

Chapter One

‘Without evidence that this person intends to do you harm, Doctor Cutler, there’s just nothing we can do.’

Officer Ronson had been pleasant enough. Lyssa sat on one side of the bare desk with her best friend, Suzette Blossom, clutching her hand. Ronson and his young partner, Miguel Chavez, were probably sick of the sight of her. She’d been in this station half a dozen times over the course of the last four months and every time it was at the prompting of Suzette. Lyssa didn’t see any point in reporting each incident, certainly not anymore.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Suzette said. ‘She’s being terrorised.’

‘With all due respect Miss. Blossom, flowers being placed on someone’s back stairs doesn’t rank highly as being indicative of imminent harm.’

The officer was doing his job, and he had a point, but it was more than that. ‘What about the phone calls?’ Lyssa asked.

‘You said it had been a couple of weeks since he called,’ Ronson said.

‘Yes, but—’

‘Maybe your secret admirer isn’t as amorous as you fear.’

‘He prowls around outside her house,’ Suzette exclaimed, flattening her hands on the table.

Lyssa soothed her friend with a hand to her shoulder. ‘It is disconcerting to know that someone is in my yard.’

‘In the times you’ve called the police out to your home no one has been found on your property,’ Ronson said, consulting the file in front of him. ‘The same as the suspicious cars you and your friend have reported.’

‘You think I’m crazy,’ Lyssa muttered.

‘She’s a god damn psychiatrist! If she was crazy she’d be the first one to recognise the symptoms,’ Suzette said. ‘You people are supposed to protect the innocent.’

‘Keep filling out your diary,’ Ronson said, pushing Lyssa’s black notebook back to her. ‘And if you’re threatened or attacked then please call nine-one-one.’

‘What use is that after she’s been attacked?’ Suzette asked.

Her best friend was fiercely protective and saw how close to the end of her wick she had become, but flipping out wouldn’t get them anywhere. Lyssa took her purse from the floor and slid the strap up her arm as she stood up. The policemen stood up too and Lyssa had to take Suzette’s hand to bring her to her feet.

‘Thank you for your time,’ Lyssa said, picking up the notebook and tucking it into her purse with one hand. ‘We’d appreciate you leaving a note in the file that we reported this.’

‘Sure thing,’ Ronson said, smiling for the first time, no doubt because these women taking up his time were leaving.

Chavez opened the door for them and she took a silently seething Suzette through the precinct and out onto the sidewalk where the sun was beating down. Their car was parked around the block and to get her friend out of the sun and away from curious eyes, Lyssa cut down the alley at the side of the police building.

‘We should report those guys,’ Suzette grumbled.

‘Wait until we’re in the car before you lose it, Suzie,’ Lyssa said. ‘We’ll go somewhere nice for lunch.’ To calm her down a little, not that Lyssa would say that out loud, Suzie had a short fuse at the best of times.

‘Doctor Cutler?’

The voice from behind them made both women turn, still hand in hand. Miguel Chavez came out of a side doorway from the police station into the alleyway, alone. He took the time to look up and down the alley before he approached them.

‘Come to belittle us some more, have you?’ Suzette sniped.

'Ronson is old school,' Chavez said. 'He thinks stalking is a new fad.'

'And you don't?' Lyssa asked.

'I know... something about it.'

'Like what?'

'Like that you're not going to get very far here until you're hospitalised or dead, short of coming up with concrete evidence that this lunatic is on your tail.'

It was nice to be believed if nothing else. 'So you're here to tell me to stop wasting my time and yours?' Lyssa asked. 'Forgive me, but if I don't report the prowler's actions then he's getting away with it. What else am I supposed to do?'

'Visit someone who can help,' Chavez said and handed her a business card. Black cardboard with curly red writing on it listed the address of a nightclub called "Risqué". If the outline of the woman draped along the side of the card was anything to go by, it was a strip joint.

'A stripper?' Suzette asked. 'You want us to go to a stripper?'

'No,' Chavez said, moving in closer and lowering his voice. 'Go there tomorrow night, eleven PM, ask at the bar for Trapper.'

'Trapper?' Lyssa said.

'Trust me; he'll be able to help. Though if anyone asks where you got this information don't use my name.'

'Why not?' Suzette asked. 'Is he a superhero? A mercenary? Or a sniper, who will take this guy out with one shot? Pow!'

Lyssa tried not to laugh at her friend, and gave her hand a squeeze to settle her. 'I don't want to be the cause of anyone getting hurt.'

'Trapper's not security,' Chavez said. 'But he will solve your problem.'

'How will he do that?'

'Ask him.'

Chavez walked backward toward the door and then disappeared inside, leaving Lyssa and Suzette staring down at the business card.

'What do you think?' Lyssa asked.

'Is it too early for a drink?' Suzette asked.

Taking her friend's lead, they went back to the car and drove to their favourite restaurant only a block from the hospital Suzette worked at with her fiancé. Once they'd ordered and received their drinks Lyssa took the card from her pocket and placed it on the table.

'Is he setting us up?' Lyssa asked.

'For what?'

'I don't know. But I don't like the clandestine theatrics.'

'He's a cop,' Suzette said. 'He's probably got all sorts of contacts. If this Trapper guy can help then he's worth checking out.'

'Are we there yet? I mean, are we really that desperate?'

'You're a prisoner in your own home. I want Lyssa back, my Lyssa, the real Lyssa, the Lyssa who wouldn't think twice about wandering the streets at three AM. The Lyssa who would face off with bikers and boxers, who convinced an abusive husband to turn himself into the cops and be honest about his despicable deeds. Where is the Lyssa whose greatest aspiration was to write self-help books for us poor women clueless about the male mind?'

Lyssa smiled. 'I haven't given up on that.'

'No? You walked away from your marriage because your husband wouldn't support that dream.'

'Archie didn't like to see me taking what he perceived as risks,' Lyssa said. 'He didn't have confidence that I knew what I was doing.'

'Observing men in their natural habitat used to inspire you and when was the last time you went on one of your crazy crusades?'

'Studying male sexual behaviour can be done at any time. I suppose I haven't been motivated recently.'

'Because you think a stalker is watching your every move,' Suzette said, leaning back to let the server place their salads in front of them and disappear again. She leaned forward and took Lyssa's hand. 'I don't blame you. It must be terrifying to know some nut is obsessed with you. But you've put your life on hold for him.'

'I do find myself... concerned. But he's hardly a stalker, maybe he is just an admirer and doesn't mean any harm.'

'After your divorce from Archie you bought that beautiful townhouse in the city and set up your practice. You promised me that taking on patients was a stopgap to help you pay the bills while you wrote your books. Writing was always your passion, the only reason you went to medical school was to appease your father.'

'That's not entirely true,' Lyssa said, used to hearing her friend's rhetoric.

Her parents had scrimped and saved all of their lives and expected their only child to use her intelligence wisely. Watching her graduate had been their greatest achievement. Though their happiest day was probably watching her marry the rich plastic surgeon... shame that hadn't lasted. Telling them that her marriage was over had been the hardest day of her own life.

Her intention had always been to study the mind, psychology fascinated her, and she'd chosen to specialise in sexual dysfunction. Since then she'd never looked back. Her main focus was male patients, but she worked with females and couples too. In her practice she had a variety of patients ranging from those with simple marital issues, to victims of sexual abuse and assault.

'I want you to write your books,' Suzette said. 'Get inspired, throw yourself into an assignment, study your subjects up close, undercover, just like you used to.'

Lyssa wanted it to be that simple, but with this admirer on her tail she found herself more aware of her own movements, and her own vulnerability. 'I'm still writing and rewriting previous findings.'

'But not studying anyone new, or putting yourself in any new and exciting environments,' Suzette said. 'You're not going to do that until we get rid of this guy. I know you, Lyssa. You have to move on from this and find yourself again.'

The only way that Lyssa could move forward was to free herself from the scrutiny of her the person obsessed with her. But going to a stranger and asking for help didn't sit well with her. Lyssa liked to know that she was making a difference in steering her destiny. Playing the hapless or helpless victim wasn't in her nature, and it was frustrating that this stalker had reduced her to that.

'Ok,' she said to Suzette. 'I'll think about it.'

For now that would have to do, because she liked to be absolutely sure before making a decision. Once she committed Lyssa had a habit of jumping in at the deep end. This opportunity wouldn't be far from her mind between now and rendezvous time Chavez had indicated, and she had a whole day of patients to get through tomorrow.

All night she considered what had happened that day with the flowers being left, and then Chavez's recommendation. Until a few months ago the fact that she didn't watch television had never bothered Lyssa. Between med school and marriage she'd never had the time to sit down and absorb the banality of the latest sitcom. But now she regretted never picking up the habit, because without background noise it was eerily quiet.

Sitting alone in the living room of the narrow townhouse, which was situated on the first floor, she read the latest instalment of her favourite fiction series under the light of a single floor lamp. Her concentration was broken when she heard a snap outside. Although the front of her property was situated on the sidewalk, and most of the noise was ambient, she was aware of every sound and passing light.

Her favourite place to read was in the window seat of her bedroom. Sometimes she'd see wildlife in her yard or in the trees near her rear property line, which bordered a city dog park. But Lyssa had given up on reading in that location because the shadows out back convinced her she could see things that weren't there. Given her profession she knew how to identify delusions and paranoid behaviour, but her education couldn't help her now. She kept expecting to see the prowler in action, leaving the roses on her back stairs, but she never had.

In all the time she'd been in this house, since her divorce two years ago, she'd grown to love it more and more. And until the flowers and phone calls started, she'd always been happy here. The flowers had been a surprise at first, the calls became unnerving, and then all of her admirer's actions had stopped, only to start again the following week. On that occasion there had been a note with the flowers, which simply said, "I see you".

The harassment escalated in frequency, then stopped again before it returned. No pattern had been established and whoever it was had no obvious goal, except to fixate on her, to scare and confuse her. Being helpless wasn't something Lyssa liked and she'd fought all of her life to hold onto her

confidence and maintain control of her own experience while others tried to take it away. But she had a sense that this predator wanted to take that control from her.

‘I’m telling you, honestly, Doctor Cutler, I’m so horny that purple statue thing over there is looking hot to me right now.’

The steel statue was fashioned like a single teardrop flame with a similar shaped hole near the bulge in the base. For a moment, both Lyssa and her patient focused on the statue, displayed on a side dresser in her ground floor office, before she replied.

‘Let’s keep this in perspective,’ she said. ‘Your wife is still accommodating you. You said that you had sex twice last week and three times the week before.’

‘Yeah, but you don’t understand.’ Her fidgety patient ran a hand through his hair. ‘When we got together we were at it all the time, constantly, now it’s like no big deal to her.’

‘You got together when you were eighteen,’ she said. ‘You’ve been together for twenty years and had three children. Relationships develop over time, they progress. We can’t expect things to always remain the same. You’ve been doing well using the suggestions I’ve made so far to entice Harriet.’

‘The thing is, there’s this girl at work and man, oh, man. She’s calling to me. We had lunch the other day and my leg brushed hers under the table. I had a boner the rest of the day.’

Lyssa put her A4 notebook aside on the circular table next to her leather armchair. ‘The first thing you told me when we started our sessions was that you loved your wife very much and were determined to stay faithful. Are you telling me that your stance has changed?’

‘No! I love Harriet and I do want to be with her, only her... she’s just not meeting my needs.’

Glancing at the clock she offered Lee Zucker a smile. ‘We’ll pick up there next week, Lee,’ she said. ‘Just take it one day at a time. Try not to act on impulse and remember where your priorities lie.’

She scheduled his next appointment and they said goodbye. After he left she went to her desk and updated her patient notes on her laptop.

The ground floor of her house was her business premises with her office and waiting room. She had a basement space, which she used for storage. Her home was laid over the first and second floors of the terraced house and she had an attic space too, which she often spoke of converting, but she hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

She didn’t need more room in the two bedroom house, and she liked the place the way it was. Enjoying her own space, and peace and quiet, after the trauma of her hectic med school life and then constantly deferring to her husband gave her a new appreciation for embracing her own environment. Lyssa was proud of what she’d accomplished in her life so far.

‘Hello!’

Lyssa had just closed Lee’s file when Suzette poked her head through the office door. ‘Hey,’ Lyssa said. ‘I’m done, just let me get changed and we’ll get going.’

‘Dinner and drinks, then we set your rescue in motion.’

Lyssa shut down the computer, slid the strap of her purse up her arm, and rose from the desk while cringing. ‘This Trapper guy could be a nut too, you know.’

Suzette huffed; the beautiful blonde’s shoulders sagged. ‘I am not going to let you back out of this.’

‘We could be inviting trouble,’ Lyssa said, switching off the lights before she locked the office and front door, then led Suzette up the internal stairs to her apartment.

Coming out of the hall into the kitchen, Lyssa shed her jacket and shoes while Suzette poured the wine she’d retrieved from the fridge. ‘Since when do you care about that?’

‘Trouble can be interesting,’ Lyssa conceded, wiggling her toes.

‘Trouble is what you’ve been in for months,’ Suzette said. ‘This weirdo stalker is taking over your life and the police won’t do a thing.’

‘Don’t upset yourself again,’ Lyssa said. ‘The police can’t do anything because there’s no evidence. They took reports, but they can’t pursue a person that no one can identify.’

‘Which is why we’re going to Risqué.’

According to Google Earth, Risqué was a strip joint in an area of town bordering the red light district. ‘All Chavez said was to go to the bar and ask for Trapper, doesn’t that sound a bit...’

‘The cop chased us down outside the station. He told us that the referral was off the record. We have to go tonight. Aren’t you curious?’

‘Maybe he just felt bad that the cops are powerless here. It’s not like they can have someone stakeout my house for months just so that I feel better.’

‘Just because the cops can’t do anything doesn’t mean you should live in fear. Maybe this Trapper guy can provide security and then you can get a decent night’s sleep.’

‘Chavez said that Trapper wasn’t security. He said he would solve my problem.’

‘It’s this or you come and stay at my place. Pete and I would love to have you, if it would make you feel safer—’

‘No,’ Lyssa said, taking her wine through the arch that led to the living room and seated herself on the couch. ‘I’m not bringing this crazy guy to your place.’ Rubbing the back of her neck, she rolled her eyes to the front curtains. ‘I just wish I knew who it was. It’s worse when you don’t know who is watching.’

‘We’re going to find out,’ Suzette said, sitting with her and taking her hand. ‘That’s why we have to go and find this Trapper guy... Anything could happen to you; do you want the crazy stalker to catch up with you? I’m sure you’ll regret not at least trying to find out if Trapper can help when this stalker is raping and gutting you.’

‘Fine,’ Lyssa groaned, putting her wine in Suzette’s hand. ‘I’ll go and get ready... We’ll have a few more glasses of wine and that will loosen me up.’

‘No argument here!’ Suzette called.

Lyssa retreated toward the bedroom at the back of the property to get herself out of her work clothes. She did want to be free of her stalker and every time she reported anything to the cops they told her there was nothing they could do. She didn’t blame them for their scepticism, because she was starting to feel like a nut herself.

Officer Chavez must have felt sorry for her, although she couldn’t be sure about his motivation for giving her this advice. But Lyssa shouldn’t flout the opportunity and Suzette was right, she didn’t want to regret not taking the chance later. This could be a one-time deal. The last thing Lyssa wanted was to reach desperation, she’d seen it in her clients and she’d also seen how stalking could affect the victim and how quickly things could escalate into dangerous territory.

Confidence came with the knowledge that this tip had been delivered by a cop and he wouldn’t send her and Suzette into danger, it had to be legitimate. If she wanted to sleep through the night again then Lyssa had to have faith in her friend and in Officer Miguel Chavez.

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