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## Chapter 3



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**W**hen you know, you know.

The sentiment, often taken out of context, stuck with Julia the rest of the day. Being around Eli meant she couldn't get away from regret concerning her broken engagement.

*Put the past in the past.*

Julia shook her head, irritated at herself. Her internal thought life was filled with platitudes—and very generic ones, at that.

“I thought they'd be right behind us.” Eli tapped the steering wheel, obviously annoyed.

Julia opened the door and stepped on the sideboard before jumping to the ground. Who needed a truck so tall, anyway? “May as well get started.”

The scenery was beautiful. She stopped when she felt the breeze and caught a glimpse of the Ohio River through the trees. “It's nice around here.”

“It is.”

Julia started when Eli's voice was nearer than she thought.

He was staring at the scenery, too, his expression more relaxed than she'd ever seen him. The few times they'd hung out during her engagement to Lance, they were in large groups, and he was more likely to be the life of the party than a thoughtful guy who enjoyed a view of the countryside.

She pegged him the moment she met him. Selfish, egotistical, and not to be trusted. Why she didn't recognize those traits in Lance was cemented by two beliefs—one, she couldn't trust herself with her own life, and two, she couldn't trust anybody outside her immediate family.

"This is the site Nick's great-grandparents—the Woodward side—settled in the early eighteen-hundreds."

She almost missed the first part, seething about the past. Better get it in gear. "What about the Renos?"

Sam had caught up with them by then. "The Renos got here a little after they did, mid-eighteen-hundreds." She grinned. "No Revolutionary War land grants for us, unfortunately. I think the first Reno was a Union General from West Virginia."

"Wow." Julia glanced around with new eyes. "My family came through Ellis Island to New York, then my great-grandfather moved the family to Cleveland to build a bridge in the thirties."

Sam shrugged. "Fun fact. Jesse Reno was friends with Stonewall Jackson at West Point."

"I bet that got awkward."

"No kidding."

"It's nice having such deep roots. My parents moved to Cincinnati before I was born. It's home." Julia turned when Sheriff Clay Lacey's official vehicle roared up the drive. She was glad to get back to work. If she weren't careful, she would find herself making a friend in Samantha Reno.

The idea of any kind of connection with Eli Reno irritated her.

Agent Burke smiled as he walked down the drive to where they stood. “The sound of construction is music to my ears.”

Eli chuckled. “No doubt. I’m a fan too. It means steady work and getting me in *my* house quicker.”

Julia tilted her head, and Agent Burke grinned. “Eli’s team is building a house for Becca and me just over the hill from here, and Eli’s waiting for us to move out of the house he bought.”

“That’s not confusing at all.” Sam laughed.

Julia tilted her head toward Clyde Burke. She had only met him a few times. His story of ten years of undercover work that landed him in the middle of organized crime and a name change was the stuff movies were made of. “So, you live around here?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Burke took a deep breath. “To make it more confusing, I lived under an assumed name for ten years. Becca only knew me as ‘Clyde,’ and since my family is few and far between, I changed my name from ‘Cameron’ to ‘Clyde’ to make the transition simpler.” He shook his head and tilted his lips in a smile. “Never thought I’d marry the girl I was hired to protect. I’m not complaining. I got the girl and get to live in paradise after so long in Chicago.”

“Congratulations.” Julia was happy for him—and curious. How did someone keep such a secret for so long and still have anyone trust them when the truth came out?

Something to think about.

“Thanks.” He smiled. “And call me Clyde—we don’t stand on ceremony in Clementville.”

Julia nodded. “Noted.”

Clyde rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Now,

let's make the most of your time down here. Where are you staying?"

"I've got a room at the Hampton in Kuttawa."

Clyde nodded. "It's a drive."

"Hopefully, this won't take as long as previous events."

"Right." Clyde scanned the skies. "Gonna be a nice day. Who knows? Maybe we'll get to solve the mystery and catch the bad guys by lunchtime."

"Not counting on it, but the sentiment is appreciated."

Since it was Nick's property, he took the lead. "We'll see if the new lock has been tampered with."

When they got to the old chimney ruins and what should have been a secured entry point, Nick let out a breath. "Looks like nobody's been here since yesterday, anyway."

"Not up here, at least."

Nick nodded as he pulled out the key and unlocked the trap door, wrestling it open with a loud squeak and thud.

Julia hesitated, not wanting to be the voice of doom. She didn't want her all-too-vivid memories of the case to color her judgment.

Switching on the lights Nick and Del had installed after shoring up the tunnel, Nick gestured to Eli to precede them to the evidence.

Sam got to a specific point on the path and stopped, a confused look on her face. "Wait. Wasn't this where the footprints were?"

The overhead lights lessened the deep shadows, and Julia tried not to think about the ones reaching deeper, providing hiding places for all kinds of vermin—both human and non-human. She shone her light on the area where Sam pointed, noting what appeared to be scratch marks on the ground. "Look at this." She knelt to study the indentions further, gesturing for Brent to come closer with his light and camera.

“Somebody’s covering their tracks.” Brent snorted. “Literally.”

“Had to.” Clay stood over the spot. “Last night, I saw them, too, and got pictures.”

“Good.”

Clyde stood and put his flashlight in a loop on his belt and turned to Brent. “Well, Mr. FBI Analyst, time for us to do our magic.”

“Aye-aye.” The younger man saluted. “I’ll go up and get the bigger lanterns.”

Julia scoured the area adjacent to the spot in question with her flashlight. “There.”

Brent climbed down the narrow stairs with the lamp and brought it to her immediately.

The brighter light illuminated the area, showing every nook and cranny that would normally slink into the shadows.

When the culprit attempted to cover their tracks, they missed a partial print.

And the stub of a cigarette that still smelled of burning tobacco. The scent was all too familiar.

THE TEAM ZEROED in on what had been left behind by the trespassers.

It wasn’t up to her or any of the members of law enforcement to question what Eli and Samantha saw. They simply focused, quickly finding more evidence the longer they looked.

“It always amazes me how even the best crooks can be sloppy.” Julia shook her head, handing Brent the material to make a cast of the print. “They didn’t count on someone putting more light on the subject.” She chuckled.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Clyde queried her.

“They got in somewhere else.” She gave him a sideways glance and heaved a sigh. “No quick solution here.”

“No, I’m afraid not.” Clyde turned to Nick. “Where are the other entrances that have been located?”

“Lisa and I found the first one by accident in the basement of my house, then the natural opening on the riverbank, and this one. A year later Darcy discovered the entrance in the basement of the café. My house and the café entrances both have locks on them, now.” The line between his brows indicated the worry he had for the safety of his family. “So far, those are the only entrances we’ve found, but we came across a tunnel system map back in January at the old Durbin place.”

“Should we split up and check all the known entrances?” Clay deferred to Clyde.

“Yes, and I want to see the map again, if it’s okay with you.”

Nick nodded. “Of course. I’ll stop at the house. I want to check the basement door, anyway. Pray we don’t find out somebody’s been in there, or Lisa will never rest until our end is blocked completely.”

“Hey, new mamas are pretty particular when it comes to the safety of their babies.” Clay twisted his lips in a grin.

“You don’t know the half. ‘Pretty particular’ is putting it mildly.” Nick smiled, and it warmed Julia’s heart. When she was in Clementville last, Nick and Lisa were about to be married. Now they had a baby, and Nick had an almost continuous smile on his face. He was obviously tickled pink at his family status.

“Lisa’s always been an all-or-nothing girl,” Eli said with a little snort of laughter.

Somehow, his comment hit Julia wrong. He probably didn’t mean anything by it—and maybe she was searching for

something to irritate her. When he turned toward her, his smile faded quickly.

*Great. What kind of expression did I have on my face?*

She'd been told she was unapproachable when deep in thought, as now, when she couldn't muster up a poker face.

*I need to work on that.*

When his face returned to the expression he bore when he first saw her in the café, she knew one thing: He'd rather be with anyone in the world but her.

It bothered her, which irritated her more. Why did she care?

"Julia, how about you ride back to the café with Eli and Samantha and check out the entrance in the safe room in the basement of the café? Clay and I will check out the river entrance."

She nodded curtly and shot a covert glance at Eli, still plainly unhappy.

Sam's laugh tinkled, diffusing the tension somewhat. "Sounds good. I've been wanting to check out that safe room ever since Trace and Hannah got stranded in it the second time. Renos seem to have a knack for getting stuck."

"The second time?"

"Oh, yeah. The first time was accidental. The second time? Totally on purpose." Sam arched a brow. "You've heard of the 'forced proximity' trope in romance novels and romantic comedies?"

"I ... guess so." Julia's lips twitched.

"Let's just say the second time, they weren't worried about being rescued, and I don't think a day went by afterward that those two didn't see each other."