
Chapter 2



Julia found it increasingly more uncomfortable to sit at the table directly across from Eli Reno.

Of all the people she had to interact with, it had to be the best friend of her rat of an ex-fiancé.

What were the odds he was a rat too?

When she discovered Lance had cheated on her, anger filled her. Then, regret. He didn't question breaking the engagement. He almost succeeded in convincing her the breakup was her fault.

She spent a lot of time at the gun range during that time. It helped.

After anger and denial, she spent some time frozen in place, wondering what she might have done differently. She took her vacation days and stayed in her apartment with the curtains drawn, ordering food and binging on her childhood favorite TV shows.

The day she woke, went directly to the shower, and got ready for work, she felt a push from somewhere. From within?

Maybe.

The case in Clementville the year before came soon after she moved to Louisville. After the traumatic injury that put her in a coma and landed her on medical leave, she kept to herself, making it difficult to make friends at work or in her neighborhood. Between that, losing a partner she'd trusted, and her broken engagement, she didn't have the energy for any kind of relationship.

The possibility of moving home was always in the back of her mind. To do that, she'd have to resign from the FBI. But she'd worked too hard to get to this position to throw in the towel because some royal jerk of a guy took advantage of her.

When the "push" came, the niggling realization that what happened to her wasn't her fault crept into her headspace. Although sometimes, when she was especially tired or emotional, it warred with the niggling fear that she simply wasn't enough and never would be.

Even though she'd only met Eli a few times, seeing him across the table, she realized she'd blocked out a lot of the conversation. Knowing his taste in friends, why should she trust what he said?

"I understand the entrance has been locked since last summer?" Clyde took charge of the interview. His eyes narrowed at Julia. When things came to a head in the tunnels beneath the Clementville Café, Clyde soon proved himself a kindred spirit. Something she'd never achieved with Special Agent Frank Stafford.

Yet another thing she could have handled better. She should have seen it coming. Shouldn't have put so much trust in her first real FBI partner.

A lovely young woman with long, slightly wavy strawberry-blonde hair approached the table.

“Here’s Samantha. She’s the one who found the footprints first.”

Eli stood and pulled a chair from another table so she could join them. Gorgeous, no doubt, and it was obvious she and Eli were close.

Figures.

After seeing the woman Lance cheated on her with, she wasn’t surprised his best friend would have a similar taste in females.

Relationship theories aside, the woman’s bright smile and open expression tugged on her when she held out her hand. “I’m Sam, Eli’s sister.” She studied the group. “What’s going on?”

Okay, so maybe they weren’t close the way she thought.

“I think I know everybody except you.” Her grin pulled Julia in.

“Special Agent Julia Rossi, FBI.”

“Wow.” Sam sighed. “That sounds so much more exciting than ‘elementary school art teacher.’”

Unexpected laughter bubbled up in Julia, surprising her when her reaction came out with a chuckle. “The idea of being in charge of twenty or more kids at the same time is beyond me. Especially without a sidearm.”

Sam laughed with her. “There are days when I wish I had a lasso to keep them in check.”

Clyde Burke glanced from Brent to Julia and then to Nick. “Is it okay if we go out to the site?”

Nick nodded. “Certainly. After Eli and Sam reported what they’d found, I put a new padlock on the entrance. “

“It’ll be interesting to see if the lock’s been tampered with.” Julia glanced at Clyde, who nodded.

“Might give us an idea of how often it’s been accessed.”

Clyde stood, leaving money with the check, stopping when Darcy approached the table.

“Your money’s no good here. I consider it my civic duty to feed you.” The petite blonde stood her ground, hands on her hips. Julia remembered that stance and felt her lips twitch.

“Now, Darcy ...” Clyde began.

“Don’t you ‘now, Darcy,’ me.”

Clay raised his hand. “Break it up, you two. Don’t want to have to run you in for a dust-up in the Clementville Café.”

SOMEHOW, for a reason that only served to prove to Eli the universe was out to get him, of all the people going to the tunnels, Julia Rossi ended up in his truck.

The saving grace of the situation? Sam was with him too.

Sam kept giving him frowny looks he knew meant, “What’s your deal?” He didn’t care. He’d pull a card from Trace and be as grumpy as he wanted. If she wanted to think happy-go-lucky Eli was pouting, so be it.

“So, how long were you in the hospital last summer?” Sam and Julia had been discussing Julia’s last trip to Clementville.

“A couple of weeks, then when I got back to Louisville, I was in the hospital for another.”

“Wow.” Sam shook her head. “I’m amazed you’d want anything to do with coming down here after that. Any after-effects?”

“No, I’m okay. The worst part was losing my partner.”

Samantha’s eyes widened. “Lose ... as in ...?”

Julia waved her hand. “He didn’t get killed.”

“Whew.”

“It would have been easier if he had. He’s still in prison

awaiting trial on federal corruption charges.” Julia shrugged. “Makes you stop and think about the people you trust.”

When they reached the stop sign before turning on the lane to the Woodward homestead, Eli glanced around Sam at Julia. The slight frown on her face soon cleared.

What he wouldn’t give to know what happened between her and Lance. Had she been unfaithful? Put her job ahead of being a wife? When Lance told him about their breakup, he seemed pretty upset, leaving out details. Maybe he couldn’t say much because she was an FBI agent.

Julia glanced back at him as though sensing his focus on her. Her deep brown eyes widened, and then irritation crossed her face.

Maybe raising an eyebrow at her was overkill, but two could play that game. Wasn’t it enough Carrie had dumped him without Lance’s fiancée—now sitting in his truck—breaking their engagement within a week of Eli’s heartache?

Love. It wasn’t worth it.

Sure, his brother, Trace, who’d never been known to be desperately seeking companionship because he was such a loner, had come down here and promptly fallen in love with a girl who wouldn’t give him the time of day.

Until she did.

Now, Trace and Hannah were on their honeymoon.

Maybe all of Eli’s years of making sure he had a date every weekend was the opposite of what he should have been doing.

No, that would imply he should have been getting dating advice from Trace. He would never admit to that. The very idea made his lips tug up in a smile.

Sam’s mouth gaped. “What are you smiling about?”

“Nothing.” When he saw her expression, he did a double-take. “What?”

“We were just talking about Julia’s experience last

summer, and I look over there, and you're smiling." Sam shook her head and turned to Julia with a huff. "I can't take him anywhere."

"For the record, I wasn't listening to your conversation."

They stopped in the drive of the Woodward homestead, waiting for the rest of the contingent.

Sam chuckled. "Well, good."

He turned and caught Julia's gaze, catching humor in her glance.

"What *were* you smiling about?" Sam wouldn't let it go.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I was thinking about Trace and Hannah."

Sam turned from Eli to Julia, waving her hands as she did. "It was the most romantic thing. Trace moved down here between Thanksgiving and Christmas—he's my other brother, Eli's twin. Anyway, he moved down here, never expecting to meet the love of his life at a job site." She chuckled. "He's an electrical engineer and was between jobs. Hannah is an electrician, and he ended up being her assistant."

"I'll bet that was fun."

"Oh, it was. Both of them were determined they were 'destined for singleness,' according to our cousin, Mandy."

"Famous last words," Eli's laugh became a snort.

"That was at Christmas, and they're on their honeymoon now?" Julia's mouth fell open.

Sam chuckled. "Mandy and Clay may have announced their engagement first ..."

"I think they were dating when I was here before."

Eli scoffed. "They got engaged in front of the whole family. Talk about witnesses."

"As I was saying, Mandy and Clay got engaged first, but Trace and Hannah wasted no time putting together a wedding. Trace said, 'When you know, you know.'" Samantha shrugged.

“And now our mom has the Clementville wedding market cornered on coordinating a wedding in two weeks.” Eli shook his head. While his sister may have romantic notions about romance and “knowing” your heart, he wasn’t having any of it.

Call it skeptical, wary, distrustful, or gun-shy. He wasn’t about to jump back into the situation he had with Carrie.