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To my aunts, Rosemary, Jill, and Dee. You've loved me, you've encouraged me, and you've all been shining examples of godly women. I love you all.

Chapter 1



June

Eli Reno bit back a laugh.

“Ugh.” His sister, Samantha, closed her eyes in frustration as she shook her strawberry-blond hair to loosen the dirt clods that had fallen from the tunnel’s ceiling. “And why, oh why, did I agree to come down here?”

“Because I’m your brother, and you love me?”

“More likely because you could sell ice to an Eskimo and enticed me with a milkshake.” She glared at him, her flashlight causing him to wince. “Just because a person can’t stand being alone for any length of time doesn’t mean they should take advantage of a girl’s need for chocolate.”

“Noted.” He grinned, shining his light to check the top of her head, then shook his head. “It’s a little dirt.”

“Next time, it might be the whole ceiling.”

“Not likely. Del and Nick shored it up after Nick and Lisa were trapped down here during the tornado.”

“Scary.”

“Funny thing, I have never heard them talk about it except in glowing terms.” Eli arched his brow. “Maybe the tunnel holds a special place in their love story?”

She laughed. “I think that’s a definite. I’ve heard Del’s side of the story and part of Lisa’s.” Sighing, she continued. “I get the distinct impression she leaves out the good parts.”

“Can we keep going?” Eli wanted to get as far into the cave as possible, preferring to emerge while it was still daylight, even if the sun didn’t set until nearly eight.

“Lead on. Let’s see what else drops on my head.”

“Hey, maybe we’ll come across some bats?”

“You, big brother, are cruisin’ for a bruaisin’.”

“Aw, come on, Sam, this is fun.”

He heard her mutter, “Like a toothache.”

The tunnel system started at the old Woodward homestead and branched out, leading to several openings. One branch, probably the oldest and most naturally occurring, came to the surface along the Ohio River. Another was found in the basement of Nick and their cousin Lisa’s house, and another in downtown Clementville—the Clementville Café, no less.

“And I do not have a problem being alone.”

She kept trudging behind him, not saying a word.

“Seriously. I’m fine on my own.”

Still nothing from his sister. He shook his head, trying to tamp down his irritation.

“I mean, you didn’t have to come with me.” He paused. “Course, it’s always a good idea to have a buddy when exploring. Safety in numbers.”

He wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of stopping and turning around. Not yet.

Traipsing through the uneven path, Eli let his mind wander, thinking about the history of the place. This was the oldest part of the tunnel system, running between the

Woodward homestead and the Ohio River. From what he'd learned, it was the section that may have been used in what was called the "Reverse Underground Railroad," where human trafficking of runaway slaves was perpetrated.

History was his jam. The construction course at the vocational school while in high school was his way of avoiding higher-level math and science courses. On the plus side, he discovered he had a knack for carpentry. So, he ditched college after a year, much to his mother's dismay.

Give him a hammer and nails or hiking boots instead of a laptop any day.

When he realized he didn't hear Sam behind him, he turned quickly, shining his light where her face should have been.

"Sam?"

"Back here," she shouted.

She'd stopped several yards and a few turns behind where he'd discovered her missing. When he reached her, she was training her flashlight beam on the ground.

Samantha's wide baby blues said it all.

Somebody had been there. Recently.

JULIA ROSSI RELEASED a sigh as soon as she arrived at her car.

The three-story structure of the Louisville, Kentucky, Field Office didn't have many places where a person could be alone, and thankfully, she got her next assignment right before quitting time.

She had to be in Clementville, in western Kentucky, at 9 a.m. tomorrow.

Go home, pack for a few days, fill the car with gas, and drive southwest for three hours.

At least it was a pretty drive.

Her last encounter with Clementville had put her in a coma after she was drugged by the thugs using the series of underground tunnels in the tiny river town. A lot had happened since then.

Leaning her forehead on the steering wheel, she sat there a minute, fortifying herself against the emotions this case prompted. Taking the assignment without complaint would look good on her record, but it wasn't easy.

The FBI was all she had, so she'd better make the best of it.

Plus, she knew the area and the people. In her short time in the FBI, she'd frequented diners all over the USA, and nothing compared to the burgers and shakes at the Clementville Café.

Finally, she sat up, set her jaw, and stared into her sun visor's mirror. Dark brown eyes stared back at her, a little luminous with the tears she let sneak through when she left the building, but overall, not bad. Her neat ponytail, almost black, true to her Italian ancestry, begged to be let loose. Maybe later.

Now, it was time for a pep talk.

You got this, girl.

When the hands-free technology in her Honda Civic displayed a call, she was tempted to let it go to voicemail.

But the number that popped belonged to Dad.

"Hey, Dad, how's it going?" She sounded relaxed, breezy even. Maybe she could convince both her dad and herself everything would be okay.

"You just getting off work?"

His volume made her smile—he was also in his vehicle. How many times had she told him he didn't have to yell into the steering wheel?

“Yes. Getting on the Watterson Expressway to head home. Then I get to pack and head west.”

“New assignment?”

He sounded worried as he had since the last case took her out of town.

“Fraid so.”

“Where to?”

She grinned to herself. “Now, Dad, if I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

“Hardy-har-har.”

He always made her laugh.

“Is the non-disclosure Dad security clearance current?” That was their joke. He claimed being her father gave him special privileges.

“You know it is.”

“Would you believe I’m going back to Clementville?”

“Kentucky?” He paused. “Isn’t that where ...”

She paused, heaving a sigh. “Yes.

In her mind, she finished the thought. *Yes, Dad, it’s where I got put in the hospital, and my partner got arrested on federal corruption charges.*

She kept those thoughts to herself.

He didn’t say anything. “Are you going down there alone?”

“I’m a big girl, Dad.”

“I know.”

“They’ve opened a field office in Paducah, so I’ll be working with an agent and analyst there, as well as the local sheriff’s office.”

“I won’t ask any more questions. Be careful, will you?”

“Of course. Remember, I’m a highly trained agent. They don’t hand out these assignments to just anybody.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’ll always be my little girl.”

Tears pricked at her eyelids, and she shook her head

swiftly to banish them. No time for that. “Doesn’t matter where I go, I’ll always be your girl, Dad.” She swallowed. “Love you.”

“Love you, too, sweetie.”

Deep breathing exercises in place, the familiar flutter of panic in her chest persisted. Why had talking to Dad triggered her? In a moment, the events of the last encounter with the tunnels in rural Crittenden County crept back in. Even after a year, the nightmares still shook her out of a good night’s sleep from time to time. Now, she was going back on her own, with no partner, and not as a woman about to be married. Instead, she was an independent agent—an independent woman—who would make her way without a man, both in her professional and private lives.

Take that, Lance Billings.

ONE OF THE perks of working for his cousins and having relatives who owned the best café for miles around was getting a good breakfast before starting the day.

Usually, Eli was at the café much earlier—more like seven in the morning. Today, he arrived closer to nine. He and Sam were meeting an FBI agent from the Louisville Field Office. After they showed cousin-in-law Nick Woodward and Sheriff Clay Lacey the indicators of activity in the tunnels, Clay had lost no time calling the new Paducah Field Office, which contacted a forensics pro from Louisville.

Eli stirred the sugar in his coffee. “What time is he supposed to get here?” His mind was focused on the work piling up while he sat there sipping coffee and eating biscuits and gravy.

Not that he was complaining.

Clay pulled out his phone and double-checked his email. “They said nine this morning.”

Nick grinned. “Don’t worry. The boss said the work would still be there when we’re done.”

“Gotcha.” Eli looked up at the familiar ding of the jingling on the door, figuring it was the agent they were waiting for. When he saw her, his stomach dropped, and he unconsciously muttered, “Seriously?”

When Nick raised an eyebrow at the comment, Eli shook his head, causing Nick to raise both brows before returning to the conversation.

“Oh good, it’s Julia.” Clay sighed.

Clay and Nick rose, greeting her as an old friend. Eli stood, finally, not offering his hand, noting her expression looked as surprised as he felt. Pale, even.

“Good morning, gentlemen.” She smiled, avoiding Eli as much as possible. “Are Agent Burke and Brent meeting us here?”

“Brent texted me. They’re almost here.”

“Good. Maybe that will save us a re-telling.” Julia scanned the room, stopping short as a squeal pulled her attention to the petite blonde hurrying toward them.

“Julia Rossi! I never thought I’d see you again.” Darcy Reno set down her coffee pot and enveloped the taller woman in a hug, laughing. “Eli, believe it or not, this woman impersonated me once. She saved my life.”

“Fortunately—or unfortunately for me—they were watching from outside, so a blonde wig and well-timed lighting did the trick.” Julia grinned.

Darcy squeezed Julia’s hand. “I’m so glad to see you here and healthy.” She shook her head. “I wish it were under better circumstances.” Turning over the inverted mug and filling it with fresh coffee, then topping off the others, Darcy glanced at

her. “While you wait for the other guys, how about some breakfast?”

“I had something on the way.” Julia’s pale countenance had pinked.

Darcy shook her head in disgust. “Let me guess. You probably stopped at the convenience store at Beaver Dam and got a pre-packaged pastry or a granola bar to go with the hours-old coffee you made yesterday. Am I right?”

Julia chuckled. “Busted.”

“Anything you want, it’s on me.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Honey, if it weren’t for you, my life wouldn’t be what it is today—or I’d be dead.” Darcy’s countenance sobered. “The very least I can do is make sure you have a good breakfast before saving Clementville one more time.”

Julia checked out the plates of the men around the table, ending with Eli’s biscuits and gravy. When she turned her eyes toward him, she paused, a strange expression crossing her face before it shuttered closed.

So that’s how she’s going to play it.

She turned to smile at Darcy. “Okay, if you insist, I’ll have the biscuits and gravy.”

“Want some eggs with that?”

“No, a biscuit with some of your amazing gravy will be perfect.”

“Coming right up.” Darcy winked and wove her way through the tables and back to the kitchen.

Maybe Julia had better taste in breakfast food than she did in relationships. It still bugged him that she broke the engagement with his best friend, Lance. Out of the blue, even.

Precisely why Eli was not in a hurry to rush back into the relationship game.

Between Lance’s experience and Carrie’s rejection and

consequent ghosting, it wasn't worth space in his brain. He didn't care if he talked to her again, but he worried about Lance. He had to be struggling, knowing that his ex-fiancée was more interested in her career than committing to a marriage. Lance hadn't answered his calls or texts in weeks.

Eli had a fleeting thought that he needed to press the issue with Lance and find out what was going on. He'd never been good at maintaining friendships, but he was trying.

His attention was caught when Special Agent Clyde Burke and Analyst Brent Rogers joined them at the table.

Clyde sat and took a long swig of hot coffee. When he set down his cup, he took out his phone and turned on the recorder. "Eli, why don't you share what you and Samantha discovered with Agent Rossi?"