterns she'd come up with to see if any of them played out, until midnight, then head home for a long, hot shower and a few hours sleep.

Not wanting to waste any more time in the dumpster than she had to, and seriously worried that her traitorous stomach might turn on her and have her throwing up the pizza she'd eaten for dinner, she hefted herself up and out of the dumpster, wishing not for the first time that she was taller than her five feet two so it wasn't so difficult.

Once she was back on the ground, she hurried a few steps away, wanting to put a bit of distance between herself and the atrocious stench while she bent down to pull off the booties she'd put on over her boots.

Then she pulled off the gloves and the Tyvek suit.

She'd bought a stash of both to use for dumpster diving so that if the killer had messed up—which sooner or later he would, they all did—no defense attorney could claim she had contaminated the scene.

She wore the protective outfit every time she went to check dumpsters—something she'd done a lot since they realized they were dealing with a serial killer.

A couple of times she'd been spotted and had to pull out her badge to explain she wasn't a criminal disposing of evidence but a cop looking for evidence.

Today though, it was cold, and it had snowed earlier, and there weren't a lot of people about. The alley she was in was opposite a couple of large office buildings, the lights of which were all out as everyone had gone home hours ago.

Rolling up her used protective clothing, she tossed it into the very same dumpster she'd just checked then headed up the short alley to the street where she had parked her car.

An icy wind had picked up, and it seemed to slice right through her jeans, sweater, and coat, making her skin break out in a mass of goosebumps as though she wasn't wearing any clothes at all.

She was just at the end of the alley when she noticed something white on the ground. Wondering what it was, Florence bent to pick it up, only to find that it was one of the gloves she'd just removed. It must have stuck to her clothing and not gotten rolled up and tossed away with everything else.

Annoyed that she'd have to backtrack to the dumpster, her stomach was already churning in protest, she was just about to straighten when the headlights of a car suddenly illuminated her.

An engine revved.

Tires squealed.

And Florence realized a moment too late that the car was coming straight for her.

9:36 P.M.

He paced his office feeling a little like a caged lion.

Someone had once likened him to a lion, an ex-girlfriend who wasn't happy that he'd broken things off. She'd accused him of being ruthless, powerful, accustomed to being top of the food chain, and then alternately lazy, letting the woman he was involved with do all the work in the relationship.

Was he ruthless?

He could be when the occasion called for it.

Powerful?

Yes. When you ran one of the world's wealthiest real estate companies, you were used to people asking how high when you told them to jump.

Accustomed to getting his own way?

As the younger son of a wealthy and older couple, he had been spoiled rotten. His brother was the one being groomed to take over the business, he hadn't had that pressure to live up to, and had relished the role of carefree kid who had the world at his fingertips.

Was he lazy when it came to relationships?

No.

Well, not really.

He wouldn't call it lazy, he'd call it bored.

As a rich, powerful, sexy, charming—with a healthy ego—thirty-year-old man, he had women falling at his feet. He liked women—liked sex more—but he was

growing tired of women who were only interested in him because of his wealth and what they could imagine themselves doing with it.

Eli Lennox had found himself wanting more out of life.

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His older brother had died almost a decade ago, ending his carefree years because as the only other child of Owen and Geraldine Lennox, he was now heir to Lennox Real Estate.

Without the heart to rebel against the changes in his life, because he knew his parents' hearts were already breaking as they struggled to deal with the sudden loss, he had worked hard in college, graduated Summa Cum Laude from Harvard, and worked at his father's side as he learned to manage a multi-billion dollar business that reached to the four corners of the globe.

Then eighteen months ago his world had tilted on its axis once again.

His mother—his beautiful, sweet, kind, selfless mother—had lost her four year battle to stomach cancer and passed away. While he was relieved she was no longer suffering, the loss had hit him hard, especially as he watched his powerful, strong father wither away as grief ate at him piece by piece.

Three months ago he'd lost his father, and alone in the world, he'd realized that he wanted more.

He wanted what his parents had. That kind of all-consuming love that could weather any storm life threw at it, including the biggest loss a couple could endure.

How could he find that when he was surrounded by women who were only after him because he was rich and powerful?

All of the women he'd dated—or slept with—would have run in the wake of the

crushing loss of losing a child. They would have cut their losses, taken whatever they could get after signing a pre-nup, and disappeared.

Eli wanted more.

He wanted a woman who was his equal, who would challenge him, and who was sexy as sin.

Why was that so hard to find?

With an irritated sigh, he walked to his desk to gather his things.

After losing his parents, he'd decided he couldn't stay in London anymore and had packed up his life and moved back to New York.

He'd tracked down a childhood friend, Elliot Emerson, who now ran a very successful financial management company that he'd built himself.

While his company bought, sold, and managed real estate across the globe, Eli had several other financial holdings that he needed someone to manage, and his old friend had seemed the perfect person to do it.

He'd also rented offices in the building Elliot owned, since he was going to be putting roots down here he wanted a permanent place to do that, and there was something oddly comforting about being around someone he knew.

Well, he knew lots of people in Manhattan, but Elliot Emerson represented a time in his life where he had been carefree and happy.

Their families had lived next door to each other up until not long after his seventh birthday when his father's business had really started to take off, and they'd moved to

London.

Back when they were small boys, he and Elliot had been virtually inseparable.

They'd played at being ninjas, and dressed as pirates, building a pirate ship in his backyard.

They'd stolen cookies from the kitchen when they'd been told they couldn't have more, and stayed up late on long summer evenings watching fireflies and counting stars.

Fighting the familiar ache in his chest as he thought about his parents and how much he had lost when they died, he was locking his office door when his phone buzzed with a text.

A half-smile quirked his mouth up when he saw it was from Elliot, despite the fact that his old friend could be rude when he dealt with others, Eli liked Elliot, and Elliot's wife Susannah.

Apparently, Elliot's mellowing out was mostly due to the fact that he'd found love, and because he was now a father to a three-year-old daughter, Bessie, who he had only recently learned about, and a new little son who wasn't even a year old yet.

Elliot

It's after 9:30 you owe me an apartment in Paris

with a view of the Eifel Tower if you're still at

the office

Eli

I never agreed to that bet

Elliot

I take that to mean you're still there

Of course he was still here.

Where else was he going to be?

The hotel he'd been staying at?

The apartment he had bought but not moved into yet?

A bar or club picking up a woman to take home and have meaningless sex with?

That was getting old real quick.

Not that he was going to tell his friend that. Elliot might have mellowed since falling in love, but that didn't mean they had the kind of relationship where they discussed things of that nature. They hadn't even seen each other in over two decades until Eli had moved back to New York last month.

Eli

It's a lot of work moving a business'

headquarters to another country you know

Elliot

If that's what you need to tell yourself

Eli

Did you want something?

Elliot

Actually yes

Can you go to my office and grab the files on the

right corner of my desk. I forgot to bring them

home with me and I need them

I'd go and get them myself but Jakey is teething

and I told Susannah to get some rest while she could

I finally got the baby to sleep but he's passed out

on my chest and I don't want to risk waking him

by putting him in his crib

Eli

Yeah I can grab them and bring them round

Elliot

Thanks, man

I thought we were home free with the lack of sleep

once Jakey started sleeping through the night

but teething has had him up screaming every

night for the last week

Eli caught the hint of regret in his voice and knew that Elliot was thinking about how he had been deprived of four years of his daughter's life.

He hadn't been around when Bessie was a newborn, when she was teething, or learning to walk, saying her first word, or potty training. Eli couldn't imagine how he'd feel knowing he had missed out on so much of his child's life, but he was glad that Elliot and Bessie were together now and that his friend would be there for every other milestone in his daughter's life.

Eli

I'll leave them with the doorman so I

don't disturb the baby by knocking on the

door

Elliot

Thanks

Stopping by Elliot's office, Eli grabbed the files his friend wanted, then headed down to the ground floor. He had texted his driver to tell him he was ready to go back to the hotel, but when he stepped out into the cold night, he saw that his car wasn't there yet.

As he waited, his attention was drawn to a woman walking out of the alley across the street.

She was short, if he had to guess not more than five foot two, but she walked with an air of confidence that made her seem seven feet tall.

She was dressed in a pair of jeans that, even from here, he could see hugged a perfect pair of toned legs, and although she wore a coat, he could see that it covered a pair of small but perky breasts.

She had long blonde hair that whipped around her face in the wind, and she had her arms wrapped around her middle as though she were cold.

The woman stopped abruptly and then bent down, picking up something he couldn't see, and that was when he noticed it.

The car.

Headlights illuminated the woman, and he saw a pale face with delicate features and wide eyes that were locked on the vehicle.

Instead of slowing, it sped up, and it wasn't swerving away from her even though the driver had to have seen her.

Eli didn't even think about it.

He sprinted across the street and launched himself at the woman, wrapping an arm around her and rolling them both out of the way of the oncoming car.

9:46 P.M.

A blur of black in her peripheral vision caught her eye.

Before Florence could react, she was tackled.

She landed hard on the pavement, her wrist taking the brunt of the fall and pain shot through it, reverberating around her body.

The car careened past.

If she'd still been there it would have slammed right into her.

Since she'd been kneeling and not standing, her head and chest would have taken the brunt of the bumper's force. There was no way she could have survived such an impact.

The car sped off, and Florence turned her attention to the person who had tackled her. Whoever it was still lay on the concrete beside her, an arm wrapped around her waist, her body flush up against his hard one.

So far, he hadn't made any move to harm her, but that didn't mean he wouldn't.

Not willing to wait and see what the man would do next, whether he was friend or foe, she squirmed quickly out of his grip and pulled out her weapon, holding it on the man. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Surprised dark eyes looked up at her, and then he broke out into a bemused smile. "I

just saved your life, darlin', that how you thank me?"

"You didn't answer my question," she bit out. "Who are you?"

The man stood slowly, seemingly unconcerned with the fact that she had a gun aimed at his chest. It was a nice chest, his coat and suit jacket were both open, and she could see his muscles' definition through his white shirt.

He was tall, at least a foot taller than her, maybe more, and he had to outweigh her by at least a hundred pounds, all of it muscle.

He took a step toward her, and Florence knew that she should announce herself as a cop, and if the man wouldn't answer her questions then cuff him and keep him here until she could call in what happened and back up arrived, then have him taken down to the station to be questioned.

For all she knew this man was in cahoots with whoever had tried to run her over.

Instead of doing anything, she stared up at him. The short, scruffy beard made him look ridiculously sexy, and the way he was looking at her had her blushing even though she wasn't a woman who blushed when a man looked at her like he wanted to devour her.

Despite the fact she didn't know who he was, her gut said this man wasn't a threat to her safety. And she reluctantly had to admit that if he hadn't been here she would probably be dead right now.

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“Are you going to tell me your name or not?” she snapped because his eyes roving her body and his heated gaze were stirring up a tingling deep in her belly that was completely inappropriate given what had just happened.

“Eli Lennox,” he said with a grin. “And you are?”

“Florence Harris,” she replied, leaving out for the moment that she was a cop.

“Nice to meet you, Florence Harris.” The way he said her name had her pulse fluttering wildly. There was something about this man that made her go all weak at the knees. “Any idea why someone just tried to kill you?”

“We don’t know that he tried to kill me,” she immediately protested.

The man arched a dark brow. “Cars trying to knock you down just part of your daily routine?”

“No, but ...”

“But nothing,” Eli interrupted. “That car was aiming straight for you, if I hadn't pushed you out of the way then you’d be dead right now.”

Florence sighed.

Unfortunately, he was right, and there was no use pretending that he wasn't. Whether it had been random, related to her case, or the serial killer she’d been hunting here to leave his next body in the dumpster she’d just checked, that car had intended to run

her over.

Could it really have been the Dumpster Killer?

Could she really have figured out his pattern?

“Something occurred to you just then, your eyes lit up.”

She blinked and looked up, disconcerted to find that Eli Lennox was standing directly in front of her.

Close enough that he could have swiped the gun from her hand if he'd wanted to.

Since she didn't think that he was involved, and she didn't want to shoot him, she'd never had to take a life before and she hoped to make it through her career keeping that record, she slipped her gun back into its holster.

“I'm a homicide detective, I was just wondering if what happened was related to a case I was working. What exactly did you see?” Her position, bent down picking up the glove, meant she hadn't had as good a vantage point as he would have had standing up.

Instead of answering her question, Eli reached out and wrapped a hand around her elbow, gently lifting her arm so he could examine her wrist. “You were favoring your other hand, did you hurt this one when I saved your life?”

“Are you going to keep harping on that?” When she tried to pull her arm free, he tightened his hold. His fingers were firm but gentle, and he was careful not to hurt her while still keeping her arm in his grasp.

Shooting her a cocky grin, he said, “You know it's an old Chinese proverb that if you

save someone's life, you're now responsible for them, it's your job to make sure they're looked after."

His fingertips brushed lightly across the sensitive skin on the inside of her elbow, and even though his touch wasn't directly on her skin, she couldn't stop a shiver rolling through her body. Of course Eli noticed, and that cocky smile of his grew bigger.

"You cold?" he asked, his voice husky now. Without waiting for her response he whipped off his coat, wrapped it around her, and then scooped her up into his arms and carried her across the street.

"What are you doing?" Florence asked, both confused and enjoying being cradled in a strong pair of arms a little more than she should.

"Taking you inside out of the cold," came Eli's smooth reply.

"But I need to call my boss, report what happened."

"You can do that inside. We'll call an ambulance too." Eli carried her across the street and inside the lobby of an office building.

"I don't need an ambulance." Spending the night in the hospital was not on her to-do list. If she was right and she'd managed to figure out the Dumpster Killer's pattern, she needed to call her partner, get their maps out, go over things, and see if they could use her pattern to figure out where he would go next.

If they couldn't get ahead of this man then how would they ever catch him?

"Your wrist looks broken," Eli said as he set her down on a couch off to one side of the foyer. "You'll need x-rays and a cast."

Florence shrugged off his apparent concern. "I'll wrap it when I get a moment."

His lips quirked up in amusement. "Babe, while I love your confidence in your own abilities, you need a doctor. If you don't want an ambulance I can always drive you to the hospital. Then take you out for coffee afterward."

"What do you mean, coffee?"

"You know a guy, a girl, a quiet little café, coffee, maybe baked goods of some sort, a date." He knelt before her, one hand cradling her injured wrist, the other rested on her knee, the heat of it seeped through her jeans and into her skin, warming her entire body.

"A date?"

"Unless you're involved with someone?" He arched a challenging brow.

Why did he have to sound so confident that she was single? "I don't date guys I don't know."

That made him chuckle. "Isn't that the whole point of dating? Getting to know someone?"

The smile he shot her was at a hundred charming watts, and she assumed it was the kind of panty-melting smile he used to get women to agree to whatever he wanted.

Too bad for him her panties were made of stone, they didn't melt for guys no matter how sexy they were, and this particular one was off the charts sexy.

Florence was sure he had women falling all over themselves to go to bed with him, and she didn't want to be just another conquest.

“How about I make you a deal?” Eli said.

That got her suspicious hackles rising. “What kind of deal?”

“You tell me that you're not attracted to me, and I'll wait here until your cop buddies show up to make sure that guy who tried to run you down doesn't come back, and then I'll walk away. But ...” he drew the word out, “if you find me attractive, then I get to take you on a date to Florence.”

“Florence?” Her eyes bulged at the notion.

“Anyone whose name is Florence should go to Florence at least once in their life.”

He had to be joking because being rich enough to take her to Florence for a date on top of being this sexy was just another mark against him.

“Well, Florence, say it,” he goaded. “Say you don't find me the least bit attractive.”

“I ... I ... I ...” she stammered, annoyed the lie wouldn't fall from her lips.

“Thought so,” he said smugly. “Looks like we're going to Florence.”

“I am not going to Florence with you, and I am not going on a date with you. There's really no need for you to hang around.”

“Don't I need to give a statement?”

Darn, she'd forgotten that. “I have to call my boss.”

“You can do that, I'll wait till you're done then have my driver take us to the hospital to get your wrist looked at.” He produced her bag, which she hadn't even given a

second thought to since those headlights had blinded her.

“I’m not going to the hospital with you.”

“So you do want me to call an ambulance.” He issued another silent challenge.

“I thought not.” He gave another smug smile when she didn’t say anything. “Call your boss, then once we both give our statements, I’ll take you to the hospital and then for coffee. Florence will probably have to wait for another day.”

“I’m not going on a date with you.” Florence was pleased when her voice was firm even though her insides were quivering. It had been a long time since she’d felt this immediate and visceral reaction to a man—especially one like this.

Eli Lennox was big, strong, powerful, and charming, he practically oozed power and wealth and control.

When she dated she preferred quieter, less confident men.

Computer geeks, accountants, insurance salesmen.

Men with flabby stomachs and receding hairlines, who didn’t work out at the gym every day or ride motorbikes.

Men who preferred to spend the evening on the couch watching TV, than in a bar drinking and partying, men with nice boring jobs and nice boring lives.

Eli was none of those things.

He screamed danger.

Not physical danger, but he held the ability to crush her heart in his big, capable hands.

“You will,” he said confidently like it was already a foregone conclusion.

Yep, he was dangerous all right.

Cocky alphas were her kryptonite. They had the ability to make her body ignite, her mind flee, and her heart crack.

It was why she had long ago decided that the single life was the life for her.

She was done being hurt, she was done being a victim, Eli might want to get her into bed, but there would never be anything more between them than hot sex.

He’d walk away happy and fulfilled, she’d walk away with another piece of herself missing.

She would either fall in love with a nice, safe, boring man or she would remain alone. As far as she was concerned, there was no place in her life for a man like Eli Lennox.

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Chapter

Two

“Eli.”

He heard his name, but he was lost in thought, and it didn't penetrate past his subconscious.

“Eli.”

The only thing that had consumed his every waking second, and invaded his dreams, was Florence Harris.

Those pouty lips, those big blue eyes with long black lashes, those silky blonde locks, they floated around in his mind in a never-ending carousel.

She wasn't his usual type, he usually went for tall women with big breasts, but there was something about Florence that had arrowed into his brain, and he couldn't shake it.

Wasn't even sure that he wanted to.

When he'd knocked her out of the way of the car, his body had responded the second he touched her. Responding to a sexy woman wasn't unusual, but something felt different this time.

“Eli.”

“What?” he snapped, finally focusing and turning from the window where he’d been staring at the spot where he’d first seen Florence.

“Did you forget something on your way home last night?” Elliot was standing in his office, a scowl on his face. “You said you'd bring the files around, I had work that I needed to do that I've got to catch up on this morning because I couldn't get it done last night.”

“Last night?” a voice echoed from the doorway, causing them both to look over.

Susannah Zachary stood there, baby in her arms, long black hair with red tips hanging loosely down her back.

“Didn't I find you passed out on the couch with Jake on your chest before ten? It was pretty adorable, I took pictures,” she said a grin on her face.

“Those I would kill to see,” Eli snickered.

“Where’s that gorgeous baby of yours?” He walked over to Susannah and plucked Jake from her arms, the baby gurgled, his chubby little hands reaching out to grab the chain he wore around his neck.

Eli was a sucker for a baby. There was just something about baby giggles that hit him right in the heart.

“So why didn't you come by last night?” Elliot asked.

“I was leaving when I saw a car aiming straight for a woman on the sidewalk. I pushed her out of the way, saved her life, turns out she’s a homicide detective.

By the time the cops arrived, and I gave my statement, it was late, and I didn't think it was worth risking waking this little guy by coming over.”

“You saved a cop?” Susannah looked intrigued.

“A pretty cop?” Elliot asked, his scowl replaced by an amused smirk.

“Gorgeous,” he corrected.

“You asked her out,” Elliot said, a comment not a question.

“She turned me down then disappeared while I was giving my statement.” He wasn't annoyed that Florence had snuck away, he knew she'd felt the same thing he had, that sizzling attraction that couldn't be ignored.

It had spooked her, but he was confident that he could win her over.

He wanted her, and when he saw something he wanted he got it or worked out a way to get it.

That Florence seemed immune to his charms only intrigued him that much more, and he was determined to convince her to give him a chance.

It wasn't just about sex—although he'd woken at four in need of a cold shower because all night he'd dreamed about how good it would feel when he was buried deep inside her—he was intrigued by her.

Why was she so wary of him? What made her decide to become a homicide detective?

What would he find when he chinked away at her armor and got to see the real her?

“You asked her out after she was nearly hit by a car?” Susannah asked.

Eli shrugged. “What would be the point in waiting? I saved her life, we both felt the attraction, and besides, that’s how my parents first met.

They were both at the park, my mom freaked out over some bees, my dad didn't realize it at the time, but when he shooed them away from her he saved her life. She was allergic, anaphylactic level allergic.” His brother had inherited that allergy, and it had cost him his life.

“You’re serious about asking her out,” Susannah said.

“Serious enough that I told her I'd take her to Florence.”

“Take her to Florence?”

Eli shrugged. “Her name is Florence.”

Elliot laughed out loud at that. “Taking Florence to Florence, I think that’s the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Hey,” Susannah swatted Elliot on the shoulder. “I think that’s sweet. And very romantic,” she added.

The phone on his desk buzzed, and he walked over and picked up the receiver. “Mr. Lennox, reception called to let me know there’s a Detective Harris here requesting the footage from the security cameras. Apparently, you asked to be notified if she came by.”

Bingo.

He'd known the cop in her would be by to get that footage.

Florence could run, but she couldn't hide.

"Thanks, Susie," he said to his secretary. "I'll go right down to see her."

"Your cop's here?" Susannah asked when he put the phone down.

"Yep." Eli knew he was grinning like an idiot and didn't care in the least. This was the first time he had been intrigued by a woman in longer than he cared to remember.

"Good luck," Susannah said as she held her arms out for the baby.

"Yeah, good luck." Elliot could barely contain his glee. Eli didn't know why he found it so amusing, it wasn't that long ago that he was tying himself into knots pursuing Susannah.

That realization hit him hard.

Elliot and Susannah had both felt that initial attraction, that little voice in your head that said something was different this time, now the two of them were happily married with a baby.

Was that where he was headed?

Could Detective Florence Harris be his one?

Was she the partner his mom had been for his dad?

He had no idea where things would go with him and Florence, but he knew that he was going to find out.

“Morning, Detective,” he drawled when he walked into the security office to find Florence sitting in a chair studying the screen in front of her.

Although she wasn't looking his way, he could feel her eye roll. “Good morning.”

“How’s your wrist?” he asked, eyeing her cast.

“Broken.”

She didn't sound angry, but he couldn't help but wince.

He'd broken her wrist when he tackled her, he couldn't help but feel bad that he'd hurt her, even if it was an accident.

It wasn't the way to make a good impression and win her over when he knew he was already on shaky ground. “Sorry about that.”

Florence turned around to face him. Her hair was up this morning, pulled into a bun at the back of her head, her face was mostly devoid of makeup bar a little gloss on her lips, and seeing her properly, when they weren't out in the dark, or he wasn't worried about how much pain she was in, Eli was struck by just how beautiful she was.

“You don’t need to apologize, like we established last night, you saved my life,” she said.

“You remember what that means, right?” he asked with a wink. “You're now my responsibility, which means I get to take you out for coffee. Or a trip to Florence.”

“I thought I was pretty clear last night that we wouldn’t be going on any date. In the country or out of it.”

“You said that, but then you disappeared on me, and I didn't get a chance to check in with you.”

“I thought you wanted me to go to the hospital.” She gave him a sweet smile.

“Touché.” He grinned back, when she relaxed and smiled like that she was breathtaking. “So, coffee today? After work maybe?”

“You're a persistent one, aren't you?”

“It's my middle name.”

“So, I know you gave your statement last night, but now that you're here, why don't you watch this with me, see if it jogs anything in your memory.”

She had ignored his second attempt at getting a date, but he could sense her weakening. She wanted to say yes, but something was holding her back. “I can stay and watch it with you.”

“Your boss won't mind?”

“Sweetheart, I am the boss,” he said with a chuckle. Florence obviously had no idea who he was, another thing he wasn't used to. People usually knew his identity and made up their minds about what kind of person he was before he even set foot in the same room.

“Oh, I thought this building belonged to Elliot Emerson.”

“It does. I'm an old friend of his, and when I decided to move my real estate business back here, he offered to let me rent some rooms until I decided where I want to set myself up.”

“Real estate...Lennox...oh, you’re Eli Lennox, owner of Lennox Real Estate,” she said, the tone of her voice implied she’d just had something she’d been worried about confirmed. She was a confusing one, this woman, he wished he knew what made her tick.

“In the flesh.”

“So you weren't joking about going to Florence, were you?”

“Not in the least.”

“You didn't get a look at the driver, did you?”

“No. I wish I did. I was watching you while I was waiting for my driver and I saw the car heading for you, I didn't think, I just reacted.”

“If you'd hesitated I'd be dead.”

The thought that Florence might have died before he’d had a chance to get to know her didn't sit well with him. “Lucky I'm quick on my feet,” he quipped to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, lucky. What time exactly did you come out?”

“Just before quarter to ten.”

She fiddled with the computer and fast-forwarded through the footage, stopping just before the time he’d said.

She pressed play, and they both watched as the security cameras caught a car come flying past. It was clear from what they could see that it had deliberately aimed right

for Florence.

The car didn't swerve or waver, the driver obviously wasn't drunk or high.

The attack had been deliberate.

Someone had wanted Florence Harris dead, but was it because the driver had just wanted to kill someone or had she been targeted?

As they watched they saw Eli go running across the road and tackle Florence, both of them rolling onto the pavement.

Tires screeched as the car took off, zooming out of screen.

Florence paused it just before it disappeared. She turned to him with a grin on her face. "Look at that. We got a nice clear shot of the license plate."

2:16 P.M.

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“I can't believe you figured out his pattern,” Jake Zeus said as they pored over the maps.

“It was just a hunch,” Florence told her partner, brushing off his praise. It was just observation, intuition, and good luck that she had managed to predict where the killer was going to dump his next body. “Do you think now that we figured out where he’s going to be that he’ll change things up?”

“Depends how set he is on following his modus operandi.” Jake studied the map for a moment longer and then said, “It all seems so obvious now that we know it, I can't believe we didn't see it before now.”

“We couldn’t have seen it until he did enough dumps.

” The pattern needed enough bodies before you could see what he was doing, but now the fact that he was making an eye was obvious when you looked at the map.

He was moving all across the city. The first ten body dumps had made a large circle, and the next four had started making a small circle in the middle.

Once you knew what you were looking for, it was easy to see it.

“What made you think of an eye?” Jake asked.

“The fact that he cuts into the victims the same words. I am nothing . I was just thinking that when you think you're nothing, it’s because you think no one sees you, and because they don’t see you, you aren’t worthy of being seen.

You're nothing. I looked at what we knew so far and thought that it looked like an eye. I used that to start searching dumpsters.”

“Next time you decide to go out looking for body dump sites, you should probably tell your partner.” He shot her a reproachful look.

“Sorry about that,” she said sheepishly.

“But you have the baby, and this was off the clock.

I thought I'd let you actually get some time with your family, and if it turned out I was on to something, I would have brought you in. I swear.” Florence didn't want Jake to think that she was shutting him out on purpose. He and his wife had a four-month-old baby at home, and he was always talking about how he hardly got any time to spend with them, she'd just been trying to cover every base.

“It's okay.” Jake reached over and squeezed her shoulder. “But don't do it again.”

“I won't,” she promised.

“So, we can add what we know to his profile, we're getting closer to finding him.”

“The car led us to a rental agency, even though he paid them cash under the table to get them to rent him the car without a license, at least we have a description of him now.” It had been disappointing to track the license plate to a small car rental dealership and find out that someone had been paid a lot of money to agree to let him rent the car without a paper trail.

Their killer was smart, and apparently he had a lot of money to throw around because he'd paid the dealership ten thousand dollars, enough to convince them to go against their policies.

“A description is better than nothing,” Jake reminded her.

That was true, but the description was nothing special—tall, medium build, short cut brown hair, hazel eyes, and a cleft chin.

They might be able to use that once they already had their guy in custody, but it was unlikely it would lead them to the man’s identity.

Still, the sketch would be shown on news stations today in the hopes that it might garner them some leads.

More than likely, it would give them dozens of false leads, but again that was better than nothing.

“So, where do we go from here?” she asked.

They had the guy’s pattern, and they knew that he had driven on to the dumpster that had been next on her list after he’d tried to run her down, and left victim number fifteen.

That was what had proved her initial speculation that it might have been the Dumpster Killer who had tried to hit her with his car.

After she’d been pushed out of the way by Eli Lennox, he’d continued on to the dumpster, left the body, and then disappeared back into whatever hole he was hiding in.

Eli.

Why couldn’t she get him out of her head?

She wasn't looking for anything serious, and even if she were, Eli would be the last person she'd be looking at for a happy ever after.

Florence knew that he wasn't good for her. He was sexy, charming, and rich. He would chew her up and spit her out, and she'd never recover from it.

Her childhood had been rough, and if there was one thing she had learned from it, it was that all she wanted was stability in her personal life.

It was one thing to risk her life at her job, but if she was going to go home to someone, she wanted it to be someone she could count on.

Stability had been something she had longed for as a child. That and food, running water, and electricity. She would have gladly gone without all of those things if she'd had someone to take care of her, look after her, and love her. But she and her brother Fletcher hadn't even had that.

Men like Eli didn't want someone like her. They wanted a woman who would wear pearls, and attend parties, and be content to be a trophy wife. That wasn't her. Even knowing she would never have to worry about being cold, or dirty, or hungry ever again, she couldn't live her life as a trophy wife.

Which meant no Eli.

Because no way was she going to be his next roll in the hay, then watch him lose interest and walk away.

“What're you thinking about?”

She started, realizing that she'd zoned out, and knew her cheeks had pinked in embarrassment.

That was all it took for a slow grin to spread across Jake's face. "You met someone."

They'd been partners for three years now, long enough to learn each other's facial expressions and body language. "No, I didn't."

"You're fibbing," he sing-songed.

Before she could insist, a delivery man with a bouquet of flowers in his arms walked over toward their desks.

"I'm looking for a Detective Florence Harris," the young man said.

"I'm Florence." She stood and closed the couple of steps between them.

"Then these are for you." The man handed her the flowers and headed back toward the lifts.

"Thought you said you don't have a new boyfriend," Jake said, curiosity brimming in his voice.

"I don't," she insisted.

"Then who's sending you flowers?"

Setting them down on her desk, she saw a small envelope taped to the colorful paper, and she pulled it off and slid a small piece of card from inside.

Florence, I'm looking forward to getting to know you better over coffee.

Hope you like the flowers, I chose snapdragons because they remind me of you; fierce and beautiful.

Your savior ;-)

Eli's confidence knew no bounds. She'd told him again this morning that she wasn't going to go on a date with him, and yet instead of believing her, he was sending her flowers and continuing to insist that sooner or later she'd go out with him.

Her phone rang, and she picked it up cautiously when she saw that it was an unknown number. "Hello?"

"Did you like the flowers?" a cocky voice drawled in her ear.

"Eli. How did you get my number?" She had decided against giving him her card in case he remembered anything about the car or its driver because she hadn't wanted him to misinterpret it as an invitation to keep asking her out.

"I have my ways."

"Did you have someone look into me?"

"So paranoid, darlin'. No, I didn't have to. I called the precinct and told them who I was and that I had thought of something else about last night and asked for your number so I could call you. They gave it to me. So, dinner tonight?"

"You've gone from coffee to dinner?"

"Right about now, I'll take whatever I can if it comes to spending time with you."

The sincerity tugged her mouth into a reluctant smile.

She'd never had a guy take such an interest in her that they would pursue her like this.

The romantic side of her brain wanted to insist that he had to like her to go to all this trouble because as wealthy and good looking as he was, he could have his choice of women.

The practical side of her brain insisted that this was just a challenge to him, he probably wasn't used to being turned down and he didn't like it, once he convinced her to date him and got her into bed, he'd lose interest and move on.

The two sides of her warred on, and she didn't know what to do.

Her body still felt the imprint of his hands touching her, her heart wanted to give it a go, thrilled at the possibility that someone might really care about her, but she was a woman who listened to her head, and it said run.

"Florence? You still there."

"I'm still here. Thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful."

"I sense a but coming."

She huffed a mirthless laugh. "I don't think we're a good match, Eli. We come from two different worlds. Thank you for saving my life, but I'm not going on a date with you. Goodbye."

She ended the call and set the phone on her desk beside the bunch of flowers. She had made the smart move, the safe move, but it felt like she'd just made a mistake.

8:04 P.M.

This was not how he wanted to spend his evening.

No, strike that, this was how he wanted to be spending his evening, but the woman sitting across from him at the table wasn't who he wanted to be spending it with.

Eli would have canceled the blind date if Florence had agreed to go out with him, but she'd said no every time he'd asked, and at some point, he had to accept that chemistry wasn't enough.

Just because he felt that sizzle of attraction, and just because he was sure that she felt it too, didn't mean that he could force her to let go of whatever fear was holding her back and give him a chance.

Didn't mean he had to like it.

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If he knew a way to convince her that nothing bad would happen if they went on a date and got to know each other, he'd do it.

But in order to convince her of that, he had to understand what her fears were, the only way to learn what her fears were was for her to trust him, and the only way for her to trust him was for the two of them to spend time together.

Which she wouldn't agree to do.

So, he was stuck with no way forward, and it looked like the only option he had left was to just walk away.

"Eli," his date whined. That sound really grated on his nerves.

"Yeah?" he said halfheartedly. He'd been dubious about this date even before he met Florence yesterday—was it really only yesterday?

When he'd moved back to New York, he'd touched base with a couple of different old friends, and one of them had a sister who'd had a crush on him from back when they were all in college together.

He couldn't remember the sister, but he'd reluctantly agreed to one dinner.

Not even really a date, just dinner, then they both went their own way.

After this nightmare of a date, they would definitely be going their own way.

Patricia Christian was impossibly thin, tall, only an inch or two shorter than his own six foot three.

Despite her rail-thin body her breasts were huge, no doubt fake, not that he had a problem with that—every woman had the right to do whatever they wanted with their own body—he just didn't find them appealing.

Probably because all he could picture was Florence's small, round, perfect breasts and everything he wanted to do to them.

He wanted to roll her nipples between his fingers and watch them go hard, he wanted to suck them and watch her squirm, listen to her moans, and then he wanted to do a whole lot more to every other part of her body.

“Eli,” Patricia whined again, her too red lips pouting childishly.

“What?”

“You're not listening to me. What are you thinking about so hard that you're not listening to a word I'm saying?”

He wasn't going to tell his date that he was thinking about another woman, even if he wasn't interested in Patricia.

And there wasn't a single thing about her that appealed to him.

She was pretty, although she was wearing too much makeup, which again only reminded him how beautiful Florence was and how she didn't need makeup to accentuate it—and she was smart, he knew she had a high IQ because she'd told him several times.

She seemed nice, and she was obviously excited about this date, but she was too obvious about her idea of the outcome.

She was here for sex, which she probably hoped would seal the deal, and sooner or later, she'd be Mrs. Eli Lennox.

Only he didn't play that game.

He'd grown up with the example of how marriage should be, two people who loved and respected each other both working toward the same goal.

They supported each other, they were there for each other, they held each other when they needed to be held and gave each other a shove when they needed a shove.

There was no way he would settle for any other kind of partnership when he got married.

When it all boiled down to it, he didn't see Patricia giving him that kind of marriage so it was over before it even began.

Forcing himself to focus, he asked, "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I was saying," she said with exaggerated patience, "that dinner was superb, I think we should order dessert."

He'd done his time, sat here for the last hour, he'd done his duty, it was time to cut and run. "Actually, I think I'm going to head off. Still dealing with jetlag," he lied.

"Haven't you been back for months? Why are you still suffering jetlag?" Patricia demanded, clearly annoyed.

Eli just shrugged. Guess it was his lazy lion side coming out.

He was done with this date, and if she didn't want to believe his lame lie and bow out gracefully then he'd just go with blunt.

“Look, Patricia, I agreed to this date because your brother said that you'd wanted to meet me.

It was never going to be more than one dinner. I'm sorry if you thought otherwise.”

“Fine,” she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Do you have a ride home or should I call you a cab?” He might not be into the date or feel bad for his bluntness, but he wouldn't leave a woman alone without a safe way home.

“I'll call a cab myself.” She glared at him, and it was clear she was frustrated that things hadn't worked out the way she'd wanted.

“Okay, I'll text your brother to let him know we went our separate ways at the restaurant.”

Leaving Patricia at the table, he paid the bill and texted his driver to say he was ready to be picked up.

His car was rounding the corner by the time he stepped out into the chilly night, and as he slid into the back seat, he realized something.

If this date had shown him anything, it was that his interest in women in general had waned, but his interest in one particular woman had grown.

Florence intrigued him in a way that no other woman did. The desire to strip her bare—metaphorically—and learn every single one of her secrets was all he could think about. It was like she had cast a spell over him, possessed him, and now he was powerless to resist.

Now he had to decide.

Let her walk away or fight for her.

Put like that, it was a simple choice.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he called Florence.

“Eli,” she groaned when she answered. “How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not going on a date with you?”

Despite the rejection, he was grinning because she'd obviously saved his number in her contacts if she'd known it was him. “I went out on a date tonight,” he announced.

The pause was long enough that he had to check that the call was still connected.

“Okay. Why are you telling me that?”

“Because on the date I realized something.”

“Yeah? What?”

“That the only woman I want to go on a date with is you.”

“Why?”

“Because you intrigue me, you’ve piqued my interest. There’s something you should know, Florence.”

“What?”

“Once I set my mind to something I get it. And right now, my mind is set on you, so you can consider yourself the focus of my wooing.”

“Wooing?” She chuckled. “What are you? A ninety-year-old man?”

“My dad always used to say that to my mom.” He smiled at the memory. “He’d always say just because we’re married doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to be wooed.”

“Used to?”

“They both passed away in the last eighteen months.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“Look, Eli, it’s not that I’m not flattered that you seem to be interested in me, I just don’t get why. I mean, we met last night, you saved my life, and that’s it. Why are you going to all this trouble?”

The fact that she seemed genuinely perplexed about why he would be interested in her gave him his first clue to her reluctance to go on a date with him.

His confident, beautiful, smart cop was insecure inside.

“Because you seem like a complex woman, one who I want to get to know better.

We're attracted to each other, maybe it doesn't go any further than that, but maybe it does.

Maybe attraction and interest could grow into something else, something more. ”

“So, you aren't just trying to get me into bed?”

“Oh, I want you so much that I'm hard just thinking about it, but no, I don't just want to get you into bed. I want more. I want to get to know you . Life is about taking chances, risks, and I get that something is making you scared to do that. I can't help you with that because I don't know what it is you're scared of. But I'm not going anywhere, so get used to that idea. And flowers. Get used to flowers because you'll be getting more tomorrow. Sweet dreams, Florence, I know what I'll be dreaming of tonight. You, beneath me, screaming my name as you come.”

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Chapter

Three

She'd seen him.

He wasn't sure what to make of that.

His whole life he had been invisible, the middle child, the kid in school who wasn't exceptional, but who wasn't disruptive so the teachers never noticed him, the adult whose job had him blending into the background, there, but not really there.

After a lifetime of never being noticed, he wasn't sure what to make of this development.

Last night, he had been shocked to drive up to the dumpster where he intended to leave his next body only to see a woman walking out of that very alley.

And not just any woman.

Detective Florence Harris.

He knew who the woman was. It had been eighteen months since he had taken his first life, and he'd thought it would be prudent to take notes on the investigation, make sure he knew who was hunting him, and what they were doing to try to find him.

He had no intention of getting caught and going to prison, so if he wanted to remain a free man, he had to make sure that he was smart.

Every decision he made, every move he made, he had to think it through, make sure he mitigated as many of the dangers as he could.

There was no doubt in his mind that Florence was there for one reason and one reason only. She was trying to get ahead of him, predict where he was going to be, and when he was going to be there.

She'd done it too.

Somehow, she had actually managed to guess where he would dump the next body, it was just too big a coincidence to believe anything else.

How had she figured it out?

No one saw him.

No one knew him.

No one cared about him or what he was doing.

Until now.

Florence had seen him. Florence had figured out enough about him to know where he was going to be. Florence certainly cared about him and what he was doing, and had no doubt vowed to put a stop to him.

His problem was, what was he going to do about this new development?

It wasn't like he could allow the detective to get too close, by now, she had to know that he was the one who had nearly run her down with his car because he'd moved on to the next dumpsite and left the body there.

She knew that she was right, that he'd been dumping the bodies in the shape of an eye, so she would undoubtedly make sure that all dumpsters in the pattern were watched, hoping that he would walk into a trap.

He wasn't that stupid, but it did present so many problems.

Should he come up with a whole new plan for disposing of the bodies?

If he did, would Florence Harris be able to figure that out as well?

Should he get rid of the detective so she couldn't come after him?

Would that change anything? He knew that she had a partner, Detective Jake Zeus, and the whole department was no doubt up to date on his case.

He was a serial killer with fifteen bodies under his belt, and eighteen months of avoiding detection after all.

Going after the detectives on the case was probably not a good idea. It was possibly a shortcut to a prison cell, and yet here he was, standing outside the apartment building where Florence Harris lived.

The building was nothing fancy and didn't appear to have great security, he probably could get inside if he wanted to, and he did want to.

Badly.

He wanted to wrap his hands around the woman's throat and force her to tell him how she had seen him. He wanted to know how she had figured him out. She had done the impossible, and it was driving him crazy.

All his life he'd wanted to be noticed. As the middle of three boys he hadn't been intelligent like his older brother whose IQ had been off the charts, nor had he been sporty like his youngest brother who had gone to college on a football scholarship.

He wasn't particularly good looking, nor was he noticeably ugly. He was just boring, average, invisible.

He'd longed to be noticed.

To be special.

To have someone, even just one person, pay attention to him, help him find out what he was good at, what made him unique, and then help him excel at that.

But that had never happened.

Parents and teachers had all overlooked him.

Girls at school had barely thrown an iota of attention his way, he'd been turned down more times than he could count. Usually, the only time he garnered a little attention was when a girl wanted to make another boy jealous, and what better way to do that than with the kid no one noticed.

That problem had plagued him through college and into adulthood, and he couldn't even remember the last time he'd been with a woman.

That was all going to change though.

He was going to teach the women of this city that he wouldn't be overlooked any longer. They would learn. One at a time they would learn. If he had to kill every single woman in New York City he would do just that.

No one could say he was invisible now.

The entire city was terrified of him.

To know that his actions had an impact on strangers was a heady rush.

He wondered if women had changed their routines to try to protect themselves from him.

Did they try to make sure they didn't walk to their cars or the subway on their own?

Did they make sure to look behind them if they were walking the streets to see if anyone was watching them?

Did they make sure they put the chains on their doors at night to stop him from getting in?

None of those things would stop him.

If they looked at him they wouldn't see him, and if he set his mind on getting his hands on a woman, then he got his hands on them.

Nothing stopped him when he wanted something.

Because he was like the invisible man, the women he set his sights on didn't even know he was there until it was too late for them to do anything about it.

He didn't need to use subterfuge to get to them, he just walked straight up to their doors, and because no one thought the invisible man was a threat, they threw it open.

Before they could stop him, he had them restrained and gagged.

Always gagged.

He wasn't there to listen to them talk, he was there for them to listen to him talk. For once, he had a captive audience, someone who was going to sit there and listen without interrupting, he wasn't going to waste that opportunity by listening to them whine, and cry, and plead for their lives.

Not once in his life had anyone ever shown him mercy so he saw absolutely no reason why he should show them mercy.

Once he'd unloaded a lifetime of anger and frustration, purging himself as it were, there was nothing to do but strangle them.

It was nice to be the center of someone else's world, even if it was for a short time.

There was no way he wasn't taking advantage of that by taking control of their lives and ending them when and how he chose.

He liked the undivided attention, he liked knowing that for those forty-eight hours, he was no longer invisible. It was like being God.

It was something he wasn't about to give up anytime soon.

Which meant he was going to have to keep a close eye on Detective Florence Harris. She was an enigma of sorts, she had somehow managed to figure him out, and yet he didn't know enough about her to figure out what his next move should be.

That was about to change.

He looked up at the windows he knew belonged to the detective's apartment, wondering what she was doing in there.

He knew from his initial assessment on the cops working his case that she was single, no family that he could find anywhere in the city, she didn't do much other than work, the gym, and the occasional outing with some friends to a bar or restaurant for a meal.

Movement caught his attention, and a moment later Florence's face appeared in the window as she pushed the curtains aside.

She had her phone to her ear and seemed to be talking away, no idea that he was out there watching her.

He didn't feel the need to move, to hide or run away, he was invisible, even if she looked right at him she would only see through him, never knowing he had even been there, right outside her apartment. If he'd wanted, he could have gone in there and killed her, and there would have been nothing she could have done to stop him.

In this game of cat and mouse, the detective might think that she was the cat and he was the mouse, but she was wrong. She was the cat, but he was the lion. Bigger, stronger, fiercer, hunting her in silence, she wouldn't even know that he was there until he pounced.

6:12 A.M.

"Yeah, I'm leaving now, be there in twenty minutes or less," Florence said into the phone.

"It'll probably take me closer to thirty to get there," Jake told her.

“Want me to do a walkthrough or wait till you get there?”

“You can start if you want.”

“Okay, see you soon.” She hung up her phone and stared out the window a moment longer.

Ever since she’d been awakened by her ringing cell and had gotten up to answer it, standing to stare out the window while she listened to her boss inform her of the latest case she and Jake had been assigned, she’d felt eyes on her.

Someone was watching her.

While trying not to be too obvious about it, she’d scanned the streets, searching for the mystery watcher, but she hadn’t been able to find them.

They were there though.

She’d bet her apartment on it.

And she loved this apartment. It was nothing fancy, the area was the best she could afford on a cop’s salary—helped along by the fact that she taught self-defense classes whenever she could at her gym.

It was a one-bedroom with a tiny kitchen with room for a six-seater table.

The lounge area had space for her old but comfy three-seater couch and a TV she rarely watched, and her bookshelf and favorite armchair where she loved to snuggle and read when she had time.

It wasn’t a lot, but it was hers, and she loved her small home.

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Since she didn't have any more time to spend trying to find out where the person watching her was hiding, she let the curtains fall closed and turned to make her bed.

She had splurged a little on her bedroom furniture, the sleigh bed and matching nightstands, dresser, and wardrobe were all in a beautiful maple, and she loved running her hand over the smooth, silky wood.

Once the bed was made she opened her wardrobe, grabbed a pair of black jeans, some knee-high boots, a blue sweater, and her thick black coat.

She made quick work of getting dressed, brushed her teeth, ran a brush through her long blonde hair and pulled it into a ponytail, and grabbed an apple to eat as she walked the block to the subway.

Taking the stairs, she stepped out into the chilly winter morning a mere five minutes after ending the phone call to her partner, glad as she always was that she didn't have some long morning routine with makeup and hair products. She wanted to get to the crime scene as promptly as she could.

Although they would continue to work the Dumpster Killer case—more diligently than ever after what had happened the other night—it didn't mean there wouldn't be new cases coming in.

She and Jake had been next in the rotation so they'd been the ones to be assigned to this case.

From what her boss had told her it seemed like it would be fairly open and shut.

It appeared to be a case of domestic violence, the victim was a woman in her mid-thirties, the husband had been in and out of prison, cops had been to their apartment several times, neighbors reported a loud argument right before shots rang out.

Domestic violence cases always hit close to home for her.

How many times had she watched her mother get beaten up by her newest boyfriend?

More than she cared to admit.

As she walked toward the subway, she became aware of someone following her.

Immediately, thoughts of her messed up childhood fled her mind as she focused her energy on everything happening around her. The streets weren't busy, but there were people about, one set of footsteps in particular seemed to be following her.

Noting the details, she determined that the footsteps belonged to a man, substantially larger than herself. He seemed to be trying to keep the distance between them the same, no doubt waiting until there was no one about before he made his move.

Too bad for him she was going to make her move first.

Florence turned the corner, the subway station was just up ahead, but instead of going for it, she ducked into the doorway of the nearest building.

Moments later, a man in a dark suit came around the corner.

Pulling out her gun, she pointed it at his head. "Why are you following me?" she demanded.

The man turned. "Are you going to be pointing a gun at me every time we talk?"

“Eli,” she said, letting out a frustrated breath while at the same time a bunch of nervous butterflies took up residence in her stomach. “What are you doing here?”

“I was going to offer you a ride to work.” His easy smile was in place, and his dark eyes were twinkling as though he found it amusing to have a gun pointed at him. “You going to put that thing away?”

Holstering her gun, Florence resumed walking toward the subway. “How did you find out where I live?”

“I may have called in a favor to get your address. Sorry.”

“You don’t sound sorry.” She should be angry with him, that was a major invasion of her privacy, not to mention it was borderline stalkerish, and yet she felt a little excited.

She’d learned as a child not to trust men, and that had carried into adulthood.

As a teenager she’d gravitated to bad boys, but after having her heart broken a couple of times, she’d realized men were more trouble than they were worth.

So why did the fact that Eli was pursuing her make her feel like a giddy schoolgirl?

If there was one thing Florence Harris wasn’t, it was a giddy schoolgirl.

Until now, apparently.

“I can do contrite if it’s going to convince you to go on a date with me,” he said, reaching out to take her hand, entwining their fingers.

“I’m not sure I should be rewarding this kind of behavior.

” The more he persisted in trying to convince her to date him, the more her resolve weakened.

Eli was a playboy, used to having women throw themselves at him, she was a cop who couldn’t remember the last date she’d been on.

They were about as mismatched a couple as they came.

And she wasn't sure she was ready to break down the barriers she had erected around her heart.

“Does that mean if I’m on my best behavior, you’ll say yes?”

“You are impossible,” she said but didn't pull her hand out of his. “If you came by my apartment to offer me a ride, why were you standing watching me in the window? And why didn't you say something when I came out? Why were you following me down the street?”

“I wasn't standing watching you in the window,” Eli said, stopping and releasing her hand so he could place both of his on her shoulders.

“When my driver pulled up you were walking down the street.

I didn't want to scare you so I was just going to catch up with you and say hi. Was someone watching you?”

Uncertain now that she had to discuss it, Florence wavered. “I thought someone was watching me earlier when I was on the phone, but maybe I just imagined it.”

“I don’t like it.” His brow furrowed, and the charming smile was gone.

“Don’t like what?”

“Someone watching you. Let me drive you to work, Florence, just in case whoever it was is still here somewhere.”

“You do remember that I'm the cop, right? I have my gun on me.”

“Like I'd forget,” he said, a small smile curving his lips up. “I'd just feel better if you weren't catching the subway on your own. I saved your life, remember? That means I'm responsible for your safety.”

“You're going to protect me?” she asked dubiously. “Have you ever even held a gun before?”

“I'm a guy, I know all about shooting.” The grin on his face and the teasing tone of his voice coaxed a laugh out of her.

“I don’t mean that kind of shooting,” she said with a pointed look at his groin. “I really have to get going, I'm supposed to be at a crime scene in ten minutes.”

“Then let me drive you. My driver can get you there quicker than the subway can. Come on, Florence,” he coaxed. “This isn’t a date, it’s just one friend helping out another friend.”

“When did we become friends?”

“When I pushed you out of the way of that car that wanted to mow you down. Someone tried to kill you that night, and now you think someone was watching you. Someone who knows where you live. I'm worried about you. Please, let me give you a ride to your crime scene so I know you get there safely.”

It wasn't his logic that got to her.

It wasn't the fact that he probably would be able to get her there quicker than the subway.

It wasn't even that he was asking her rather than telling her, and asking politely.

It was that he'd said he was worried about her.

No one but her brother had ever worried about her.

Her brother and now apparently Eli Lennox.

5:47 P.M.

He was getting impatient.

Waiting wasn't something that Eli was good at.

Or used to doing.

When he wanted something he got it, the only thing in his life that he hadn't been able to get was something to save his family. His brother had died while he was off at a party with his friends. While he'd been having wild sex with his girlfriend of the moment, his brother had been struggling to breathe as his allergy squeezed the life out of him.

Although Eli had only been twenty at the time, his brother a decade older, that moment had changed his life.

His course turned in a completely different direction, and as he walked a different

path, bit by bit, he himself changed.

That easy-going kid who still carried that air of immortality was gone, replaced by someone who had to learn how to survive in the cutthroat world of billion-dollar businesses.

Watching his mother waste away as she valiantly fought the cancer that was invading her body, and then his father die slowly of a broken heart having lost his other half, he'd been filled with a desire to find his other half.

When he had pictured what that woman would be like it was nothing like Florence Harris, and yet she was the only woman he'd ever met who had consumed him.

She was all he could think about.

All day he'd been unable to concentrate, while he usually spent hours at the office, there was always something needing attention no matter how many people he had working for him, today he'd been counting down the hours until he could leave.

Florence hadn't told him when she'd be done for the day when he'd offered to come and pick her up after work, but since he knew which precinct she worked out of, he'd decided he would simply sit and wait for her to leave.

Knowing it was unlikely that she would leave any earlier than five, he'd had his driver pick him up at quarter to and drive him over there so he could wait.

Which he was still doing nearly an hour later.

It took every single ounce of his self-control not to go barging in there and demand that she come with him.

If he wasn't trying to win her over and convince her to go on a date with him then he might have done it. But he knew for a fact that if he went all alpha controlling on her, all he would be doing was pushing her further away.

Eli had no idea why it was so important that he convince her to give him a chance, but he wasn't going to argue against how he felt, he was just going to go with it. He'd heard enough times growing up about how it had been love at first sight for his parents, and while he didn't think he was ready to claim that he was in love with Florence, he was intrigued and consumed enough to know that this could actually go somewhere.

The possibility was thrilling and terrifying.

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Was he really ready for a serious commitment?

Was he ready for marriage and kids?

Was he ready to put someone before the company his father had built from the ground up, the company that he had sworn to make the most successful in the world?

Florence stepped out of the building, and he was shoving the door open and stepping out in seconds like he was a magnet drawn to her by the universe.

Just as he was crossing the street, she turned. When she noticed him, her eyes grew wide before her brow scrunched, it seemed she was not happy to see him.

Eli put on his most charming smile and was about to make a witty comment when a man stepped out from behind Florence.

A man.

A ridiculously good looking man with wavy black hair and piercing green eyes. The guy was taller than he was and was built like a rock.

A jealous haze descended on him.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice a deep growl. Did Florence have a boyfriend she had failed to mention? Was that why she had been so reluctant to agree to go on a date with him?

The idea that Florence belonged to another man left him feeling bereft.

“This is Jake,” Florence told him. “Jake, this is Eli Lennox. You know the guy from the other night who pushed me out of the way of the car.”

So she’d told this Jake man about him, but hadn’t said a word to him about Jake, for some reason that infuriated him.

“Nice to meet you,” Jake said, holding out a hand, a friendly smile on his face.

Eli ignored the other man’s hand. “Are you dating her?” he demanded, pleased to hear that he sounded as ferocious as he felt.

Jake laughed, and even Florence was smirking.

That only served to add further fuel to his anger.

He had no idea why he was acting like a possessive jerk, he’d only known Florence for a couple of days, and he hadn’t even been able to convince her to go out with him yet, if she was involved with this man then he should turn and leave before he made a fool out of himself.

His feet didn’t get that memo though, so he stood there and glowered.

“Something amusing?” he ground out.

“Kind of,” Jake said.

“Jake and I aren’t a couple so you can tamper down that caveman act before you make even more of a fool out of yourself,” Florence informed him. “Jake is my partner. My married with a four-month-old baby at home partner.”

At her words, he relaxed. “Nice to meet you then, Jake.” He held out his hand, and the other man shook it with another laugh.

“I’d ask what the caveman act was about, but I was there when Florence got the flowers the other day and managed to pry out of her that you were the one who saved her life and that you asked her out. I told her to go for it by the way,” Jake added with a wink.

“See,” he turned to Florence, “even your partner thinks you should go out with me.”

“Yeah, well, he’s been trying to marry me off for at least a year now, ever since his wife got pregnant.”

That Florence hadn't gone out with anyone else made him exceedingly pleased. “Don’t worry, I’ll wear her down sooner or later.”

“I’m counting on it,” Jake told him. “I better get going, I have to pick up diapers and formula on the way home. See you in the morning, Florence. Nice to meet you, Eli, and good luck, this one is stubborn.”

Florence rolled her eyes at her partner’s retreating back, then asked him, “What are you doing here?”

“You really have to ask that? Are you obtuse as well as stubborn?” he teased.

“I’ve already said no a million times,” she reminded him like he could forget.

“I know, but I came all the way here, and I thought that since I made two gestures today you might feel disposed to reward me.”

“Reward you for stalking me and finding out where I lived then showing up at my

work?”

“Reward me for my thoughtfulness in offering you a ride,” he corrected. “You can keep saying no, Florence, you can keep pretending that you don’t feel what I feel, you can keep pretending that there isn’t something between us, but it won’t change the facts. I feel it, and I know you do too.”

Taking a chance, Eli stepped closer, curling an arm around her waist, he drew her up against his body.

She didn’t fight him, but he felt her sharp intake of air, and he knew that what she was feeling scared her just like it scared him.

The only difference was he was willing to embrace it, and she wanted to fight it.

“You’re beautiful, smart, strong, and ridiculously sexy. I can’t stay away from you, and I don’t want to. I’m going to kiss you now so you better stop me if you don’t want it to happen.”

He gave her a moment to back out, and although he could feel her nervousness, her fingers curled into his shirt, and her lips parted, the tip of her pink tongue darting out.

Taking that as his cue, Eli dipped his head and feathered his lips across hers. The moment they touched heat exploded between them, it was like a fire ignited, searing every inch of his body.

Since they were standing in the middle of a busy street he couldn’t do what he wanted, which was to throw her down, rip off her clothes and taste every inch of her to see if she tasted as delicious as her mouth did, reluctantly he ended the kiss.

He only possessed so much self-control, and he was already reaching the end of it,

dragging her to his car, and acting out his fantasy was not going to win Florence over.

“You tell me that kiss didn't make you feel things you've never felt before, and I'll walk away right now and never turn back,” he challenged her.

Florence blinked slowly, her big blue eyes giving away what she was feeling without her having to say a word. “I've had good kisses before ...”

Eli touched a finger to her lips. “Not only do I not want to hear about you kissing other men, I don't want to hear you lie.

” He moved his finger to her neck where her pulse was fluttering wildly, then to her chest where her heart was thumping.

“Your body gives you away. You felt it. Florence, tell me you felt it too.” He needed to know he wasn't crazy, that this thing between them was real.

“I felt it,” she said softly. “I just don't know what to do about it.”

Brushing his knuckles across her cheek, enjoying the feel of her soft, smooth skin, he smiled. “That's okay. I do.” Tilting her face up, he kissed her again.

Chapter

Four

“You think it could be him?” Florence asked her partner as they stood outside the interview room looking at the angry man sitting inside it waiting for them.

“His girlfriend seems to think it could be,” Jake replied.

If the man’s partner thought that there was a possibility that he was the Dumpster Killer, a man who had killed fifteen women now since he’d dumped a body the night he’d tried to run her over, then it was something they needed to look into.

The sketch from the owner of the car yard that had rented the car under the table had been plastered all over the news.

Of all the calls they’d received from people saying they thought they knew the man in the sketch, this one had seemed to be the most promising lead.

Justin Bates was twenty-nine years old, he had an ex-wife who was the mother of his four children, worked as a plumber, and was currently involved with his high school sweetheart who he’d reunited with after his divorce.

His wife had moved across the country after they’d split up to be closer to her family, and had full custody of the children.

Not only had Justin not fought to keep his kids in his life, he was currently around ten

thousand dollars in arrears in child support.

There were several drunk and disorderly, drunk driving, and assault charges on his record. When they'd spoken with his boss when they'd gone in to pick Justin up to bring him in for questioning, they'd learned that the man had a major problem with women.

Complaints filled Justin's personnel file. Almost every house he'd gone to do work in where there was a single woman home alone at the time his boss had received a phone call complaining that Justin had been inappropriate with them.

Of course the first thing she'd asked was why Justin hadn't been fired. The answer was that the company was owned by his uncle who felt obligated to keep Justin employed, given that he had four children who needed food, and clothes, and a roof over their heads. His uncle had been surprised that Justin had found a woman to marry him, and even more surprised that he'd gotten back with his high school girlfriend, and seemed to share her concerns that Justin—who clearly had a violent streak and a problem with women—could be the killer.

Right now, they didn't have anything that would get them a warrant to check out Justin's apartment, or his computer, phone, or bank accounts, they would have to hope that they could get him to slip up and say something incriminating or for CSU to find some forensics that would connect him to the crimes.

“Let's go in and see if we can get him to give anything up,” she said as she pushed open the door. “Good evening, Mr. Bates. I'm Detective Harris, and this is my partner, Detective Zeus, we're here to ask you some questions.”

The look Justin gave her was dripping with condescension, it was clear the idea of being interrogated by a woman did not sit well with him.

Since she and Jake had been working together for years now, they didn't have to verbalize anything for them to decide that they would get more out of him if she led the interview. He would be so busy trying to prove that he was smarter than her that he'd be more likely to slip up and say something he shouldn't.

"What kind of questions?" Justin addressed his question to Jake.

"Do you own a car, Mr. Bates?" she asked as both she and Jake ignored his question.

"This is Manhattan, hardly anyone owns a car," he snapped, still refusing to look at her when he spoke.

"So, if you needed a car, you'd have to rent one, correct?"

"Why would I need a car?"

"For argument's sake, let's just say you did need a car, you'd have to hire it from somewhere, correct?"

"I suppose," Justin huffed.

"Have you rented a car lately, Mr. Bates?" she asked.

"No," he replied. But he answered a little too quickly for her liking.

"Where were you three nights ago, Mr. Bates?"

The man gave a disinterested shrug. "Home with my girlfriend, I guess."

"That's not what she said," Florence informed the man. "According to her, you left after dinner and were gone until the early hours of the morning. Where did you go?"

“I was home,” he insisted. “If Kyla said differently, then she’s a liar.”

“Why would she lie about you not being home three nights ago?” she pressed. “What was so special about three nights ago that she would bother to lie about that night in particular?”

“I don’t know why women do the things they do, but I do know they lie,” he growled, throwing a glare her way.

“Let’s say you were out somewhere that night,” she continued, unfazed by his outburst. It certainly wasn’t the first time a suspect had yelled at her, in fact she’d been on the receiving end of much worse. “Where would you be?”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere. You suggesting that I’m cheating on my woman?” Justin looked like the thought was outrageous.

“Personally, men who cheat are pretty low in my opinion, right up there with men who abandon their kids, but no you’re not here in a police station being interviewed because you might be cheating on your girlfriend.

You’re here because we want to know if you killed anyone.

So, Mr. Bates, are you a cheater, or a killer, or just a child abandoner?

” Men who made children but didn’t stick around to look after them were one of the things she hated the most. Her own father had skipped out on her, her brother, and her mom before she was even a year old.

Because of that, her entire childhood had been a living nightmare.

One thing she had learned in her career as a cop was to be prepared for anything.

That was the only reason that she reacted in time.

Justin Bates launched across the table, which was thankfully bolted into place, or it probably would have connected with her before she could move out of the way, and lunged for her.

She and Jake reacted simultaneously, she grabbed Justin's arm and twisted it up behind his back, eliciting a howl of pain from him, and slammed him into the wall as Jake snapped a pair of handcuffs on.

"You think you can talk to me like that, woman?" Justin bellowed as they opened the door and dragged him into the hall, fighting against them every step of the way.

"You're what's wrong with the world. Women like you who don't know their place.

You think you can tell a man what to do.

Women belong in the house, cooking and cleaning and taking care of their man.

I bet you don't even have a man. Who would want a woman like you?"

With that final statement, he shoved his bodyweight sideways, throwing her into the wall. Her broken wrist got caught between her body and the wall, and she hissed as pain sliced through the limb.

Cops filled the hallway, dragging Justin away from her and down toward a holding cell where he would be kept until he was taken off to jail, charged with assaulting a police officer, which would hopefully get them the warrants they needed to look closer into his life.

"You think you can get away with treating men like this?" Justin screamed at her.

“Sooner or later you’ll get what you deserve. Someone will wipe that smug smirk off your face.”

“You okay?” Jake asked.

“Fine, I’ve had worse.”

“What was that all about?”

Florence jumped at the silky, smooth voice behind her. Just hearing it had her insides turning to melted butter, and her lips tingled just remembering the kiss they had shared last night.

That kiss had kept her up half the night as she obsessed about whether or not she should trust Eli enough to give him a chance.

“It was nothing,” she said, not wanting to get into a discussion on what had just happened. In her life it really was nothing.

“It didn’t sound like nothing. It sounded like that man was threatening you.” Eli’s hands clamped—albeit gently—around her shoulders and turned her to face him. Protectiveness was oozing out of him, and she had to roll her eyes at him.

“You remind me of my brother.”

“Excuse me?” Eli looked aghast at the prospect. “That is not what a man who was kissing you just twenty-four hours ago wants to hear.”

“Relax, Romeo, that’s not what I meant. I didn’t say that I wasn’t attracted to you. It’s just the protectiveness, you’re just like Fletcher. You know I am trained, I know what I’m doing, this isn’t the first time a suspect has threatened me.”

“You're attracted to me?” Eli was grinning at her like an idiot.

“I thought we already established that last night.”

“You mean when I kissed you?” His arm circled her waist, and he drew her up against him.

As it always did when he touched her, her heart began to beat a frantic rhythm in her chest, and she became hyper-aware of every part of her body that Eli touched.

He lowered his head, his lips hovered just above hers, she could feel his warm breath, and she tilted her head to bring him closer.

Just when she thought he was going to kiss her, he spoke instead, “Can I drive you home?”

Surprised and disappointed, that he hadn't kissed her or even asked her out on another date, Florence quickly stamped down the feelings. She was the one who had consistently turned him down, she shouldn't be surprised that he had finally decided to take her at her word.

Why should she expect him to fight for her when she hadn't been sure she was willing to fight for herself?

No one in her life had fought for her.

Even her brother had left to go to college, leaving her behind in that hellhole.

Eli wasn't any different.

No man was different.

6:37 P.M.

Vulnerability was obvious in Florence's sky blue eyes, but somehow Eli knew she wouldn't want to know that he could read her so easily.

"You leaving now?" he asked, releasing his hold on her but claiming her hand.

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“I was going to do a little more work into researching our suspect before I called it quits for the day.” Florence tried to tug her hand free from his, but he only tightened his grip, and she finally gave up.

“We can do that in the morning,” Jake spoke up. “Callie asked me to be home by seven because her parents are coming over for dinner, if I leave now I can be there not much after.”

“Then I guess you’re leaving now,” he said with a grin.

“I guess,” Florence agreed but didn't look too happy about it. Whatever was running through her head right now was evidently something that was upsetting her.

“I’ll give you a ride home, do you need to get anything before we leave?” he asked Florence.

“My purse is upstairs on my desk.”

“I’ll wait down here while you go get it.”

She opened her mouth, her face troubled, but then snapped it closed, nodded, and disappeared off down the corridor.

“Did she tell you that she thought someone was watching her apartment this morning?” he asked Florence’s partner once they were alone.

Jake’s eyes grew wide. “No, she never said a thing.”

“I went to pick her up, and she pulled a gun on me, thought I was the one watching her.”

“Were you?” Jake arched a brow. “I know you’ve been sending her flowers, calling her, and hanging around ever since you saved her from getting hit by that car.”

Eli tried hard not to lose his temper at the insinuation. “I’m interested in her.”

“And she’s told you several times that I’ve heard, that she’s not interested.”

“She might say the words, but you know she doesn’t mean them.”

Jake studied him for a long moment. “Look, from what I know of her childhood, it was pretty messed up. She doesn’t trust easily. If you’re interested, you better be prepared to be patient. I have a feeling you’re not a patient man.”

“I can be patient with her.”

“Thanks for telling me about someone watching her.”

“I told you so you can do something about it.”

“And I will.” Jake gave a nod then walked off.

While he waited for Florence, Eli debated the odds that he could convince her to come and stay with him until they found whoever had been outside her apartment.

His hotel was safe, and the apartment he would be moving into had excellent security, even though he hadn’t officially moved in yet, he owned the penthouse, and he kind of liked the idea of staying there with Florence.

“I thought you had snuck out the back,” he teased when Florence finally returned.

That coaxed a smile out of her. “I thought about it.”

Instead of ordering her to give him a chance to prove to her that there could be something real between them, he took her hand again, pleased when she threaded their fingers together. “You hungry?” he asked as he led her outside to where his driver was waiting for them.

“Starving. Jake and I were so busy today we skipped lunch.”

Stamping down a flare of jealousy at the thought of her spending all day every day with a man who could be a model, he said, “How about we grab some takeout on the way to your apartment?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess we can do that.”

Pleasantly surprised by Florence’s acquiescence to what he considered to be a date—not that he was going to tell her that just yet, he didn’t want to spook her—he opened the car door for her. “What do you want?”

“I’m easy, whatever you like is fine by me.”

“I’m in the mood of pizza.”

“Pizza is good, but I only like cheese on my pizza.”

“What?” He shot her a look like she was crazy, then pulled out his phone to order the pizzas from his favorite place. “No mushrooms? No ham? No olives? Nothing at all?”

“Nothing at all,” she echoed.

“You’re crazy, but cheese pizzas it is. So tell me what other foods you like and don’t like,” he said as the car took off.

“My favorite vegetable is carrots, I love to snack on them raw, but for some reason, I don’t like them grated in salads and things.”

“Actually, I get that. I love chicken, especially fried chicken, but for some reason I can’t stand chicken nuggets. When I was a kid my mom was always trying to convince me to try them, they were her favorite easy to cook dinner, but she could never get me to like them.” Eli smiled at the memory, right up until the very end of her life it had been a running joke between the two of them.

“Are you and your mom close?”

“We were. She died about eighteen months ago. She had cancer.”

“I’m sorry.” Florence reached out and took his hand, squeezing it.

Keeping hold of her hand, he brushed his thumb backward and forward across her knuckles.

“It was hard losing her. We were close ever since I can remember. Even as a teenager I loved spending time with her. We traveled a lot, I lived in London, Paris, Rome, Sydney, and Geneva when I was growing up, my father worked a lot, and my brother was ten years older than me, so my mom and I would always go for lots of walks, taking in the atmosphere and the culture of each new city. Those times walking around, just the two of us, those are some of the best moments of my childhood.”

“It’s nice you have memories like that.” Florence gave a sad smile, and he wondered what her relationship with her parents was like. “What about your dad, were you close with him as well?”

“We had a different relationship than the one I had with my mom.

He was the disciplinarian, and I could be a bit of a wild kid.

He worked a lot, and my brother was the one who was supposed to take over his business, so he spent a lot of time grooming him, but he made time for me too.

I played soccer, and he always came to my games to cheer me on, at the time, I didn't realize it, but looking back I appreciate that he made that time for me. A lot of my friends' parents didn't.”

“You lost your dad too, right?”

“About a year after my mom. He loved her so much he didn't want to live without her.”

“And your brother died too? Is that why you ended up running the business?”

“He died when I was twenty and in college. Anaphylaxis, he was allergic to bees and got stung while he was at the park. He was dead before the ambulance arrived, they tried to revive him, but he was already gone.”

“You’ve lost so many people, I'm so sorry.” Florence wiggled sideways across the back seat so she was sitting right up against his side.

“Makes you realize how fragile life is.”

“Yeah, it does.”

Something in Florence’s voice said she also knew something about life’s fragility, only perhaps for very different reasons than he did.

He wanted to ask about her childhood and her family but wasn't sure she'd tell him anything.

She had mentioned a brother, and it hadn't seemed like he was a sensitive topic.

The car stopped, and he decided that he might as well go for it. "You only have one brother?"

"Fletcher, he's two years older than me."

When she didn't offer more he pushed. "And your parents, are you close with either of them?"

"My dad took off before I was a year old, I know his name but nothing else about him. My mother was a mother in name only, she never really cared about me and Fletcher, we raised ourselves."

Eli hated that she'd been without a loving family her whole life, and it didn't take a genius to figure out why she was hesitant to give him a chance. She'd never had a family who was there for her, and she had no reason to believe that happy families existed.

He would show her what a real family looked like, what it felt like to know that there were people who had your back, who were there to support you.

He wanted her to know what it felt like not to be all alone in the world.

A knock on his door signaled the arrival of the pizzas, and he opened it and took them from his driver. The smell of pizza permeated the car, and he handed Florence a takeaway cup of coffee and set the box on his lap, opening it, the steam filled the back of the car.

“You're not by yourself anymore, Florence,” he told her.

“Coffee, pizza, as far as I'm concerned this constitutes a date.

The first of many dates to come. I'm not looking for no-strings hot sex, there are any number of women I could find if that's all I wanted.

I want what my parents had. I'm looking for someone to share my life with. I'm looking for you.”

With that, he curled a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss every bit as steamy as the pizza.

Chapter

Five

It was getting harder and harder to wait between kills.

It had only been four days since he dumped the last body in the trash, and already he had sought out his next victim.

He knew the risks. The more often he killed, the more evidence he gave the cops.

As careful as he was to clean down each of his victims, there was always the chance that he would make a mistake and leave a piece of himself behind.

If he kept the number of kills to a minimum, then he decreased his risks.

But he was finding he could no longer do that.

There was something inside him compelling him to keep going. Each kill, each time he forced someone to see him, instead of feeling soothed like a balm had been smoothed over his anger, all he felt was the burning desire to do it again.

And again.

And again.

He was pretty sure it would never be enough.

Not that he cared. He liked killing, he liked taking his anger out on others, and he certainly had enough anger to parcel out every day for the rest of his life without relieving himself of his burden.

Because killing had become a compulsion, he was already here, standing outside the door of what would be victim number sixteen.

He was quite impressed with himself and how smoothly this had all gone.

For eighteen months now, he had been breaking into women's homes, tying them up, and keeping them alive for forty-eight hours while he unloaded a lifetime's worth of woe onto them.

Then he would strangle them, carve his message into their flesh, and dump them in dumpsters, and so far the cops didn't have a single thing to pin the crimes on him.

The more he killed, the more the pressure to keep killing with perfection.

How embarrassing would it be to wind up in prison for what he had done?

Already, he had narrowly avoided a jail cell more times than he could count. That happened when you had an anger problem, and you hated women.

Rapping on the door, he pasted on a bored expression and waited.

He found that early in the morning was the best time to get to his victims, they were usually still half asleep, and being startled awake by a knock at the door had them thinking the worst. While they opened the door expecting to see a cop standing there waiting to deliver bad news, they saw him instead and immediately dropped their guard. That was when he swooped.

He knocked again, harder this time, and waited.

Moments later he heard footsteps inside.

When the door was thrown open a pretty young woman in her mid-twenties stood there, wrapped in a fluffy pink robe, her long hair a wild mess around her face. Her eyes were wide with fear, but when she saw him, she immediately relaxed.

“Morning, ma’am,” he said in his well-practiced disinterested tone.

“Sorry to wake you so early, just letting you know that because of maintenance work in the building, we’re going to be turning off the electricity at six.

We’re letting everyone know so they can be prepared and have time to cook breakfast and get ready for work and school before we cut it. ”

“Thanks so much for letting me know, I’d never be able to do anything with this hair without my hairdryer and a lot of product,” she said with a giggle as she ran her fingers through her messy locks.

He gave her a small smile. “Would you please sign this to confirm that you’ve been notified,” he said as he held out the clipboard.

“Sure thing. You get a lot of people complaining and claiming they weren't informed?” she asked as she took the clipboard.

The second her attention was focused on scrawling her name on the sheet that looked like it had been signed by half the other residents in the building, he made his move.

His hand whipped out, his fingers curling around her throat because he knew that would immediately draw her attention to fear that her air supply would be cut off and

stop her from screaming and drawing unwanted attention.

As his hand squeezed tightly enough to make her panic, he pushed backward, shoving her into the apartment.

Spinning her around so her body was tight up against his, he moved his hand to cover her mouth while his other wrapped across her chest, pinning her arms to her side and effectively preventing her from fighting.

He kicked the door closed and let out a sigh of relief that everything had gone smoothly once again.

Just as he was patting himself on the back for a job well done, he felt something sharp slice into his leg.

His attention diverted, he must have loosened his grip just a little because the woman let herself go limp, and when he went to adjust his hold on her she managed to fling herself forward and out of his grip.

“What did you do?” he growled, looking down to find blood trickling down his leg.

“Protected myself,” the woman said, a smug smile on her face as she ran for the door.

No way was she getting away.

No way.

Lunging toward her, he managed to reach her just as she got her hand on the doorknob and threw it open.

She opened her mouth, and he could see she was dragging in a breath ready to scream

at the top of her lungs. If she did, everyone within earshot would be calling the cops and come running to see if there was anything they could do to help.

That wasn't happening.

Grabbing a handful of hair, he yanked backward, and she screeched and stumbled.

“You don’t get to leave,” he hissed as he threw her onto the floor and closed the door.

The woman was a fighter, and she was already crawling toward a table where he could see a cell phone.

Stepping forward, he kicked her in the side as hard as he could.

She gasped in pain and fell flat on her stomach, clutching at her ribs.

He followed up with another kick because he was annoyed that everything had been messed up.

He was bleeding, she’d gotten to the door and gotten it open so he couldn’t know for sure if anyone had seen or heard something that they shouldn’t, which meant this whole thing was ruined.

He had to call it off, that was the only sensible thing to do.

That didn't mean the woman got to live.

He’d meant what he said before, she didn't get to leave.

His foot pressed down on her back, and he shoved her into the carpet, pleased when she cried out in agony as he stomped on her no doubt broken ribs.

“You ruined everything, because of that you’re going to suffer before you die.

Women think they get to do whatever they want, they don’t care about the pain they cause, they don’t care about anyone but themselves.

All you do is poison everything you touch.

You should have stayed locked in the house cooking and cleaning, it’s all you’re good for. ”

Reaching down, he curled both hands into her robe and lifted her off the floor, throwing her across the room. He stalked over to where she had landed and kicked her again, this time in the face, before hefting her up and tossing her again.

Throwing another punch at her face, he was satisfied when he got her right in the mouth, wiping away her ability to ever again give a smug smile. He grabbed her shoulders, slamming her head into the floor over and over again, then curled his hands around her neck and squeezed.

By the time the woman was limp, the life choked out of her, he was breathing hard, his heart drumming in his chest, tears of anger and release blurring his vision.

His outburst had achieved what he’d wanted, but it had also been loud and messy.

There was no way he could stay here and clean everything up, and he wasn't prepared to take the body with him when he left, that meant he was just going to have to hope that any of his own blood and DNA that had been left behind would be buried under all of the woman’s blood.

Standing, he wiped her blood from his hands then realized he was now smeared in blood, he could hardly go back outside looking like this, but he didn't have time to

hang around and clean up. If someone had heard the scuffle then the police could already be on the way here.

There was a black coat hanging on a hook by the door, it looked big, and he thought he might fit into it.

It was a woman's jacket, but it was still early, and there shouldn't be too many people about.

He only had to get to his car, and even if it drew attention it was better than walking away covered in blood.

Delivering one last kick to the dead woman lying at his feet, he grabbed the jacket, put it on, and then hurried through the building as quickly as he could.

7:10 A.M.

Anger.

When Florence walked into the room that was the first thing she thought.

There was blood smeared on two of the walls, and on several places on the carpet. The body of Jana Friedrich lay in an awkward position on her side, off to one side of the room.

About an hour ago, one of the neighbors in the building had been walking past on their way to work and noticed the door half open. He'd stopped and looked inside, and as soon as he'd seen the blood and the body, he'd immediately called 911.

Given the message on the wall, she and Jake had been called in.

Whoever had beaten Jana to death, had left behind a drawing of an eye, done in blood, on one of the apartment walls.

Given that the Dumpster Killer had been leaving a message about being nothing on his victims, and had been dumping the bodies in the pattern of an eye, they had come to the only logical conclusion that Jana was the killer's sixteenth victim.

Only something had obviously gone wrong.

With every other victim, the killer had kept them alive for two days, as evidenced by the timeline of when they had last been seen and time of death, and the fact that there were red marks on their wrists and ankles indicative of being restrained for a period of time.

From the looks of things, Jana had been strangled, but only after she had been badly beaten.

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As soon as she'd gotten the call, she had come right to Jana's apartment.

Part of her had expected Eli to be waiting outside her building to pick her up, and she had to admit she was a little disappointed to find that he wasn't. She'd enjoyed learning more about him last night, and the way his face lit up when he talked about the family he had loved and lost had touched her, making her wish she'd had that same kind of family.

Although she wasn't quite ready to admit that pizza in the back of his car constituted a date, it had been fun, and after they'd discussed families, they'd talked about all sorts of things.

Hobbies, sports, music, things they liked and things they didn't, and by the time they got to her apartment, she'd been tempted to invite him up.

She'd resisted though.

She liked Eli, underneath the cockiness and the charming veneer there was a real softie. The way he talked about how much he'd enjoyed spending time with his mom told her that he had a big heart, and that he wasn't afraid to get in touch with his softer side when he was with people he cared about.

He'd certainly been patient with her even though she had insisted over and over again that she wasn't going to go on a date with him. His persistence was beginning to break through her barriers, and maybe soon she would be ready to go on a real date.

The idea didn't fill her with anxiety like it usually did.

She had never dated seriously, never wanted to put herself in a situation to be hurt by men the way her mother had been, never wanted to be left raising kids alone.

Once she had sworn off the whole casual dating with guys she met in bars, she'd expected that if she ever did settle down it would be with someone who could never disappoint her.

Someone nice and boring and predictable and stable.

And then Eli had come barreling—literally—into her life, and she realized she was falling for the opposite of everything she'd believed she wanted.

He could have any woman he wanted, so why would he choose her?

What happened when—if—he lost interest in her at some point, and decided he wanted someone in his own league, his own world?

Would he abandon her and any children they shared?

He would no doubt make her sign a pre-nuptial agreement—not that she would mind—before they got married, if they divorced, would he provide for their children or turn his back on them like her own father had?

Her phone chimed with a message, and she pulled it out, smiling when she saw it was a message from Eli.

Eli

Thanks to you I was late to a meeting this

morning. I dreamed about your mouth on

me and had to take a long cold shower

when I got up

Her cheeks burned, but she couldn't help but chuckle, she'd had to take a cold shower this morning too because she'd dreamed about Eli's mouth touring her body, teasing her, pleasuring her, making her come so hard she'd been unable to think, even in her dreams.

Florence

Good morning to you too

Eli

Sorry, where are my manners, good

morning my little sex kitten

Florence

How do you know I'm a sex kitten?

We haven't had sex.

Nor are we going to any time soon

Eli

Why do you torture me?

Florence

It amuses me to see you beg ;-)

Eli

Pleasssse go on a date with me

Pleasssse have wild, hot sex with me

Pleasssse put me out of my misery

PPLLEEAAASSSSSEE!!!!

Florence

You're so silly!

Eli

I'm a regular clown

“Florence.”

She looked up from her phone as Jake walked through Jana Friedrich's front door.

Florence

I gotta go

I'm at a crime scene

Eli

Be careful, I don't want any psycho stalker

taking you out before I get to explore every

inch of that sexy body of yours

Florence

You're all heart

Eli

I do try

Seriously though, be safe, I worry about you

Having anyone who wasn't her big brother worry about her was odd, but kind of nice. And the weird thing was, she actually believed that Eli really was concerned about her.

Florence

I'm a cop, I'll be fine

I'll talk to you later

The last she'd written before she even realized it, but once she hit send she realized that texting with Eli had just become part of her daily life since they'd met just four days ago.

Eli

You betcha, princess

With a smile she couldn't quite wipe off her face despite the carnage around her, she put her phone away, turned to her partner, and forced herself to focus.

She wasn't used to distractions in her personal life getting in the way of her work, and she was going to have to be careful not to let it interfere with things because her job was important, people were counting on her.

"That Eli?" Jake asked with a knowing smile as he nodded at her pocket where she'd put her phone.

"Why do you ask questions when you already know the answer?"

"Because it annoys you," he grinned. "Eli told me someone was watching your apartment yesterday."

"He shouldn't have done that." This thing that was developing between them—whatever it was—was never going to work if he tried to go all alpha on her and undermine her with her colleagues.

She was a cop, trained in self-defense, a perfect shot, and she didn't take unnecessary risks, she could certainly take care of herself.

"He was worried about you."

"You say that like its cute," she complained.

"I like seeing someone worry about you. You tell me if anything else happens, no

excuses.” He gave her his I’m serious look, and she rolled her eyes but nodded. If someone really was stalking her, she wouldn’t be stupid enough not to take it seriously and call in help if she needed it.

“The killer left something behind this time, something I don’t think he meant for us to see,” she informed her partner, walking over to an evidence bag and picking it up.

“What is it?” Jake asked.

“The answer to how he gets into their apartments. He pretends to be a construction worker here to tell them that the electricity is going to be turned off. This form says that they’re signing their admission that they were informed and Jana Friedrich’s signature is on it.

Once he hands them the clipboard, they’re distracted, he uses that to overpower them.”

“What went wrong here this morning? This is an explosion of anger, something happened to disrupt his usual plans.”

“Come here.” Florence walked to a puddle of blood close to the door. “See this, I think this one is his. I think she had something sharp in her hand when he grabbed her, and she was able to get away from him. At least temporarily.”

“What makes you think this is his and not Jana’s?”

“Because it’s so small and there’s no mess around it.

The others all look like he threw her somewhere, and she crashed into a table, or a chair, or the pile of magazines, but this one is just here on its own.

If this is his blood—and CSU will test it and see if it belongs to the victim—then we finally have something concrete on him.

We could get a hit in the system, we could have this guy in custody today maybe, or at least within in the next couple of days.

He messed up this morning, got cocky, and thought that he was never going to get caught, and because of that arrogance, we finally got what we needed to nail him to the wall. ”

7:26 P.M.

“We’re not offering that much,” Eli said into the phone. One of the things he hated the most about running a business of this size was that he couldn’t personally be in control of everything that happened.

Lennox Real Estate had offices around the world, and owned and managed rental properties, hotels, office buildings, apartment blocks, besides buying and selling land, and sometimes flipping houses or even hotels.

The properties were spread over twenty countries, and since he was only one man, there was no way he could personally oversee everything.

When it came to his company he could be ruthless.

A business had one purpose; to make money for the business owner.

His father’s touch was a little lighter than his. As he was in his personal life, he was a charmer, and he was always looking to charm and talk his way into the best deal possible, but when that didn't work, he was always ready to do whatever it took to close a deal.

Right now, he was past the charming stage and well into the playing hardball phase.

“They said they won't take anything under three million,” Don from his Toronto office told him.

“Our offer is two point five million, and that's final,” he said firmly, what he was offering was a fair price considering the state of the hotel he was looking to buy, and the amount of work that would have to be put into it before he could sell it.

“And if they turn it down?”

“Then, we'll simply wait for them to go under and buy it for even less.

” The hotel was going under, as far as he knew, the couple who owned it were close to filing for bankruptcy, not only was his offer fair, but it also saved the couple from having to take drastic measures.

If they wanted to wait him out hoping to get what they wanted they would be sorely disappointed, and they'd be the ones hurting, not him.

There was plenty of real estate in the world, he wasn't going to miss owning one hotel in one city if he missed out on it.

“I'll talk with them again in the morning.”

“I'll be waiting for your call,” he said before disconnecting.

Dropping his head into his hand, he stifled a yawn.

It had been a long day, and because he'd had almost back to back meetings, he hadn't been able to squeeze in time to see Florence. It had only been twenty-four hours since

he'd dropped her off at her apartment and left her with a kiss, but he felt like he was having withdrawals.

Every time he touched her, kissed her, it was like a fix, but he wanted more, it wasn't enough, and he was starting to think he could never get enough of her.

“Long day?”

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Eli looked up to find Elliot standing in the doorway. “I thought you went home already, don’t you have Bessie this week?”

“She and Susannah were excited about painting each other’s nails, apparently they have little stick-on hearts or something they were going to put on them or something like that. I don’t know, but Bessie was very excited when she was telling me about it.”

“And you don’t want to put hearts on your nails and paint them?” he asked with a snicker.

“If Bessie asked me to I would,” Elliot said, coming into the office and dropping down onto the chair on the other side of his desk. “I’ve dressed up in tutus, and had tea parties with a bunch of dollies, and danced around to Disney songs. I’d do anything my little princess asked.”

“You really would, wouldn’t you? What changed? I heard about you, the way you spoke to people, the way you treated your employees, that you were always in a bad mood, and now you’re the guy who turns into a puddle of goo over the small things.”

“Puddle of goo, huh?” Elliot asked, amused.

He shrugged. “That’s how I always thought of my brother and how he was with his son. With his wife too.”

“Falling in love changes things.”

“It certainly changed you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. I can’t imagine my life without Susannah in it. She might drive me crazy sometimes, but she’s everything to me.

She’s an amazing woman, an amazing wife, an amazing mother and step-mother, every day I’m thankful that she spilled coffee on my car. If she hadn’t, then I don’t know what my life would be like.”

“Did you two fall in love at first sight?”

Elliot chuckled. “Actually, I think Susannah hated me at first. I didn’t make a very good first impression. I may or may not have made a huge deal out of the fact that she spilled coffee on my brand new Porsche. I eventually wore her down though, convinced her to see me as someone other than the rich jerk she thought I was. But she was hesitant at first, had this notion that because we came from two different worlds that we wouldn’t work.”

“How did you convince her to give you a chance?”

“I wanted her from the moment I saw all her sass, but she had this idea that we had to do something in each other’s world before she would commit to anything.

It wasn’t an easy road, especially once we found out about Bessie, but we fought for us.

Sometimes we didn’t always fight in the right way, and sometimes we let other people and our pasts get in the way, but we figured things out. I think the fact that I got a tattoo just like the one she had helped,” Elliot finished with a wink.

“Tattoos, huh?” He’d store that idea away.

“Worked for me with Susannah. I take it this isn’t just a random conversation. You're thinking about the cop.”

“I haven't been able to think of anything but Florence since I met her.”

“I take it she’s still hesitant and turning you down.”

“Kind of. I picked her up last night, and we got takeout on the drive back to her apartment, and we’ve kissed a few times, I know she’s interested, and I know she feels this attraction the same as I do, but she’s scared.”

“Do you know what about?”

“I know that her childhood wasn't great, her dad left when she was a baby, and I take it her mom wasn't much of a mother. She has a brother that she seems to like, but I get the feeling she doesn’t let people get too close to her.”

“How are you going to get past her fears?”

“I have an idea.” He grinned. Before he’d made this last work call he’d made a few phone calls to set something up.

“From that grin, I'm guessing you're pretty pleased with whatever you cooked up.”

“I made some pretty awesome Valentine’s Day plans.”

“Dinner at a fancy restaurant?”

“That’s something you would do. Nope, my plans are on a much bigger scale. I have everything set up, but my biggest problem is going to be convincing her to go with me. Any tips from the expert?”

“You know you're talking about a guy whose Valentine's Day plans are dinner at home with a five-year-old and a baby, and then if we're lucky and the stars all align we'll get one shot at hot, mind-blowing sex before we both pass out.”

“Beggars can't be choosers.” He grinned. “And you got the girl, so between the two of us you're definitely the expert.”

Elliot pondered for a moment. “Trust your gut and follow your heart.”

“That's very poetic,” he said, surprised.

“I honestly don't think there was much I wouldn't have done to convince Susannah that we should be together.

I just felt it, I can't explain it any better than that. I know she did too once she let go of her concerns. So the question is, what is your gut telling you, and is your heart telling you it's worth the work to prove to Florence that you two could have something real.

Only you can answer those questions.” Elliot stood and walked to the door where he paused.

“Can I take it that you won't be in the office tomorrow?”

Eli didn't even have to think about what his heart was saying, it was screaming at him that he shouldn't let Florence get away. His gut was also telling him what he had to do to get her to agree to his Valentine's Day plans.

“Oh, I definitely will not be coming into the office tomorrow.”

“Hope your plan goes off without a hitch.”

“Me too.” Florence was stubborn, but she wasn't stupid, and she was already getting used to the idea that he wasn't going anywhere. If she said yes to his plans for tomorrow, then he was pretty sure that by this time tomorrow, they would be a couple.

8:53 P.M.

Her optimism this morning that this case might be wrapped up by the end of the day was over.

Justin Bates had been in custody when Jana Friedrick had been murdered, so if she was the sixteenth victim of the Dumpster Killer, he wasn't the man they were looking for.

So either the eye painted in blood at the scene was a random thing, or an attempt to throw them off the case by the real killer, or Justin wasn't the serial killer.

Florence wasn't sure which was worse.

She liked Justin for the Dumpster Killer, he fit their profile, hated women, was definitely full of rage, but he had been in a jail cell waiting to try to get bail, there was no possible way he could have killed Jana.

If the cases were related, then they were back to square one in finding the serial killer.

There was always the chance that the DNA that CSU had gotten from the blood at the apartment—which she had been correct in assuming belonged to the assailant and not Jana—would get a hit in the system, but they couldn't count on that.

If forensics didn't work out then she didn't know where she and Jake would look next.

Dropping the file she had been poring over, Florence rubbed her temples, she was getting a headache.

Disappointment over the case wasn't the only disappointment she'd faced today.

Other than the couple of texts they'd exchanged this morning, she hadn't heard from Eli all day.

She missed him.

It didn't make any sense that she was falling for him so quickly, especially given her past and who he was, and what she's always thought she would want in a man if she were ever to settle down.

But none of that seemed to matter.

She was attracted to him, he was a good looking guy, so that went without saying, but it went deeper than that.

She had actually had a good time with him last night on their date that she wasn't quite ready to admit was a date. He'd made her laugh, and she'd liked seeing his sweeter side when he'd talked about his family.

He was charming and undeniably cocky, but underneath that he had a big heart, and that made him kind of adorable.

Could something really develop between them?

Something real?

Something lasting?

Did she even believe that relationships could last?

Not only had her dad abandoned her and her brother, but her mother had gone through a grand total of seventeen men before she graduated high school, none of them had lasted more than a few months, and each was worse than the last.

How could she believe in happy endings when her life experience was exactly the opposite?

Her gut told her that Eli was different, that there wasn't a single similarity between him and the men who had her putting a lock on her bedroom door and sleeping against it so she'd know if any of them tried to enter during the night.

Eli might be a good guy, but he was so far out of her league it terrified her.

She'd grown up in a trailer in the middle of a field without electricity and running water, what did she know about fancy charity balls, and which fork was for salad and which was for dessert, and talking with people who had never had to worry about going to bed hungry?

Despite all of her worries, she grinned when her phone chimed with a text message, and she saw it was from Eli.

Eli

Hey, princess, I missed you today

She'd missed him too, and this time she wasn't going to let fear make her run and hide. She'd never hidden from anything else in her life, and she wasn't about to start now.

Florence

Missed you too

Eli

Success!

I knew if I tried hard enough I could get

you to admit that you liked me

Florence

Don't go getting a big head

Eli

Too late ;-)

Florence

Are you always this cocky?

Eli

Confident not cocky, and yep!

Florence

Po-tay-toe po-ta-toe

I'm going to stick with cocky

Eli

Since you think I'm cocky anyway then

let me warn you that the next time I see you

I'm not just going to kiss you I'm going to

make you come so hard I'll have something

to be cocky about

Her face turned beet red at his declaration.

Her body responded instantly, and she squirmed on the couch, suddenly uncomfortable and needing a release that only Eli could give her.

Eli

Got nothing to say about that, princess?

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Her mouth went dry, and she could barely draw in enough air to function. What did she say to that? She didn't want to encourage him, she wasn't ready for sex yet, and yet her body was screaming at her that it vehemently disagreed.

Florence

I don't think sex on the street

outside my apartment, or sex in the

back of your car is appropriate

Eli

Who said that tomorrow morning

was when I'd see you next?

A knock on the door accompanied the text.

Florence set her phone down on the small table by her couch, needing a moment to calm her racing heart and cool her libido before she replied to Eli.

She checked the peephole and sucked in a breath when she saw who was standing on the other side of her door.

Opening the door, she didn't even have time to say anything before he had grabbed

her, dragged her close, and his mouth descended on hers, kissing her like he was possessed and she was the only cure.

Eli's arm hooked under her bottom, and he lifted her up, carrying her into the apartment and kicking the door closed behind them.

He carried her to her small kitchen and set her down on the counter, standing between her legs as he continued to kiss her, his tongue probing into her mouth, teasing hers and making her entire body tingle.

"If you want me to stop you better say something now," Eli whispered against her lips.

Stop was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't say it.

She didn't truly want him to stop.

As much as the logical side of her brain said that there were too many things that could go wrong and that she could wind up with a broken heart, her body and her heart said that she wanted more.

She wanted what Eli was offering.

Wasn't it unfair to pin the actions of others on him?

He'd done nothing to justify her doubt—it was simply a product of her past—and if he said that he wanted her and wanted to see where things could go with them, then shouldn't she believe him and take him at his word?

"Don't stop," she said, curling her fingers into his hair and drawing his mouth back to hers.

She was wearing a pair of pajama pants and a tank top, and Eli's confident hands slipped under her top, sliding up to claim one of her breasts. She moaned into his mouth as his expert fingers kneaded her and then began to roll her sensitive nipple between his fingertips.

She almost came from that simple touch, it had been so long since she'd been with a man, and she'd never ever been with one who she had feelings for, it had always just been about getting her needs met. But this...this was something else. This time her heart was involved.

It shouldn't be, it was too soon, but it was what it was.

When his hand left her breast, trailing down her stomach, she mewed her protest.

"Don't worry, princess," he chuckled, "I have something better for you."

His hand slipped under the waistband of her PJ pants and went straight to the bud that was already swollen and needy, desperate for some attention. She was wet and dripping, and Eli ran his fingers through it before returning his attention to the spot that was crying out for him.

He continued to make love to her with his mouth, while his hand expertly ministered to her, and it was only a minute later that white spots began to dance in front of her eyes.

They exploded into a mass of colorful confetti as her body wound up tighter than she had realized was possible, and then unfurled in a blast of pleasure that seemed to go on and on.

By the time the feelings faded, she was slumped forward, resting against Eli's chest.

The smug grin on his face made her give him a lazy smile. “Pretty pleased with yourself, huh?”

“Anyone else ever made you come that hard?”

“Nope.”

“Then yeah, I'm pretty pleased with myself.”

“You’re so cocky.” She idly ran her fingers through his dark hair then let them trail down his cheek, his stubble tickling them. Her gaze fell to the tent in his pants. She moved her hand to unbuckle his belt, wanting to give him the same pleasure he’d bestowed upon her, but he stopped her.

“Not tonight,” he said.

“But you’re going to be uncomfortable if you don’t do something about that.”

“You’re not ready for sex.”

“I never said that.”

“You didn't have to.”

Since he was right, she didn't bother arguing with him. “We don’t have to have sex for you to get off.”

“I know, but really, it’s fine,” he said, his hand lifting to tenderly cup her cheek.

“You’re nervous about this, about us, and I don’t want you to think that all I'm interested in is sex, because I’m not.”

I'm interested in you, princess. Sex can wait until you're ready, and I don't want to come until I'm buried deep inside you."

That might just be the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her.

Florence nestled her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tucked against his chest. This was nice. She'd never been held just for the sake of being held, and until this moment, she hadn't realized just how much she'd needed it.

Being held like this was so intimate, in Eli's arms she felt safe and protected, but also cared about and wanted.

Maybe there was something in this happy ending stuff after all.

Chapter

Six

He knocked on her door and waited, unsure what kind of reception he was going to get when she opened the door.

It had only been a few hours since Florence had gently told him it was time for him to head home after that amazing make-out session.

Watching her face as she came, feeling her muscles tightening around his fingers as he drew out her pleasure for as long as he could, that was something he could get used to.

But he wanted more.

He wanted a deeper connection, more than just making out and hot sex, and he was pretty sure this was the first step in getting it.

“It’s only me,” Eli called out when he could hear her moving around on the other side of her door.

“Eli?” She threw open the door and shot him a confused frown. “Is something wrong? It’s four-thirty in the morning, what are you doing here? Are you going to drive me to work, because I don’t usually leave for another couple of hours?”

“I am here to pick you up, but not to take you to work,” he explained with a grin.

“What? Where are you taking me then?”

“To Florence.”

“Florence?” Her eyes grew wide, and she stared at him in disbelief. “I thought that was just you trying to, you know, convince me to go out with you. I didn't think you were serious about it.”

“Dead serious. I told you, anyone whose name is Florence should visit there at least once in their life. What better time to go than for Valentine's Day?”

“Isn't that kind of over the top for a date? I mean it must take hours?—”

“Ten,” he interrupted. “Ten hours.”

“We can't fly to Florence, we don't have tickets, and by the time we got to the airport, and tried to find something, and waited for the flight, even if we didn't check bags it would take hours to get through border security, and...”

“We won't need to worry about any of that,” he assured her. “We'll be taking my personal plane. I made the arrangements last night so everything is all set and ready to go. All we need to do is turn up at the airport. Ten hours there, ten back, I figure we'll walk through the streets of Florence then have dinner at this beautiful Villa I know of, and we'll be back in New York in twenty-four hours.”

Shock was written all over her face at his suggestion. “I can't just go away for twenty-four hours. I'm in the middle of a serial killer case that is quickly spinning out of control, not to mention the other cases Jake and I are working.”

“I already spoke to your boss and your partner, and they both said they thought you should go. They said you hadn't taken a day off in almost two years and you deserve

a break.

It's one day, Florence. Let me treat you, take you someplace special and spoil you rotten.

The case will be waiting for you when you get back, and because I know you're a workaholic and that taking this break would be hard for you, I got sealed copies of your files for you so you can work a little on the plane if you want. Don't worry I didn't take a peek at them."

Although Eli didn't let it show, he was nervous. He wanted Florence all to himself for a whole day, but he knew he was taking a big gamble. There was a very real chance that she could say no. He knew twenty-four hours was the most he could convince her to give up, so he'd made the most of the small window of time they'd have in the beautiful city of Florence and planned out a walk and dinner for them, and he really wanted her to say yes.

If he was going to convince her to be all in with this fledgling relationship they had growing, they needed some time away from their real lives to just spend together and connect.

"Please, Florence." Eli reached out and cupped her cheek in his hand, his thumb caressing her soft skin.

"Come with me, just relax and let go, I have everything planned out, we'll have an amazing time, just trust me.

" He caught her gaze and held it, letting her read in his eyes how important for them he thought this was.

From the look on her face, she was clearly debating with herself, and he had to fight

to keep breathing and not hold his breath as he awaited her answer. Finally, she gave a single nod. “Okay.”

“Okay?” he echoed, hardly daring to hope that she had cracked and decided to let him treat her.

Eli had the feeling that her tough upbringing had made her rely on herself and no one else, and growing up poor she probably wasn't used to extravagance like flying to another country on a private jet for twenty-four hours.

“This makes me feel weird, and a little irresponsible, but it’s obviously important to you, and it does sound kind of fun.”

“And romantic,” he added, leaning in to kiss her.

Stopping himself before he reached the point where he wanted to throw her onto the sofa, rip her clothes off and plunge into her hot, wet body—that point seemed to get closer and closer the more time he spent around Florence.

“We better get going, we’re supposed to be leaving at five. ”

“What should I wear?”

“Something comfortable, and you’ll need your coat, it’ll be cold, and once we get to Florence, we’ll mostly be outside.”

“I've never been to Italy before, the only time I've been out of the country was for a conference in London that Jake and I went to the year before last. What's Italy like?” Florence asked as she disappeared into her bedroom.

He willed his feet to stay put, he wasn't here for a peep show, and he had a feeling if

he watched her undress they wouldn't make it to the plane in time to leave.

"It's beautiful. There's so much history there, and Florence is a gorgeous city.

I wish that we were able to spend more time there, but I packed in as much sightseeing as I could for the couple of hours we'll be there.

And the Villa I'm taking you to for dinner is just amazing. "

"Tell me about it."

"It's called Villa Il Leccio. It's been around since the 1200s, and in the eighteenth century it was transformed into a country house for the Landi family.

It's been in their family for nine generations, and they still live there.

Part of the house is used as a bed and breakfast, and they have the most mouthwatering food, cooked onsite, with a lot of the ingredients grown on the farm.

The views across the Tuscan countryside are breathtaking, and the gardens are beautiful with roses and lavender, and lemon trees.

I wish we had more time to spend there, and next time we go we'll book a room and spend a couple of weeks exploring Tuscany. "

"Next time?" Florence asked, sticking her head around her bedroom door.

"One visit to Italy is never enough. When I take you back, not only will we explore Tuscany, but I'll take you to Rome, and Milan, and along the Amalfi Coast, and we'll need at least a couple of weeks to enjoy Venice.

” Italy was one of his favorite countries, he’d loved living there and continued to vacation there at least once a year.

Of all the cities he loved in Italy, Venice was his favorite.

There was just something about wandering its little streets, crossing bridges over the canals, and eating bowls of ice cream worth fifty Euros in St Mark’s Square that was magical in that kind of way you could never get enough of.

He couldn’t wait to share that with Florence.

He’d take her for a romantic gondola ride, they’d explore the Basilica and the Doge’s Palace, and each and every one of the islands that made up Venice, including his personal favorite, Burano with all its colorful houses.

“Awfully presumptuous of you to assume that I’ll go back to Italy with you again.”

“Hey, you’re the one that calls me cocky,” he reminded her with a teasing smile. “Princess, you aren’t just going to go back to Italy with me, you’re going to travel the world with me.

Remember, I saved your life, you’re my responsibility, it’s my job to make sure you travel the world and unlock all its secrets.

” Traveling with his parents had opened his eyes to all the world had to offer, from cozy little towns in England to thousand-year-old pyramids in Egypt, he’d loved every second of those vacations, especially just being together as a family.

Now he wanted to share that with Florence and the family they would have one day.

The thought of having a family with her didn't even surprise him.

He was in deep.

Already falling for her.

One day, they'd get married and have children, and he'd take his family to all the places he loved, sharing those experiences with them and watching the wonder and joy on their faces that he knew his parents had loved seeing on his.

When his father had died, he'd felt so alone in the world, no family left, but Florence was going to change that. She was already his, all he had to do was hope that this romantic trip to Florence was enough to convince her of that.

9:07 P.M.

Florence, Italy

"I can't believe we're here," Florence said as she tried to take in everything around her all at once. Everything had happened so quickly. Just ten hours ago she'd been woken by a knock at her door, and now she was in Italy.

In Italy .

It didn't seem real.

She'd quickly thrown on a pair of white jeans, black knee-high boots that were warm and comfortable, a blue sweater that she knew made her eyes shimmer like a summer sky, she'd added a blue woolen beanie, scarf, and gloves, and her favorite black coat that reached to mid-thigh and would provide extra warmth.

Traffic had been virtually non-existent, and by the time they climbed on board Eli's plane, barely thirty minutes had passed.

She had never been on a private jet before, and she was sure she'd made a fool of herself, with her mouth hanging open and her eyes wide, staring in shock at the gorgeous and luxurious interior.

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Eli hadn't seemed to mind, just guided her to a leather seat, sat her down, and buckled her seatbelt for her because she was still staring in awe at the plane, and then took the seat beside her. The ten-hour flight had flown by, Eli had told her all about Italy and by the time the plane had landed, she'd been bursting with excitement.

And now they were here.

Standing in the Piazza Del Duomo Giovanni in front of the amazing Baptistery of St John and it all felt so surreal.

“Have you been inside?” she asked, unable to take her eyes off the interesting building. It was octagonal, the walls clad in marble, and Eli had already told her on the plane that it was almost a thousand years old.

“On one of my trips here I did.”

“The doors are amazing.” Made of bronze with panels depicting the life of Jesus Christ, she was pretty sure she could study them for hours and still miss some of the many intricate details.

“Yeah, they are. Not as amazing as you though,” he teased.

She threw a quick grin his way, then turned to take in the Florence Cathedral. It had taken around one hundred and fifty years to build the gothic church, the dome was huge, and the pink and green marble on the walls was stunning. “It’s so beautiful, I could stare at it forever.”

“I wish we had more time, when we come back I’ll book us a couple of weeks just in Florence,” Eli promised, and she didn't even bother this time to tell him it was mighty cocky of him to just assume that they would come back here together.

They only had about ninety minutes to take in as much of Florence as they could before they were off to the Villa Il Leccio for a special dinner, and then back to the airport to head home.

“Where are we going next?” she asked, knowing she sounded like a kid on Christmas morning and not even caring.

Growing up the way she had, Florence had never expected to travel the world visiting cities that had been around for hundreds of years.

Her trip to London had been fun, and she’d done a little sightseeing, but mostly it had been a work trip, and she’d spent the majority of time in various seminars.

“We’re going to walk through the Piazza Della Repubblica, and then down to the Piazza Signoria where the Palazzo Vecchio is. In the Piazza there’s the Neptune Fountain and a copy of the David statue, and since I can't take you to see the real thing, I thought that was the next best thing.”

Hand in hand they strolled through the quiet streets, it was late, and there weren't many people about, and yet she didn't feel unsafe in the least. The streets were old and mostly stone, and the buildings looked like something from another world.

Everywhere she looked there was something that caught her attention, and she was sure that Eli must be getting tired of her constant squeals of excitement.

She was never like this, all giddy and smiley.

She worked hard, and while she had fun with her friends, most of her time was spent on work.

She'd had to fight to get to where she was in life, and since her childhood hadn't been one filled with fun moments, she wasn't accustomed to just letting her hair down and relaxing.

Casting a surreptitious glance Eli's way, she saw him watching her with a bemused expression.

Their lives had been so different. He'd grown up in various cities across the globe, traveled to the places on most people's bucket lists, and had never known a time where he couldn't have or do whatever he wanted.

Her life had been the opposite.

They'd had no money, lived in a trailer in the middle of a field, they had no electricity, no running water, she'd owned a total of about four outfits—something the other girls at school had teased her mercilessly about—and rarely had enough to eat.

She'd been a scrawny little thing, pitied by the other adults in her home town of River's End and mocked by the children, and even though she now had enough money for the necessities of life she was still short, with small breasts and no womanly curves.

She definitely wasn't beautiful, although she supposed she wasn't ugly either, and she didn't think of herself as sexy or attractive.

Doubt crept into her mind.

She was so far out of Eli's league they weren't even in the same universe.

He could have anyone, why was he putting all this effort and interest into her?

It seemed a bit extravagant if all he wanted was sex, and he claimed that he saw a future for them, but she wasn't sure.

She liked him, yes, and they unquestionably had chemistry in spades, she found conversing with him to be easy, and he made her feel things no other man ever had. But ...

"Stop thinking." Eli stopped walking, hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her close so she was flush up against his body.

"You're worrying about nothing." He touched a soft kiss to the tip of her nose and then moved to her lips, kissing her sensuously.

"You're beautiful, I'm not only glad to have you holding my hand walking the streets of Florence, I feel honored that someone so smart, and sexy, and tough is even giving me the time of day. I don't care about our differences, Florence.

I love seeing how excited you are, how enthusiastic about everything you're seeing, it's endearing and sweet, and this is the most perfect Valentine's Day I could have imagined.

To be honest, I'm the one who should be worrying."

"Why?"

"Because now I've got to find a way to top this every Valentine's Day." He gave her that cute lopsided grin of his. "Seriously, Florence, I see a future for us. Just relax and

let it happen, stop fighting it.”

He was right.

She had to find a way to let go of her insecurities.

It was hard, having spent two-thirds of her life being put down and ignored, but if she wanted a future, she was going to have to find a way to work past it.

Standing on tiptoes, she whispered her lips across his. “Thank you. Not just for this amazing date, but for not giving up on me. It means more than you can know.”

“Anytime, princess, I’ll never give up on you.”

Reassured that she was making a mountain out of a molehill and creating problems that weren't there, just because they came from two different worlds didn't mean they couldn't work as a couple. Eli didn't want her to be anything but herself, she just had to keep reminding herself of that.

When she finished gushing over the statues in the Piazza Signoria, they walked down and crossed over the Ponte Vecchio. Even though it was late and the shops were all closed, it was fascinating to cross over a bridge that had first been constructed before the year one thousand.

Eli continued to talk about the history of the sights they were walking past and by the time they walked up to the Palazzo Pitti, a renaissance palace built in the mid fourteen hundreds, and bought by the Medici family in the sixteenth century, it was time for their sightseeing to end.

“This was magical, it’s like traveling back in time,” she said, as she snuggled close to Eli to ward off the cold as they strolled down to where Eli’s car would pick them up

to take them to the farm for a late dinner.

“There are so many places in the world I want to show you.

If you're going to be as adorably curious and excited like you were tonight, then I'm going to have a hard time keeping my hands off you.” The look he had on his face when he looked down at her was hungry like he couldn't wait to devour her.

Florence knew that when it came to the two of them having sex the ball was in her court.

He wanted it, but was holding back because he knew she wasn't ready, and as much as she wanted to be ready she wasn't quite there yet. It was a big step, it wouldn't be like sex with her other partners, there was so much pressure.

If they didn't connect in the way she knew Eli thought they would, then she was afraid he would walk away.

“You did an excellent job keeping your hands to yourself,” she teased to force herself to lighten her mood.

“That sounds like a challenge. Perfect timing,” Eli said as the car pulled up to the curb. “We have nearly thirty minutes to make out before we get to the farm.”

That was all it took for her body to be instantly on edge, ready and waiting with needy anticipation for Eli's touch.

11:54 P.M.

Florence, Italy

“I don’t want to leave.”

The words were music to his ears. “I know, me either, I wish we could stay here forever, but unfortunately, you have work, and I have work. But we’ll come back and stay for a while so you can see everything you want to see.”

“I look forward to it,” Florence said with a tired smile.

It had been a long day, a ten-hour plane ride, two hours walking through the quiet streets of Florence, the drive to the Villa, dinner under the stars, they’d talked and laughed and made out a little, he couldn’t be more thrilled with how the date had turned out.

It had exceeded even his wildest dreams. That Florence was no longer disputing that he planned on taking many vacations with her made it even better.

“We have to get going soon, it’ll take us about thirty minutes to get back to the airport.

” Eli was every bit as reluctant to return to real life as Florence was, but he knew her, and he knew that any longer in the beautiful Tuscan countryside and she’d start getting antsy about her job and the case she was working.

“Just a few more minutes.”

They were curled up side by side on a bench on the back patio, they had blankets on their laps, the Italian countryside in front of them, stars sparkling down on them, and the most delicious meal of pasta in a spicy tomato sauce, and gelato. The meal had been the perfect ending to a perfect day.

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A few more minutes passed in silence while they soaked up the vibes, preparing to return to the real world.

This break had been exactly what he needed.

To keep himself busy after his father's death he'd been working sixteen plus hour days, seven days a week, he'd needed a timeout, and he and Florence had grown so much closer.

"Alright, princess, it's time to go."

"Okay," she said, sighing as she stood.

"Better button this up." He stood too and reached out to button up her coat, tucking the ends of her scarf underneath, then tugging her beanie down to cover her ears.

Eli let his fingers trace the silky smooth skin of her face, and couldn't resist curling his hand around her neck and drawing her in for a kiss.

Reluctantly, they joined hands and walked around the side of the house to meet the car.

The ride to the airport was filled with a companionable silence, but Eli intended to get Florence talking once they were on the plane. He wanted to know more about her, specifically about her fears of the two of them as a couple. But for right now, he wanted her to enjoy her final view of Italy.

Holding hands, they left the warmth of the car and hurried into the plane. Instead of taking seats in the main cabin, Eli led her through to the bedroom at the back.

“You have a bed on here?” Florence asked when she saw it. “Why didn't you show me this on the way here?”

“Because we wouldn't have left it when we got to Florence. Once I get you naked, I intend to take my time exploring every single inch of that perfect body of yours with my hands and my tongue.”

“Ten hours wouldn't have been enough time?” Florence snickered.

“Princess, a thousand hours wouldn't be enough time for me to explore your body.”

Her cheeks turned pink in that cute way they did when she was embarrassed, and he had to wonder again why such a beautiful, sexy woman got embarrassed so easily when they talked about sex. She had to know how attractive she was, didn't she?

Not for the first time he had to wonder just how bad her childhood had been.

“Come on, let's sit.” He shed his coat, and Florence did the same, then he led her to the bed, and when he sat, back up against the headboard, legs stretched out, she sat beside him. Eli wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and she immediately snuggled against his side.

“I can't believe this is how you fly, this plane is amazing, how am I ever going to fly coach again after this?”

“That is something you won't have to worry about, if my plane is unavailable, I fly first class, which means now so do you. So ...” he dragged out the word as his hand traced lazily up and down her arm.

“What?” She moved back a little so she could look up at him, those suspicious crinkles in her forehead back.

“Nothing to worry about.” He touched his thumb to her forehead and smoothed the lines away. “I just want to know more about you.”

“By that I assume you mean you have questions about my childhood.” Although her voice was neutral, he felt her stiffen and knew this was a topic she didn't enjoy discussing.

“You said that you and your brother basically raised yourselves because your mother wasn't much of a mother to you. How bad were things?” he asked, thinking he may as well just ask, there was no point in beating around the bush, and he'd always been taught that being direct was the best approach in pretty much every situation.

Florence sighed then rested her head on his shoulder, a move he suspected was mostly so she didn't have to look him in the eye when she spoke.

“Things were pretty bad. My mom was a bartender who was really more of a hooker.

What money she made she spent on booze, so Fletcher and I went hungry a lot, and we didn't have many clothes.

Our trailer didn't have electricity or running water. When my mom was home, she was preoccupied with whatever man she was dating at the time. Fletcher spent most of his time at his best friend's house, so most of the time I was alone.

I used to go to the library a lot, I liked to read, and it was quiet—and warm.

I wanted out of that life, I didn't want to be my mom when I grew up.”

It was hard to swallow past the tightness in his chest. As a child, his biggest concern had been playing football with his friends after school and keeping up with the newest video games.

He had never once, even before his father's company took off and they were wealthy, had to worry about where his next meal was coming from, and he'd taken things like hot showers and switching on a light once the sun went down for granted.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said, touching his lips to the top of her head. "I hate that you grew up that way."

Florence shrugged. "It was what it was, both Fletcher and I broke the cycle."

"Your brother still lives where you grew up?"

"Yeah, he's a deputy in River's End. I can't stand that town, I hardly ever go back there, usually when we catch up, he comes to me or we meet somewhere halfway between us. Things were different for him, he was close with his best friend's family, he'd sleep there most nights, eat there, take showers there, but I didn't really have friends, girls can be mean, and the teasing was pretty bad."

Eli shoved away the arrow of anger. "His friend's mom didn't make sure you were looked after as well?"

"She did, well she tried, but I had uh...trust issues." Florence yawned and pressed closer against him.

He got the feeling that her trust issues stemmed from a deeper place than just growing up poor, but he didn't want to push too hard on their first real conversation about her past. Eli understood without her having to say anything that he had to tread lightly.

Right now, she was beginning to trust him, but with a father who had abandoned her, a mother who hadn't cared for her, and a procession of men in and out of her life, she hadn't had stability, and she was wary of believing that he would be any different.

But he'd prove to her that he was nothing like her poor excuse for a sperm donor and her mother's boyfriends. He'd be there for her, he wouldn't let her down, he'd show her what it was like to have a family who stood by you no matter what.

"Florence, I know you have trust issues, but..." he trailed off when he heard her soft exhale and realized that she had drifted off to sleep.

Not wanting to disturb her, Eli let her rest, lifting her gently so she was cuddled on his lap.

Too wired for sleep, too angry about what Florence had been forced to endure growing up, he sat there for the remainder of the flight, stroking her soft locks and trying to figure out how to prove to her that he wouldn't let her down.

By the time they landed back in New York, and he scooped her into his arms to carry her from the plane, he still had no idea how he was going to do that, but he knew one thing for certain. Florence Harris had inserted herself into his heart, and he had no wish to dislodge her.

Chapter

Seven

Last night on the plane, she'd been about to tell him everything.

Every thing.

All the deep dark secrets of her soul.

Even the ones her brother didn't know about.

If she hadn't drifted off to sleep, she probably would have spilled her guts.

The knowledge had Florence on edge.

It wasn't like she hadn't known that she was falling for cocky, charming, oh so sexy Eli Lennox. She'd already been falling hard and fast, but the Valentine's Day date in Florence had her landing right smack-dab in the middle of a relationship.

Only the landing hadn't been sharp, and prickly, and terrifying like she had been expecting. Instead it had been soft, and warm, and like walking into an embrace.

That alone had been enough to throw her off.

Obviously, given that she had nearly told Eli everything.

How could she even consider telling him that?

Eli was already way out of her league, and she was probably never going to fit into his world, those differences were only going to grow more pronounced when he learned just how messed up her childhood had been.

As if being poorer than poor, abandoned by one parent, ignored by another, and ostracized by the other children wasn't bad enough, when he learned that she had also been...

“Hey.”

Florence jumped at the voice.

Literally jumped.

Sprung so far up and out of her chair that it toppled over, landing with a crash on the floor, the stack of files she was supposed to be reading joined them, scattering everywhere.

“What’s going on? What was that about?” Jake asked.

“Sorry, nothing,” she mumbled as she bent down to collect the files.

“That was not nothing,” Jake argued, righting her chair and holding it out for her. “What’s with you today? You’ve been quiet, distracted, and jumpy. How was the date with Eli? Being flown to Florence on a private jet must have been pretty cool,” her partner prompted as he went back to his desk.

“Yeah, it was cool,” she agreed, sitting down and rubbing at her temples where a headache was forming.

“But?” he prompted.

What did she have to lose by talking things through with Jake? They were friends, they worked long hours together and talked about anything and everything. Maybe having someone to bounce things off would be a good idea. “I’m falling for him,” she began.

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“It depends.”

“On?”

“He says that he really likes me and that he sees a future for us. I know he lost both his parents over the last couple of years, and his brother died years ago, he wants to replace his family.”

“He’s looking for a wife and thinks that could be you,” Jake summarized for her. “I still don’t get why that’s a bad thing.”

“Because we have nothing in common. You know how I grew up, and Eli grew up in private schools traveling the world in private jets. He has enough money to do anything he wants, have anything he wants, get anything he wants. So why does he want me?”

“Is that a real question?” Jake arched a brow at her. When she didn’t respond, he continued, “Maybe because you’re smart, pretty, funny, compassionate, caring, thoughtful, I can go on if you’re not convinced.”

Florence waved off his compliments. “I don’t come from his world. How am I going to fit in with those people?”

“Okay, well, I can get how that would be intimidating, but I don’t think Eli cares about any of that.”

“No, because he wants to get me into bed,” she muttered.

“What?” Jake choked on the coffee he’d been drinking.

“Eli is cocky, I think if I'd said yes he would have slept with me the very first night we met. But I didn't. I said no when he asked me out on a date. That made him determined, I don’t think he’s used to hearing the word no. You’ve seen him, I know you're a guy, but you have to admit that he’s off the charts sexy, not many women would be able to resist him.

Especially when he turns on that charm of his.

What if I'm just a challenge to him? A conquest. When he finally charms his way into my bed what if he loses interest and he moves on? Or what if he’s just after any woman because he’s decided he’s lived alone long enough and wants a new family?

” Ashamed to admit her insecurities, even to her partner, Florence picked up a pen and began to spin it between her fingers.

“You want my honest opinion?”

“Of course.”

“I think you're falling in love with him and it has you running scared. I get why, you don’t have a great track record when it comes to people sticking around in your life. But I don’t think Eli is like that.

I'm with you on the cocky thing, but when he spoke to me about setting up that

special date for you he was excited, he couldn't wait to share his love of Italy with you.

I don't think he'd go to that amount of trouble just to get you into bed.

Wine and dine you at a fancy restaurant, yeah, maybe buy you expensive jewelry, but not fly you to Florence. ”

She absorbed what her partner had just said.

She had learned early on in life that people didn't stick around.

Her mother's men were like a revolving door, and each one seemed to be worse than the one before.

She had learned to be self-sufficient because she had to be.

There hadn't been anyone around to take care of her, and it was so much easier just to rely on herself.

Letting Eli in was a scary prospect. That she was on the verge of doing just that made her want to withdraw, send him on his way, and hide back down in her safe little hole.

It was one thing to fall for a nice, boring guy who would never hurt her or let her down, but someone like Eli who flew to Italy on a whim, he could decimate her if she let him in and he left like everybody else had.

Exhausted from thinking about all of this, Florence raked her fingers through her hair, then awkwardly twisted it into a ponytail as the strands stuck to her cast.

“Enough about my love life, or lack thereof. Let’s talk about the case.

No hits on CODIS yet?” The blood from the apartment had been running through the Combined DNA Index System for forty-eight hours now and had yet to find any matches.

She was starting to believe it never would.

But their killer had to be in the system somewhere.

You didn't go from nothing to murder with no stops in between—especially not the kind of smooth, well-coordinated, well-executed murders of the Dumpster Killer.

“Nothing yet, doesn’t mean we won't get one though.”

“Yeah,” she agreed half-heartedly. “We can wipe Justin Bates off our suspect list. He was in jail when Jana Friedrich was murdered, and I don’t think we can ignore the eye that whoever killed her painted in blood on the wall as a link to the dumpster killings.

” The fact that Jana’s killer had drawn that specifically instead of writing his usual message felt like it was a message directed at her.

She was the one who had figured out his body dump pattern, and he knew it because he’d tried to run her down.

Memories of the other morning when she’d thought someone was watching her flitted through her mind.

Had it been him? Was he fixated on her now?

“Yesterday, while you were enjoying Tuscany, I went through all the other reports we had when we ran the sketch of the killer, and I found two that I like as suspects.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her spirits lifted at the notion.

“Yep. One is a twenty-seven-year-old Frank Buttermann. He’s not in the system, but he had been interviewed in the assaults of two women that he had previously lived next door to.

There wasn't enough evidence to arrest him either time, but the cops were pretty positive he was their guy. The other is thirty-year-old Michael Stypes. He’s also not in the system, but there are nearly half a dozen stalker reports all where the women accuse him of following them and leaving nasty, vile messages scratched into cars and windows.

He was arrested, but it never went to trial, again, not enough evidence for the DA to take it to court.

His fingerprints are on file but not his DNA, so we wouldn’t get a hit in CODIS for him. Which one do you want to look into?”

“I’ll take Frank Buttermann,” she said, taking the file he held out to her.

Two suspects, and the time pressure of knowing that the Dumpster Killer wouldn’t be able to wait long before going after another woman should be enough to keep her mind occupied, so she didn't obsess over her very own cocky savior, Eli Lennox.

6:10 P.M.

“Hey, princess, how was your day?” Eli straightened up from where he’d been leaning against the car and walked over to greet Florence as she walked out of the

police precinct.

She looked over and offered up a smile, but he could tell immediately that something was off. “My day was fine. How was yours?”

“Fine. I missed you.” He leaned down to kiss her, and while she kissed him back without hesitation, he still got the feeling that something was up. “I thought I would take you out for dinner. Something fancy, I wanted to treat you.”

“I think the trip to Florence was enough of a treat for one week.”

“A trip around the world wouldn’t be enough of a treat for one week,” he countered. “I thought we could go for drinks and then for dinner.”

“Actually, Eli, do you mind if we take a rain check? I have a headache, and I was going to go straight home, take a hot bath, and then go to bed early.”

What she said sounded logical, and she did look tired and a little drawn, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that she was pushing him away. She had a distant look in her eyes and her tone, and he felt like she was trying to dismiss him, albeit politely.

What had happened between last night and tonight?

Last night she had been curled up at his side, fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder after opening up to him about her childhood, and today she was pushing him away again.

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“Sure, of course. I’ll drive you home, and if you want I can come up, I make a mean chicken noodle soup, and I don’t want to brag, but I give the best massages, ten minutes with my hands on those tense shoulders of yours and you’ll be out like a light, you’ll sleep like a baby through the night.”

“You don’t want to brag?” she asked with an arched brow. “Because that doesn’t sound like you.”

Eli relaxed a little at her teasing banter, maybe he was just getting a weird vibe from her because she was feeling sick with a headache. “Okay, I am bragging about my massages, I have a reputation to maintain after all.”

“Well, not that I think you're overselling yourself, but I'm going to pass, I just want to sleep.”

“All right,” he agreed. It went against his every instinct to acquiesce so easily, but she’d kissed him, and she’d teased him, he had to believe that she was just worn out and not trying to push him away.

After hearing what he’d told her about her past he understood why she might want to push him away.

She hadn't had anyone to trust, and believing that he wasn't going to be just another person to hurt her had to be hard.

If she needed a little space he could give her that.

Taking her hand, he led her over to the car and helped her inside. When he slid in beside her and put an arm around her shoulder, she leaned into him and laid her head on his shoulder.

The ride to her apartment didn't take long, and he soaked in the feel of her warm, soft body against his.

His fingers stroked her hair which was hanging loosely around her shoulders, and rubbed up and down her arm, pleased when she gave a small content sigh and snuggled closer.

His heart squeezed almost painfully at the sound, he wanted this so much it hurt.

How did he convince Florence of that?

He'd told her over and over again that he was serious about her and that he didn't care that they had grown up in two different worlds. He'd tried to show her with his actions as well, the trip to Florence was meant to show her just how special he thought she was, it wasn't something he did with every woman he dated.

As much as it killed him, maybe he had to take a step back and let her come to the same place he was on her own. He couldn't force her to believe him, he could continue to show her, but in the end, she had to learn to believe in him.

"Want me to walk you up?" he asked when they pulled up in front of her building.

"No, thanks. If I let you come up you're just going to try to convince me to let you in, I know what you're like." The smile she gave him this time was almost sad like she knew what he was like, but her past was trying to convince her that she was wrong, and there was something sinister hiding underneath his persona.

“All right, call me if you feel worse and I can be here in fifteen minutes,” he told her.

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Call me if you change your mind and want that massage.” He winked.

“Okay,” she said again, this time with an eye roll.

“Call me if you get lonely and need some company.”

“Eli,” she said overly patiently, “I promise I will call you if I need you. But believe it or not, I know how to take care of myself.”

“You don’t need to take care of yourself anymore now though, princess.

You have me. And I want to take care of you when you're sick.” He cupped her cheek in his hand and fixed his eyes on hers, holding her gaze and not letting it go like he could help her look inside his mind to see he was telling her the truth.

“I appreciate that,” she said, but her bottom lip trembled a little and for a second he was terrified she was going to cry. Women and tears were not something he was good at dealing with. Was any guy?

“Sleep well, princess, I’ll text you to say goodnight later.” He leaned in and feathered his lips across those sweet lips of hers.

“Night,” she whispered when he released her. With a wave, she turned and hurried into her building, pausing to look back before the door swung closed. His instincts were screaming at him to go after her, but he didn't want to crowd her right now when she was obviously battling against herself.

He asked his driver to take him back to the office, he may as well get some more work done since the evening he had planned for Florence wasn't going ahead. He'd give her an hour or two to take her bath and then he'd check in, make sure she was okay, and wish her sweet dreams.

Making his way through the quiet building, he saw the light on in Elliot's office and thought he might stop by, see if Elliot had any advice for what he should do next with Florence.

"Hey, Elliot, do you..." he broke off as he opened the door to find Elliot with his arms wrapped around Susannah, their hair and clothes were mussed, their lips locked, and the desk in disarray. Obviously he had interrupted their office rendezvous. "I am so glad you guys have your clothes on."

"If you'd walked in five minutes earlier we wouldn't," Elliot said. "What are you doing here? I thought you had plans with Florence."

"She said she had a headache so I dropped her off at her apartment."

"Florence is the cop, right? The one you saved a few nights ago?" Susannah asked, disentangling herself from Elliot's arms.

"She is," he nodded. "Yesterday we had this amazing day in Florence, and today she's back to pushing me away again. I don't get her. Scratch that, I don't get women," he said, walking over to the desk and sinking down into one of the chairs.

"You took her to Florence?" Susannah asked wide-eyed.

"For Valentine's Day."

"You took her all the way to Italy for Valentine's Day?"

Elliot, you are really failing in the dates department, you gotta lift your game,” she said, swatting her husband on the arm, then she turned her attention to Eli.

“She’s probably not used to being whisked off to another country for a date, I mean it’s such a sweet idea, but I’d be overwhelmed if I were her. I remember going to a charity ball with Elliot when we first got together, and I felt out of my element, I can’t imagine how I would have felt if he’d done that. I mean, I would have loved it, and the gesture would have touched me, but I would have also felt so out of his league.”

“It really would have been that big a deal to you?” he asked. If it was that big a deal to someone like Susannah who had lived a middle-class life, then he couldn’t imagine how it would have felt for someone who grew up the way Florence had.

“Oh, yeah. Being around rich people can make the rest of us nervous, especially since she likes you and probably doesn’t want to disappoint you,” Susannah told him.

“She could never disappoint me.”

“You know that, but does she?”

“So how do I convince her that I don’t care about money and the different ways we grew up?”

“You have to connect with her on a different level. You did the all-out extravagant gesture with the Valentine’s Day date in Italy, now show her that you can be just a regular guy,” Susannah suggested.

“I’d listen to her, man, she’s good at giving advice,” Elliot said, wrapping his arms around Susannah and kissing her neck.

Connect with her on a different level, he could do that, sure he was used to having

money and using it to get what he wanted, but being wealthy didn't define him. He would give up every cent he owned if it would get him his parents and brother back. Florence was his chance to create a new family, not that it could replace the one he'd lost, but he didn't want to be alone anymore.

He wanted to share his life with someone, get married, have kids, travel the world, and grow old side by side.

Florence was the only woman he'd met who he could see himself living that life with.

Eli would do whatever it took to prove that to her.

Chapter

Eight

The shrill buzzing of her alarm clock found its way inside her dream.

It took Florence a moment to realize what the noise was and what it meant.

Groggily, she sat up and rubbed at her eyes, was it really time to get up already? It felt like she'd only just dragged herself to bed and burrowed under her covers. She must have fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow because she didn't remember lying awake and fretting.

Fretting.

That was a new experience for her.

She wasn't someone who was neurotic or who worried about things, but ever since she'd met Eli, she couldn't seem to stop this back and forth argument in her head.

The two sides of her couldn't seem to come to an agreement.

The insecure side of her insisted that she and Eli weren't compatible given their vastly different upbringings, and wanted to convince her that he was only interested in the challenge she presented, being probably the only woman who had ever turned him down.

But the part of her that had already survived more than most people did in an entire lifetime, and all before she was old enough to vote, insisted that Eli liked her, she liked him, they had fun together, and there was definitely sexual attraction, so she may as well jump right on in and give this relationship everything she had and see where it ended up.

“You are going crazy,” Florence muttered to herself as she threw back the covers.

This new neuroticism was not fun, nor did she find it attractive.

She was a practical kind of girl, she liked simple things, she was comfortable with simple things, and this constant obsessing was only serving to annoy herself.

At least her headache was gone.

When she got to her apartment she’d taken the long hot bath she’d so desperately needed before falling into bed, but she’d skipped dinner, and now her stomach was protesting with a growl.

She’d intended to hit the gym before going to work this morning but was rethinking that now.

If she went to the gym she’d miss Eli when he came to pick her up, and she felt like she owed him an apology for last night.

The headache hadn't been a lie, but she often got stress headaches, and she could have— should have—invited Eli up and let him cook her dinner and give her a massage. So far, in this little almost relationship that they had going, he had given a lot more than she had. All she’d had was doubt and insecurity and consistently turning him down.

Well, it was time to change that.

She wasn't a coward, and she had to stop acting like one. So she'd had her trust violated on multiple occasions, that was nothing to do with him. Would it really kill her to hand out her trust one more time? She'd survived everything else.

"Big girl panties." She reminded herself as she stood and stretched.

After deciding she'd have something to eat first, then shower and get dressed, she'd hang out here and wait for Eli to come and pick her up.

Missing one morning at the gym wasn't going to hurt her, she'd just pester Jake to run with her at lunchtime until he finally gave in.

Her partner was not a runner, but he had been known to cave and go with her on occasion, usually after she'd hounded him about it.

Picking up her cell phone from the dresser she checked to see if she had messages.

Eli had been going to text her goodnight, but she'd crashed as soon as she got into bed and had missed the message.

She hoped he hadn't thought it was because she was shutting him out because she wasn't. Well, not really anyway.

Florence was reading Eli's text as she walked into the living room when she realized she wasn't alone.

Her gun was in its lockbox in her bedroom, and she was spinning around to go and get it when someone slammed into her from behind. She was thrown up against the wall before she had a chance to do anything about it.

“Stop,” the man hissed. “I’m not here to hurt you, I’m here to help you.”

“You break into people’s houses to help them?

” she spat, annoyed with herself for not being more aware.

She was always aware of her surroundings, and not just because she was a cop.

It was a skill she’d had to learn as a kid if she wanted to keep her mother’s boyfriends out of her bedroom.

Now one moment of distraction was going to get her killed.

“Are you going to stop struggling?” her attacker asked as he pressed her body against the wall, using his superior strength and size to keep her there.

He had a leg pinning hers, and his hands wrapped around her wrists as he held them above her head.

His other hand was planted firmly between her shoulder blades, and she could barely turn her head to the side.

She knew every self-defense move ever designed, she taught classes, she was a cop for goodness sake, and yet none of that changed the facts that she was five foot one and didn't even weigh in at one hundred pounds, there was nothing she could do to get away from this man.

That wasn't going to stop her from trying though.

Forcing herself to go against her instincts, Florence stopped fighting and let herself go still, the only chance she had was to let him think she wasn't a threat, then when he

let his guard down, she'd make her move.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I told you already, I'm here to help you."

"With what?" It was unlikely he was here to rape her because if he had been he would have gone after her when she was in bed, asleep, and vulnerable.

"Your case."

Case?

So he knew she was a cop.

That meant this wasn't some random break-in, he'd deliberately targeted her because of her profession, and she had to wonder if this was about the Dumpster Killer case. Was this the killer she and Jake had been hunting? Someone had been watching her apartment the other morning, was it this man?

"Which case?" she asked, if this was the killer then she wanted to get him talking.

"You know. You're close, you know it was him who nearly ran you down the other night, and the sketch that was shown on the news is him, he's an electrician, his name is Michael Stypes."

Michael Stypes?

He was one of the two top suspects on their list, she and Jake had looked into him and another man yesterday, they'd planned to go and speak with him today.

How did this man know that?

How did he know she'd nearly been run over?

Was he following her?

Who was he?

There was no way that he could have known about the car that nearly hit her unless he had been there, so he was either one of the people interviewed as a witness or the one driving the car.

Could this be the killer?

Was he trying to throw her off, get her to look at someone else so she wouldn't look at him? But if he was, then how did he know the name of one of their suspects?

"Are you Michael?" she asked.

"No, of course not. But you need to go and pick him up before he kills again."

"How do you know it's Michael? How do you know about the car?"

"You're welcome," he said pointedly.

Sensing that he was relaxing, he'd told her what he wanted to say, and now he was going to make his move. Whether that was to leave or to kill her she wasn't waiting around to find out.

She lifted her leg and kicked sideways, connecting squarely with his kneecap.

The man grunted in pained surprise and his grip on her loosened.

Taking advantage, Florence threw her head back, connecting with his chin and by the pain that ricocheted around her head, she knew she had hurt him.

Twisting enough that she could get her arms free she raked her fingernails down his arm, hoping that she could get a clean DNA sample for whoever found her body if she didn't make it out of this alive.

Using her cast to her advantage, she swung it at his face and slammed it into him.

Pain lanced through her wrist, but she ignored it and swung at him again.

“Stop,” the man hissed. “I told you I don’t want to hurt you, but if you won't stop, you're not giving me any choice.”

There was no way she was stopping.

Obviously sensing this, the man delivered his own blow to her head, connecting with her temple and making her see stars. He hit her a second time, then a third, and a fourth, and by then her head was swimming so badly that she didn't have a chance at fighting back.

He released his hold on her, and she fell to the floor, her legs unable to hold her up.

The man stood above her, but her vision was blurry now, her body uncooperative, and the tides of unconsciousness were lapping at the edges of her mind.

6:40 A.M.

Eli had gone back and forth with himself over coming here, but in the end, he decided

that he couldn't stay away.

He was making a real effort not to push too hard, not to pressure her too much, to take a step back and give Florence some space, but he couldn't do it.

Last night when she hadn't replied to his goodnight texts asking how she was feeling, he'd been ready to leave the ball in her court, let her take the next step.

This morning he'd woken up and known he couldn't do that.

Something was urging him to fight for her and keep fighting for as long as it took for her to get the message.

Maybe Florence needed to know that she was worth it.

All her life she'd felt disposable, not good enough, her father hadn't stuck around, her mother had put boyfriends and alcohol ahead of her children, she hadn't had friends to support her, she'd been alone every step of the way, no wonder she had trouble believing him.

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He'd find a way to prove it to her, he'd fight for her, make her believe that she was special and precious, and she was worth every ounce of effort he was putting into wooing her.

He wasn't used to having to work for a woman's affections, but for some reason that was a turn on, he'd heard the saying that anything worth having was worth working for, but he'd never really understood it until now.

It was the very fact that Florence was both strong and confident, and insecure and vulnerable that made her so attractive.

So he would continue to pick her up in the mornings and drive her to work, then collect her at the end of the day, and he already had their next date all planned out for them, only this time he had gone in a completely different direction.

Climbing out of the car when it stopped in front of Florence's building, he made sure that the flowers were all straight in their bouquet and hadn't gotten mussed on the ride here.

Just as he was approaching the door, he saw a man go hurrying out, barging past him and nearly crashing into him in his haste.

As the man went past, he caught a whiff of subtle lavender that reminded him of Florence's perfume.

Eli froze.

Had this man just left Florence's apartment?

Did Florence have a boyfriend?

Was that why she had been shutting him out?

It wouldn't be the first time that someone had used him for his money, maybe when he'd mentioned taking her to Florence she'd thought she'd play along, lead him on just enough to keep him interested, then cut him loose once she got what she wanted.

Anger burned inside him, and he turned to head back to the car.

He was halfway there when he stopped again. What was he thinking? This was Florence they were talking about, she was a cop, she didn't play games like that. If nothing else, he knew she wasn't lying when she'd told him about her childhood, the hurt in her eyes had been real, she couldn't fake that.

Deciding that he was being foolish, Florence wasn't the only woman who wore lavender-scented perfumes, there was no reason to believe that the man had come from her apartment at all, Eli spun around and hurried inside out of the softly falling snow.

The lift seemed to take forever to arrive, and he waited impatiently.

Maybe part of him did believe the man had just left Florence's apartment and he wanted to catch her in the act to either confirm or deny his suspicions.

It was wrong to doubt her, but she had been pushing him away, and he wanted to know the reason why.

If it wasn't because she was involved with another man then what was it?

Finally, the lift arrived, and when he got in he hit the button for Florence's floor a little harder than necessary, but he was angry with himself.

He hated this sudden rush of insecurity where Florence was concerned.

That wasn't him, like Florence was always pointing out he was cocky, he knew he was good looking, charming, smart, and wealthy, and he didn't believe in false modesty.

He didn't tie himself up in knots obsessing over a woman.

But Florence wasn't just any woman.

She was special, and he felt like she had infected him, getting not just under his skin but embedded in every molecule of his being.

The doors to the lift opened, and he strode through them, trying to get himself under control before he saw Florence.

If he was all alpha and controlling when he knocked on her door she was going to shut that down pretty quickly, she was a cop, she probably spent all day with alpha males and knew how to put them in their place.

When he got to her door he came up short.

It was sitting slightly open.

For some reason, he didn't think Florence would leave her door open like that. Sure, she'd had a headache when he'd dropped her off last night, but she was lucid and cognizant.

Wasn't she?

Had she been sicker than he'd realized?

Was she lying passed out in there?

"Florence?" he called out as he knocked on the door.

There was no response, and as the door swung further open he saw a body lying on the floor half obscured by the sofa.

"Florence," he said again, a little more panicked this time as he quickly surveyed the apartment.

When he didn't see anyone else he ran across to her, dropping to his knees at her side. She was lying sprawled on her stomach, wearing only a tank top and a pair of purple fuzzy pajama pants and he could see bruises on her wrist and blood streaking her blonde hair.

With a trembling hand, he reached out and touched her neck, searching for a pulse. He'd never done that before, and at first, he couldn't find one. "Stop it, calm down," he ordered himself as he pressed a little harder and was rewarded with the steady beating of her pulse.

"Florence, wake up. It's Eli," he added, not wanting her to panic when she regained consciousness to find a man looming over her.

She didn't respond, and knowing he was way out of his element here he pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911 as he stood and grabbed a throw from the back of the couch and tucked it around her.

“911 what's your emergency?”

“I just arrived at my girlfriend's apartment to find her unconscious, she's been attacked. Her name is Florence Harris, she's a homicide detective.”

“Is she breathing?”

“Yes, but I see blood on her head and...” he trailed off as Florence stirred beneath him. “She's waking up.”

“Please remain on the line, sir,” the 911 operator requested.

“I'll keep the line open, but I'm putting the phone down,” he said, his attention focused on Florence. “Princess, it's Eli, can you hear me?”

“Eli?” she said, her voice weak as she groggily tried to turn over.

“I don't think you should be moving until the paramedics get here,” he told her, a hand on her shoulder gently holding her still.

“I'm okay,” she insisted.

Since he knew arguing with her was going to be futile, Eli slipped an arm around her shoulders and one under her knees and lifted her up. Carrying her to the couch, he sat down and set her on his lap, tucking her closely against his chest as he made sure the throw was wrapped around her.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I was hoping you were going to tell me that,” he replied as he brushed a lock of hair that had gotten stuck in the drying blood off her cheek and tucked it behind her ear.

“There was a man,” she said slowly, lifting a hand to press it to her forehead. “My head hurts.”

“It’s a little banged up,” he attempted a joke to calm both of them. His heart was racing a million miles a minute, and he wanted to get up and pace but didn’t want to let Florence go and knew that with a killer headache the motion would probably make her nauseous.

“He...he...he said something important...but I can’t remember...” Florence said haltingly, becoming agitated.

“Shh, princess,” he soothed, kissing the top of her head.

Florence needed him calm right now, so he’d better pull it together.

“It’s going to be okay. It will come back to you, I’m just glad that you’re okay. When I walked in here and saw you lying there, and the blood...” He had to pause to drag in a ragged breath. “You scared the life out of me. I don’t want to lose you.”

Florence snuggled closer, resting her cheek on his chest as her hands curled into his sweater. “You were here again when I needed you.”

“I told you, you weren’t alone anymore. I’ll always be here when you need me.”

“My savior,” she whispered.

“Always, princess.” He pressed his lips to the top of her head again and held them there, drawing in her sweet scent and savoring it because he knew he’d come very close to losing her. “Always.”

2:09 P.M.

It had been a long day.

She had sat on Eli's lap until the paramedics arrived.

Both Eli and the medics thwarted her protests that a trip to the hospital wasn't necessary, so she'd gone there, endured tests, been poked and prodded, and then eventually released.

Eli had driven her home, but now that they were here, she had the monumental task of making it from the street up to her fifth-floor apartment to conquer.

"You know I could just carry you," Eli said. His arm was wrapped around her waist, and although he was practically supporting most of her weight anyway, she shook her head.

"No, I can do it." Being helpless was not a feeling with which she was familiar, and it made her uncomfortable. She was going to walk to the lift, stand in it, and then walk to her front door if it killed her.

"You know you have a concussion, you're supposed to be taking it easy," he reminded her as he opened the door to her building and helped her walk through it.

"And I will once we get upstairs," she said, gritting her teeth and plowing forward. Giving up was not in her vocabulary.

"You call me cocky, I'm going to start calling you stubborn," Eli muttered under his breath, but she heard the humor in his tone and knew he was just teasing her.

Although it sometimes drove her crazy, Florence secretly liked it when he teased her.

Growing up, she and Fletcher were more concerned with trying to stay alive, finding

food to eat and clothes to wear, than teasing one another.

Even though they were adults now and both had jobs that paid the bills, they didn't have the traditional sibling relationship. But Eli's teasing made her feel a levity that hadn't been a part of her life before.

Her legs felt heavy, and her head hadn't stopped drumming with a steady beat that seemed to send pain reverberating through her body, preventing her from thinking about anything but putting one foot in front of the other.

They made it all the way into the lift before Eli's patience ran out. "This is ridiculous," he snapped, scooping her up. "I think you're strong and tough, you don't have anything to prove."

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Florence opened her mouth to protest, insist that he set her down, but it was such a relief to be off her feet that she didn't bother. Instead, she just uttered a tired sigh, rested her aching head on Eli's strong shoulder, and let him hold her.

When the lift dinged, he strode out, keeping his movements slow and steady so he didn't make her nauseous, and she was thankful that he was so attentive to even the smallest of details. He'd been wonderful today, sitting beside her in the hospital, holding her hand, pulling her hair back for her when she'd thrown up, and wiping her brow with a cool cloth.

It was hard for even her deepest seeded insecurities to convince her that he was only interested in sex when he was being that sweet.

He obviously had her keys because he unlocked her apartment door and carried her inside, where he set her on the couch, then locked up behind them. CSU had finished up in here, and although there was a mess that would have to be cleaned, she wasn't up to dealing with that at the moment.

No sooner had he fluffed up some pillows, propped her up against them, and covered her with a blanket than there was a knock on her door.

Tutting disapprovingly, Eli answered the door. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly, and she craned her neck to look around him to see who was there.

"I have questions I need to ask the two of you," Jake said as he strode into the room.

"She's supposed to be resting," Eli said.

“It’s okay,” she assured him. Whoever had broken in here and attacked her knew too much about her case, he was obviously stalking her.

“I won’t be long,” her partner promised as he came inside, grabbing a chair from the table and pulling it up.

Eli tutted again but came and joined her on the couch, sitting down at the other end, lifting her legs, and then setting them on his lap, his hands absently stroked the length of her calf. “Ask your questions but be quick about it.”

This protective side of his was sweet, as was the attentiveness and fussing, who knew that her cocky savior had such a soft side.

Focusing her gooey mind on her assault she told her partner, “I remembered what he said to me. He said that he knew who the Dumpster Killer was. He said the name Michael Stypes. How could he know that was one of our suspects?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said. “Did he say anything else to you?”

“He said that he wasn’t going to hurt me and that I shouldn’t fight him. He kept me pressed up against that wall,” she said, gesturing to the wall behind her, then shooting Eli a reassuring smile when she felt him tense.

“He knew about me almost getting hit by the car, then he told me we were on the right track and that Michael is the killer. He’s obviously been following me, it’s the only way he could know about the car, I think he was the person watching my apartment the other morning.

” Eli tensed again, and she held out her hand to him, he took it and entwined their fingers.

“What did you see when you got here?” Jake asked Eli.

“When I was walking up to the building’s door, a man was hurrying out.

He smelled of lavender, and the first thing I thought was that he had been in Florence’s apartment.

” Eli hesitated, shot her an apologetic look, then continued, “I wondered if he was her boyfriend and nearly turned around and left, but then I realized that was stupid and came inside.”

“You thought I was cheating on you?” she asked, hurt. That wasn't something that she would do, and she’d given no indication to Eli that she was hiding another man in her life.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s stupid. It was just that you blew me off last night and then never returned my texts, and I guess I panicked a little when I saw a man leaving smelling of your perfume. I’m sorry, Florence.” His hand squeezed hers, and the look he gave her was genuinely remorseful.

“Yeah, okay, I guess I have been unsure about the two of us, I can see why you might have interpreted that as me dating someone else,” she acknowledged. Given that she had doubted the two of them and their budding relationship, she couldn’t really hold it against Eli that he had doubted her.

“So you saw the man who attacked her,” Jake said, it was the only logical conclusion they could come to. “Did you get a good look at him?”

“Not a good look, a passing glance maybe. He was older, late forties I would guess, dark hair streaked with gray, glasses, medium height and build, dressed in sweats,” Eli rattled off.

“That’s a pretty good description,” she said.

“I’m observant, I notice details even when I’m not really paying attention,” he replied.

“Do you think that if you saw him again, you’d recognize him?” Jake asked.

Eli shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I’m going to set you up with a sketch artist,” Jake announced. “Do you have any idea who the man was?”

Florence considered this. There had been something familiar about him, but her memories of the assault were still hazy.

Bit by bit, they were coming back to her, but right now, it was like looking at it through a pair of glasses that weren’t prescribed for her, everything was blurry and trying to focus on it made her head hurt.

Reluctantly, she shook her head, then winced at the movement. “There was something familiar about him, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“It will come to you, don’t push too hard,” Eli told her.

“He’s right,” Jake agreed. “When you stop trying it will come back. All right, is there anything else either of you can think of that seems important?”

“No,” she said, and Eli shook his head.

“I think you should probably go now, she needs her rest,” Eli told Jake.

“All right, I’ll see myself out. Take care of yourself, Florence, and call if you need

anything. If either of you remembers something, you call me.”

Once Jake was gone her eyelids grew heavy. This concussion was wiping her out.

“Close your eyes, princess, take a nap.” Eli stood, then removed one of the pillows behind her and helped her lie down, making sure the blanket was tucked around her so she didn't get cold. Then he stood beside her and stroked her cheek and smoothed her hair.

This was nice.

Having someone take care of her like this.

Any boyfriends she'd ever had she'd held at arms-length, not letting them get close enough to care for her when she was sick.

But here was Eli, a wealthy businessman with a billion-dollar company that no doubt needed his attention who had only known her a week, tending to her, fussing over her, caring for her.

“Sleep, sweetheart, I got you,” he whispered as her eyes fluttered closed, and she drifted off to sleep.

3:28 P.M.

He watched her sleep.

She looked so relaxed, so carefree, like in slumber the weight of the world was no longer crushing her.

Eli liked seeing Florence like this. He wanted to help her be this way when she was

awake.

It didn't take a genius to figure out she was dealing with some heavy stuff, and as much as he wanted to convince her to tell him, let him help her carry the burden, if he pushed too hard she would only shut down.

He could have lost her today.

He'd known that she was in danger, that someone was watching her, he should have insisted that she come and stay with him until she and her cop buddies figured out who it was. Instead, he had ignored his instincts because he was trying so hard not to mess this up.

Florence had become very important to him in a very short amount of time, and he was beating himself up about thinking that she'd been leading him on and seeing someone else, while she'd been lying unconscious in her apartment.

He should have recognized her leap of faith in trusting him with her past for what it was, her saying without actually saying it, that she felt the same thing he did growing between them.

She stirred on the couch, her eyes blinking sleepily open.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty," he said, leaning forward from the armchair where he'd been sitting watching her sleep, and cupped her cheek in his hand, touching a kiss to her forehead.

"Hey," she mumbled, struggling into a sitting position and wincing.

"You shouldn't be moving about, actually you shouldn't even be awake, you were only out for forty minutes, you need more sleep."

“Can't sleep, I need the bathroom,” she said, going to stand.

“I got you.” Preempting her standing, he scooped her into his arms and carried her through the apartment to her bathroom where he deposited her inside. “I’ll be waiting out here, call out when you're done.”

“Eli,” she said overly patiently. “I can't go with you standing out here listening, and I can walk, I only have a concussion.”

“I’ll go stand in the living room then,” he said, ignoring the part about her walking on her own. As long as he was here, she would be taking it easy even if he had to make her.

Florence rolled her eyes and closed the door behind him with a firm click.

To give her a little space, he walked out into the living room and leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest while he waited. When he heard the bathroom door opening, he walked back into the hall and picked her up again. “I think you’d be more comfortable in bed than on the couch.”

“You’re a regular Mr. Mom aren’t you,” Florence grumbled, but she curled her arm around his neck and rested comfortably in his arms.

“The best,” he agreed cheerfully, he’d spent the last several years taking care of his dying mother, and caregiver was a role he was comfortable playing.

“There you go,” he said, pulling back the covers, setting her down, and fluffing up her pillows against the headboard and covering her with the blanket. “Better?”

“Yeah, actually, it is.” She rested her head against the pillows and closed her eyes. “I can't remember the last time I spent the day in bed.”

“You need a day off, everyone does,” he added because he got the feeling she thought that taking time just for herself made her lazy. “I made soup, you hungry?”

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“Actually, yeah, I am,” she said, opening her eyes to look at him. “The same chicken noodle soup I turned down last night?”

“The very same. I’ll be right back.” Giving her a quick kiss on the lips, he headed into the kitchen and ladled a couple of spoonfuls of the soup he’d made while she slept into a bowl.

The bowl went on a tray he’d found in a cupboard in Florence’s kitchen, he added a couple of slices of bread, a glass of water, a couple of painkillers for after she’d gotten some food in her stomach, and flowers in a vase.

Carrying the tray into Florence’s room, her eyes grew wide when she saw it. “You didn’t have to go to that much trouble.”

“It was no trouble,” he said, setting the tray on her lap.

“The soup would have been enough, but this looks like homemade bread, and the flowers are beautiful.” Tears welled in her eyes, drops balancing on her thick lashes. “Sorry,” she said, brushing them away, her gaze falling to the covers. “Must be the concussion making me emotional.”

“Hey.” He hooked a finger under her chin and forced her to look up at him.

“I don’t care if you’re emotional. I want you to be emotional, this is a safe place, I care about you.” He touched the pad of his thumb to her cheek and caught a lone teardrop that had escaped.

“I’m here for you, I’m not going anywhere, you can tell me anything, you can let your guard down around me. It’s going to be okay, Florence.”

“Okay,” she whispered, giving him a shaky smile. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me for being here.

This is where I want to be. Here, with you.

” To emphasize his point, he lowered his mouth and gently claimed hers.

The kiss was soft, sweet, tender, and he felt its ramifications deep down into his bones.

“I want to be with you, sweetheart,” he murmured against her lips.

“You’re almost too good to be true,” she murmured back.

“No such thing, princess. And just so you know I didn’t make the bread for you, didn’t have time, had my driver go and pick up some I had at my hotel, can’t eat store bought bread anymore,” he teased to lighten the mood.

Florence laughed like he had hoped she would.

“Here, eat up.” Eli straightened and picked up the spoon, if he didn’t put a little distance between them he would do a whole lot more than just kiss her, and Florence was in no shape for that today.

“I can feed myself,” Florence said, reaching for the spoon.

“I want to do it. Besides your hand is shaking, you’ll probably spill soup all over

these pretty lavender sheets.”

She looked down, surprised that her hand was trembling, then looked up at him. Her sky blue eyes seemed to stare right through him, down into his soul, seeking an answer to a question she didn't want to ask aloud. Apparently, she received the answer she sought because she gave a nod.

Treasuring that second step of trust she'd just taken, Eli smiled as he dipped the spoon into the soup and raised it to her mouth. Florence parted her lips and took the soup, her eyes widening as it hit her tongue.

“That is amazing,” she gushed. “Did you make that yourself?”

“Yep, the recipe was passed down from my great-grandmother to my grandmother to my mother and then to me. I think my mom always wished she had a girl to cook and bake with her in the kitchen because neither my brother nor I were very interested in cooking.”

“When did that change?” she asked after she took another mouthful of soup.

“When she got sick the first time. She was always weak from the chemo, she couldn't get up and cook, and she was nauseous all the time, this soup was the only thing she could eat for months.

When she got really sick she would sit in bed, just like you are now, and I would feed it to her.

” He smiled at the memory, those were about the last moments he'd shared with his mother before she got too sick and was transferred to palliative care.

“That's how you learned to feed someone so well, you haven't spilled a drop.”

“That, and feeding my nephew.”

“You have a nephew?”

“He’s ten, was born just a month before my brother died.

After his death his wife struggled a lot, in the end, she couldn’t cope with losing her husband, and she took her life two years to the day after his death.

My mom was the one who looked after Joey, but then she got sick, and I was balancing school and looking after her and my nephew. ”

“You really love your family.” The look on Florence’s face was wistful, and he knew she wished she’d had a family who loved her.

“I did. I do,” he corrected, they weren't all gone.

“Where is your nephew now?”

“After my mom and then my dad died, I assumed that I would keep Joey, he’d lived in that house, with me and my parents his whole life, but his other grandparents filed for custody.

I fought them, used the fact that they were poor against them, and argued that I could give him a better life and that I could give him anything he wanted.

” Eli burned with shame as he recalled how dirty he had made that case, determined to win at any cost because he didn't want to lose another person that he loved.

“You realized that he needed more than money though, that he needed someone who could be there for him day and night,” Florence said gently, reaching out a hand to

cover his.

“How did you know that?” he asked, surprised that she had accurately figured out what had happened.

“Because I know you,” she said with a smile. “You have a good heart, anyone who would feed his dying mother homemade soup, and look after his nephew like he was his own son would do what was best for the child and not himself.”

“Joey was lonely, he didn't say anything, didn't complain, but I know he would get upset when I'd miss school plays and baseball games. His grandparents could give him what I couldn't, and I dropped the case. I still see him as often as I can, and I pay support every month so that they can give him everything he needs.”

“You spoil him rotten, don't you?”

“He's the only family I have left. Had,” he corrected, because this woman sitting before him was exactly what he needed to move forward, have a family of his own. “You should get some more sleep.”

“I am tired,” Florence admitted, fighting back a yawn.

“I'll be right back.” Eli picked up the tray, returned it to the kitchen, tidied up, and then went back to Florence's bedroom. He found her sitting up in bed right where he'd left her.

“I don't think I even have the energy to lie down,” she said when she saw him.

“I can help with that.” He kicked off his shoes, then threw back the covers and slid into the bed beside her.

“What are you doing?”

“Staying here with you so you’re not alone.

” Curling an arm around Florence’s shoulders, he helped her shuffle down and then lay down, he tucked a pillow under her head, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and settled her against his chest. “Sleep, princess.

I'm not going anywhere, I'm staying right here with you, close your eyes and sleep.

I got you, baby, you're not alone anymore.”

Neither was he.

After a decade of loss, losing his brother, watching his mother waste away as she battled cancer, losing her and then his dad, and then giving up his nephew, he was tired of being alone and tired of losing the people he loved.

Florence filled that void, made him feel hope again like the future wasn't one endless abyss of loneliness.

“I'm right here,” he said again, more to reassure himself this time, then he kissed her forehead and closed his eyes, comforted by the warm, soft body, pressed up against his.

7:46 P.M.

There would be no mistakes this time.

None.

Mess ups were for failures. How many times had he been called a failure in his life?

Hundreds?

Thousands?

He wasn't sure, but more than he cared to think about.

As a child, it had been the often repeated mantra in his house. Why hadn't he gotten straight A's on his report cards? Why didn't he make the basketball team? The baseball team? The football team? Why wasn't he smart enough? Why wasn't he sporty enough? Why wasn't he good enough?

There were, of course, no answers to those questions.

He didn't excel at anything because he wasn't good enough.

Not good enough.

Never good enough.

At least not until now.

Now, he was a killer who had stalked the city for eighteen months, kept the cops at bay, left no trail for them to follow, and had sixteen bodies to prove it. He had used his weaknesses to his advantage, played on the fact that no one ever noticed him, and he had triumphed for once in his life.

The only way to prove to everyone in his life who hadn't noticed him, hadn't cared about him, hadn't believed in him wrong, was to keep killing.

Knocking on the door, he waited for it to be answered.

He didn't have to wait long.

The door was thrown open, and a pretty lady with long blonde waves cascading down her back dressed in a business suit and bare feet stood there. He knew she'd just arrived home because he'd watched from right beside the front door to the building as she walked inside.

Of course she hadn't seen him, perhaps if she had her fate would have been different, but like always, he was the shadow that no one noticed.

"Hello, may I help you?" she asked.

"Evening, ma'am, just letting you know the electricity will be going off at eight, there was a problem in the neighboring building that requires us to shut things down for at least an hour."

"Oh, really?" She looked annoyed. "I was going to video call with my boyfriend who's traveling overseas for work."

"Sorry for the inconvenience," he said, not sorry in the least. "Please sign here to indicate that you've been notified." He held out the clipboard.

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With an irritated sigh, she snatched it from his hand and scribbled her name on the sheet of paper. Before she could hand it back, he whipped out his hand and clamped it around her neck, shoving her inside the apartment, kicking the door closed behind him.

Learning from the last time when the woman had managed to get the drop on him, he increased the pressure on her neck, squeezing until she passed out. Then he dropped her unconscious body on the floor and breathed a sigh of relief.

Everything had gone smoothly.

Last time had been an anomaly, he'd been thrown from his game by Detective Florence Harris managing to get a read on him.

It was disconcerting for someone who was used to being invisible to finally be seen.

It was like his cloak had been removed and his nakedness made clear for all the world to see.

But he'd come up with a plan to get rid of the detective.

He was going to take care of this woman, and then he was hoping that the cop would be waiting for him at the next dumpsite.

As soon as he saw her, he was going to shoot her, aiming his car at her hadn't worked but a bullet between the eyes would do the job.

He was a good shot, not perfect—because he wasn't perfect at anything—but he was good enough to hit his target.

Right now though, he had a different woman needing his attention.

Kneeling down, he dragged the woman's hands behind her back and added more duct tape than was necessary to bind her wrists.

Then he pulled over a chair from her kitchen table and hefted the woman up and onto it, securing her with an entire roll of tape because he was so paranoid about something going wrong.

By the time he was done, the woman was starting to come round.

“Who are you?” she croaked through a throat he knew had to feel like it had been covered in sandpaper.

“No one,” he replied simply. “I've never been anyone. Do you know what that's like? No, of course you don't.

” He gave a derisive laugh. “Look at you.” He lifted a hand and ran his fingertips down the woman's cheek.

“You're beautiful, I bet everywhere you go everyone is looking at you. Guys want to have sex with you and women want to be you.”

“I...I...it's not...I don't...” the woman stammered.

“Don't lie to me,” he warned. “I don't like liars. My parents didn't like lying, verbally berating their children, that was fine, but lying was a big no-no. Do you know what it's like to be the invisible middle child? Not the smart one, not the sporty one, not

popular, not anything.”

Pacing across the room, he raked his hands through his hair, that familiar feeling of being lost in the dark, alone in the world, nowhere to turn for help or comfort began to soak through his body. It didn't matter how many times he told this story it didn't take away that pain.

He always thought it would, and it did for a little while, a day or two maybe, but then it came back.

He was back to being that scared little boy, desperate to please his parents, get them to notice him, but deep down knowing it would never happen.

“When I was twelve, they left me at the airport.

Didn't even notice that they'd left me sitting in a seat at the gate when they boarded the plane.

It wasn't until they were looking for a cab in an airport in Melbourne, Australia, that they realized I wasn't there. It's a fourteen-hour flight from LAX to Melbourne Airport, the seats were three in a row, me and my two brothers sitting together with our parents in the row in front, how could they not notice I wasn't there? Do you know that not a single person came up to me in that airport to wonder why a kid was sitting alone for hours?”

“I-I'm s-sorry,” the woman murmured. “B-but I don't know wh-what this h-has to do w-with me.”

“Of course you don't.” He stalked back over to her and grabbed her around the neck again, hard enough to make her wince, but not hard enough to cut off her air supply.

“Everyone notices you.” His free hand grabbed one of her breasts and squeezed it hard enough to make her grimace.

“You throw these things in men’s faces and get whatever you want, you flaunt your beauty, use it to your advantage, but you don’t notice anyone around you, do you? Do you know that we’ve met before?”

Her green eyes grew wide, and she gave a small shake of her head.

“Of course you don’t. Because no one ever notices me. You weren’t the first to walk right on by without sparing me a second glance, and you won’t be the last. Guess where we met, if you get it right I might let you live. Might ,” he repeated with a wink.

She shook her head, silently begging him not to make her play this game.

Releasing her, he pulled up a chair and sat in front of her, knee to knee. “Come on, it’s a good chance, you should take it while you can. What about I give you three guesses, that’s fair, right? Right?” he repeated when she didn’t say anything.

“R-right,” she agreed.

“So let’s have at it, where did we meet before?”

“At the gym?” she asked, uncertain eyes watching him warily.

He huffed a laugh. “Do I look like the kind of guy who works out regularly?”

Unsure how to answer that she gave a single shake of her head.

“That’s one guess down, two to go.”

“The grocery store?”

“Not even close,” he replied. “You only have one guess to go, better think really hard before you answer because if you get it wrong, you're going to have to be punished.”

Tears slid down the woman's pale cheeks, and she shook her head again, her eyes pleading with him not to do this. Too bad for her he had never been shown any mercy in his life, so he saw no reason why he should bestow any on her.

“Time is ticking by,” he said. “I want to be a fair guy, give you your three chances, but if you want to forfeit...” He raised a brow.

“No,” she said quickly. “Did we meet on the subway?”

“We did not,” he informed her, standing. “That was guess number three. You failed. You know what that means? It's time for your punishment.” A smile graced his lips as fear consumed the woman, it was nice for once to be the center of someone's world instead of being ignored.

Chapter

Nine

Florence yawned and stretched, surprised when her arms hit a warm, hard body.

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she turned her head and looked up to see Eli smiling down at her.

Had he spent the night?

The last thing she remembered was him feeding her soup—which was not only cute and sweet but surprisingly attractive—as they talked about his nephew.

She remembered him getting into bed beside her and holding her in his arms, then exhaustion must have taken hold because that was where her memories ended.

“Morning, princess, how are you feeling?” he asked when he saw that she was awake.

“Better,” she replied. It was true, her head still ached, but it was now more like a distant throbbing than the knifing jackhammer that had been there yesterday.

This wasn't her first concussion, and she knew she'd be in pain and a little shaky for the next couple of days, but she was definitely ready to go back to work today.

She wanted to know what Jake had found on both her attacker and the Dumpster Killer.

“Soup and sleep, the cure for everything,” he said with a grin as he leaned down to capture her lips in a soft kiss.

Florence was getting used to the feeling she got whenever they kissed, the idea of her and Eli as a couple was starting to sink in, feel more natural. “You stayed the night.”

Eli frowned at her. “Of course I did. I told you I was staying. You think I'm the kind of guy who would leave an injured woman alone?”

Right.

He'd stayed because he felt obligated.

“Whoa, what was that?” He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and wouldn't let her turn her face away. “I said something wrong then, but you're going to have to help me out because I have no idea what.”

“It's just,” she started, averting her gaze since she couldn't turn her head, “did you just stay because you felt obligated?”

“Obligated?” His dark eyes grew round. “You really think that I would spend the night here just because I felt obligated?”

“I don't know.” She shrugged. He'd spent the whole night sleeping in her bed, and yet he hadn't pressured her for sex. In her history, sex was all men cared about.

“What's running through your pretty head, princess?” Eli asked, his voice was tender, and his hand that swept across her cheek was gentle.

He was breaking every preconceived stereotype she had of men like him. Boring men were meant to make her feel safe, not wealthy playboys, and yet here she was, in

Eli's arms, feeling more secure than she ever had in her life.

"I want to understand, sweetheart. Tell me, tell me what's scaring you."

Eli sounded so sincere that she found that words started tumbling from her mouth.

"You know that my childhood wasn't great.

My mom always had a new man in her life— our lives—most didn't last more than a few months.

They weren't the kind of guys to take an interest in a couple of kids with trust issues and emotional problems. A couple beat my brother up before he got too big and could fight back." She paused to drag in a breath because what was coming next wasn't easy to talk about.

"I'm right here," Eli said as he settled her against him, snuggling her head under his chin, he rubbed circles on her back.

"One of the men my mom picked up in a bar was a serial killer. Little girls under the age of ten. I was eight. He was called the Coffin Killer because after he assaulted them, he would sedate them then put them in a coffin, leaving them to asphyxiate."

Instead of asking questions like she thought he was going to, Eli picked up her right arm and pushed the sleeve of her sweatshirt up, revealing a tattoo of a branch of cherry blossoms. "You survived."

She curled her fingers around his and clung to them.

"He didn't put the needle in properly, when he put the drugs in my system it didn't knock me out like it was supposed to. I was woozy but not out, he put me in a coffin,

left to do something, and I ripped out the IV and ran. The house he'd taken me to was right in the middle of town, I ran out onto the street where a passing car stopped. By the time cops arrived on the scene he had fled. There was a scar on my arm from the ripped IV, when I turned eighteen and got out of River's End I wanted to do something to cover it up."

Eli's arms tightened around her until his grip was almost painful, but she welcomed it. She'd never been held like this before like she mattered, like someone cared that she was hurting. "Did they find him? Arrest him?"

"No. His name was just an alias, no one knows his real identity. I'm his only living victim, he's been killing for nearly thirty years now, over fifty known victims. He still contacts me, I think he might have been the one who broke in here."

"You think?" Eli demanded.

"I didn't spend much time around my mom's boyfriends, I didn't know that man, I couldn't identify him, he drugged me and most of what happened is hazy. He's never made contact with me like that before, he just writes me letters.

I'm the one who got away, and it's his way of making sure I never forget him.

But I won't," she said softly. "I can never forget them."

"Them?"

Realizing her mistake too late she tried to tug herself free from his hold. "Him, I meant him," she mumbled.

"Uh-uh, sweetheart. Another of your mother's boyfriends hurt you, didn't he?"

What did she have to lose? She'd gone this far, she may as well go the whole way.

"I was sixteen, my brother was off at college. My mom was passed out drunk, her boyfriend wanted sex, he couldn't have her so he took me instead.

Fletcher doesn't know, if he did he would have blamed himself, and I was worried about what he would do.

But it wasn't his fault, he looked after me as best he could when we were kids. He'd joined the military, he was happy, he had broken away from that life, and I didn't want to drag him back into it. You're the first person I've told."

"That was very selfless of you, but what about you, Florence?" Despite Eli's calm voice, she could feel his body vibrating with anger beneath hers.

"What about me?"

"You needed someone to be there for you, so you didn't have to go through it alone."

"I made the best of things, I worked hard in school, got out, went to college, and now I have a job where I save lives, where I stop things like what happened to me happening to other people. And if I can't, then I at least get the person who hurt them off the streets."

Lips pressed to the top of her head. "Thank you for trusting me. This is why you think that I'm just interested in sleeping with you? Because in your experience, men only have one thing on the brain; sex."

Florence nodded.

"That's not me, honey. If I wanted sex, I know where to go to get it.

What I want from you goes so much deeper.

You're amazing, you know that? Beautiful, compassionate, smart, strong, I admire you, and I'm attracted to you.

I want you, Florence. All of you. Your heart, your soul, and yeah your body, but only when you're ready to give it to me. You know what?" He tipped her face up so she was looking at him.

"What?" she whispered, mesmerized by the affection she saw shining from his eyes.

"You are worth every ounce of effort I'm putting into winning you, and worth every ounce of effort I'll put into our relationship, into you. I can see in those pretty baby blues of yours that you don't think you're worth it, but you're wrong. You're worth everything I have and more. What those men did to you was despicable, detestable, it makes me want to do things I didn't even think I was capable of. But it doesn't affect the way I see you, it doesn't change anything, you're everything I've been searching for, and I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. I wish you could see yourself as I do. You're like a warrior, ever since you were a little girl with blonde braids, blue eyes, and freckles." His thumb traced across the smattering of freckles on her nose and cheeks. "A warrior who's conquered more in her life than most people ever have to. A warrior who isn't fighting a war on her own anymore.

I'm here, princess, all you have to do is believe it. Let me fight with you."

Eli had been honest with her from the beginning, he'd told her he was interested, and despite her many attempts to push him away, he hadn't budged.

He had fought for her, supported her, spoiled her, and he was still sitting here in her bed, holding her in his arms after learning every sordid, dirty detail of her life.

Ever since she was eight years old she'd felt dirty. The kind of dirty that nothing could wash away.

At least that's what she'd thought.

"Kiss me," she said, taking Eli's face between her hands and drawing it down to meet hers. Each time he kissed her he wiped away a little of the dirt that marred her soul.

10:34 A.M.

Eli kept see-sawing between soaring to the heights of the heavens because Florence had finally opened up to him, stopped fighting what was between them and let him in, then plunging to the depths of Hell as he thought about what had been done to her.

Knowing that she had been hurt made him want to rage, scream, beat his fists against the wall, rip something to shreds, and destroy something so that his feelings didn't consume and then destroy him.

How had Florence lived with this for almost two decades?

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He'd known for a couple of hours, and he felt like he was losing his mind.

He had never thought of himself as a violent person, but knowing that Florence had been violated twice, both times when she was so young, both times without someone to be there and hold her hand and absorb her tears, made him want to kill the monsters who had taken something from her she could never get back.

She'd lost her innocence, a part of her soul, her ability to trust others, and yet despite all of that, she had triumphed.

She'd escaped the life that would have been so easy to fall into, she hadn't followed in her mother's footsteps.

Instead, she'd blazed a bright trail through life as a respected and decorated cop who risked her life to keep others safe.

Eli found himself in awe of her.

In his life he'd suffered loss after loss, losing his brother, then his sister-in-law, his mother, and then his father.

Each time he'd had to stand beside a coffin watching it get lowered into the ground, knowing that he'd never get to see or speak to that person again, a little piece of him had gone with them.

But through all of that, he'd always had his family, even after his father's death he'd had his nephew, he'd had connections, people he could go to when the loneliness

became overwhelming.

Who did Florence have?

A brother who didn't even know half of what she'd gone through, and who seemed to have spent more time with his friend's family than he had looking out for his little sister.

Florence had no one.

At least she hadn't until now.

"Please tell me you are not looking at engagement rings."

"Okay, I'm not looking at engagement rings," Eli told Elliot with a grin.

"Then why are you on a jeweler's website with engagement rings on the screen?" Elliot asked, peering over his shoulder at the laptop open on his desk.

"Because I'm looking at engagement rings," he replied, stating the obvious.

"You're asking Florence to marry you?"

"Not today, but yeah, in the near future."

"You've only known her just over a week."

"So?"

"So don't you think that's kind of soon?" Elliot walked around to the other side of the desk and pulled out a chair, dropping down into it.

“I’m not known for waiting, hanging back, and taking my time. When I see something I want, I go after it.”

“Only Florence isn’t a thing, she’s a person. A person who has been a lot more hesitant at going out with you than you were about going out with her,” Elliot said.

“She’s had a rough life, absent father, drunk mother, lots of Mom’s boyfriends in and out of her life, some bad stuff happened when she was a kid, she has trust issues.

Trust issues that she overcame this morning when she opened up to me.

” He wasn't going to betray Florence’s trust by going into details, but he wanted his friend to understand that just because Florence had had doubts, it wasn't because she didn't feel the same way about him that he felt about her.

“You’re really serious about her?”

“Deadly,” he said, then winced at his choice of words.

Given how they’d met and Florence’s job, it probably wasn't the best way to describe his feelings for her.

“I knew when I first laid eyes on her that there was something about her that called out to me. Yeah, that first day I wanted to get her to go out with me because I was attracted to her, and I wanted to get her into bed, but that first time she turned me down, everything changed.”

“You wanted her because you couldn’t have her, because she was a challenge.”

Although he hated to admit it, yeah, at first that was what it was, but it had quickly changed to something much deeper.

“I won't say that at first the fact that she turned me down when most women jump at the chance to go out with me wasn't intriguing, but it's so much more than that.

I can't explain it, when I saw her I just knew that she was the one for me. Love at first sight I guess, just like my parents.” After spending his childhood and adolescence watching his parents trust their guts, both in their business and personal lives, it had taught him that sometimes your body instinctively knew things well before your brain figured it out.

“Things are still really new between you two, what if once you get to know her better you find out you're not as compatible as you think?”

“Won't happen. I know what I feel, man. I'm falling in love with her, and the more I know about her, the more I like her.”

“So, you're already all in?”

“ All in. She's everything that I want in a woman, she's strong, smart, compassionate, caring, and underneath her tough cop exterior she's vulnerable and even a little insecure.

She makes me feel needed and not just for my money, she needs someone to be there for her, and I want to be, Elliot, I want to be, man.

I've never felt like this before, she consumes me.

I miss her when I'm not with her, like miss her with this gut-wrenching, stomach-knotting, raging emptiness.

When I'm with her I'm torn between wanting to ask her a million questions to find out every single detail about her, and wanting to take her to bed and never let her leave.

All I do is think about her, count the seconds until I can see her again, I want her and I'm not going to pretend otherwise.

So, yeah, I'm not going to propose to her today, but I'm also not going to wait forever just because society thinks it's too soon."

Elliot leaned forward, elbows on his knees, studying him.

Then he nodded, "I get it, and I'm happy for you. I can't say I would have pictured you falling for a cop, but then again, I don't think anyone expected me to fall in love with someone like Susannah. So you're all in, and you said Florence is letting her guard down, did you think any more about Susannah's advice that you try to connect with her on a different level? "

"I did," he couldn't help but grin as he thought of what he had planned for his date with Florence tonight.

When he'd dropped her off at the precinct and told her he'd pick her up and take her out for dinner after work she hadn't protested, just kissed him and told him she couldn't wait. "Actually, I got the idea from you."

"From me?" Elliot asked, eyes wide.

"Yep."

"So, you going to tell me what it is?" Elliot asked.

"Nope. Not until I tell Florence, but I know she's going to love it.

" After thinking that there was a chance that she'd been hiding a relationship from him he'd felt like he had to make that up to her, especially knowing that while he'd

been thinking the worst, she'd been lying unconscious in her apartment.

When they'd been curled up in her bed this morning, the idea had come to him, and the second that it had, he'd known it was the perfect way to show her rather than just tell her how much he cared about her and how important she was to him.

If Florence needed reassurances that he wasn't playing around, then that's what he'd give her.

If she needed to hear a million times that he was serious about her and them, then he'd say it a million times.

If she needed them to date for a while before they were intimate, then he'd take as many cold showers a day as he had to.

Whatever she needed, he would give her because she was already his.

It didn't matter that they'd only known each other a few days, it didn't matter that she had issues from her past that made her wary of people but men in particular, it didn't matter that she was unaccustomed to having someone in her corner.

As a kid, he might have been the carefree, irresponsible rich playboy, but caring for his mother as she battled cancer, and helping to raise his orphaned nephew had grown his nurturing side.

Florence didn't just bring out that side in him, she also brought out his protective side, he wanted to tuck her away someplace where nothing and no one could ever hurt her again, he wanted to take care of her and make sure she never wanted for anything again.

It wasn't a side of him that most people saw, no one had ever whittled through the

charming, sexy, playboy veneer to the man underneath.

No one had ever cared enough to try, to even see that there was more to him.

Florence saw, she saw every part of him, and that was both terrifying and exhilarating.

He was already in too deep and couldn't walk away from her even if he wanted to.

And he didn't.

Florence had had a grip on his heart since he saw her in that alley, and it only tightened the more he got to know her.

1:06 P.M.

“So, he was right,” Florence said as she looked around the apartment of thirty-year-old Michael Stypes. “The man in my apartment knew that Michael was the killer. He said he was there when I was almost run down. Do you think he followed the car and found out who the driver was?”

“Makes sense, although what I'd really like to know is how he knew that we were onto Michael. He had to have been at the precinct at some point, seen the files on our desks. You think it was the Coffin Killer?”

Florence shrugged. “My guess would be yes, but I didn't know he was stalking me. He sends letters, sometimes pictures of some of his victims, but as far as I knew, he wasn't following me around. Obviously, I was wrong since he was there when I was almost run over.”

“I don't like that,” Jake said, getting that protective look on his face.

“Can we just deal with one serial killer at a time please?” she asked, taking a step closer to the large corkboard that covered most of one of the living room walls in Michael’s apartment. “Lucky for us, our guy is a meticulous planner.”

“Lucky,” Jake agreed as he stood beside her.

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Spread across the board were pictures of every single victim of the Dumpster Killer, both alive and deceased, and maps marking where each body would be disposed of.

“Jake, look at this,” she said, directing her partner’s attention to a photo of a pretty blonde in her mid-twenties. “She’s not one of our victims.”

As far as she was concerned that could mean only one thing.

Michael had already chosen his next victim.

Apparently, Jake thought the same thing. “Michael isn’t here, and he isn’t at work.”

“He’s at her apartment.” Florence was already running out of the apartment and down the stairs, there would be time later to work through the treasure trove that Michael had left for them, but this woman’s time would be running out.

Michael was already veering off his path, killing more and more frequently, there was every chance he wouldn’t keep any future victims alive for forty-eight hours, which meant that every second counted.

Jake was on her heels as they ran out onto the street. The apartment listed next to the woman was only a block away, it would be quicker for them to get there themselves than to call it in and have uniforms deployed to the building.

It was early afternoon, and the streets were busy, Florence had to weave her way around people as she ran as fast as she could and made it to the building in minutes.

At the apartment door, she and Jake paused, silently coordinating how they would proceed. They'd worked together long enough that they didn't need to go through things in detail, they knew each other well enough to know what the other was thinking, and knew how to play off each other.

With a nod, Jake reached for the doorknob. Florence had her gun out and ready to aim at Michael the second the door swung open.

As soon as it did, two heads snapped in their direction.

The woman—Rachel Oaks—began to weep in relief as she realized the cavalry had arrived and she wasn't about to die.

The man—Michael Stypes—looked panicked and then angry as his gaze darted to the table where a gun lay discarded.

In that millisecond, he appeared to weigh his options, decide he would never make it to the weapon, and instead lunged for the chair the woman was bound to and ducked behind it, using his victim as a shield.

“It's over, Michael,” she called out, weapon trained on the chair. Although she believed Michael to be unarmed, she wanted to try to talk him down before they did anything that might get an innocent victim hurt.

“It's you,” he called back. “You saw me, but no one sees me, how did you do it?”

So he definitely knew who she was, Florence was sure that it was Michael who she'd felt watching her that morning Eli had arrived to take her to work.

Maybe he viewed her as a threat who had needed to be eliminated.

“I look for details, Michael. The little things, the things no one else notices, that’s what makes me a good cop. ”

“You ruined everything,” he seethed.

“What did I ruin, Michael? What are you trying to achieve by killing these women?”
If she could get him talking, keep his focus on her, then hopefully he wouldn’t notice that Jake was slowly circling around the edge of the room to get behind him.

“They deserved what they got.”

“Why? Why did they deserve to die, Michael?”

“They didn't see me. They looked at me, and they saw straight through me. Take Rachel here.” He did something to the woman to make her cry out, and when she looked, Florence could see that Michael had his fingers tangled in the woman’s long hair.

“What did Rachel do?”

“Rachel is a friend of my older brother’s wife, at their wedding I was a groomsman, she was a bridesmaid, we walked down the aisle together.

I asked her if we could dance together at the reception, she said yes, only then she spent the whole time gyrating against one of the other groomsmen.

She left with him, she was drunk, filthy thing didn't even spare me a second thought.”
He ripped Rachel’s head back, exposing her thin white neck, and Florence had no doubt that if he had a knife in his hand he would have slit it.

“I'm sure she didn't mean to hurt you, did you, Rachel?”

“N-no. The other g-groomsman was my boyfriend at the time. I l-looked for you, but I d-didn't see y-you,” Rachel stammered.

“Of course you didn't,” Michael roared. “No one ever does. Not my parents, not women, not you. No one ever sees me. Except you,” he growled in her direction.

“I'm sorry that you've felt invisible, Michael. I'm sorry that you feel like no one cares about you, but you have our attention now. I see you, I hear you, you are not invisible.” She knew what it was like to feel invisible, to think that no one cared about you, and it hurt. It made you feel like there was something wrong with you, like it was your fault that there was no one who cared whether you lived or died. She had felt that way all her life, even after she'd built a new life for herself in New York, she'd felt more alone than she'd ever realized.

Until Eli came into her life.

Now for the first time ever, she felt like she had someone.

“Are you patronizing me?” Michael demanded.

“No,” she said honestly. “I understand, Michael. Maybe it's why I could see you.

My dad split before my first birthday, my mom was more interested in getting drunk and her newest boyfriend.

There was no one to make sure I did my homework or ate dinner, no one to care about my grades in school, or if I did extra-curricular activities, or applied to colleges.

No one cared that I went to bed hungry and had to bathe in a river, so trust me, Michael, when I say that I know what it feels like to be invisible.

But this isn't the way to go about being seen.

Killing women who you feel ignored you or looked straight through you doesn't change anything. ”

“Yes it does,” he said firmly. “They all saw me then. For those forty-eight hours, I was the center of their world, they saw me, they got to feel my humiliation when they had to pee in their pants, and when they had to beg me for a glass of water. They learned, they sat there and listened as I told them every time someone has looked past me without seeing me.”

“You've made your point, Michael. The whole city has lived in fear of you for over a year. They all saw you, they all heard you, sixteen victims, you'll never be invisible again, you'll go down in history as one of the worst serial killers the city has ever seen. It's time to end this.”

Michael didn't say anything, and she could feel the change in the air.

He had made his decision.

He wasn't going to go quietly.

He'd made his point, and now he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory.

Well, too bad for him that she and her partner weren't going to let that happen.

Michael shoved the chair with Rachel still tied to it forward, sending it toppling to the floor causing the woman to cry out as she landed along with it, unable to break her fall.

When Michael moved to lunge at her in an attempt to get her to fire so he could

commit suicide by cop, Jake—who had successfully circled the room so he was behind the other man—tackled him.

Just like that, it was over.

Michael fought, but they got him cuffed, read him his rights, and freed what would have been victim number seventeen.

Today was a good day.

6:13 P.M.

“Hi.” Florence wrapped her arms around his neck, kissed him hard on the mouth, then put her arms around his waist, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Since she wasn't often the one to initiate intimacy like that, Eli felt his heart soar. Bit by bit, the more time they spent together, the more he proved to her that she had nothing to fear as far as he was concerned, the more she lowered her guard and let him in.

“I missed you today,” Florence continued.

She missed him.

Those three little words meant more to him than he'd thought they would.

In a way, it was better than hearing that she loved him because he could already see in her face, deep in her eyes where she tried to hide it, that she was falling in love with him.

But to know that she missed him, that she was thinking about him when they weren't

together, that he wasn't the only one consumed by what was growing between them made it feel that much more real.

“What’s wrong with you?” Florence tilted her head up to look at him. “I’ve never known you to be so quiet.”

“Just happy.” Eli smiled down at her, then couldn’t resist capturing her lips in a kiss that would have gone a whole lot further if they weren't standing outside the precinct on a busy street.

“I am too,” she said with a look on her face that said she was both surprised and pleased with this development. “Where are we going tonight? Did you get us reservations at some fancy restaurant? Do we need to stop by my place so I can change into something else?”

This chatterbox side of Florence was something he wasn't used to, and something he was sure that most people didn't get to see. That she was relaxed around him now, comfortable with public displays of affection and easy teasing, made him feel much more secure in their relationship, and that he had made the right decision when he’d put in an order for a custom made engagement ring.

“Actually, what you're wearing is fine.”

She looked down at herself. “Jeans and a sweater is okay for wherever we’re going?”

“It’s perfect, no one will mind what you're wearing.”

“Well, now I'm intrigued.”

“Good.” He ruffled her hair, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and led her to the car.

“So,” she drew the word out, “care to enlighten me as to our plans for this evening?”

“Nope.”

“Nope?”

“It’s a surprise,” he informed her as he opened the car door for her and then slid onto the back seat once she’d gotten in.

“You should know that I’m not crazy about surprises.” Florence shot him a dubious look as she buckled up.

“Relax, you’ll like it. I promise,” he added when she still didn’t look convinced.

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“If you say so,” she muttered under her breath.

“You know you're cute when you pout like that.”

“Cute?” She made a face. “I'm twenty-seven, way too old to be cute.”

“Wrong, I think you're adorable. Sexy too.” He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned her face to meet his. When he kissed her, he took things slow, letting his tongue explore every inch of her mouth, tasting her and wondering what the rest of her tasted like. He couldn't wait to have her naked, and in his bed, he was going to taste every inch of her sweet body before he buried himself so deep inside of her it would seal their connection forever.

By the time he finally broke away they were both breathing heavily, and if he wasn't serious about what he'd planned for them tonight, then he would have asked his driver to take them straight back to his hotel room or to his penthouse. But this was something he really wanted to do.

“How's your head?” he asked as they turned into Eighth Avenue. His finger softly traced the lump on her temple.

“Much better. Although, I'd say it was still awful if it means you'll make me more of that amazing soup.”

“You don't have to be sick for me to cook for you.” Eli kissed the tip of her nose. “And if you love the soup, then you're going to love it when we move in together, and you get to come home to my cooking every night.”

A flash of uncertainty washed over her features, but he saw her resolutely push it away and smile at him. “Since I’m not much of a chef, I definitely will.”

Score.

He’d wondered how she’d reacted when he so blatantly told her where he saw things going between them. She shouldn’t be surprised though, he’d been upfront with her from the beginning. Florence called it cocky, but to him it was just recognizing what you wanted and going for it.

“We’re here,” he said as the car came to a stop.

“And where is here?” she asked as they both climbed out of the car.

“Here is Tig’s Tattoo and Piercing,” he replied.

“A tattoo parlor?” Her nose scrunched up in an adorably confused look. “This is where you’re bringing me for a date? You want me to get a tattoo?”

“Nope. I’m the one who’ll be getting the tattoo. My first tattoo in fact.”

“Oh?” Now she arched a surprised brow. “Playboy that you are, I would have guessed you had at least one.”

“Never really saw the appeal. Not until I saw yours anyway.” Eli took her hand and led her inside the tattoo parlor. His gaze immediately went to the large tattooed man sitting on a stool by the desk. “Tig, I presume.”

“Mr. Lennox?”

“That’s me.”

“And your lovely lady is?”

“I’m Florence,” she said, holding out her hand to shake his.

“Pleasure to meet you, ma’am. You both getting tats?”

“Actually, the design I asked about when I called you earlier, it’s a replica of one that Florence already has,” Eli explained.

“It is?” Florence looked up at him wide-eyed.

“You got the design?” Eli asked Tig.

“Right here.” The man handed over a piece of paper. “This what you wanted?”

“Perfect,” he said when he saw the drawing of the branch of cherry blossoms. Turning to Florence, he took hold of her wrist, slid her sweater up her arm, and exposed her stunning tattoo. “This wasn’t just something you got to cover up the scar, was it?”

Florence shook her head, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“I did get it to cover the scar, but it was more than that. I wanted something that symbolized how I felt about what happened to me. I researched meanings of flowers because I thought that would be something pretty, and I came across cherry blossoms. They symbolize hope, new beginnings, as in Japan they bloom at the start of a new year. They also symbolize the transient nature of life. Beautiful things pass away, nothing ever lasts forever. That’s how I was feeling back then.

I was eighteen, I’d survived something that should have killed me, and I was finally able to escape the life I’d always hated and build something new, something better. I

felt like the cherry blossoms symbolized the younger, more innocent me. I lost that, and that scar was the reason why, but it was also the reason why I was still alive. I wanted to incorporate it into the design because that scar made me the person I am today.”

“I saw this the night that we first met, the next day I couldn’t stop thinking about you, and I researched what it meant.

Even though I didn't know why you'd chosen it, and I didn't understand its significance in your life, I knew it was something important to you.” He skimmed the beautiful image of delicate pink blossoms, Florence’s skin every bit as soft and silky as real cherry blossoms would be.

“Mono-no aware, it’s a Japanese saying for the awareness of impermanence.

It acknowledges the bittersweet feelings you have of seeing how wonderful life can be and realizing that those moments don’t last forever.

We can be both saddened by and appreciative of the idea that life is transient.

I wanted to add that to my tattoo because it symbolizes how I feel about losing my family.

As deep as the loss hits me I wouldn’t have given up the moments I shared with them for anything.

The pain is worth the payoff of the years I spent with my parents and brother.”

Big, round teardrops balanced on Florence’s long lashes, her hands lifted and rested against his chest. “That’s really beautiful, Eli.

Underneath all this cocky, laidback exterior you like everyone to see, lies such a big heart.

I want to get that saying added to my tattoo.

It's poignant and beautiful in a melancholy sort of way, and it's something I want to be reminded of moving forward. "

Eli rested his forehead against hers. "You're something special, you know that?

You've endured so much, yet you're so beautiful, so strong and resilient, you make me want to be a better person, stronger and more compassionate." Feathering his lips across hers, Eli kissed her and then straightened and said to the tattooist who was watching them with interest. "Looks like we're both getting tats after all. "

10:40 P.M.

Where had the evening gone?

It felt like it was just a couple of minutes ago that she'd stepped out of the precinct to find him waiting for her, and yet a glance at her watch told her that four and a half hours had flown by.

This date had been perfect, just her kind of thing, she'd sat and watched while Eli got his tattoo, then had the same Japanese saying added to hers, then they'd eaten burgers and fries in the back of his car as they'd driven back to her place.

Now the date was over, and it was time to say goodnight.

Only she didn't want to.

She didn't want him to go.

Opening up to him this morning had been cathartic in a way she hadn't envisioned.

Florence didn't like to talk about herself and the messed up stuff she'd lived through.

Nearly dying at only eight years old had been made so much worse by the fact that she had no one but her ten-year-old brother to try to help her deal with the fallout.

And what had happened when she was sixteen she had never told a single living soul, just wept, curled up in a ball, on the mattress on the floor that was her bed, before she went to sleep every night.

Having someone know the darkness that had touched her had always seemed terrifying, but somehow, having it be Eli who knew made it okay.

Better than okay, actually.

It had given her a peace that she hadn't felt before because finally— finally —she wasn't alone anymore.

“Million for your thoughts?”

She looked up to see Eli looking down at her, a tender smile on his face. “I think the saying is ‘penny for your thoughts’.”

“I know, but I have to live up to my reputation sometimes.” He winked. “What has you so quiet and lost in thought?”

“Just thinking about you, about us.” Worry creased his brow.

“These worry lines belie your cocky reputation,” she teased, reaching up to smooth the lines away.

“You don’t need to be all concerned, I wasn't thinking anything bad, I was just thinking that I want you to come upstairs with me when we get to my apartment.”

“Florence, we don’t have to do anything. I didn't come up with the tattoo idea to try to impress you and get you into bed, I did it because I wanted to, because it made me feel closer to you, like I was sharing in your past and the journey it’s taken you on.”

“Shh.” She pressed her finger to his lips to silence him, and then replaced her finger with her lips. “I want you to come up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Are you going to treat me like a china doll because you know about what happened to me?” She arched a challenging brow. She didn't want Eli knowing that she was a victim of sexual assault to change how he saw her. “Because before you knew about that you were all for the two of us having sex.”

“You're not a china doll, but you are mine, and I worry about you.”

“I'm yours?” Her arched brow reached almost to her hairline.

“Not in a possession kind of way.” He chuckled.

“You're mine because I care about you, and I'm never letting you go. That’s why I have this inked on my skin.” He held up his arm where a white bandage covered the new tattoo.

“It’s not a male thing, I'm yours too,” he added, brushing his lips across hers.

Florence caught his face between her hands when he would have ended the kiss and deepened it. That he wanted to join her on her ongoing journey to put what she'd been through behind her only made him more attractive. She was falling for him, hard and fast, and she was done fighting it.

She was finally there, in that place she thought she'd never arrive at, she was ready to move on.

She was ready to be happy.

“Come upstairs with me, Eli,” she whispered against his lips. “I want you, I want this, I don't want to wait anymore.”

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“Princess, you better be certain because you say that again, and I'm not going to be able to resist you.”

“I want you, Eli, more than I've ever wanted anything else,” she goaded him because she wanted him to lose control and see her as a strong, capable woman, not the terrified, traumatized kid she'd been.

She wasn't going to break, she'd had sex with other men, she didn't have panic attacks or flashbacks, but what she hadn't done before was make love. She'd never felt the way she felt about Eli with any other man, and she knew that those feelings would change sex, make it something deeper, something more than sensual pleasure, it would touch every single part of her.

Eli groaned, unbuckled her seatbelt and dragged her onto his lap. “I want you so badly, I can't wait,” he growled in her ear.

One of his hands curled around her hip, holding her in place while his other hand undid her jeans and slid beneath the fabric. His fingers stopped just shy of touching her where she was aching for him.

“Eli,” she moaned against his mouth, thrusting her hips forward in an attempt to hurry him along.

“Uh, uh, uh,” he tutted. “Patience, princess. I'm going to take my time, enjoy every second of watching you squirm, it's going to make hearing you scream my name when you come that much sweeter.”

“Just remember, I give as good as I get,” she warned, nipping at his earlobe.

“I’ll remember that.” He laughed as his finger brushed lightly across her, making her shiver. How could one little touch make her that turned on?

Her mouth found Eli’s again and as badly as she wanted him inside her the way he teased her, pushing just the tip of his finger inside her before withdrawing it, his thumb rubbing circles on her aching bud, worked her higher than she’d ever flown before.

She was torn between wanting it to never end and for him to have mercy on her and letting her come.

Too soon the car stopped. “We’re here,” he said, withdrawing his hand and making her mew a protest.

“You better not ask me again if I’m sure I want this,” she warned, her entire body was turned on, tingling, buzzing, burning for him. “If you don’t finish what you started the second we get inside I’m going to combust.”

“Oh, you’ll be combusting, princess.” Eli wrapped an arm around her waist and climbed out of the car without ever letting her go.

The walk to the building’s door and up to her floor seemed to take forever, and she couldn’t not find Eli’s mouth again, kissing him had become her new oxygen, she needed it to survive, and she didn’t even care that they were making a spectacle of themselves.

Somehow, Eli managed to get them to her apartment with her legs wrapped around his waist, while never breaking their kiss, and he managed to do it without them crashing into any walls.

The second her door closed behind them, they were ripping off each other's clothes with a fervor she hadn't felt before, and from the frantic way Eli was removing her sweater and jeans he hadn't felt it before either.

"You're gorgeous." Eli whistled as he gave her an appreciative once over the second he got her naked.

"You're pretty gorgeous yourself," she said, admiring the view. Eli was every bit as cut as she'd known he would be. "You going to look or you ready to touch." Grabbing Eli's hand, she led him through to her bedroom.

When they reached the bed he scooped her up and laid her down reverently, the look on his face was hard to read, she could see the heat, he was as turned on as she was, but there was something else there.

Something deeper. Something she thought was probably a reflection of what she'd see on her own face if she looked in the mirror.

"Eli," she pleaded. "I need you. Now. Please."

At the please, his control seemed to snap, he climbed on the bed, hovered above her. "You're on birth control, right?"

"Yes, and I'm clean."

"Me too, you good to do this without a condom?"

"I don't care how we do it as long as you get this inside me now," she said as she grabbed hold of his hard length and squeezed.

"Is that a yes?" he asked tightly.

“It’s a yes.” She grabbed his hips and tried to hurry him up.

That Cheshire cat grin of his spread across his face and he positioned himself at her entrance, pushing inside her inch by excruciatingly slow inch.

It had been a while since she’d been with anyone, and it took a moment for her body to adjust to his size—and Eli was very well endowed—but once she had she felt full.

Not just her body but her heart and her soul as well.

Eli’s cockiness, confidence, and tender sweetness had managed to patch up her heart and repair her soul.

They moved in a unison that implied years of togetherness instead of their first time. They kissed, their hands roamed each other’s bodies, as their movements grew faster, impatient, as they both neared the peak.

Florence could feel it coming, feeling her entire body growing tighter and tighter, and then she hit the end of the rope, and her body exploded in a fiery passion that didn't leave a single inch of her untouched.

Eli came a second after her, and continued to thrust dragging out both of their pleasure until they both collapsed, sated and happy, against the mattress.

“That was amazing,” she murmured. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to move for a month.”

“Only a month?” Eli asked. “Then my job is not done here. Unless you're out for a year, I have improvements to make.”

She would have been happy to just curl up in Eli’s arms, snuggle for a while, and

then drift off to sleep, but it seemed he had other plans. “What are you doing?” she asked as he moved down her body.

“Round two,” he grinned.

“I don’t think I can come again this soon after that.”

“I love a challenge.” Eli settled between her legs, and when the tip of his tongue darted out to touch her and pleasure zinged through her, she realized she was wrong.

Who cared about sleep?

She was going to spend the night making out with Eli, and she wasn't even going to regret it when her alarm went off in the morning.

Chapter

Ten

Eli couldn't remember the last time he'd actually enjoyed snuggling with a woman after sex.

It wasn't like he'd kicked the women he'd been involved with straight out of bed once they'd both been satisfied, they'd spent the night, or he'd spent the night, some had liked to lie against him, others had rolled over to their side of the bed, but all of those times he'd never felt this connection.

He'd never felt the need to hold them close, keep them cuddled against his side even in sleep.

But with Florence, he felt like even if she was on the other side of the bed she was too far away.

Florence had set her alarm for six o'clock, which meant he had exactly nine minutes to wait until she woke up and he could make love to her again.

She'd wanted to wake at five to hit the gym before she started her day, and he'd been slack lately, skipping several workouts because he was spending all his free time with Florence.

But he'd talked her into staying in bed for another hour because he wanted to start his day exercising in a different manner.

Another glance at the clock on Florence's nightstand said there was still another four minutes before the alarm would go off.

That was too long to wait.

Rolling Florence underneath him, Eli trailed a line of kisses down her neck. "You awake, princess?"

"Mmm," Florence murmured as she stretched and blinked open sleepy eyes to smile up at him. "If you keep doing that then yes, I'm awake." She arched her neck to give him better access.

"If I keep this up? Princess, try and stop me. Touching you, kissing you, tasting you, I could make this my new full-time job." If it were up to him, he'd be calling up the jewelers today to insist they have the ring ready and waiting for him to pick up this morning so he could propose to her tonight.

He wanted to make love to her every night, fall asleep with their limbs tangled together, and then start each new day with sex.

"How do you get me from asleep to turned on in mere seconds?" Florence asked as she moaned and shifted, lifting her hips as she felt his hard length pressed against her.

"Having you sleep naked is part of my master plan," he teased as he probed her entrance. Last night they'd done it fast and hard, slow and sensual, and everything in between, right now he wanted to take his time, enjoy the moment.

Florence obviously had other plans.

She thrust her hips up, burying him deep inside her hot, wet center.

Just like that his control snapped. When he was inside her bringing her pleasure was all he could think about. It wasn't even about his own release, he just wanted to see the look on her face as she toppled over the edge into a world filled with nothing but ecstasy.

Capturing her nipple in his mouth, he tongued it and was rewarded with a moan falling from her lips that made him grow harder if that were possible. Her fingers curled into his hair as he feasted on her, savoring every moan, every sigh, every wiggle as her body urged him on.

His release was building, but he held it back, determined that he wouldn't come until she did.

Scraping his teeth lightly across her nipple, he sent her tipping over the edge. She clamped around him as her orgasm spiraled through him, setting off his own orgasm.

It plowed into him with the force of a freight train, going on and on until he thought it was going to last forever.

By the time it finally faded, his arms shook as he kept his elbows locked so he wouldn't crush Florence.

"Don't," she said, reaching up to curl her arms around his neck, pulling him down so his body covered hers.

"I'm too heavy, princess, I'll hurt you."

"You won't," she contradicted, holding him tighter so he couldn't lever himself back up. "I like feeling your body on top of mine, makes me feel safe."

Tilting his face sideways he pressed a kiss to her temple. "You are safe with me,

princess.”

“I know.” She gave a contented sigh as she snuggled closer.

He liked this.

Just lying in bed, holding Florence in his arms.

This was perfect.

Everything with her was perfect.

He’d give her a few more days, a week or two maybe, to get used to the idea that they were together and he wasn't going to let her down, and then he was proposing.

It didn't matter to him if they’d known each other a day, a week, a month, or a year, he was falling in love with her, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, so he saw no reason to delay.

The connection between them was strong, it wasn't going anywhere, he couldn't imagine anything coming between them.

Was he expecting a perfect life without arguments and disagreements?

No.

Eli was too realistic to think that. But he’d watched his parents model how to have a successful marriage, how to deal with problems as soon as they arose so that nothing was left to fester, and that’s what he wanted with Florence.

“I wish we didn't have to get up and get ready for work,” Florence said.

“Me too. Want to play hooky?”

“I wish I could, but Jake and I have to interview Michael Stypes today, get the paperwork on the case wrapped up to send to the DA.”

“I know the guy is a serial killer, but still I can't help but be grateful to him. If he hadn't tried to run you over then we would never have met.” It felt wrong to be grateful to a killer, but how could he not be thankful that Florence had been brought into his life? He'd needed her, and she'd needed him, and fate had thrown them together at the perfect time.

“Can't argue with that. I'm still glad he's off the streets though, because men like Michael, they never stop killing.”

He didn't have to be a cop to know that.

And knowing that filled him with a cold dread.

Florence had survived a serial killer when she was eight years old, but it didn't look like the man had been able to let her go.

The Coffin Killer had been stalking her for nearly two decades now, it seemed unlikely that he would ever leave her alone. “Did Jake make any progress in finding the man who attacked you?”

“I don't think so, but we were distracted with the Dumpster Killer. CSU didn't find anything here, he probably wore gloves, he's been active for decades, he knows what he's doing, he won't have left any forensics behind.”

“Why aren't you more worried about this?” He lifted up so he could see her properly.

“I'm a cop, I can take care of myself, and he's never made physical contact like that before. I think he only came by because he wanted to help, make sure we got the Dumpster Killer off the streets, I guess he didn't like the man trying to kill me.”

“Are you making excuses for him?”

“What?” Florence's eyes grew wide and disbelieving.

“No, of course not. That man tried to kill me, he sexually assaulted me, I'm his only living victim, you don't think I feel guilty that I survived and all those other girls didn't? I've been looking for him ever since I became a cop, I'd give anything to be the one to snap cuffs on him and read him his rights. If you don't get that, then maybe you should leave.” She tried to shove him off her, but he sat up and drew her into his lap.

“You're right, I'm sorry. Of course I don't really think you're making excuses for him. It just terrifies me that there is a smart killer out there who is fixated on you.” He'd already lost most of his family, there was no way he was losing Florence too.

Her face softened, and she reached out to cup his cheek in her hand. “Okay, I guess I can understand that, it freaks my brother out too. I'm careful, and if he comes after me again he won't be getting away. You don't have to worry about me.”

“Too late, princess. When you care about someone you worry about them, so I'm going to worry about you. Always.” Turning his face to the side, he touched his lips to the inside of her wrist, making her shiver.

“I guess that's kind of sweet.”

“That's me,” he grinned, argument averted, he was going to have to get a handle on the fact that Florence had a dangerous job. “If I make us French toast for breakfast,

we'll have time to take a shower together before we have to leave for work."

"Shower first, breakfast can wait." Florence slid off his lap and grabbed his hand, leading him into the bathroom.

Watching her perky little behind and her long toned legs, he could go with that plan.

8:12 A.M.

"I might have something."

Florence glanced over at her partner. "Something on which case?"

"Yours."

"Mine? You mean the break-in?" She was ready to put that behind her. She didn't think that the Coffin Killer was a threat to her, and if he was stalking her, then maybe she could get him off the streets.

Nineteen years.

For nineteen long years she had wanted that man off the streets.

Even as an eight-year-old child, she had wanted to do whatever she could to put him behind bars, but what she could do had been limited.

She'd known that the man who had tried to kill her was her mother's boyfriend, although she'd seen him only a handful of times, but neither she nor her mother had been able to tell the cops anything that had helped them find the guy.

Over time, she'd had to get used to the idea that he would never be caught.

That the little girls who had lost their lives would never get justice.

Florence had always felt worse for those girls than she had for herself.

She'd gotten off lightly, she had lived, they hadn't. That was what she had told herself when she couldn't fall asleep for fear of nightmares, that was what she had told herself when she was terrified to be alone but had no one there to comfort and reassure her.

That was what she had told herself every day for almost two years before she'd finally felt like her life was returning to normal.

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Slowly, her life had returned to normal, or as normal as her and her brother's lives had been.

She'd been focused on school and getting good grades so she could get out and build a better life, but she'd never forgotten the man, couldn't even if she'd tried because he wouldn't let her.

Nearly four years had passed when she got the first letter, she and Fletcher had taken it to the Sheriff who had handed it on to the FBI who were working the Coffin Killer case, but nothing had ever come of it, and over time she had stopped passing the notes along.

But she'd kept every one of them, determined that sooner or later she'd get him.

Had her chance finally come?

They didn't even know the man's real name. He'd been Jerry Kramer when he'd been dating her mother, but Jerry Kramer hadn't existed.

"Hey."

She looked back up, realized she had zoned out, and refocused her mind. "So, what did you find out?"

"There was a fingerprint on the window, and it doesn't match yours," Jake informed her.

“A fingerprint on the window? Why would he have touched the window?”

“Were your blinds open or closed?”

“Open, I never close the living room blinds only the bedroom ones.”

“We know he’d been watching you, what if he had seen you with Eli.

He has you in the living room up against the wall as he tells you that Michael is the one who tried to run you down, then he sees Eli coming.

He panics, looks out to confirm it’s your boyfriend because you haven’t been with him long and he probably wanted to make sure. Once he confirms that it is Eli he sees coming, he hightails it out of there.”

“Could he have made it out that quickly? I mean, Eli saw him coming out as he was about to enter the building, would he have had time to make it down?”

“Depends. If he recognized the car that Eli owns then he could have made it if he took the stairs. Anyone else been in your apartment that might have touched the window?”

“Besides you and my brother, and Eli the last few days, no one but the plumber from last spring when that pipe in my bathroom broke, has been in my apartment.”

“I doubt he would have been standing in your living room looking out your window.”

“I guess not,” she agreed. “So chances are it is from him. Is it already running through the system?”

“Yes. This guy has to be in the system, you can’t murder dozens of children and not

have been arrested for something somewhere along the line. He's a pedophile, at some point someone would have reported him for taking too much of an interest in their daughter. A girlfriend perhaps, or if he has a job that entails working with or around kids then a parent or colleague, a neighbor, whatever, someone has to have seen something."

"I don't know, Jake," she said slowly. "This guy is good. Really good. He's been operating for decades, and he has never—ever—left a single piece of forensic evidence behind.

Not a hair, not a fingerprint, not a shoeprint, nothing.

Nada. Zero, zip, zilch, what are the chances that he messed up now? "

"But this involves you, and you're different. You got away. You. An eight-year-old little child bested him."

"I didn't get away the other morning," she muttered.

It annoyed her that she hadn't been able to get out of the Coffin Killer's grip.

She was a cop, taught self-defense, worked out religiously, and was an excellent shot, yet he had overpowered her.

That took her right back to being the helpless child she had fought so hard to leave behind.

Took her back to the afternoon she had been walking home from school only to be accosted by her mother's boyfriend.

He had grabbed her arm and dragged her along with him.

No one had noticed because no one in River's End had paid much attention to the poor little girl.

She remembered him holding her down while he inserted the IV into the inside of her elbow.

Although he'd messed up, somehow she'd gotten enough of the sedatives that what had happened next was hazy.

Her next clear memory was lying in a coffin.

Her whole childhood she hadn't been in control. She couldn't stop her father leaving, she couldn't stop her mother drinking, she couldn't change the circumstances that she and Fletcher had lived in, she couldn't stop the Coffin Killer from hurting her, nor had she stopped one of her mother's boyfriend's from assaulting her.

When she had left River's End, she had vowed that she would never again be helpless, and she hadn't been until her own personal bogeyman had come back into her life.

To get her equilibrium back, it felt like she had to put the Coffin Killer where he belonged.

Behind bars.

He had hurt enough children, destroyed enough families, it was time to end his reign of terror.

"He's obsessed with you, Florence, and he's upping the game. Following you around, breaking into your apartment, he's no longer content just to watch you from a distance and send you mail."

“What are you saying, Jake?” she asked, not liking his tone.

“I’m saying you need to be careful.”

Arching a suspicious brow. “And what exactly do you mean when you say I need to be careful.”

“I think you should stay somewhere else for a while, a hotel, or with Eli.”

“With Eli? We only just met, I’m not moving in with him.” Although the idea didn’t sound as objectionable as it should.

Sure she and Eli had just met, but they both knew that what was between them was big, and she was positive that Eli would actually jump at the idea of them living together, but it was too soon.

Right? The rules of dating said you didn’t move in together after a week of dating.

And really, it hadn’t even been a week, they’d only technically been dating for a couple of days.

“You don’t have to move in with him, that’s not what I’m suggesting. All I’m saying is that a serial killer who has eluded the authorities for over two decades is fixated on you and he’s escalating. You need to take this threat seriously. I know you, you brush off any concerns that relate to you, and you go out of your way to make sure that every victim in every case we work is safe and well taken care of. I want the same for you. Check your surroundings, be alert, if you’re going to be staying alone at your apartment maybe you should get an alarm system.

Florence, you’re finally happy, really happy I mean, now is not the time to go and get yourself killed. ” He finished with a grin.

Florence rolled her eyes at him, but couldn't help but smile because what he'd said was true.

At eight, she didn't have anything to live for. As depressing as that sounded, it was true. But now at twenty-seven, she had a man in her life who cared about her, who respected her, who was there for her, and she could see herself with him long term. Marriage, kids, the family she'd never had as a child she could have with Eli.

With happiness within her grasp and all her dreams about to come true there was no way she was letting a serial killer take that away from her.

5:53 P.M.

"You know you can't pick me up every single day," Florence said when she saw him standing outside the precinct.

"Why not?" Eli asked, drawing her into his embrace and kissing her.

"Because I'm a grown-up with a job, and you're a grown-up with a job, and those two jobs can't coincide every day."

"I don't see why not," he told her as he led her to the car.

She seemed like she was on edge, she hadn't been when he'd dropped her off this morning so it was obviously something that had happened at work.

A nice, quiet date night was precisely what she needed, and he had something simple but meaningful planned for the evening.

"Well because?—"

Eli cut her off by capturing her lips and kissing her until he felt her relax against him.

“Did you just kiss me to shut me up?” she asked as they slid into the car’s back seat. Since she didn't sound angry he knew he wasn't in trouble.

“No, I kissed you to get you to relax,” he told her, settling her against him as his driver headed off into the traffic. “Rough day?”

“Long day,” she replied on a sigh, nestling closer and tucking her face against his neck. “Thanks for picking me up.”

Women! First she was annoyed that he was there to pick her up, and now she was grateful, he didn't think he would ever figure out the way their minds worked.

“You're welcome.” Eli kissed her forehead and then just wrapped his arms around her and held her close. He liked this, just holding her in his arms, and all too soon they were pulling up outside his building.

“Where are we?” Florence asked, suspicion sliding into her tone. “This doesn’t look like a restaurant.”

“I said I was buying you dinner, I never said I was taking you to a restaurant,” he reminded her as he took her hand and tugged her from the car, excited to show her what he had planned.

“So, are you going to tell me where we are?”

“My place. Well, my new place, I’ve been staying in a hotel since I moved back to the city, but I thought no time like the present to rectify that.”

With a puzzled look on her face, she asked, “We’re moving your stuff into your new

apartment for our date?”

“Nope,” he answered simply. He used his key to let them into the building, then nodded to the doorman on the way to the lift.

“So, what are we doing?” She sounded more curious than annoyed and he couldn’t help but grin, he got the opinion that Florence was like a dog with a bone, she wouldn’t let things go, it was what made her a great cop, and an interesting girlfriend.

“Dinner and shopping,” he replied vaguely, fighting a laugh.

Her nose scrunched up. “Shopping? In your apartment?”

“Online shopping, princess, it’s been around for a while now.”

“I know what it is,” she said with an accompanying eye roll. “I was just wondering what we’re shopping for.”

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Before he could answer, the lift opened to the penthouse and Florence gasped, dropped his hand, and took a step into the space, eyes wide as she spun in a slow circle, taking in the impressive entrance hall.

Then she noticed the windows in the living room and practically ran to them, staring out at the exquisite view of Central Park and the Manhattan skyline.

“This is your place?” she asked, turning back to examine the room.

“Yep, all mine.” For some reason he felt proudly pleased by her enthusiasm for the penthouse.

He’d bought it because the owner had been in financial trouble and anxious to sell, so he’d got it for a steal and been able to take possession of it almost immediately.

Although he had liked the place and the view, it hadn't really felt like it was anything special until this moment when he saw the joy on Florence’s face, and knew that one day soon this would be the home they would share.

Eli could imagine the two of them living here, curling up in front of one of the fireplaces on cold winter evenings, going to bed together each night, and eating breakfast in the kitchen before heading to work.

It was all so perfect, and he was so glad he had planned this date.

“Is this a real wood fireplace?” she asked in awe as she strode over to the one in the living room.

“It’s one of four of them in the place. There’s herringbone floors, plaster moldings, five ensuite bedrooms, a formal dining room, eat-in kitchen, library, its own laundry room.”

“It’s amazing,” she gushed as she hurried off into the next room.

He followed her as she ran from room to room exclaiming over the features and the views, and by the time they were back in the living room, he was ready to tell her what he had planned for their date.

“As you can see this place is empty, I sold my furniture before I left London intending to buy everything new for my new place, and I was hoping you would help me choose furniture and furnishings.”

“Me?” Those blue eyes of hers widened, making them look like two huge glowing blue orbs, staring into them was like staring into a summer sky, you could get lost in them.

“Yes, you.” He leaned over and ruffled her hair. “After all, you’re going to be living here too as soon as I can convince you to move in with me.”

“Eli, we’ve only been going out a few days, we haven’t even known each other for two weeks, don’t you think it’s way too soon to be thinking of us living together, even if you are joking.”

“Honey, I couldn’t be more serious.”

“Still it’s too early, we don’t know what’s going to happen with us.”

Catching her chin, he forced her to look at him. “Are you telling me that you don’t feel what I feel?”

“N-no,” she said hesitantly.

“You feel this, Florence.” He pressed his free hand to her chest where he could feel her heart pounding.

“Your heart feels it.” Curling his hand gently around her neck he could feel her pulse fluttering wildly.

“Your body feels it.” His fingers touched her temples.

“Stop letting your head deny what the rest of you already knows. We belong together, Florence, and I don’t care if we’ve known each other for a minute or a decade, I want you, I know you want me too, don’t fight it, princess.

” Wrapping an arm around her waist, he drew her in close, melding her body against his, and kissing her long and slow.

“You scare me, Eli,” Florence admitted.

“Why, princess?” While he was pleased that she was admitting her fears to him if she didn't tell him everything that was running through her pretty, blonde head, then he didn't know how to help her overcome her fears.

“Because you have the power to crush me. You know how I grew up, I never had anyone there for me, even after her boyfriend tried to kill me, my mom wasn't interested in her children. My brother was gone by my sixteenth birthday, and I was on my own. I’ve never let anyone in, and if I did, I was planning on it being some boring, average looking guy with a boring job. Not you. You’re smart, funny, charming, rich, handsome, and ridiculously sexy, you're the opposite of what I thought I wanted, and yet I want you. I want to move in with you and see where this goes, but if it doesn’t work out, I’ll be broken. ”

“No one can break you, Florence,” he said softly.

“You are the strongest woman I've ever met, and even if things didn't work out between us you'd be okay. But things are going to work out, I don't just want you to move in here, I want to marry you, have kids with you, and grow old with you. I know that scares you and I'll give you time to adjust to the idea, but it is what it is so get used to it.

” With that, he kissed her forehead then took her hand and led her to the kitchen.

“So, I owe you dinner, and a little birdie told me that you have a slight obsession with ice cream.” Eli opened the freezer door to show her what was inside.

“There has to be at least twenty flavors in there.” Florence laughed.

“And that's not all.” He opened the cupboard door to reveal what his personal assistant had organized for him today.

“We also have every single topping that you can think of. We have sprinkles, chocolate chips, chocolate sauce, strawberry sauce, caramel sauce, fudge toppings, nuts, cherries, and about a dozen other things.”

“It looks like you bought out the whole store.” Florence laughed again.

“My girl likes ice cream, then she gets ice cream.”

“Your girl, huh?”

“You got a problem with that?”

“No, so long as you're my guy.”

“Deal.”

“Deal.”

“Seal it with a kiss?”

“Can't say no to that.”

Chapter

Eleven

She had a spring in her step.

It was a weird saying, and if you'd asked her before today, Florence would have said that nobody could have a spring in their step, it just wasn't possible. It sounded odd and made her picture a big coiled spring attached to the bottom of a pair of shoes, making them bounce as they walked.

As weird as it sounded, that was exactly how it felt.

It was like she was bounding down the sidewalk, springing up to the beautiful pre-dawn sky with each step she took.

The change in her was all because of Eli.

Last night, she had let go of the fear that had engulfed her, it had been like throwing herself off the roof of a fifty-story building, but she knew that Eli was waiting at the bottom to catch her and that made everything okay.

It was so freeing to finally have let go of the heavy burden she had carried most of her life. Not only did she have a job she loved, and a safe place to live where she didn't have to worry about going to bed hungry or washing in a river, but she had someone to share her life with.

Florence couldn't wipe the smile off her face.

She really had someone who wanted to be with her. Eli was everything she'd thought she had to avoid at all costs, and yet it turned out he was everything that she had needed in her life.

At her building, she paused to stare up at the sky for a moment.

Usually, she was so busy with her job and the gym that she didn't take time to just be and enjoy the sunrise. As a child, she'd often been out of the house before dawn, washing in the river so nobody would see her, then once she was done she would sit in the clearing near where her mother's trailer was, lean against the sturdy trunk of an old pine tree, and watch as the sun rose.

She'd loved to watch as the sky changed color, going from the dark inky blue of night to a pale white then erupting into a mess of pinks, yellows, and reds.

It was a stunning spectacle and had reminded her that life was bigger than her and her problems. Knowing that had reassured her, given her the strength to face each new day.

Now, as she watched another sunrise, her back leaning against her building, in a very different setting than where she had grown up, she got that same feeling.

The world was bigger than she was, and carrying around old hurt and fears was only holding her back, preventing her from living life to the fullest.

Back as a scared and lonely little girl, she had promised herself that once she got away from River's End, she would have the perfect life, she was going to have the family and home she had always longed for. She'd done okay with the job part of the plan, but not so great with the family part.

That was all about to change though.

Okay, so she wasn't quite ready to move in with Eli, but she was ready to date exclusively with the understanding that things would be getting serious pretty quickly.

The whole idea was beginning to excite her more and scare her less. It helped that Eli was so easygoing, nothing seemed to ruffle him, and he was being very patient with her and her insecurities, which was probably what had allowed her to open up to him.

With a sigh, she pushed away from the wall, she had to go up, take a quick shower, and get changed because she wanted to get to the gym before she went to work.

She'd skipped too many workouts and after all that ice cream for dinner last night, she really needed to hit the weights and the treadmill.

Rubbing her arms to brush away the chill and warm up, she waited for the lift and wondered what Eli had planned for them tonight.

He'd wanted to drive her back to her apartment so she could get ready for work, but she'd needed a little time to herself and told him the walk would do her good.

Reluctantly, he had agreed, but told her to expect him to be picking her up again tonight to take her out for dinner.

Since it was Eli they were talking about, she had no idea what to expect but knew that dinner wouldn't be just dinner.

The lift doors opened, and by the time it reached her floor, she'd warmed up again.

Checking her watch, Florence saw she was going to have to hurry if she wanted to get

in a full workout before work.

Well minus a weights session, with her arm stuck in this cast weights were out until it came off, and even then it would probably take her a while to get full strength back in that arm.

Treadmill, exercise bike, and stair machine were probably it for her today.

She picked up the pace as she walked down the hall but froze at her door.

Something felt wrong.

Remembering her discussion with her partner the day before, she pulled out her gun before unlocking the door.

If someone—no doubt the Coffin Killer—was in there, she wasn't walking in unprepared.

She wasn't ever going to be a victim again, if that man was in there then the only way he was walking out was in handcuffs.

As quietly as she could, she slid the key into the lock and eased open the door.

The second she stepped through the door she knew she was right.

Someone was in here.

The apartment was quiet, half hidden in shadows as only the early morning light filtered in through the window. Florence wasn't sure where he was hiding, but she knew he was somewhere, watching her.

“I know you’re in here,” she announced, gun held out in front of her, ready to swing in the direction of the intruder as soon as he gave himself away.

“Where have you been all night?” asked a voice laden with barely controlled anger.

“Out,” she said briefly. She wasn't going into details with this man, all she had to do was keep him talking until she got a fix on where he was, and then she’d get him in handcuffs and call Jake.

“You were with him weren't you? The rich man.” The way he said it made it sound like he was jealous.

“What if I was?”

“You shouldn’t be with him,” he spat.

“Who should I be with?” She took a couple of steps toward the pantry, he was hiding in there, she could see the door was slightly open and since his voice was coming from the kitchen that was the only place he could be.

“You know the answer to that question. You’ve always known, it’s why you’ve never brought a man to your place before.”

How did he know that?

It was true, whenever she was with a man it was always at their place.

This was the first real home she’d had, and she wanted to keep it her safe place.

Bringing a man here when she’d known there was no future with them gave them the opportunity to invade her safe place, and she’d worked too hard to finally be

comfortable somewhere, there was no way she was ruining that.

Eli was the first man who had ever spent the night here, it was like her subconscious had known what her conscious mind was trying to ignore.

The only way that the Coffin Killer could know so much about her and her life was if he was watching her constantly. He had to have an apartment here in the building, on her floor, probably either next to or across from her apartment. He was more obsessed with her than she had realized.

“You should be with me. You’ve been mine since you were eight years old, we have a connection that can never be erased.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Toby Lane.” He stepped out of the pantry, a gun in his hand aimed right at her.

It seemed they were in a stalemate.

She had her gun pointed at him, but he had one aimed at her, and Florence knew he wasn't going to just put it down and let her cuff him.

She wasn't going to put hers down either. She’d had enough of living in the shadow of what this man had put her through. It was always there, hovering at the back of her mind, but maybe if he was finally in prison she could cut the last tie to her past and move forward without baggage.

“Put your gun down, Toby,” she ordered. “It’s time to end this.”

“We’re ending this, Florence. Once and for all.

I'm here to claim what's mine, I won't let some rich businessman come in and steal you away from me.

I won't lose you again. I kept my distance, watched you without you knowing, waiting until the time was right before making my move, but that time is now. You have a choice, Florence, you can either come willingly with me now, or I can kill that man of yours and then forcibly take you. Your choice.”

“Actually, Toby, we’re going with choice number three. I’m going to arrest you and make sure you spend the rest of your miserable life in prison.”

6:56 A.M.

He couldn’t stay away from her.

It had been less than an hour since Florence had left his penthouse, and Eli couldn’t resist stopping by her place before he headed into work. He had a meeting at seven-thirty that he was probably going to be late for, and he couldn’t summon even an ounce of regret.

In just days, Florence had become the single most important thing in his life.

More important than his company, more important than his friends, more important than everything except his nephew. He was addicted to her, and he had no interest in curbing that addiction.

Last night had been so much fun, and he was so glad he had included Florence in choosing furniture for the penthouse.

If it had just been him moving in there he would have just paid someone to do it for him, he wouldn’t have cared what bedroom furniture they chose, or which couch, or

what curtains or blinds for the windows, but Florence had been really into it.

She'd looked through a million different options before settling on things, and by the time they'd eaten their fill of ice cream and made out a little before falling asleep on the air mattress he'd asked his personal assistant to leave, they'd finished choosing furniture for the living room, the dining room, and the master bedroom.

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Of course he'd made plans for tonight, and he was sure this was the perfect next step in convincing Florence that she had nothing to be afraid of when it came to their relationship because he'd picked up the ring before picking her up yesterday and he intended to propose sooner rather than later.

Eli had decided that he would continue to stay at the hotel until he and Florence moved into the penthouse together.

It was their home now, and he wanted them to move in together, moving in without her just felt wrong.

He estimated it would take a week, maybe two, to get all of the furniture and furnishings delivered, which gave him plenty of time to get Florence on board with the idea.

The car stopped outside her building, and he couldn't help but stop and survey the sidewalk for anyone who looked suspicious. When he'd called Florence's partner Jake yesterday to get some ideas on what Florence liked to eat and what her favorite treats were, they'd also discussed her stalker.

That the cop was worried about Florence's safety was enough to amp-up his own concerns.

This serial killer was dangerous, just because he hadn't succeeded in killing her when she was a child didn't mean that he wouldn't now.

The man was obsessed with her, and even if she was brushing things off and

downplaying them, he wasn't.

There was no way he was leaving her alone until the guy was off the streets.

He would either be spending every night at her house, or she'd be spending it at the hotel, or a combination of the two, but there wasn't a chance in Hell that he was letting her stay here alone while a serial killer had her in his crosshairs.

When he didn't see anyone loitering he headed inside. Florence was probably going to be annoyed that he'd followed her here, but he was pretty sure that he knew the perfect antidote to her irritation.

If they were quick they probably had time to take a shower together before she went to the gym, and he went to work.

With a goofy grin on his face, he took the lift to her floor. Since he met Florence, he couldn't seem to stop smiling. It didn't matter what he was doing or who he was with, he was always grinning because he was always thinking about Florence.

How much better would things be once they were engaged?

Then married?

And if he had his way, there would be a bunch of little cocky, stubborn half Florence half him babies entering the world sometime in the near future.

"I know you said you wanted some time for the gym and I'm supposed to be preparing for a meeting but..." he trailed off as he opened Florence's apartment door and stepped inside.

The door hadn't been locked.

That should have been his first clue that something was wrong.

If he'd been paying attention and not picturing what he was going to do to Florence once he got her naked and in the shower, he would have noticed. He would have stopped, realized what was going on, called the cops, and avoided this.

Unfortunately, you didn't get do-overs in life.

Instead of doing anything remotely helpful, he had walked right into a hostage situation, and he knew without anyone having to say anything that his presence had made things worse.

Florence's gaze flew his way, her blue eyes widening in first surprise, quickly followed by regret, then fear came next.

That Florence was afraid told him that this was bad.

She had a gun in her hands, and it was pointed at a man with dark hair going gray, who appeared to be in his late forties.

He'd seen the same man leaving the building the day he found Florence lying unconscious in her apartment.

Florence's stalker.

The Coffin Killer.

Seemed the guy had finally surfaced and he knew what he wanted.

What he wanted was the one who had gotten away.

Florence.

The serial killer had a gun in his hand, it was pointed at Florence, but the second he entered the apartment it swung in his direction.

Before he had a chance to react, Florence had moved so she was between him and the weapon.

What was she thinking?

She was the one the killer wanted not him.

“Ah, Eli Lennox, we were just talking about you.” The man shot him a smile. It wasn't pleasant.

“Eli, this is Toby Lane,” Florence said without looking over her shoulder at him. Her weapon never wavered, and although he hated that she had put herself between him and a potential bullet, he had to admire the fact that she would so confidently and selflessly put her life on the line for him.

“Toby, huh? aka the Coffin Killer, I presume,” he said trying to move so that he could get closer to Florence. It probably wasn't his smartest move, but he couldn't stand the idea of her in danger. So even though she was the cop and he ran a real estate company, he couldn't not want to protect her.

Without even turning to look at him, Florence seemed to know where he was and where he was going and adjusted her position accordingly. “This doesn't really have anything to do with you, Eli, this is between me and Toby. I want you to leave, Eli. Go right back out the door and go to work.”

“I don't think so,” Toby said.

“This is nothing to do with him, Toby,” Florence said again, her tone was calm and controlled, smooth like she knew she was in control and didn't have to yell or argue to get her point across.

“Actually, this is everything to do with him because he's the one who ruined everything ,” Toby growled. “You were mine, you were always mine, and then he comes along, and now you think you belong to him.”

“Florence doesn't belong to me,” he said, incensed by the notion. “She's not a piece of property, she's a person. A person who is free to make her own choices and decisions.”

“Eli, stop talking,” Florence ordered.

Ignoring her, he continued, “And she wasn't yours, she was never yours.

You two weren't a couple, you didn't date, you were involved with her mother and used that to assault and try to murder her.

You drugged her, you put her in a coffin, if she hadn't woken up and run away you were going to bury her alive.”

“Eli, leave,” Florence hissed.

That wasn't happening.

There was no way he was leaving her alone in here with an armed and dangerous man.

“He. Doesn't. Leave,” Toby said, over-enunciating each word.

“This is what you're choosing over me? You might be the only one who survived, but that doesn't make you any less mine than the others. I was your first, I'm the one who claimed you. You know that you've always been mine, that's why you've been single all these years, and if the only way to make you single again is to take this guy out of the equation, then that's what I'm doing.”

“Don't make things worse for yourself, Toby.

At the moment, all we have on you is that you broke in here and held a gun on me.

We don't have any proof to tie you to the coffin murders.

You shoot someone, and that changes. Eli is going to walk out of here, and you're going to put your weapon down and your hands behind your head,” Florence said.

“He is all that is standing between you and I being together. He has to die.”

7:04 A.M.

As far as Toby was concerned, there was no other option.

Florence was his, and Eli Lennox was getting in the way.

“Eli, leave,” Florence ordered.

“You move, she dies, Eli ,” he sneered. Florence was blocking him from getting a direct shot off at the man without also hitting Florence.

That he wasn't prepared to do.

Yet.

But if she gave him no other option, he wouldn't discount it because one way or another, he was making her his.

Nineteen long years he'd waited.

When he closed his eyes each night, he could still picture the little blonde girl he'd first met when he'd gone home with her mother.

The child had looked like a doll. She had delicate features and porcelain-like skin that had been as soft as it looked.

Large blue eyes framed by long dark lashes dominated her face, and her lips had been a light pink and shaped like a heart.

Long blonde hair had cascaded down her back in loose waves that shimmered when she walked.

She'd been perfection.

By far the prettiest of all the little girls whose paths had crossed with his, and he'd contemplated keeping the child.

What he'd do with her he had no idea, it wasn't like he could take her home to his wife and children, what excuse would he have given for who the child was and where she had come from?

Regardless of the risks of keeping little Florence, and the difficulties in explaining why she was suddenly in their lives, he had definitely considered the possibility. Maybe his uncertainty had made him slip up and not inject the correct amount of sedatives to knock the little girl out.

If it hadn't been for that mistake, she would probably have died because when push came to shove, he always chose safety over risk.

Toby knew that sounded odd given that he was a serial killer, which had to be the very definition of risky, but in reality, he was a very cautious guy.

He checked both ways not once but six times before he crossed the street, he watched what he ate and counted calories every day, covered up in the sun, and waited a full thirty minutes before going in the water after eating.

He also made sure that every child was properly cleaned before being deposited in the coffin, and that he wore a head to toe protective covering so he didn't leave any of himself behind.

It was his cautious nature that had allowed him to avoid detection for over two decades.

So why had he now thrown caution to the wind?

What was it about Florence Harris that had gotten under his skin?

Her china doll-like features?

Her sweet nature?

The fact that she'd had to fight for everything she had in life because she'd been handed a raw deal?

Whatever the reason, he couldn't stay away.

He'd tried.

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He had tried with everything that he possessed, reminded himself of the risks, and the consequences of continuing contact, but he just couldn't stop.

When she'd rented an apartment in this building, he'd rented the one across the hall so he could watch her whenever he wanted.

As far as his wife knew he traveled a lot for work, and he supposed he did, only she had no idea that selling insurance wasn't what he spent the majority of his day doing.

Now he was standing in her apartment, pushed into claiming her because Eli Lennox had entered her life. No longer was she single, sitting in her apartment alone every night. Now when he tried to daydream about taking her for his own, he kept seeing this man intruding and stealing her away.

"Toby?" Florence's voice dragged him out of his head. "You want to do the right thing here, I'm sure you do. You've been so very careful with everything you've done so far, it's why we could never find you. Why I could never find you, so shooting Eli here and now isn't the smart thing to do."

"Don't talk about me like I'm some helpless victim or something," Eli growled, trying to move closer, but Florence moved with him, continuing to put herself between the two men.

"You were looking for me?" he asked, he hadn't realized that Florence thought about him at all except when he sent her letters. The idea that she had been as consumed by him as he was by her pleased him.

“Of course. What you did to me changed my life,” Florence said, also ignoring Eli. “I tried to find you, but all I knew was the fake name you’d given my mother. You made sure that we didn’t have anything to use to find you. Who are you, Toby? Do you have a wife? Children?”

Toby nodded. “I’ve been married for thirty-two years. My high school girlfriend and I got pregnant when we were sixteen. We married just before our son was born. It was the right thing to do.”

“Yes, it was. That must have been hard, having a child so young, you were practically a child yourself.”

Florence’s soothing tone spurred him on.

“It was hard. I was one of eight kids, we were expected to work in my parents’ restaurant from the time we were old enough to bus tables and clean dishes.

I went straight from working at my parents’ business and chores at home to having my own home, a wife, and a baby.

More work. Diapers, teething, a colicky screaming baby keeping you up all night.

Responsibilities, work, a marriage, all I’ve ever done was take care of other people, I never got to just be me, never got to go to college and get the job I wanted because I had a family to support. ”

“You never really got to be a child, just run and play with your friends, climb trees, swim in the river, play a team sport, have sleepovers.” From the tone of her voice and the sad, faraway look in her eyes, he wondered if they were talking about him or her.

“You never did either,” he said, taking a step toward her.

“You had to fight just to stay alive, you had to take care of yourself because your mother sure as hell wasn't. You had to work two jobs to put yourself through college, and you still work long hours just to pay your bills. I know what that's like. To just want to take a break, to just lie down, close your eyes, and rest.”

“Like the girls. You put them to sleep so they could forever be peaceful children. They'd never have to grow up, never have to work for anything, they got to be little forever. You gave them the life you wished you'd had.”

He'd never thought of it that way before, but there was a lot of truth to what Florence was saying.

As far back as he could remember, all he had wanted was rest.

Just to sleep in in the morning and not have to be up and at the restaurant to help before school. After school there was no hanging out with friends, no sports practice, it was working at the restaurant, homework, then bed. Weekends were more of the same, schoolwork and work.

Work.

Work.

Work.

All he'd needed was a break.

A break that had never come.

He'd never had a childhood, so he'd gifted those little girls with a childhood that would last forever. No growing old, no responsibility, no work, they got to stay little

forever, the best years of their life would never end for them.

But he'd failed Florence.

He hadn't given her eternal peace.

Instead, she had gone on to continue living in poverty, going hungry, no electricity or running water, no one to care for her and look after her.

He hadn't saved her.

Her continued suffering was on him.

That was something he needed to rectify.

"Put the gun down, Toby. You've been so careful to make sure that this didn't end with you in prison, you don't want to do that to your family. You've taken care of them, provided for them, made sure that they would never find out the truth about you. Don't ruin that now."

His family would never find out the truth.

The cops had nothing to pin on him, and there would be no way for them to connect him to Eli Lennox's murder.

"No one will know it was me," he said.

"That's not true, Toby," Florence said. "We have something, you left a fingerprint behind when you were here the other morning. Sooner or later, they will connect that fingerprint to you, and when they do everything you've worked so hard your whole life to build will fall apart."

The best thing you can do for yourself and your family is to turn yourself in, don't make it worse for your wife and children by spending the rest of your life looking over your shoulder. ”

The cops having his fingerprints sealed things in his mind.

He was done.

Finished.

What he wanted was standing right before him, and he was taking it.

7:17 A.M.

He wasn't going to do it.

He wasn't going to put the gun down.

Florence could see it in his eyes.

Toby Lane had just come to the realization that this wasn't going to end the way he had envisioned. He wasn't walking out of here with her in tow. They weren't going to live out whatever fantasy he had been dreaming about. And he certainly wasn't going to be killing the man she loved.

Loved?

She hadn't realized until that moment that she was in love with Eli.

Everything had happened so fast, and she barely believed in falling in love let alone love at first sight, but that was pretty much what had happened.

That connection had been forged the second they touched, and it had only grown.

It didn't matter that she'd been wary of getting involved, of letting anyone in for fear of being hurt, he had barreled into her life, turned it upside down, and in the process had finally helped her break free of her past.

They had their whole lives ahead of them, a future where she could just be her, a normal woman who wasn't ruled by her messed up childhood.

There was no way she was losing that.

She was not letting the serial killer who had nearly taken her life and played such a large part in shaping the person she'd become take anything else away from her.

"Don't do it, Toby. I can see in your face what you're planning, and it's not the way to play this out," she said.

"He has to die, it's the only way," Toby insisted, shifting to try to get a clear shot at Eli.

That wasn't happening.

Eli should have listened to her and left while he'd had the chance, but the stubborn man wasn't going to leave her alone in here with an armed man even if she was the one who was trained to deal with situations just like this.

Florence both loved him for it and was annoyed with him about it.

"Killing him won't change anything," she said, moving with him to keep herself as a barrier between the gun and Eli. The man was determined to take Eli out, and he wasn't going to put his weapon down, the best she could do was keep his attention on

her and then seize an opportunity when it presented itself. “I’m not yours. I was never yours. All I am is someone you tried to kill. There’s no other connection. You’re the one who couldn’t let me go, who kept sending me letters, bragging about your kills like they were conquests that I would be proud of you for accomplishing. The only reason I was looking for you was to arrest you, put you in prison where you belong. I didn’t want to find you to be with you, I hate you, Toby. I don’t know what kind of relationship between us you’ve built up in your head, but it’s not real. There is nothing between us.”

Toby’s eyes bulged, and his face turned beet red.

Because she’d been a cop a long time, she could read in his expression what he was going to do before he did it.

He was a representation of every killer she’d ever dealt with.

He took his issues and painted them onto his victims, killing children because he envied them their childhood and yet also wanted to protect it for them.

He wanted her because she was the one who had bested him, over years of stalking, he had built up this idea of her in his head that was never going to match up to reality.

“Last warning, Toby,” she said.

“You’re mine, nothing can change that, you’ll never belong to him.” Toby had fire in his eyes as he waved the gun about wildly.

He was devolving, and the end was coming quickly.

The bang echoed through the room.

Pain tore through her.

She fired her weapon.

The bullet hit Toby—the man who had haunted her dreams for the better part of two decades—in the shoulder, and he dropped.

No way was he getting off easy.

A quick death was too good for him, she wanted him behind bars where every criminal in jail with him knew that he raped and murdered little girls.

She wanted him to suffer, and Florence didn't even care if that made her a bad person. Surely there was nothing wrong with wanting the man who had nearly ended your life before you got into double digits to suffer like you had suffered.

“Florence,” Eli yelled, and she heard him rushing toward her.

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Ignoring him and the pain that threatened to consume her, Florence closed the couple of steps between her and Toby and kept her gun trained on him as she reached for him. He kicked out with his legs, and although she tried to dodge to the side, he managed to knock her down.

When he tried to roll on top of her to pin her to the ground, Florence went for the quickest way to incapacitate a man.

She kneed him in the groin.

His attention diverted, Florence rolled him to the side and twisted the arm that held the gun up and behind him.

Toby shrieked and lashed out with his free hand connecting with her neck where the bullet had grazed her, and she felt a shaft of pain fly through her body.

Blood was flowing from the wound, but she was pretty sure that since she was still capable of moving that it hadn't hit her arteries.

She twisted his arm up further and pressed down so he was unable to take another go at her.

“You’re bleeding,” Eli said as he dropped down beside her.

“I’m fine, handcuffs should be on the counter can you get them for me?”

“Let go of me,” Toby growled.

Twisting his arm up further he yelped in pain, and a sense of satisfaction filled her. It wasn't much, but it felt good to be the one inflicting pain on him.

“Here.”

Taking the cuffs from Eli, she snapped one onto the wrist she still held and then maneuvered him onto his stomach and secured the other end of the cuffs to his other wrist.

Then she sank back against the kitchen counter.

This time Toby hadn't won, she had.

He was in cuffs, she'd read him his rights, and she'd do whatever was necessary to keep him locked up.

“He shot you,” Eli sounded outraged as he pressed something to her neck.

“Grazed my neck, if I was bleeding out we'd know. Hey.” She scrambled up onto her knees when she saw blood on his shirt. “He got you too.”

“It's fine, princess, just grazed my arm.” His hands covered her shoulders, and he eased her back so she was sitting and propped against the counter, then held a towel to her neck.

“I told you to leave, what were you thinking staying in here when that man wanted to kill you?” she said, perhaps a little louder than necessary, but as adrenalin drained from her system, fear of what might have happened was growing.

“You really think I would have left you in here alone with him?” Eli demanded, pressing harder against her wound and making her suck in a pained breath. “Sorry,”

he said, lightening his grip. “I knew I shouldn’t have let you come back here alone while that man was after you.”

“It’s over now,” she reminded him, glancing at Toby who was still on his stomach on the kitchen floor. The puddle of blood around him was growing, and she didn't want him to bleed out. “We need to try to stop the bleeding, and I need to call Jake, tell him what happened,” she said, moving to stand.

“I don’t want you near him,” Eli said, holding her in place. “You stay here, keep pressure on your wound, call your partner, explain what happened, and I’ll make sure he doesn’t die before you get justice for yourself and those other girls.”

Grateful that Eli understood without her having to explain that she couldn’t risk Toby dying before he was charged and was forced to face what he’d done, she closed her eyes and rested her head back.

It was over.

Never again would she have to go to bed at night knowing that the Coffin Killer might have his next victim in his clutches.

Never again would she have to worry about coming home to find another letter bragging about a child’s murder waiting for her.

“Here, can you hold this with the cast on?” Eli asked as he gently lifted her casted arm and put her fingers on the towel.

“Yeah, I got it.” It was awkward but even with the cast she could use her fingers to put pressure on the wound.

“And here’s your phone.” He pressed her phone into her other hand and then he

pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You're something else, you know that? Seeing you take down a man twice your size is something I won't ever forget.”

“I had all the motivation in the world,” she said softly, opening her eyes to stare into Eli's. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do to make sure nothing happened to him.

11:23 A.M.

“I missed you,” Eli said, walking into Florence's hospital room, dragging her into his arms, and kissing her.

“I missed you, too,” she said, settling against his chest and tucking her head under his chin.

Because of the shooting and the fact that both of them had heard Toby Lane's confession, they'd been separated once the cops showed up.

He'd been going out of his mind worrying that Florence's injury was worse than they'd thought, and having to give his statement and answer a million questions was torture.

All he'd wanted was to see with his own eyes that she was alive and okay, to hold her and kiss her, then take her home and try to forget that this nightmare ever happened.

As far as he was concerned, it was time to pack up Florence's things, cancel the lease on her apartment, and she could stay with him at the hotel until the furniture arrived and they could move into the penthouse. He didn't want to wait any longer, he could have lost her today.

“You ready to get out of here?” he asked. He smoothed a hand down her hair, stroking the length of her spine, before settling it on her hip, keeping her close.

“Beyond ready. I hate hospitals. I know it’s only midday, but I’m exhausted. Since my place is a crime scene, do you want to go back to your hotel room and crash for a while?”

“I hope by crash you don’t mean just sleep,” he teased.

“I think I have enough energy for a few other things,” she said with a giggle.

“So when will CSU be done with your place?”

“I’ll be able to get back in there tomorrow. Why?”

“I thought we could pack your stuff up and get it ready to move.”

“Move it where?” Florence leaned back so she could see him.

“Well, temporarily to the hotel, but the penthouse will be furnished and ready for us to move in within two weeks.”

“Are you asking me to move in with you?” Her mouth quirked up on one side in a half-smile. “Because I gotta tell you, this is the least romantic way to ask someone to move in together.”

“Sorry, guess we’re both exhausted. Florence, I can’t stand spending another night without you in my bed, would you please move in with me?”

She laughed. “That was a little better, but still not your best work. Are you just asking because of what happened today?”

“No, princess, I already bought an engagement ring so no, this isn’t spur of the moment, I was just waiting till you were ready before I asked.”

Her eyes bulged. “You bought an engagement ring already?”

“Florence, I was ready to propose after our first date. I would have if I thought you’d have said yes. I can't wait for us to live together, to get married, have a family. Once we’re married, you’ll be able to quit your job so I won't have to worry about you anymore.”

“Wait. What did you just say?”

“You can't stay a cop.”

“Excuse me? I can't stay a cop? Why not?” she demanded, pushing out of his arms and planting her hands on her hips.

“Why would you want to? In the two weeks we’ve known each other you’ve been attacked three times by two different serial killers, one of whom has been stalking you for the last two decades.

Florence, I’ve already lost my brother and both my parents, I can't lose you too.” He took a step toward her, but she backed up.

“Eli, I love my job. It’s all I've wanted to do since I was eight years old, and the cops working my case showed me more care and compassion than any other adult ever had. I'm not quitting my job.” Her tone of voice said it was final, but he couldn’t let it go, the idea of losing Florence filled him with dread.

How could he live his life without her in it?

“Okay, I understand that, I do, but surely, you can understand where I'm coming from.” He wasn't being unreasonable about this. He wasn't. Right? “It’s not like you’ll have to work, I make more than enough to take care of you.”

“So what exactly do you expect me to do all day while you go off to work? Get a massage, my nails done, go shopping, have tea and sandwiches with your friends’ trophy wives?” Florence’s tone dripped with sarcasm.

“Well, no, of course not. If you want to have a job you can do something else.” He hadn’t really thought this through, all he knew was that the idea of Florence getting killed on the job nearly paralyzed him.

Every time he thought about it all he could see was a gun pointed at her and her covered in blood.

How could he kiss her goodbye every morning knowing that she might not come home to him?

“And what, pray tell, is an acceptable job for me to have?”

“I don’t know. Anything that doesn’t involve you facing down killers every day.”

“You just want me to sit in your penthouse, and make myself pretty while I wait for you to dress me up and take me out to one of your fancy balls or something. This was exactly what I was afraid of. We come from two completely different worlds. I like being a cop, it means everything to me, and you want me to give it up so I can be at your beck and call whenever you have time for me in your busy schedule.”

“That’s not what this is about,” he snapped, his temper rising, a little voice in the back of his head was telling him to stop talking, that he was making this worse, but he couldn’t stop.

Fear had taken over his brain and he couldn’t shut it off.

“I would never treat you like that, and you know it.

This is about me not wanting to be picking out your coffin and thinking about what I'm going to say for your eulogy.”

“I'm not going to die.” She rolled her eyes at him.

“Really? Because in less than two weeks you were nearly run down by a car, knocked unconscious in your apartment, and held at gunpoint. So you can see where I'd get the idea that your job is dangerous.”

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“So it’s been a bad week. I haven’t ever been in any situations like this before. Look, Eli, I do understand why you’d worry, but that’s not usually what my job is like. I can’t give it up, Eli, it’s part of who I am.”

“Because of your past. It’s like you have a death wish.”

“A death wish?” she echoed incredulously. “I do not have a death wish, why would you even think that?”

“Maybe because of your past. Everything you’ve been through, your dad leaving, your mom being a non-functioning alcoholic, the Coffin Killer, being assaulted by your mom’s boyfriend.”

“None of that means I have a death wish. If anything, it made me want to live because I had to fight to build a life, I didn’t have wealthy parents give me everything I ever wanted and hand me a multi-million dollar company to run. I didn’t have anyone there for me when I was a child, there was no one to care about what happened to me, that’s what made me want to be a cop. I remember the ones who were there for me after Toby tried to kill me. They held my hand, let me cry without screaming at me for making too much noise, they cared, and that showed me that there were people out there who cared about others. That’s why I like my job, do you know how many children just like me I’ve been able to help?

I can make a difference in those kids’ lives not just by finding who hurt their mom or dad or sibling, but by caring about them. How can you ask me to give that up?”

“How can you ask me to be with you and watch you walk out the door every day

knowing you might not walk back? Don't you know that it would kill me to lose another person I love?" This was spinning out of control and he didn't know how to get things back under control.

"You knew what my job was when you asked me out the first time."

Raking his hands through his hair he took a deep breath, tried to breathe through the suffocating terror that the idea of losing Florence induced.

"I know you love your job, and you're amazing at it.

The best cop in the city—the country—I'm not discounting your ability or your passion, I just didn't realize the risks you took. Putting yourself in the line of fire with a crazy man holding a gun, that's going above and beyond."

"I put myself in the line of fire because you were the intended target." Her eyes were watery with unshed tears.

"So you're choosing your job over me? Over us?"

"You're the one making it a choice, I don't see it that way."

"I can't lose you," he said. This was killing him, but right now he didn't see any other option. Losing his brother, then his mother, then his father, then giving up custody of his nephew had about killed him, he'd lost enough, and he couldn't go through that again.

At least ending things now would be a clean break, he wouldn't have to walk around every day with a knot of anxiety in his stomach wondering whether he would be receiving a phone call informing him Florence was dead.

“So this is it? You're just leaving?” Florence demanded.

He could see the hurt in her eyes and knew that he was breaking his promise to her that she was worth fighting for. He was proving to her that she was right, that no one stuck around, that everyone walked out of your life sooner or later.

This felt like a mistake, but the facts were he just couldn't cope with losing another person he loved, and Florence risked her life every single day.

“I'm leaving,” he said softly. “I'm sorry, Florence.”

Eli reached for her, but she backed away from him. She shook her head like she couldn't believe this was happening and then turned her back on him.

“I really am sorry,” he said. He held out his hand, holding it just above her head but not making contact, then with feet that felt like lead and a heart that ached, he turned and walked out of her hospital room, leaving her behind.

3:42 P.M.

It had been a crazy ten days.

Meeting Eli, flying to Florence for the day, adding to her tattoo, catching the Dumpster Killer, finally closing the Coffin Killer case, falling in love, and then having it all fall through her fingers.

Florence felt drained.

All she wanted to do was go home, climb into bed, hide under the covers, and try to find her equilibrium again.

“You know you’re more than welcome to come and stay with us for a while,” Jake told her, casting a glance her way.

“I know, you offered like ten times already,” she reminded him.

“I know, just want to make sure you know that you don’t have to go home alone.”

It wasn't that she didn't appreciate that her partner was trying to look out for her, he knew that she and Eli were over and that dealing with the man who had nearly ended her life before her ninth birthday had taken an emotional toll on her, but what she really needed right now was just to be by herself.

She needed to try to sort things out, process her emotions, and find a way to get past them.

This was precisely why she had decided if she was ever going to get involved with someone it would be a man who was nice and boring and could never break her heart.

She'd known better than to get involved with Eli.

It was why she had fought against her feelings.

Eli had been destined to destroy her. He was way out of her league, he came from another world, it wasn't his fault, just like it wasn't hers, but if she'd been thinking clearly and not allowed her heart to interfere with her head, she would have known that it could never work.

Not even love was enough to conquer such high obstacles.

What was love?

Did she even believe in it?

Florence wasn't sure she did.

Okay, she loved her brother, and she'd thought she loved Eli, but what did she know?

Her father hadn't loved her mother or her and Fletcher enough to hang around.

Her mother hadn't loved her and her brother enough to make sure they had even the basics of life. None of her mother's boyfriends had loved her for anything more than someone to sleep with and pass the time away with.

And Eli hadn't loved her enough to stay and fight for her even though he'd promised that he would.

Love was a lie.

It didn't exist.

"Hey." Jake reached over and gently touched her shoulder. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said on a sigh, fighting back tears because she didn't cry in front of people.

Her mom hadn't been a fan of tears, and crying only earned you a beating and being kicked out of the trailer for the night.

Maybe that was why the cops who had worked her attempted murder case had made such an impact on her.

They hadn't minded her tears, they'd just held her, let her cry, then they'd offered

comforting words and given her a teddy bear so she had someone to tell her fears to.

She still had that bear tucked away safely in the top of her closet.

“We truly don’t mind you staying with us for a few days. Even just for tonight,” Jake added as he pulled the car up in front of her building. Obviously, he didn't believe her when she said she was doing okay, and to be honest, she was too tired to try to convince him.

“I just need some time alone right now,” she told him. “Thanks for getting CSU wrapped up and out of here today so I can come back here.”

“Of course. You’ll call if you need anything.” It was a statement, not a question, so Florence nodded, knowing she would never call her partner, but she didn't want to be rude because Jake was going out of his way to look out for her.

“Thanks, Jake, for everything.” She offered him a small smile as she reached for the door handle.

“Anytime. I'm here for you, breaking up sucks, no matter how long you’ve been together.”

“Yeah, it does,” she agreed. “See you next week.” Her boss had ordered her to take the remainder of the week off, and she had no idea what she was going to do with herself.

“Try to get some rest, things will look better in the morning,” Jake told her as she climbed out of the car.

Somehow Florence doubted that.

In the morning she still wouldn't be with Eli, and that was what was making her feel like someone had taken her heart and shredded it into a million pieces.

Knowing that Jake would sit and watch until she was inside her building, she hurried in out of the freezing wind. Not in the mood to wait for the lift, Florence trudged up the stairs to her floor and then found herself hesitating at her door.

This was ridiculous.

No one was going to be waiting inside for her.

Although part of her hoped that Eli had realized he'd made a mistake and had stopped by here to hash things out and make up.

With a deep sigh, she opened her door and stepped inside pausing to scan the room, searching for any signs of a person hiding in the shadows.

There was none of course, and it annoyed her that she even had to think about it.

She didn't like that her home had been breached like that.

Toby hadn't just held a gun on her, he'd taken her safe place and made it feel no longer safe.

Maybe she should have stayed with Jake tonight.

No.

The way to face problems was head-on.

That was the way she had approached every other problem in her life.

Her phone dinged, and hope pinged through her as she fished it out of her purse.

Her hope was dashed when she saw the text was from her brother and not Eli.

When was this hoping that she was going to see him and hear from him going to pass?

She'd never been in love before, she'd been too afraid that she would end up in the very position she found herself in right now.

Since she'd hardly responded to him after meeting Eli and she felt bad about it, she locked the door behind her, then sank down into her favorite armchair and read his text.

Fletcher

Hey, little sis, I'm worried about you

you're not yourself lately what's up?

Florence

Sorry, it's been a crazy couple of weeks

Fletcher

I already heard from Jake so

consider that before you think

about lying to me

Florence couldn't help but smile at that. That was one of the things she loved most about her brother, he was a straight shooter, he never beat around the bush, and he expected the same from her.

Florence

How much did he tell you?

Fletcher

Everything

You need me to come up there and beat

this Eli guy up for you?

Florence

While I appreciate the offer I'm okay

Fletcher

You want me to come up and hang out with you?

Florence

That's sweet, Fletch, but I'm exhausted

I'm just going to crash and I'm sure

things will look better in the morning

Fletcher

I'm worried about you

Florence

You don't have to

Fletcher

Can't help it, little sister

Jake said you're off work till next week

I can't come tomorrow but the next day

I'm driving up to see you

We'll hang out, do anything you want

You can talk if you want to but you don't have to

She could say no, insist that she was fine on her own, but in reality she wasn't.

She did need someone right now, it felt like life had tossed her into the middle of the ocean without a life vest.

She needed a life vest.

Spending a little time with her brother would help.

Florence

Okay, that sounds nice

Fletcher

Love you, Florence, and call if you need anything

Florence

Love you too

And I will

As she put her phone down, she couldn't help but smile.

Most of her life she'd felt all alone in the world, but she wasn't completely alone. She had her brother who had been by her side through so much. They'd raided dumpsters together in search of food scraps, and snuggled together to stave off hypothermia when they'd had to sleep outside in the forest because their mother had kicked them out so they didn't interrupt her night with her current lover. And now she had Jake, he'd offered to open up his home to her, and cared enough to reach out to her brother to update him on everything that had happened.

Her life wasn't all bad.

She'd get over Eli, her heart would mend, and she'd come out of it stronger than she'd been before.

But right now she needed a good cry.

Needed to expel all those emotions swirling around inside her, threatening to well up and choke her.

Pushing herself out of the chair, she went through to her bedroom and stretched up onto her tiptoes to find the teddy bear the cops had given her when she was eight.

Taking it with her to the bed, she curled up under the covers, and clutching the bear in her arms, she stopped holding back the tears.

They flowed down her cheeks, puddling on her pillow, it had been so long since she'd last cried, not since she was sixteen and been violated by her mother's boyfriend, and half a lifetime of bundled up pain came flooding out.

Chapter

Twelve

Gray.

Gray buildings, gray roads, gray sky, it seemed the whole world was gray this morning.

Eli thought that was perfect.

He felt gray inside, so it was fitting that the world around him represent how he felt.

Florence.

Everywhere he looked he saw her, it didn't seem possible that she had only been in his life for eleven days.

Eleven days, but it felt like a lifetime.

In such a short amount of time, she'd become everything to him.

He'd been planning his life with her, he'd been picturing their wedding day and how stunning she'd look in her wedding gown, he'd thought about where he'd take her for their honeymoon.

He'd dreamed about touching her stomach as their baby moved inside of her, and

holding her hand while she was in labor.

He'd actually looked forward to busy years where they balanced work, kids' schedules, and time together.

Everything had been perfect.

Until it hadn't.

Now he'd lost her, and it felt like he was dead inside.

How had she made such a significant impact on him in such a short amount of time?

Had he really been in love with her or had he been caught up in the romance of it all? He'd saved her life, maybe that had impacted how he'd seen her, romanticized the whole thing.

He'd wanted so badly to find someone to share his life with, and Florence had been the only woman he could see himself marrying, but did that mean he was in love with her?

Something bounced off his head, and he swung his chair around from facing the window to find Elliot standing behind him.

"What are you doing?" he asked irritably, picking up a scrunched up piece of paper that was on his lap, he wasn't in the mood for people today.

Well, any person except Florence.

"Trying to get your attention," Elliot replied, dropping into the chair on the other side of the desk. "What's with you?"

“What do you mean?”

“You’re in an awful mood, I can only assume this has something to do with the mysterious Florence—who you’re yet to introduce us to by the way.”

“That’s not going to happen,” he muttered, turning his attention to the stack of papers on his desk that needed his attention. He wasn't in the mood to work, but it was the only way he could keep his mind off Florence.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Then what has you in this mood?”

With a sigh, Eli shoved away from the desk and raked his hands through his hair.

“We broke up.”

“You broke up?”

“Yeah.”

“You going to elaborate?”

May as well. Wasn't like he could make things worse by talking about it, who knows, maybe Elliot would say something that could help him get over Florence.

“Florence’s childhood was rough, her dad wasn't in the picture, and her mother drank and slept around a lot. One of the mom’s boyfriends was a serial killer, you’ve probably heard of him, he sedated and buried alive little girls.

Florence was one of them. Only she didn't get the full dose of drugs and was able to get away. The killer was obsessed with her and has been stalking her all these years. Yesterday morning he made his move. Florence and I had spent the night together, but she went back to her apartment to change and he was waiting for her. I walked in, and he had a gun on her. He was ranting and raving, and she put herself between me and the killer. He shot at us, and she shot him, tackled him, and cuffed him."

"That's quite a story." Elliot's eyes were wide, but then his brow crinkled in confusion. "But I don't get why you broke up."

"Because she could have died."

"Okay," Elliot said slowly.

"She's a cop, she has some sort of death wish, and I've already lost enough people that I love. I'm not going to be with her and stand on the sidelines waiting for her to get herself killed."

"I'm not following you."

"She nearly died as a child, I guess it messed her up." Maybe it had been unwise of him to get involved with someone who had been through so many traumatic experiences.

What did he know about helping someone cope with trauma?

His family had been as close to perfect as a family could be, he'd never had to worry about paying his bills or not being able to get anything he wanted, Florence had been correct when she'd said they had nothing in common.

"I don't get that impression."

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t sound like she has a death wish at all.

In fact the opposite. She had a rough start in life, could have turned to alcohol like her mother, or drugs.

She could have turned to prostitution to pay her bills.

Instead, she overcame her upbringing, went to college, and got a job where she saves lives.

Despite having every reason not to trust men—not to trust anyone—she was willing to give you a chance.

I'm guessing that was hard for her given everything that you’ve already said about her.

She was nearly killed, yet she got on a plane with you—a virtual stranger—and went to another country, which must have been a huge leap of faith. ”

He hadn't thought about it like that, but Elliot was probably right, she had every reason not to trust him and yet despite her fears, she’d given him a shot.

He’d promised her that she could trust him, that he wasn't going anywhere, that he would fight for her and for them, and yet he’d walked away.

Just like everyone else in her life.

Just like she had been afraid he would.

While Eli hated that he had broken his promise, he hadn't seen any way around it.

And still didn't.

“So that’s it? It’s just over between you two?”

“Yes. What else can I do? I asked her to quit her job, I make more than enough to support her and buy her anything she wants.”

“You asked her to quit her job?” Elliot exclaimed.

“I’ve lost everyone in my family, I can't lose anyone else.”

“You can't ask her to quit her job.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s ridiculously unreasonable. What’s she supposed to do with her time? Wasn't she already concerned about you two coming from two different worlds? Asking her to sit around and be your trophy wife doesn’t sound like the smartest thing you’ve ever said.”

“I don’t expect her to be my trophy wife.” He pouted.

“Then what do you expect? Does she love her job?”

“Yes.”

“Does it help her deal with what happened to her by saving others?”

“Yes.”

“Then if you love her, how can you ask her to give that up?”

“Did you miss the part where a serial killer was stalking her and held her hostage at gunpoint? Her job is dangerous, I can't be with someone whose job is all about putting themselves in danger.”

“But the serial killer was from her past. Nothing to do with her job. That could have happened no matter who she was or what she did,” Elliot reasoned.

Okay, so he didn't have a good argument to that. “I knew that she was in danger, Elliot, and I let her go back there alone. I practically threw her into that situation.”

“So, this is about you and your guilt.”

“No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know.”

“You want to know what I think?”

“Do I?”

Elliot chuckled. “I think that you're being stupid.

You're throwing away the best thing that ever happened to you because you're being stubborn and unreasonable.

I know that our experiences shape us. Susannah almost walked away from what we had because of hers, she let it cloud her thinking, get in between us, she thought she was doing the right thing in that moment, but when she really looked at it, she realized that nothing was worth ruining what we had.

You're going to regret this. I understand you're afraid of losing another person you

love, that must be terrifying, but cutting things off with Florence before you can fall any further in love and possibly lose her is going to be your biggest regret.”

Eli didn't even have to wonder if that was true.

It had been less than twenty-four hours since they broke up, and he already regretted it.

The problem was whether loving her and watching her die was worth the risk.

“I can't imagine my life without Susannah, Bessie, and Jakey in it. The thought of losing any of them makes me sick, but when it boils down to it, I'd rather love them and lose them than never have loved them at all.”

“That’s deep,” he said with a half-smile. He wasn't used to seeing the man who had been his playmate as a child, and had a reputation as being hard and rude be so sensitive and introspective.

“Being in love does that to you. No one can make this decision for you, Eli, but as a man who saw the whole world differently once I met Susannah, let me just tell you that it’s worth it.

Whatever you have to do, do it. Whatever you have to deal with, deal with it.

Whatever you have to come to terms with, come to terms with it.

Don’t let the best thing that is ever going to happen to you slip away.

Don’t be Florence’s savior, her hero, and then be the man who destroyed her. ”

Elliot stood and left his office, leaving Eli staring after him.

It wasn't him who had the power to destroy her it was Florence who held the power to destroy him.

Could he risk it?

Could he really ever think it was better to love her and lose her than not love her at all?

10:57 A.M.

She was sick of moping.

All Florence had done since she got home yesterday was mope.

She'd slept a little, but her dreams kept being punctuated with images of Eli. His charming smile, his cocky attitude, his lips which possessed the ability to make her body and her mind turn to jell-o.

She missed him.

Missed him with every ounce of her being.

It felt like she was missing half of her soul. She felt empty, walking around as only half a person was awful. She couldn't think, couldn't settle to anything, she wasn't hungry even though she hadn't eaten since the ice cream date in Eli's penthouse.

This was ridiculous.

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She was sitting around like some middle school girl who had broken up with her boyfriend, but she wasn't twelve years old. She was a mature woman in her mid-twenties, she was a logical, sensible person, she didn't run and hide from things, she found a way to overcome them.

That was what she had to do.

This problem with Eli had to have a solution.

It had to.

Every problem had an answer.

As far as she could see there were two answers to her current issue.

Number one, she could accept that Eli would only continue to date her if she agreed to quit her job, in which case she couldn't be with him.

If that was the answer, then she had to find a way to move on, the best way to do that was to meet someone else.

If nothing else, she would have at least learned from this brief relationship with Eli that she was ready to have a serious relationship.

That was something.

That was turning a negative into a positive.

Or answer number two was that she track Eli down and give him a piece of her mind and see if there was a compromise they could come to that allayed both their fears and allowed both of them to be happy.

What was she going to choose?

That wasn't even an option.

She wasn't a coward, and she didn't give up. She wasn't just going to sit here and mourn him, she was going to fight for what made her happy, and Eli made her happy.

Happiness hadn't been a huge part of her life. As a child, there had been nothing in her life to bring her any joy, but as an adult she'd started seeking out those moments. Eli had shown her what true happiness was like and there was no way she was walking away from that without a fight.

Throwing on jeans and a sweater, Florence grabbed her purse and ran out of her apartment.

She was going to find Eli, and she was going to make him listen to reason.

He'd said he was going to fight for them and while it hurt that he had given up, this relationship thing wasn't a one-way street. She had her fears and insecurities, and he had his too. If he couldn't fight for them right now then she had to.

Give and take, strengthening and supporting one another, lifting each other up, and sometimes even carrying the other when they were paralyzed by fear.

It was the middle of the day, she doubted Eli would be at the hotel, and after the time they'd spent at his penthouse choosing furniture she didn't think he would go there, which meant he would be at his office.

The journey there felt like it took forever, but finally she was in the lift on her way to his office.

“Mr. Lennox asked not to be disturbed,” a pretty young woman informed her as she walked past.

Florence ignored her, she’d come all this way to see Eli, and she wasn’t leaving until she’d seen him.

“Ma’am? Ma’am?” The woman got up from her desk and hurried after her as she threw open Eli’s office door.

He was sitting at his desk, and his head lifted as he heard her enter.

Just seeing him was like a balm to her aching soul and she felt better already. She loved this man, and there was no way she was letting him go, now all she had to do was convince him that he wasn’t going to lose her.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lennox, I told her you didn’t want to be disturbed, and she didn’t listen,” the secretary apologized.

“It’s fine, Elaine,” Eli said, giving the woman a dismissive nod. “What are you doing here?” he asked once the secretary had closed the door behind her.

“Convincing you that you’re being stubborn and unreasonable.”

Eli huffed a small chuckle at that before growing serious. “Are you going to quit your job?”

“You know I can’t do that. I don’t want to lose you, Eli, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You’ve taught me so much, how to trust, how to love, and how

to let my barriers down and let someone in.

But my job is a part of me, it's who I am.

I can't not do it. It would be like me asking you to give up running the company your father created from the ground up, that he sacrificed for to create, that he dedicated decades to building. You couldn't do that any more than I can give up being a cop. "

"So, nothing has changed."

"I understand that you're afraid of losing me, but you could lose me a million other ways. A car accident, an illness, a plane crash, anything could happen, you can't live your whole life being afraid. You taught me that."

"It's not living my life being afraid. Yes, I could lose you in a car accident, or you could get sick and die, but that's not the same.

That's out of your control. My mother spent years fighting to live, she went through chemo even though it made her so sick she couldn't get out of bed, she tried every treatment option they offered.

She fought." His dark eyes were full of anger, passion, lust, and love.

He still loved her he just felt like he was trapped in a dead end.

He couldn't see a way out, and she knew all about that.

Half her life she'd felt trapped by circumstance, not sure where to go or what to do. But she'd never let that stop her. In life you had to keep moving forward, even if it looked like there was no way to keep going, you just looked until you found it because there was always a way.

Always .

“This isn’t about me,” she said calmly. “This is about you. This is about your fears. You know that it’s not really my job that’s the problem because Toby Lane wasn’t connected to me through that. He would have come after me at some point regardless if I’d become a cop or a hooker.

You lost your brother, your mom, and your dad, I understand that you’re afraid of losing me too.

But you know what?” Florence planted both hands on his desk and leaned over so they were nose to nose.

“You’re going to have to find a way to deal with it.

You have to learn to compromise. I get that you’re used to getting your own way, ordering people around, but that’s not how this works.

If we’re a couple, then you have to understand that it’s give and take.

I’m not one of your employees, you don’t get to just give me an ultimatum and expect that I’ll fall into line. ”

Eli stared at her for a long moment. “I don’t want to lose you either, Florence. But I don’t think you understand what it’s like to love someone and lose them because you’ve never loved anyone before.”

She winced at the words even though she knew he didn’t mean them the way they sounded. Just because she’d never had anyone in her life to love besides her brother, didn’t mean she was incapable of loving or understanding what it would be like to lose someone you loved.

“When I look at you I see the future that I want more than anything, I see everything that I've ever wanted. But when I look at you I also see it slipping through my fingers. I can't survive that.”

“So, you'd rather lose me anyway by just breaking things off?” What was the point of wanting to end things because he might lose her but lose her anyway by ending things?

“I'm sorry, Florence. You think this isn't killing me? Because it is. I feel like I've been forced to rip off a part of myself to survive.”

She shook her head at him. She'd come here to fight for what she wanted, to fight for them because she knew Eli needed her to, but there was only so much she could do it he wasn't willing to budge. “So, you lied.”

“About what?”

“When you said that you would always be there for me, that I was special, that you cared about me. You're just like everyone else.

You leave. You break promises. You don't mean what you say.

I told you that once you got me into bed you'd lose interest and move on and surprise, surprise, that's exactly what happened. ”

Disappointment filled her. She'd allowed herself to be lulled into what had obviously been a false sense of security. She'd believed Eli when he'd said those things to her, against all the odds, against all her conditioning, she had actually believed those words when they came from his lips.

That was her mistake.

In the end, she didn't have anyone to blame for this predicament but herself.

Well, lesson learned.

Part of fighting for what you wanted was accepting when one strategy no longer seemed viable and trying a different approach.

She'd come here to convince Eli that he was making a mistake, but he obviously wasn't interested in seeing things from her point of view.

It was time to accept the facts.

This was over.

11:37 A.M.

Florence's words cut through him as effectively as any knife could.

"You know what the worst part is?" she asked, giving that disappointed look.

He'd rather see her angry, fire sparking from her eyes as she laid into him for ruining what they'd had than see her disappointed in him.

It was like when his mother used to give him that same look when he was a boy, and he'd done something they both knew he shouldn't have.

She would never yell at him, she'd just give him that look and guilt would do the rest.

It worked just as well when Florence did it.

"The worst part is that you're the first man I've ever trusted besides my brother.

I didn't want to, I tried not to, that's why I kept turning you down when you asked me out.

I knew it would all end badly. I should have trusted my instincts.

I've made it this far in life on my own, I don't need a man, I'll be fine by myself. ”

That wasn't what he wanted.

Florence had faced her fears and hadn't given into them.

Why couldn't he be that brave?

He wanted to, he didn't want to let Florence go. Elliot's words kept echoing through his head.

He was going to regret this. He knew it, and yet he couldn't seem to make his mouth say the words because his mind kept conjuring up images of Florence lying in a coffin, her hands folded across her stomach, and her blonde hair lying in soft waves around her still face.

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Florence looked at him, opened her mouth then snapped it closed again. With that, she turned and walked out of the office without another word.

Eli sat staring after her like an idiot.

What was he doing?

Was he really going to let her just walk away?

Was he really going to let it end like this?

Did he want to spend the rest of his life regretting this one moment in time?

Florence was right, what was the difference between losing her to her job or losing her because he was too afraid of losing her.

Either way, she was gone and no longer a part of his life.

Elliot had said that while it would gut him to lose his family, he would rather have had them and lost them than to never have had them, and that was the same way he felt about his parents' and brother's deaths.

He wouldn't give up the good times they had shared, the values they'd instilled in him, or the love they'd showered on him for anything.

He was being a jerk.

A controlling jerk.

A stubborn one too.

Jumping out of his chair, he flew out of his office, he had to catch up to her before it was too late.

He had to do whatever it took to get her to forgive him, he'd get down on his hands and knees and grovel if that would work.

Whatever it took he'd do, somehow he'd make it up to her for putting her through this.

Bypassing the elevator, he took the stairs three at a time as he made his way down to the lobby.

When he burst through the door he scanned the room, but he couldn't see her.

Running now, he pushed through the front doors and stood on the street looking wildly about.

Where was she?

Was it too late?

Was she already gone?

It wasn't like he didn't know where she lived, but somehow he felt it in his bones that if he didn't find her fast and explain, he would lose her forever.

He spotted a flash of purple.

Florence had been wearing a purple sweater in his office, he distinctly remembered that because purple had made her eyes appear more violet.

It was her.

Standing where she had been when the car came screeching toward her that night they had first met.

Quickly looking from side to side he darted across the street, ran straight to her, grabbed her by the shoulders, and pulled her in for a kiss.

“You’re right, I’m an idiot,” he whispered against her lips.

“I never called you an idiot,” she countered.

“Not in so many words, but I got your message,” he grinned.

“What are you doing down here?” she asked warily, disentangling herself from his grasp and taking a pointed step back. He couldn’t blame her, but it still hurt, even if he didn’t have anyone but himself to blame for the distance between them.

“Groveling.”

“Groveling?”

“I figure I owe you. You were right, I was being an idiot. You conquered your fears, and I let mine control me. I want to protect you, so nothing ever hurts you again, but I know I made a mistake in trying to control you and make you give up something you love. Seeing that man holding a gun on you, knowing that you would have taken a bullet for me. That you did take a bullet for me,” he amended, lightly touching the white bandage circling her neck.

“I shouldn’t have let you go home alone, I knew you were in danger, I knew he was stalking you, and yet I let you go anyway because I had a meeting.

A meeting. How would I have felt if he’d killed you or kidnapped you? ”

Her eyes softened, and Eli knew in that moment that he hadn't lost her.

“You know how I told you the cocky thing could be attractive, well it can also be extremely annoying.

You didn't let me do anything. I’m an adult, and a cop, I can take care of myself.

I get that we worry about the people we love, but you can't be acting like a possessive, controlling jerk every time I'm not in your line of sight.”

“I saved your life, remember? I'm responsible for you.”

“Well, as sweet as it is that you take your responsibilities so seriously,” she said with an affectionate grin, “I can't have you hovering over me all the time. I’m as safe as I can be at work, Jake and I watch each other’s backs.

Yes, my job can be risky, but despite the bad impression this last week and a half gives, I really haven't ever been held at gunpoint before, or nearly run over with a car.”

He knew he had to find a way to let it go.

Florence was right, he couldn’t act like a possessive, controlling jerk.

His mother would never have put up with that kind of behavior from his father, and his father would never have insinuated that his mother was somehow incapable of

taking care of herself.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “I’m sorry. I hate that I hurt you. That I made you cry.” His thumb brushed the dark bags underneath her red-rimmed eyes. It was clear that she hadn’t slept much last night, he knew he hadn’t, every time he’d drifted off he’d dreamed of Florence’s sweet body. “You know what you said, don’t you?”

“What? What did I say?”

“You said, and I quote, ‘I get that we worry about the people we love’. Do you love me, Detective Florence Harris?”

“That wasn’t how I imagined saying that for the first time.”

“I don’t care how you said it, all I care is that you love me.” Pressing his lips to hers, he kissed her like they weren’t standing on a busy street.

“You know you’re leaving me hanging here...” she trailed off and gave him a pointed look.

“Oh, princess, I love you. I told you already that you’re mine, and I’m not ever going to let you go. I messed up yesterday. I wish I could take it back. I wish that last night instead of going to my hotel room alone and trying to sleep that I had taken you to the penthouse, made love to you, and then fallen asleep with you in my arms. Forgive me?”

“Well...” She made a big show of pretending to consider the idea. “I guess I can’t fault you for giving in to your fears when I’ve been guilty of doing the same thing. I forgive you, Eli, but please don’t ever make a promise to me that you don’t intend to honor. I just...I can’t...”

“I know, sweetheart, I'm sorry. But I would never not fight for you, I'm fighting for you right now because the idea of you going to work still fills me with an indescribable terror, but I'm going to learn how to deal with it because it's important to you.

Thank you for calling me out, thank you for fighting for me even though I gave you every reason to hate me.

I promise you that I won't ever break your heart again.” He put a hand on her chest above her heart, enjoying the feel of it beating against him.

Her heartbeat had become his, it was as vital to his survival just as much as his own beating heart.

“I believe you.” Tears shimmered in her eyes, round teardrops balanced on her eyelashes before trailing silvery lines down her cheeks, and although he hated to see her cry for any reason, he knew these were happy tears and not sad ones. “I love you, Eli.”

“I love you, too, princess.” He caught her tears with his lips before kissing her again. “You know we haven't christened my office yet,” he said with an arched brow.

“You saying you want to go back up there now?”

“You saying no?”

“But everyone is there. What if someone walks in on us?”

“We'll lock the door, and I'll tell my secretary I don't want to be disturbed.”

“Cos that worked so well when I just ignored her and walked into your office,”

Florence said with a laugh.

“Ah, but this time the door will be locked.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Why not? After everything that’s happened since I met you I’ve learned to live in the moment.”

He couldn’t argue with that. Bending down, he lifted Florence over his shoulder and carried her back across the street.

12:00 P.M.

Eli set her down on the desk in his office, and Florence couldn’t believe they were really going to do this. She hadn’t ever done anything like this before, and she couldn’t deny that she was turned on.

“I can’t wait to taste you,” Eli murmured in her ear.

“You better hurry up and do something,” she moaned as his tongue touched her collarbone followed by his lips as he trailed kisses down to the tip of the v of her sweater.

“This has got to go,” he said, his hands grabbing the hem of the sweater and pulling it over her head.

“This too.” He unsnapped her bra and let it fall to the floor, and then his mouth was feasting on her breasts.

His tongue swirled around her nipples, teasing her, torturing her until she was begging for more.

“Eli,” she begged. “Please.”

“Please what, baby?”

“Please, I need you,” she said breathlessly.

“Stand up.”

She complied, standing on shaky legs.

“Spread them.”

She was too turned on to do anything but what Eli told her to.

Once her legs were spread he unsnapped her jeans and eased them down her legs. Then he knelt before her, and his hands curled around her bottom and pulled her closer.

“So sweet,” he murmured, then he licked her through her cotton panties.

“Eli,” she whimpered.

“So impatient,” he teased, curling his fingers around the top of her panties and pulling them down her legs.

Lifting one foot, he slid her sneaker off, before setting that foot down and picking up her other, removing that shoe too.

“Step out,” he ordered, and once she did he tossed her jeans and panties off to the side.

Now that he had her naked, his hands spanned her hips, and he lifted her up and set her down on the side of his desk. His hands on her knees parted her legs, and then he was between them.

Florence shuddered as his tongue touched her, he licked and nibbled, and then slid a finger inside her, curling it so it touched that spot inside that had her gasping.

He added another finger, stroking deep, before curling again to get her sweet spot.

His tongue continued to swirl around her bud, and when his teeth nibbled gently, she came undone.

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Biting her lip to keep from screaming his name, she came on his face as he continued to draw out every last drop of pleasure leaving her a trembling but satisfied mess.

When she could form a thought, she looked up to find Eli watching her with that smug, cocky smile she'd come to know so well.

“Feeling pleased with yourself?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah.”

Scooping her into his arms, he carried her over to the couch and laid her down on it. Then after giving her a reverent look that had her both feeling attractive and tingling with anticipation, he shed his jeans and stretched out above her.

He entered her with one smooth thrust, and she moaned in pleasure as he filled her so completely it was like they were made for each other. Eli thrust slowly in and out, and her hips began to move, meeting him thrust for thrust.

Pleasure built low in her stomach, spreading throughout her body until it consumed her, and this time she couldn't help screaming his name as he sent her spiraling into another orgasm.

Eli came a second after she did and the fact that they were both experiencing such pure ecstasy at the same time made it all the better.

“I'm not ever going to get enough of that,” she said as her fingers trailed lazy circles on his back as she held him close.

“I’d say me either, but I think that’s a given,” he teased. “Come on, let’s get out of here. We’ll go to the penthouse, the furniture isn’t delivered yet, but there’s still some ice cream left.”

“You know I’m also not ever going to get enough ice cream,” she added on a giggle.

“Sex and ice cream, can’t say that’s not a great day.”

She giggled again because Eli lowered all her inhibitions and allowed her to just be free, not so serious and logical all the time.

They put their clothes on, and Eli’s driver took them back to the penthouse where they proceeded to christen every single room of the place, and eat enough ice cream to put a couple of sugar addicted preschoolers to shame.

By the time they were done it was dark out, and Florence was ready to curl up in Eli’s arms and get some sleep, but it seemed he had other ideas.

“Put your shoes on,” he said, holding them out to her.

“We going somewhere?”

“Yep.” He wouldn’t tell her anything else, so her curiosity grew as she put her shoes on and followed him out of the penthouse.

They bypassed the elevator and instead headed for a flight of stairs.

“What are we doing?” she asked, unable to figure out what Eli was up to.

“You’ll see.” He took her hand and led her up to the roof.

“You’re bringing me to the roof?”

“Yep.”

“Why?” She looked around, seeking a clue as to what he had planned, but all that was up here was a little rooftop garden. “What’s going on? What are you up to?”

“Come sit with me,” was all he said as he led her over to the edge of the roof and tilted his head up to look at the sky.

“When I was a little boy, I used to be scared to go to sleep, I was afraid of nightmares.

I used to get upset as soon as it got dark because I knew bedtime was coming.

My mom tried everything to get me over this fear, she took me to doctors, and tried to get me to explain exactly what it was that was scary to me.

In the end, she took me outside one night after it got dark, she put a picnic blanket on the grass, and we lay on our backs and stared up at the sky.

She taught me all about the constellations and how they got their names, we did that every night for two weeks and then suddenly I realized that I wasn't afraid anymore.”

“That’s a sweet story.” She rested her head against his shoulder, and his arm came around her shoulders, holding her close.

Sometimes she wished she had lovely stories about special moments like that with her family.

Although she didn't, she was determined that her children would have enough

memories to make up for the ones she didn't have.

“After that, anytime I felt scared I would open my curtains and look out at the stars. Over time I outgrew my fear of the dark like most kids do, but I never stopped loving the stars. There’s something so special about them, they’re beautiful and interesting, and one day I want to lie on a picnic blanket in my backyard with my kids and teach them everything their grandmother never got to share with them.

” Taking her hand again, he led her off to the side where there was a picnic blanket spread out.

She gasped, and tears pricked her eyes. “This is the blanket isn’t it? You kept it.”

“I did.” Guiding her on to the blanket, they sat down and then stretched out, staring up at the wide, velvety blue expanse dotted with thousands of sparkling diamonds.

“I brought you up here for a reason,” he explained as he stroked his hand up and down her arm.

“I owe you one romantic gesture when I ask you to move in with me.

So, Florence, I would love it if you would move in with me here as soon as the furniture arrives.

Until then we can stay at the hotel, or your place, or move between the two.

You up for living with me? I know I drive you crazy sometimes, and I can't promise you that I won't be cocky most days, but I really want to watch the stars with you before we go to bed at night, and wake up with you in my arms.”

“I would love to move in with you. And you didn't really have to make a big gesture

like this, I already said yes.”

“I wanted to make a gesture, you deserve a gesture.” He turned his face and caught her lips, kissing her sweetly and tenderly, and somehow that was better than the hotter, passionate kisses of earlier when they’d been making love.

“Just for the record, I love all your sides. I love that you’re confident and cocky because if you weren’t we wouldn’t be here together tonight. And I love even more that you’re this big, sweet, cuddly softie underneath because it makes me feel special.”

“You are special, princess, and I don’t want you to ever forget it.”

“I never felt special before you came along,” she admitted.

“I know, honey, but it was their loss not yours.

Your mom and dad are the ones who missed out on having this amazing, sweet, compassionate, strong woman in their lives.

But their loss is my gain, because I’m the one who got to be by your side when you finally figured out just how special you are, and that makes me feel special.”

“Are you trying to make me cry?” she sniffed.

“No, sweetheart, I just want you to know how much you mean to me and how proud I am of you for realizing that you deserve the world. And that’s what I’m going to give you, the world.”

“I don’t need the world, Eli. I just need you.” She lifted a hand to cup his cheek, his scruff tickling her palm as her fingers stroked his soft skin.

“You have me, Florence. You have me.”

Those were the most wonderful words anyone had ever said to her.

Chapter

Thirteen

“Fletcher can be kind of...” Florence trailed off.

“Don’t worry, babe, your brother will love me,” he assured her.

She was nervous this morning, but he was sure they would have a great time meeting her brother.

Fletcher Harris had been going to drive up to the city to spend the day with her, but Florence had decided last night that she was ready to go back to the town she’d grown up in.

He was so proud of her, but he wished she could relax.

“Really, babe, everyone loves me,” he teased, knowing he’d get a smile out of her.

She acquiesced as he’d known she would. “You and that cocky attitude of yours. But, really, Eli, Fletcher can be kind of grumpy until you get to know him. And he’s pretty protective of me because it was just the two of us when we were kids.

So don’t be surprised if he doesn’t fall for that charm of yours. ”

“You worry too much.” He reached over and took her hand, kissing it then setting it on his thigh as he drove.

Today it was just the two of them, he hadn't wanted his driver to take them because he wanted to be alone with Florence.

After they spent the morning with her brother and had lunch, they were driving back to the city to have dinner with Elliot and Susannah. Kind of a meet the families day.

“You're just realizing that?” she muttered. “Take the next left here, then it's only another mile until we get to River's End.”

“You haven't been back here at all since you left?”

“Not once. The day I graduated high school, I packed my things and left. Fletcher had already been gone for two years because he joined the military straight out of high school. There was nothing for me there, and by the time Fletcher was out of the military and moved back there I just couldn't face the place, too many bad memories.

Usually, he comes to see me or we meet halfway.

I thought I'd never go back there, but I don't know, I just feel ready. ”

“It's because you're finally able to move on,” he said, squeezing her hand.

He wanted to tell her how proud of her he was for conquering her demons, but he didn't want it to sound like he was patronizing her, because that wasn't how he meant it.

He was proud of her, he knew how hard it was to let go and let the past be the past, it had taken her so many years to get to this point, and now that she was, he was glad he was here to celebrate the milestone with her.

“I can't believe we're here,” she said shakily a few minutes later when they entered a

quaint, pretty little town. “Fletcher’s house is in the middle of town, drive halfway down Main Street, turn right, and then left, then right again and his house is number eighteen.”

Eli followed her instructions and spotted the house that belonged to her brother before they reached it because a huge blonde man was standing at the end of the driveway. He was looking toward them, arms crossed, a scowl on his face.

“That’s Fletcher,” Florence said with a sigh.

“He looks like a cheerful chap,” he joked, parking the car out the front of the house.

“Real cheerful.” Florence chuckled as she climbed out. “Hey, big brother,” she said as Fletcher wrapped his arms around her and lifted her feet off the ground.

“I missed you,” Fletcher told his little sister.

“I missed you too. This is Eli,” she introduced him as he came up beside her and took her hand when Fletcher set her back on her feet. “Eli, my brother Fletcher.”

“Nice to meet you.” He held out his free hand, and the other man eyed it before grabbing it in a crushing grip.

“You two good now, Florrie?” he asked his sister.

“Yes,” Florence replied firmly. “He had some issues to work through same as I did, but we sorted everything out, and we’re both happy.”

Just like that Fletcher relaxed. “Then nice to meet you too. I’m sure it goes without saying that you hurt my baby sister, and I hurt you.”

“Message received and understood,” he assured the other man. “And you don’t have anything to worry about, I love your sister, and I would never do anything to hurt her.”

“Good, because Florrie has been through enough.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that,” Florence said with a scowl as she swatted at her brother’s shoulder.

“I know,” Fletcher agreed with a straight face.

The siblings had the same blonde hair and the same eyes, but otherwise their features were different, and he guessed Fletcher took after their father while Florence favored their mother.

Despite the differences in their appearance, their mannerisms were the same, they had the same smile, and their eyes sparkled the same way.

“I have to go to the bathroom, you two going to be okay?” Florence asked, eyeing her brother warily.

“Relax, I won't beat him up.”

Florence rolled her eyes but hurried off inside the house, and Eli took advantage of this moment alone with Fletcher.

“As the man in Florence’s life I'd like to ask you for her hand in marriage. I know it’s old fashioned, but I think it would mean a lot to her to know you approve since it was basically just the two of you growing up. ”

“Marriage? You two are already talking marriage?” Fletcher looked surprised but not

displeased at the notion.

“I already have the ring.”

“Haven't you only known each other two weeks?”

“Twelve days to be exact. And that's kind of how I work, I see something I want I go after it. It's not in my nature to sit back and wait.”

“Does Florence know you want to ask her to marry you?”

“She does. And she's already said yes to moving in with me.

The proposal is just a formality, it's not a matter of if just of when.

Florence looks up to you, you're her big brother, and she'd like to know you're on board, but full disclosure I'd marry her with or without your approval. I just hope it isn't without.”

Fletcher broke out into a grin. “I like you. You tell it like it is. You and Florence have my approval and my blessing, I'm really happy for you guys. Florence has been through a lot, she deserves all the happiness in the world.”

“And she'll get it,” he promised.

“Everything okay out here?” Florence asked as she joined them.

“Would you stop worrying, we're fine, I like him,” Fletcher told her, ruffling her hair and making her swat at him again.

“Told you he'd like me,” he said.

“You and your cockiness.” She rolled her eyes at him, then rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “Can we go inside now? It’s freezing out here. How are you wearing just a shirt, aren’t you cold?” she asked Fletcher.

“Nope, not cold at all,” Fletcher replied as he led them up the path and inside.

The house was simple but nicely furnished, but it was a definite bachelor pad. Big screen TV on the wall, multiple gaming consoles, a pool table, pinball machine, and two big black leather couches.

“So I hope you don’t mind, but when I mentioned you were coming for lunch the Blacks wanted to come and see you,” Fletcher said, a hint of apprehension in his tone like he wasn’t sure how Florence would react to the news.

Florence froze for a moment, reached out to take his hand, and then smiled. “Yeah, okay, that’s fine. It will be nice to see them. Who’s coming?”

“Everyone. Theo, Abe and Levi, Tatiana and Patrick, Will and Julian, Kevin, the whole gang.”

“Theo was Fletcher’s best friend when they were kids, well they still are,” Florence explained. “Are you barbecuing?” she asked when Fletcher went into the kitchen and picked up a plate piled high with steaks and burgers.

“Of course.”

“But it’s the middle of winter.”

“Doesn’t mean that barbecues don’t taste good,” Fletcher said with a wink. “Let everyone in when they get here.”

Alone in the room, Eli pulled her into his arms. “You good with all the extra guests?”

“Yeah, I guess. I'm glad that Fletcher has them, they're like his family, the Blacks took him under their wing, looked out for him.”

“But not you?” He couldn't help but feel a burst of anger that there had been people to look out for Fletcher but no one to be there for Florence.

“It's okay,” she soothed, running her hands down his arms. “I don't care anymore.

I have you now, and that makes everything better.

It's like it washes away all the bad things that ever happened to me, I know they're still there, but I can hardly see them anymore because anytime I feel bad about what I went through or I feel sad or unworthy, I just have to remind myself that you want me.

Of all the women you could have chosen, you chose me. ”

“You make it sound like you're the one who lucked out in this thing we have, but really, I'm the lucky one,” he told her, framing her face between his hands and kissing her forehead.

“See, you say such sweet things, make me feel so special, I love you so much.”

“Not as much as I love you.” He kissed her again, on the lips this time, and she melted into him. His hand slid up under the back of her sweater, and they probably would have done more than they should have, considering they were in her brother's house when the doorbell rang.

“Raincheck?”

“Oh yeah.”

7:07 P.M.

“I don’t think you’ve stopped smiling since we got to your brother’s house,” Eli said.

Florence hadn't thought about it, but he was right.

Everything had fallen into place, and she was happy. Completely and utterly happy.

It was nice.

She felt like she had been transported from her old life and put down in the middle of a whole new world.

Everything looked brighter, prettier, lovelier, just better.

She felt lighter, like the weight she had been carrying around was gone now.

She knew it wasn't really gone, it was just that now she wasn't carrying it alone.

Eli was there.

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He was at her side, holding her hand—figuratively as well as literally—and helping shoulder her baggage, and what was even better was she could help him carry his as well. They were partners. A team. And it was such a relief to not be alone that she just couldn't wipe the smile off her face.

"I'm happy," she said, resting her head on his shoulder as they stood in the lift on their way to his friends' apartment.

"I love seeing you this happy and relaxed."

"I think you're going to be seeing a lot of me like this. I have you, things with my brother are better than they've ever been, two prolific serial killers are off the streets, what's not to be grinning about?"

"Can't argue with that." His arm around her shoulders tugged her closer, and he touched his lips to her temple in a soft kiss.

The lift opened, and a moment later a door was swung open and a gorgeous guy with dark hair and dark eyes stood there grinning at them. On his hip was an adorable baby with silky black locks, long-lashed eyes, and chubby cheeks, who was gooing and giggling to himself.

Florence was a sucker for a baby.

There was just something about their chubby little arms and legs and little round bellies that made her want to cuddle them and squeeze them and tickle them until they made that little gurgly laugh. There wasn't a sound on earth that could compare

to a baby's laugh as far as she was concerned.

"Oh, who is this?" she asked, reaching out to tickle his tummy, making him squeal in delight.

"This is Jake," the man holding him replied. "Don't be fooled, he might look cute, but his favorite thing to do is wait until the middle of the night when you finally fall asleep before deciding it would be fun to scream his lungs out."

"Aww, he just needs his mommy and daddy," she said, smiling at the baby.

"I'm Elliot by the way," the man said, his eyes twinkling as he grinned at her.

"Right," she said, tearing her attention away from the baby. "Sorry, he's just such a little cutie, he's hard to resist."

"Tell me about it," Elliot said with an eye roll. "Impossible to stay mad at him no matter how many nights he wakes us up crying."

She ran a hand over the baby's soft little head. "Babies are irresistible. I'm Florence, nice to meet you, Elliot." She held out her hand to shake his, but instead he handed over his son.

"Jakey loves to meet his fans. Come in, Susannah is dying to meet you, Florence, we've heard a lot about you."

Florence threw a frown over her shoulder at Eli as they walked into Elliot's living room, wondering what he'd said about her. Huge windows filled one wall, showcasing an impressive view of the Manhattan skyline.

Elliot laughed when he saw her frown. "Don't worry, he only said good things.

Please, sit, Susannah will be right out, and as soon as we put Jakey down for the night, we can eat.”

“No hurry,” she said, sitting down on a soft leather couch and bouncing the baby on her lap.

“You like to sing, Jake?” she asked him.

“Here, give me your little hand. This was my favorite song when I was a little girl, my brother used to sing it to me, and it always made me laugh. Let’s see if it makes you giggle.

” Taking one of Jake’s cute little hands, she touched a fingertip to his palm and began to trace circles.

“Round and round the garden like a teddy bear. One step, two steps,” she walked her fingers up his arm, “tickle you under there.” She finished with an accompanying tickle under his armpit that made the baby screech with laughter.

“That is adorable.”

Florence looked up to find a pretty woman around her age with long black hair that had red tips, smiling at her.

“Every day I think he can't get any cuter, and every day I get proved wrong,” Susannah Zachary said.

“He’s gorgeous,” Florence said.

“And now we have a new song to sing together. I'm Susannah, you must be Florence.”

“I am, it’s nice to meet you. I hear that I have you and Elliot to thank for my tattoo date the other night.

Eli was telling me that he got the idea from you two.

He said that Elliot got a tattoo that matched yours, and apparently you were telling Eli that he didn't need to take me to fancy restaurants to impress me, and I'd feel more comfortable not feeling like we came from two different worlds. I wanted to thank you both because I think standing there in that tattoo parlor watching Eli get a tattoo that matched mine was when I realized I was falling in love with him.” She turned to smile at Eli who was sitting beside her, watching her with a smile on his face that she quickly realized was him imagining them sitting side by side while she bounced their own baby on her knee.

For some reason the idea didn't freak her out like she thought it would.

“Glad to be of service.” Elliot grinned.

Susannah swatted at him. “We’re delighted we could help out. I know when Elliot and I first got together, I was concerned that our different worlds might mean we wouldn’t work as a couple, I figured you might be feeling the same thing.”

“I was.” Florence already knew that she and Susannah were going to wind up being friends, she liked the woman and her down to earth attitude already. Plus she had possibly the world’s cutest baby.

“If it wasn't for these two I would probably still be trying to take you to fancy restaurants and flying you to Italy,” Eli teased.

“You know I wouldn’t turn down another trip to Italy.” She grinned at him.

“I wouldn’t either.” Susannah poked Elliot in the ribs. “Well, I better put this little guy to bed. Elliot, can you go check on the lasagna.”

“Sweet dreams, sweetie,” she said, kissing Jake’s chubby cheek then handing him off to his mother.

“We’ll be right back.”

Alone, Eli slid his arms under her legs and drew her over and onto his lap. “You looked good with a baby in your arms,” he whispered, his lips teasing her as he trailed kisses along her jaw.

“I love babies,” she agreed, turning her face so his next kiss landed on her lips. “Know what I love more than babies?”

“Me?” he asked with an arched brow and that cocky grin she was growing to love more and more every time she saw it.

“No, not you,” she said, smacking his shoulder lightly. “Our baby.”

“Our baby? Is this the same lady who kept trying to convince me that it was too soon to move in with someone you’d only known a couple of weeks talking about having babies?”

“I don’t want to have a baby today.” She rolled her eyes at him, then gave him another smack for good measure. “But I wouldn’t mind having one in the semi-near future.”

“You know we can start working on that tonight. I hear it can take a few months to get pregnant, then it’s nine months until the baby actually arrives, I think that would qualify as the semi-near future.”

Were they really talking about having a baby sometime soon?

And was she really okay with that?

Florence was surprised to find that she was.

All her life she hadn't believed in love, had thought that it didn't exist that it was just make believe fluff that someone created to sell movies and books. Now she was completely rethinking that notion.

She was in love with Eli, she's already agreed to move in with him, she knew he was just biding his time before he proposed, and now they were discussing babies, and instead of feeling like it was too soon she was just excited by the idea.

"Baby making is definitely going on the agenda for tonight," she agreed, dragging his face to hers so she could kiss him.

"H-hmm," someone cleared their throat behind them.

"Sorry, are we interrupting?" Susannah asked, smothering a laugh.

"Yes," Eli replied with a groan.

"Raincheck number two?"

"Oh yeah."

Chapter

Fourteen

“Rise and shine, princess,” Eli said, leaning down to kiss Florence awake.

“What time is it?” Florence groaned, rolling sleepily onto her side and refusing to open her eyes.

“Nearly seven-thirty,” he replied. He’d had meetings all day yesterday, closing a deal, and he hadn’t made it home until just after midnight. It had been another two hours before Florence got home. He’d been waiting up for her, and she’d been buzzing with excitement because she’d just closed a case she and Jake had been working on for the last week, and it had been five before they’d finally made it to bed.

“I don’t want to get up yet,” Florence said, pulling the covers over her head.

“You have to,” he said with a laugh.

“Don’t. Today is my day off.”

That was exactly the point.

Today was Florence’s day off, and it was also their one month anniversary, there was no way they were spending the day sleeping. Of course he had some in bed plans for them, but that was for tonight, today he was going to spoil her rotten.

He'd been planning this day ever since they'd officially become a couple and done the whole him meeting her brother and her meeting his friends thing.

At first he hadn't known what to do, he'd toyed with the idea of flying her back to Florence but then decided that she tended to enjoy when he made gestures rather than threw a bunch of money at something.

Eli was pretty sure he had planned the perfect day.

If he could get her out of bed.

He had to laugh at that, usually he wanted to get her into bed, not out of it.

"Princess, you can get out of bed or I can get you out of bed, your choice." He slid his hands under the blankets and found her ribs, he caressed her bare skin, tracing under her breasts before rolling her nipples between his fingers, making her moan.

Then he tickled her, making her squeal and wriggle away from him.

"What are you doing?"

"Waking you up," he said, reaching for her and tickling her again.

"Stop," she shrieked. "Eli!"

"Ready to get up now?" he asked, throwing the covers off the bed so he could feast his eyes on her naked body. Maybe they should stay in bed for the day, make love, eat ice cream, and just chill.

"Why are you so intent on us getting up? You do realize that we only went to bed two hours ago, right?" Florence rolled to face him, propping herself up on one elbow.

Fighting temptation, he pulled Florence over so she was lying on top of him. “Trust me, I have a whole day of fun planned for us to celebrate one month together.”

“I can't believe a whole month has gone by.”

“Best month of my life.” He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, Eli loved when she wore her hair loose so it hung in golden blonde waves down her back.

“Mine too.” She kissed him lightly then rested her head on his chest. They lay together like that for a few minutes before she sighed. “Well, I guess I'm awake now, and I can't deny I'm curious about what you have planned.”

With that, she stood, and when he watched her tight little backside sashay off to the bathroom, he nearly grabbed her and tossed her down on the bed to make love to her until they both forget anything but making each other come so hard nothing else mattered.

Eli somehow managed not to succumb to temptation and stuck with his plans, and after Florence had showered and dressed, he took a shower himself. Once they were both ready, he took her hand and led her into the lift.

“So, are you going to tell me what we're doing today?” she asked.

“You'll see.”

“Do you get some sort of pleasure out of torturing me?”

“Yep,” he said, grinning at her then kissing her. He loved making her squirm, Florence was always so in control, so put together, and he liked to see her ruffled.

The morning was crisp but not too cold, the sky was a clear blue that hinted that

spring was only a couple of weeks away, the sun shone, and there was a gentle breeze.

The day was beautiful, and he hoped that it stayed that way because what he had planned for later would be better if the weather held.

The traffic wasn't heavy, and they reached their destination a little before they needed to be there.

“The aquarium?” Florence asked as she looked out the window.

“I remember you telling me that you always wanted to go to the beach when you were a little girl, so I thought it would be fun to come here and spend the day with sea life.”

“I love it.” Florence threw her arms around his neck and hugged him hard.

“They do a few behind the scenes encounters, and I booked us into all of them. We’re going to be meeting penguins, sea lions, and sharks.”

“Really?” she squealed like a schoolgirl and clapped her hands together delightedly, and he was infinitely glad he’d gotten out of bed this morning. Bringing that smile to Florence’s face made him ridiculously proud like he’d cured cancer or solved world hunger or something.

“Really,” he said and kissed the tip of her nose.

The next few hours flew by, the penguins were adorable, and being kissed by the sea lions was fun, they’d even got to touch the sharks. By the time they were done, he didn't think he’d ever seen Florence smile and laugh as much as she had in those couple of hours at the aquarium.

“That was amazing,” Florence said as they climbed into the back of his car. “Thank you, that was such a fun date, it was a perfect way to celebrate our one month anniversary.”

“Part one of the one month anniversary celebrations,” he corrected.

“There’s more?” she asked, surprised.

“Did we just meet? I thought you knew by now that I love to go all out when I'm looking to impress.”

“I guess a certain trip to Florence for a few hours walking through the city and dinner speaks to that.” She giggled. “So what's up next?”

“You’ll see.”

His answer earned him an eye roll, but he just chuckled and pulled her onto his lap so they could make out until they got to part two of the celebrations.

When they pulled to a stop and got out, Florence squealed again, her eyes as round as saucers as they stared at the hot air balloon ready and waiting to take them floating through the sky.

“How did you know that I've always wanted to go in a hot air balloon? I've never told you.”

“A little birdie may have whispered it in my ear.”

“Fletcher. It had to be my brother because he’s the only one who knows.”

“I may have asked him for a few tips on things to do today that you’d enjoy,” he told

her. He'd wanted to make this day special for her, and he and Fletcher had become friends over the last couple of weeks.

"A hot air balloon ride at sunset, that has to be the most romantic thing ever. Eli, this is so wonderful," she gushed, giving him a quick kiss before running over to the balloon.

They climbed into the basket and slowly rose to fly. Florence oohed and ahed as they floated over fields and beaches, the Manhattan skyline as their backdrop.

The more excited she got, the more he fell in love with her.

Eli had thought that the love he felt for her was stronger and deeper than anything he had ever felt, and yet every day she did or said something that made it grow.

He wondered how much he would love her a year from now, a decade from now, a lifetime from now.

Throughout the ride the sky put on a show, turning red and pink and gold as the sun slowly set, and by the time the balloon landed, it was dark out and time for the third and final part of his celebration plans.

"That was so romantic," Florence said as he led her back to the car. "Are we going back to your place now because I want you naked and inside me sooner rather than later."

"That will have to keep, princess, because I have one more surprise."

Florence yawned as they got into the back of the car, and snuggled up against his side. He thought she'd fallen asleep, but when they'd driven back into the city, and the car stopped, she lifted her head from his shoulder and looked out the window.

“What are we doing here?” she asked, confused.

Instead of answering, Eli took her hand and tugged her out of the car. They were parked right outside the alley where he had spotted her that first night and saved her life when he’d pushed her out of the way of the car.

He passed her a tub of ice cream. “Dinner.”

“Aww, mint chocolate chip, my favorite.” She took the tub and pulled off the lid as she asked, “So why did you bring...” she trailed off, and from the look on her face, he knew she’d seen the engagement ring nestled in the ice cream. “Is that what I think it is?”

Dropping down onto one knee he took her hand.

“Florence, you drive me crazy, make me laugh, and make me love in a way I didn't realize I was capable of loving. I know we’ve only known each other for one month and that everything we’ve done we’ve done at full speed, but when I see something I want I go after it, and I want you.

I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I don’t see any reason to wait.

You’re everything to me, I would do anything just to bring a smile to your beautiful face, and I don’t want another day to go by without you as my wife.

Will you do me the honor of trusting me with your heart and your life and marry me?
”

7:20 P.M.

Florence couldn’t take her eyes off the ring in the tub of ice cream.

An engagement ring.

Eli was down on one knee in front of her and had just said the most beautiful things to her.

Every logical bone in her body told her this was too soon. One month wasn't enough time to know if you were ready to commit the rest of your life to another person. One month wasn't enough time to know if the feelings you thought you had were real.

One month was too soon, and yet...

Her heart told her everything that she needed to know.

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“Of course I’ll marry you,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around Eli’s neck, causing him to lose his balance and they both tumbled to the ground. Somehow Eli managed to break her fall, taking the brunt of the impact, and it just made her love him even more.

“Yes? You’re saying yes?” Eli wrapped his arms around her and stood, bringing her up with him. He held her feet off the ground and spun around in circles, dancing about the alley as though they were at a fancy dress ball.

“You thought I’d say no?” she asked, her arms still wrapped around his neck.

“I didn’t think you’d say no, I thought you’d say it was too soon.”

“I don’t care. I love you, and we’re living together anyway, I want to marry you, I want to officially start our lives together.”

“Am I going to be pushing my luck if I ask you to marry me today?”

“Today?” she squeaked. “How can we get married today? It’s already after seven, and I don’t have a dress or an appointment to get my hair and makeup done. My brother isn’t here, neither are your friends. And we don’t have a venue or a caterer, how could you possibly think we could pull that off?”

“Are you doubting me?” he teased.

“No, but how do you think we can pull together a wedding tonight?”

“Oh, you of little faith.” He set her on her feet but kept an arm around her waist, then called over his shoulder, “You guys can come out now.”

Florence looked in surprise as her brother and the Blacks—who she’d really connected with over the last two weeks—Jake and his wife and baby, Elliot and Susannah with Bessie and Jake, some of her friends from work and the gym, and some people she didn’t know but assumed were Eli’s friends, and his nephew Joey whom she’d met last week, all suddenly appeared in the alley.

“How did...where were...how did you do all this? Where were they? Were they waiting in the alley until I said yes?” Then she broke into a grin. “What would you have done if I’d said no?”

“I knew you weren’t going to say no.”

She shook her head. Eli’s level of cockiness never failed to amaze or amuse her. “And what if I say no to getting married today? You’d have gotten everyone here for nothing.”

“Are you saying no to marrying me tonight?” Eli asked with an arched brow.

“Nope.”

“See, told you I know you better than you know yourself.” Eli shot her a smug smile before dragging her in for a kiss.

A chorus of congratulations sang out around them as their family and friends came to offer hugs and slaps on the back. Florence had never felt so surrounded by love and support in her life.

So much had changed over the last month.

Not just herself, although she had been learning to trust and open herself up to someone, letting go of her preconceived notions that people—men specifically—couldn't be trusted.

She'd also come to know what it was like to have a support system, people who cared about how she was, and what she was feeling.

She and Susannah had become particularly close.

They'd gone out for coffee a few times, usually accompanied by the adorable Jake, and Tatiana and Patrick Black had stepped up.

They were becoming almost like surrogate parents to her.

The couple had always been there for her brother, and although she hadn't let them she was sure they would have been there for her too.

Back then, she hadn't been ready to let anyone in, she couldn't handle being disappointed and let down again, but she was ready now.

She was ready to have friends.

She was ready to have a family.

She was ready to get married.

"We're really doing this tonight?" she asked Eli. "What about a dress?"

"Got one." He nodded to Susannah who held up a stunning white halter-neck ball gown with delicate lace across the bodice.

“Hair and makeup?”

“Joey’s grandmother was a hairdresser for thirty years before she retired, she’s volunteered for hair and makeup duty. Fletcher will give you away, Elliot is my best man, Joey will be the ring bearer, and Bessie has been practicing being a flower girl.”

“You’ve thought of everything.” If there was one thing that she loved the most about Eli, it was the fact that he cared about making her happy.

He paid attention to everything she said, stored away pieces of information she hadn't even realized she'd given him, and then pulled them out and surprised her with something thoughtful.

“Pretty much,” he said with that cocky smile of his.

“So where are we getting married? You flying us all to Florence or something?” she asked, thinking that would be exactly the kind of thing he would do since that was where they’d had their first date.

“I thought about that, but to be honest, I can't wait another ten plus hours to make you my wife, it’s been hell waiting a month to marry you.”

“So, where are we getting married then?”

“You’ll see.”

“Eli,” she groaned.

“Don’t worry, princess, you won’t have long to wait. I'm going to leave you in the very capable hands of Christine and Susannah, and I’ll see you soon. Very soon.” He kissed her lightly on the lips before disappearing with most of the people who’d been

hiding in the alley.

While this was definitely a quirky proposal and unusual wedding, Florence couldn't be happier.

She and Eli didn't do anything traditionally, and that suited them just fine. Most people didn't get engaged in an alley—even if it was where they had met, and where one had saved the other's life—one month after meeting and then proceed to go straight to the wedding, but that was how Eli lived his life, he went after what he wanted, and he wasn't known for being patient. While she'd always been the opposite, Eli's impulsiveness was washing off on her.

Susannah and Joey's grandmother ushered her into a car and took her to Susannah's place where she put on the dress that fit her perfectly, and made her look like a princess.

Christine did her hair, twisting it up so it sat piled elegantly on top of her head with a few gentle waves hanging free, Susannah applied her makeup.

By the time they were finished, she didn't just look like a princess she felt like one too.

"You going to tell me where we're going?" she asked as they headed downstairs to find a white limousine waiting for them.

"Eli would kill me if I ruined the surprise, you'll see when we get there," Susannah answered.

"Spoilsport," she muttered.

Susannah just laughed, and the three of them got into the back of the limo as they

drove through the city. When the limo came to a stop, she scrunched her brow in surprise, this was not where she had expected them to be going.

“This is where Eli planned for us to get married?” she asked, gesturing at his building.

“This is where he told us to come,” Susannah replied, but the twinkle in her eyes said there was more to it than that.

Inside the building, Florence headed to the elevator that went to the penthouse, but Susannah herded her toward a different lift, and when they got off on the top floor, she knew what Eli had planned.

The roof.

They’d sat up there a couple of weeks ago, and he’d told her about his mother and how they’d watched the stars together, then asked her to move in with him.

Since that night, they’d often come up here to lie on a blanket, and he’d taught her about all the constellations.

She shouldn’t have been surprised that this was where he would choose for them to get married.

When she stepped out onto the roof her hands flew to mouth and tears blurred her vision.

It was beautiful.

Who knew an apartment building roof could look so gorgeous.

Eli had strung fairy lights up everywhere, there were dozens of bouquets of cherry blossoms spread about, and wooden benches lined up either side of a white carpet.

The millions of lights of the city sparkled around them, the stars looked down upon them, and Eli stood waiting for her under an arch of cherry blossoms.

He was dressed in a tuxedo, and the look on his face had her tears brimming over.

Love.

He was looking at her with love in his eyes.

Florence had never thought she'd have anyone look at her that way, she'd been resigned to living alone or having a loveless marriage with someone she felt was safe.

Instead, she'd found true love.

The kind of love that would last a lifetime.

She felt like the luckiest woman in the world.

9:46 P.M.

Exactly one month to the minute from when he had run across the road to tackle Florence out of the way of the oncoming car, she stepped out onto the roof, looking like a princess in the wedding dress he'd chosen for her, and he knew his life was complete.

She looked around, taking in everything he'd had their friends and family set up today while they'd been at the aquarium and flying in a hot air balloon. Eli knew the exact second her eyes found him because her face lit up, her eyes grew watery, and

she smiled at him.

He loved her smile.

Loved the way her eyes crinkled at the edges, the little dimple she got above the left corner of her mouth, the way the smile seemed to reach deep down inside her, coming from her heart—her soul.

That was how she was smiling at him now.

Fletcher walked over, hugged her hard, then took her hand and placed it on his arm. The music started, and Bessie and Joey walked down the aisle, Bessie happily tossing rose petals and Joey concentrating on carrying the rings.

Then it was Florence's turn.

She walked down the aisle toward him. Cold feet wasn't even something that crossed his mind, this was what he wanted, what he'd always wanted.

A partner, someone to share his life with, the struggles and the good times, the struggles would be made easier by having Florence by his side and the good times made better because of her.

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Florence and her brother stopped in front of him, Fletcher kissed her cheek, then took the hand that was on his arm and passed it to Eli.

Florence couldn't take her eyes off him, and he found himself in the same position.

He took her hand, squeezed it, and somewhat reluctantly they both tore their gazes away to look at the celebrant, who was really an old friend of his from England.

“We’re gathered here today—in the freezing cold—to join Eli Lennox and Florence Harris together in marriage.

Since these two like to do things the opposite of by the books, Eli asked that I keep things short and sweet because he wants to marry his bride then whisk her away to...

well, since there are children present, let's just say enjoy their wedding night.

So to that end, Eli, do you take this woman as your wife, to love with everything you have and are, in good times and bad, as long as you both shall live? ”

“I do.” Eli took the ring from Joey and slid it on Florence's finger.

“Florence, do you take this man as your husband, to love with everything you have and are, in good times and bad, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Florence took the other ring from the small pillow Joey was carrying and slid it onto his finger.

“Then by the power vested in me by the state, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Eli, you can now kiss your bride.”

Not wasting any time, Eli curled an arm around Florence’s waist and drew her in so she was pressed against him, then tangled his fingers in her hair as he brought his mouth down to meet hers.

This kiss felt different. He knew that it shouldn’t, nothing had changed except now they were married, but it was different.

Better. It had been a bumpy road to get to this place, and a couple of times along the way he thought it might not work out the way he wanted, but here they were, husband and wife.

Everyone cheered, confetti filled the air and rained down around them like colorful snowflakes.

Because he never did things the way other people did, the wedding reception would be for everyone else, but he and Florence were out of here.

He was taking her downstairs to their penthouse where he intended to spend the night making love to her over and over again.

The honeymoon would have to wait a couple of weeks until she could get time off, but that just gave him more time to plan the perfect trip.

“Dinner on me at Elliot’s house,” he announced as he somehow managed to tear his lips from Florence’s.

“Thanks, man.” Elliot rolled his eyes. “You get to go home and make out with your wife, I get to entertain your friends and family.”

“And I love you for it.” He grinned and gave Elliot a slap on the back. “To make it up to you, Florence and I will babysit the kiddos for you next weekend so you and Susannah can spend some time alone together.”

“Better be all weekend to make up for this,” Elliot grumbled, but Eli could see he was holding back a smile.

“Thank you everyone for coming, for everything you did for us today, we promise we’ll throw you a party that we’re actually going to attend,” he promised. “But tonight, I’m taking my stunning bride downstairs.”

Florence laughed as he scooped her up into his arms and started to carry her toward the stairs. “Thank you so much, everything you did today means so much to me. To us,” Florence said over his shoulder.

As soon as he had her alone his lips were drawn to hers, it was near impossible to be alone anywhere with her and not kiss her.

“I can't believe we’re married,” she said, taking his face between her hands when the lift doors dinged open.

“You better believe it,” he told her as he carried her out of that lift and into the private one that would take them to the penthouse. “Because I’m your husband now, you’re stuck with me forever.”

“Forever? I wonder if there’s a husband exchange program for when our current model starts to wear on our nerves,” she teased.

“You’re going to regret that later when I have you hovering on the edge and won't let you come,” he warned with a grin as his mouth found hers again.

As soon as the elevator opened, he whisked her through the penthouse to the master

bedroom where he carefully laid her out on their bed.

Her cheeks were rosy, her lips plump from kissing, her eyes sparkled with joy, tendrils of hair curled around her face, she was gorgeous, stunning, beautiful, the prettiest thing he had ever laid eyes on, there weren't enough words in the world to describe what she meant to him.

“I better get out of this dress,” she said, sitting up.

“Leave it on.” His hands on her shoulders kept her lying against the pillows.

“We can't make love with me wearing this, the skirt is all big and puffy with the tulle underneath.”

“I want to see it bunched around your hips when I taste you, I want to see you wearing your wedding dress and know you're my wife now.” Eli moved to the foot of the bed, lifted one of her feet, slid the strappy stiletto off, then picked up her other foot and did the same.

She was wearing pantyhose and a garter, and he sucked in a breath as he pushed her dress up and saw it. “Why is this so sexy?”

She giggled. “I think tradition dictates you remove it with your teeth.”

“Oh yeah,” he groaned. Kneeling between her legs his teeth nibbled gently at the inside of her thigh before taking hold of the garter and pulling it down her leg.

“You're right, that is sexy,” Florence said, her eyes on him, following his every move.

“Not as sexy as having you come all over my face.” He winked and then pulled her pantyhose down her legs, groaning and running his tongue across his lips when he saw her white satin panties. “I'm going to enjoy removing those.”

Using his teeth, he removed her panties, then trailed a line of feather-soft kisses up her leg, stopping right above the spot he could see growing wetter by the second.

Pressing his nose to her center, he breathed in her scent before his tongue darted out to taste her.

“Delicious,” he moaned.

Not able to wait any longer, he began to lap and suckle her, inserting a finger, and curling it to hit her sweet spot, he began to work her up.

Despite his threat in the lift to tease her and not let her come he wanted her dripping for him before he buried himself inside her heat.

There would be time to tease her later. The sight of her wedding dress bunched around her hips as he feasted on her turned him on, and he had to cling to control because his wife had to come before he got off.

Florence was moaning, her hips coming off the bed, silently begging him for more, and whatever his princess wanted she got. He added another finger and increased the speed of his tongue, and a moment later, she came on a scream.

While she was still floating back down to earth he unbuckled his pants, shoved them off, and entered her in one thrust. She gasped as he filled her, her hands lifting to curl around his shoulders.

He was close but determined not to come until she came a second time he reached between them as he began to move, stimulating her from the outside as he thrust harder and faster.

It didn't take long, Florence's internal muscles began to clamp around him, and unable to hold back, he let himself tumble over the edge.

“How does that get better every time?” Florence asked with a sated smile.

“Because you're amazing. You're mine. My beautiful princess.”

“And you're my cocky savior.”

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