



The Ideal Man (Buchanan / Renard / MacKenna Book 9)

By Julie Garwood

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With the Landrys captured, she'll be called to testify. But the Landrys have been caught before, and each time the witnesses are scared into silence—or disappear. Now Max vows to be Ellie's shadow, promising never to leave her side until the trial. But that could be dangerous for both of them, and it isn't long before the sparks—and the bullets—fly.

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Editorial Review

Review

"If a book has Julie Garwood's name on it, it's guaranteed to be a meticulously written, well-thought-out, and thoroughly engaging story."

-*"Sun Journal"* (Maine)

"Romance writer Julie Garwood attracts readers like beautiful heroines attract dashing heroes."

-*"USA Today"*

About the Author

Julie Garwood is the author of numerous New York Times bestsellers, including *Sizzle*, *Fire and Ice*, *Shadow Music*, *Shadow Dance*, and *Slow Burn*. She lives near Kansas City.

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ONE

The first time she slit a man's throat she felt sick to her stomach. The second time? Not so much. After she cut five or six more, the blade in her left hand began to feel like an extension of her body, and she started to take it all in stride. The exhilaration subsided, and so did the nausea. There was no longer a rush of anxiety, no longer a racing heartbeat. Blood didn't faze her. The thrill was gone, and that, in her line of work, was a very good thing.

Dr. Eleanor Kathleen Sullivan, or Ellie as she was called by her family and friends, was just four days shy of completing a grueling surgical fellowship in one of the busiest trauma centers in the Midwest. Since trauma was her specialty, she had certainly seen her share of mangled and brutalized bodies. It was her responsibility to put them back together, and as a senior fellow, she had the added duty of training the first – and second-year residents.

St. Vincent's emergency room had been full since 4:00 A.M. that morning, and Ellie was finishing what she hoped was her last surgery of the day, a repair of a splenic rupture. A teenager, barely old enough to have a driver's license, had decided to test the limits of the speedometer in his parents' Camry and had lost control, rolling the car over an embankment and landing upside down in an open field. Lucky for him, he had been wearing a seat belt, and luckier still, a man following some distance behind him had seen the whole thing and was able to call for an ambulance immediately. The boy made it to the emergency room just in time.

Ellie was observed by three second-year surgical residents, who hung on her every word. She was a natural teacher and, unlike 90 percent of the surgeons on staff at St. Vincent's Hospital, didn't have much of an ego. She was amazingly patient with the medical students and residents. While she worked, she explained—and explained again—until they finally understood what she was doing and why. No question was deemed too insignificant or foolish, which was one of the many reasons they idolized her, and for the male residents, the fact that she was drop-dead gorgeous didn't hurt. Because she was such a talented surgeon and supportive teacher, all these fledgling doctors fought to sign up for her rotation. Ironically, what they didn't know was that she was younger than most of them.

"You're off duty this weekend, aren't you, Ellie?"

Ellie glanced over at Dr. Kevin Andrews, the anesthesiologist, who had asked the question. He had joined the staff six months before and, since the day he'd met Ellie, had been hounding her to go out with him. He was an outrageous flirt and yet very sweet. Blond hair, blue eyes, tall and well built with an adorable smile, he could turn the head of almost every woman in the hospital, but for Ellie there just wasn't any spark.

“Yes, I am. I have the whole weekend off,” she answered. “Charlie, would you like to close up for me?” she asked one of the hovering residents.

“Absolutely, Dr. Sullivan.”

“You better hurry,” Andrews said. “I’m waking him up.”

The resident looked panic-stricken.

“Take your time, Charlie. He’s just messing with you,” she said, a smile in her voice.

“Tuesday’s your last day at St. Vincent’s, isn’t it?” Andrews asked.

“That’s right. Tuesday’s my last official day. I might help out on a temporary basis later on, but I’m not promising anything yet.”

“Then you could decide to come back permanently.”

She didn’t reply.

He persisted. “They’ll give you anything you want. You could name your price, your hours . . . you should stay here, Ellie. You belong here.”

She didn’t agree or disagree. In truth, she didn’t know where she belonged. It had been such a hard road to get this far, she hadn’t had time to think about the future. At least that was the excuse she used for her indecision.

“Maybe,” she finally conceded. “I just don’t know yet.”

She stood over Charlie, watching like a mother hen. “I want those stitches tight.”

“Yes, Dr. Sullivan.”

“So Monday night is my last chance to take you to heaven?” Andrews asked in a teasing drawl.

She laughed. “Heaven? Last week you were going to rock my world. Now you’re going to take me to heaven?”

“I guarantee it. I’ve got testimonials if you want to see them.”

“It’s not going to happen, Kevin.”

“I’m not giving up.”

She sighed. “I know.”

As she checked the last suture, she rolled her shoulders and stretched her neck to one side then the other to get the kinks out. She’d been in the OR since 5:00 A.M., which meant she had been bent over patients for eleven hours. Sad to say, that wasn’t a record for her.

She felt wrung out and stiff and sore. A good run around the park would get those muscles moving, she decided, maybe even rev up her energy.

“You know what would help you get rid of a stiff neck?” Andrews said.

“Let me guess. A trip to heaven?”

One of the nurses snorted with laughter. “He’s awfully persistent, Dr. Sullivan. Maybe you should give in.”

Ellie removed her gloves and dropped them in the trash bag by the OR doors. “Thanks, Megan, but I think I’ll just go for a run instead.” As she pushed the doors wide, she untied her surgical mask and pulled off her cap, shaking her blond hair loose to fall to her shoulders.

Twenty minutes later she was officially off duty. She changed into her workout clothes, a pair of faded red shorts and a white tank top. She double-tied her beat-up running shoes, grabbed a rubber band and swept her hair up in a ponytail, slipped her iPod into one pocket and her cell phone into the other, and she was ready. Walking a maze of corridors to get outside, she avoided the direct route through the ER for fear she’d get waylaid with another case.

There was never a lack of patients rolling through the doors. Along with the usual emergencies—the car accidents, the heart attacks, the work injuries—the ER saw a steady stream of victims of violent crimes. The vast majority were young men. Gangs roamed the area east of the highway, and shooting one another seemed to be a nightly sport. Since St. Vincent’s was the largest trauma center in St. Louis, all the serious cases came to them. Weekends were a nightmare for the staff. There were times, especially during the hot summer months, when gurneys lined the halls of the ER with patients handcuffed to the railings while they waited to go into surgery. Additional police had to be routinely called in to monitor them to make certain one gang

member hadn't been placed too close to a rival.

Ellie became a member of the One Hundred Club when she removed her one hundredth bullet. It wasn't a club she wanted to join, but she would always remember the case. The young man was only twenty years old, and it was the third time he'd been shot. She couldn't forget his insolence and his cold, empty eyes. They were almost as lifeless as the cadavers down in the morgue. Patching up these boys so that they could return to the streets and the same violence was heart wrenching, and she prayed, with every surgery, that this time they would learn something, that this time they would find a new life. It was a naive hope, but she clung to it anyway.

Like the other overworked and underpaid residents and fellows, Ellie operated on broken bodies, the consequence of violence. But she had never actually witnessed a crime . . . until today.

It was a hot and humid late afternoon. Two medical students had caught up with Ellie just as she began her run on the onemile track in Cambridge Park, a vast area that sat adjacent to the hospital. Heavy rain clouds hung over them, and all three panted for air. After the first mile, both students dropped out, but Ellie was determined to get in at least one more mile before calling it quits. She made mental lists as she ran. She had a million things to do before heading home to Winston Falls.

Dear God, it was muggy. The humidity was so thick, she felt as though she were running through a sauna. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck, and her drenched clothes clung to her body. Her friend Jennifer, a nurse in pediatrics, who was taking a shortcut across the track to get to the ER entrance, shouted to Ellie that she was crazy to run in this heat. Ellie waved and continued on. She probably was crazy, but getting any time to work out was such a luxury, she couldn't afford to be choosy about the weather.

Ellie could hear faint cheering coming from the new soccer field across the street to the north, and as she rounded the curve, she saw the players—high school – age girls—sprinting across the field. From the large number of fans in the bleachers, she guessed it was an important game.

The administrator of the hospital, the board, and a plethora of attorneys had fought the soccer field. They wanted to purchase the land to build another huge parking garage, and Ellie was happy they had lost their bid. Like the track and small playground to the south, the soccer field was far enough away from the hospital that, no matter how much noise the teams and fans made, the patients weren't disturbed.

Ellie was a football, basketball, and soccer fan, in that order. She loved to watch most sporting events. She admired the grace, skill, and finesse of the players, probably because she didn't possess any of those attributes herself. She had been such an awkward child, her mother had enrolled her in ballet classes, and she never got to play a sport. When she wasn't tripping over her own feet trying to do a plié, she was reading. She was much more comfortable with her books. Her aunt Vivien liked to call her a bookworm.

No time to watch any games today, she thought. She had way too much to do. She returned to her mental list of things to be accomplished before she could head home to her sister's wedding. Oh God, how she dreaded that. She wished she had another week to get ready for the ordeal; then admitted to herself that no amount of time would prepare her for the whispers and the sympathetic smiles from her friends and family. Who could blame them? After all, her sister Ava was marrying Ellie's ex-fiancé. It was going to be a week of mortification, she decided. But, hey, she was tough. She could handle it.

"Yeah, right," she whispered.

And then there was Evan Patterson. Just thinking about him made her stomach hurt. Would he dare show up in Winston Falls? God, she hoped not. But if he did, would she need to get another restraining order, even if she was going to be home for only a few days? She could feel herself getting worked up and had to force herself to calm down. She was an adult now, and she could handle anything that came her way. Even a maniac, she told herself. Besides, she was sure Evan wasn't back in Winston Falls. If he had returned, her father would have alerted her.

Ellie didn't want to worry about Patterson now or think about the wedding. Instead, she chose to focus on the task at hand. Just a little more than a half mile to go, then a lovely cold shower. She took her earphones from her pocket and was about to turn on her iPod to listen to a lecture on new thoracotomy procedures when she heard a loud pop.

Ellie stopped running. Lightning? She looked up at the ominous sky just as another pop echoed, then a third and a fourth in rapid succession. Had lightning hit a transformer? That would explain the bursts . . . except there hadn't been any lightning.

Gunshots? Had to be. As many bullets as Ellie had removed from gunshot victims, she'd never actually heard the sound of a gun firing. The noise came from somewhere up ahead. She glanced to the right toward the soccer field. No panic there. The game was still going on, so she had to be wrong. If not gunshots . . . then what?

Five or six seconds had passed since the first popping sound. Ellie reached for her earphones again. Okay, she'd been mistaken.

Then the screaming started.

Everything happened so fast. In the span of just a few more seconds, Ellie observed the chaotic scene unfold in front of her as though it were happening in slow motion.

In the distance, several men, wearing navy blue T-shirts and vests with FBI in bold yellow letters printed on the back, appeared almost out of nowhere and fanned out as they raced toward the trees in the center of the park. People were scattering every which way. Screams mingled with the cheers from the soccer field, the fans and players apparently oblivious to what was happening. A father ran from the playground toward the street with two little boys. The children weren't able to keep up, so the father scooped them into his arms and kept running. Several people who had been strolling through the park also scrambled to get away, as did three boys who had been tossing a Frisbee. One of the boys ran into the street, directly in front of an ambulance returning to the hospital. The vehicle came to a screeching halt, and the boy rushed around to the open window shouting something to the paramedic as he pointed toward the trees.

Suddenly, a man and a woman, linked arm in arm, drew her attention. They walked briskly toward her on the running path. There was something off about both of them. The man had a thick mustache. He wore dark glasses, a baseball cap pulled down over his forehead, and a brown, hooded windbreaker zipped up to his neck, a peculiar choice in the 90-degree weather. Was he all bundled up to keep his clothes dry when the storm broke? The man looked over his shoulder, his neck glistening with sweat. The woman looked directly at Ellie. Her bizarre appearance was startling. A short black wig sat slightly askew on her head with a few long hairs hanging down the side of her neck. Her eyes were such an intense, unnatural shade of green, she looked as though she were wearing novelty contacts, the ones you'd buy for a Halloween party. When the couple was about thirty feet away from Ellie, they veered toward the street.

Someone shouted a command. Then one of the FBI agents who had run into the trees appeared and headed straight for the pair. The woman let go of the man and began to run as he slowed and pulled something from his coat pocket. When he whirled around to face the agent shouting at him, Ellie saw the gun. Before she could react, he'd fired two shots. The first bullet struck the man in pursuit, the force so great it knocked him back before he crashed to the ground. The second bullet went wild. As Ellie dived to the grass, the shooter spun around and pointed the gun toward her. He didn't pull the trigger but instead ran to the street and jumped into a car that sped away.

The ambulance had just turned around to go in the direction the boys were pointing, but when the gunshots were fired, it changed course. Sirens on, the ambulance crossed over the curb and swerved to miss the hospital emergency entrance sign. It bounded across the park toward the gunshot victim, weaving in and out of the crowd that was scrambling toward the boulevard.

Ellie jumped to her feet and ran after it. Her mind was racing. Who were the surgeons on call tonight? Edmonds and Walmer, she remembered, and she'd seen both of them in the hospital. Good.

The target had been a good distance away from the shooter, but he'd taken a direct hit to the torso. Ellie had no idea how bad the wound was, but she thought, if she could stabilize him, he'd make it to the OR.

The ambulance crossed the grassy area of the park in no time and stopped a few feet away from the downed man. Two paramedics leapt to the ground. Ellie recognized them: Mary Lynn Scott and Russell Probst. Russell opened the back doors and pulled out the gurney while Mary Lynn reached for the large orange trauma bag and rushed forward, sliding to her knees beside the victim. By the time Ellie reached the scene,

four armed agents had surrounded him. One knelt on the ground talking to the man, trying to keep him calm, while three others stood over him.

The tallest of the three agents who were standing blocked her view. He barely glanced at her as he brusquely ordered, "You don't need to see this. Go back to your soccer game."

Go back to your game? Was he serious? Ellie was about to protest when one of the paramedics looked up, spotted her, and shouted, "Oh thank God. Dr. Sullivan."

The agents looked at her skeptically and then slowly moved out of her way so that she could get past. Mary Lynn tossed her a pair of gloves, and Ellie pulled them on as she knelt down beside the man to assess the injury. Blood saturated the man's shirt. She gently lifted the compress Mary Lynn had pressed to his shoulder, saw the damage, and immediately sought to stem the bleeding. While she gave orders to Russell and Mary Lynn, she kept her voice steady. The patient was conscious, and she didn't want him to panic. "How bad is it?" he asked.

She made it a point never to lie to a patient. That didn't mean she had to be brutally honest, however. "It's bad, but I've seen worse, much worse."

Russell handed her a clamp, and she found the source of the bleeding. The bullet hadn't gone through but had made quite an entrance.

Once Mary Lynn had gotten the IV line in, Ellie nodded to her to begin the drip.

"What's your name?" she asked as she began packing the wound.

"Sean . . . Sean . . . ah, hell, I can't remember my last name." His eyelids began to flutter as he struggled to stay conscious.

The agent kneeling beside him said, "Goodman."

"Yeah, that's right," Sean said, his voice growing weaker.

"Can you remember if you're allergic to anything?" Mary Lynn asked.

"Just bullets." Sean stared at Ellie through half-closed eyes. "Are you a doctor?"

"Yes," she said, flashing a reassuring smile. She finished packing the wound and leaned back on her heels.

"Dr. Sullivan's a trauma surgeon," Russell explained. "If you had to get shot, she's the one you want operating on you. She's the best there is."

"Okay, he's stable. You can take him," Ellie said as she peeled off her gloves and dropped them in the plastic container Mary Lynn opened for her.

Sean suddenly grabbed her arm, his grip surprisingly strong. "Wait . . ."

"Yes?"

"I want to marry Sara. Am I going to see her again?"

She leaned over him. "Yes, you will," she said. "But first you're going into the OR to get that bullet out. Now sleep. It's all good. The surgeon will take care of you."

"Who's on tonight?" Russell asked.

"Edmonds and Walmer," Mary Lynn answered.

Sean tightened his hold on Ellie's arm. "I want you." He didn't give her time to respond but held tight and forced himself to stay awake as he repeated, "He said you're the best. I want you to operate."

She put her hand on top of his and nodded. "Okay," she said. "Okay, I'll do it."

She stood and stepped back to get out of the way so that the paramedics could put Sean into the ambulance but was stopped by something solid. It felt as though she'd just backed into a slab of granite. The agent who had told her to go back to her soccer game was blocking her exit with his warm, hard chest. He put his hands on her shoulders to steady her, then let go. When he still didn't get out of her way, she stood her ground pressed against him.

"Dr. Sullivan, do you want to ride with us?" Russell called out.

"No, go ahead. He's stable now."

Russell swung the doors shut, jumped into the driver's seat, and the ambulance was on its way.

Ellie turned to the agent who had been kneeling with Sean. "Was anyone else hurt?"

The granite wall behind her answered. "Not hurt, dead." He was very matter-of-fact.

“They weren’t ours,” another agent explained. “They were wanted men.”

She turned around and came face to shoulders with the most intimidating man she’d ever seen, and that was saying something considering the monster chief of surgery she worked under. This man didn’t look anything like him, though. The agent was tall, dark, and scary, with thick black hair and penetrating, steely gray eyes. His firm, square jaw was covered with at least one day’s growth of beard, maybe two. He looked as though he hadn’t slept in at least twenty-four hours, a look she knew all too well.

Ellie’s heart skipped a beat. The man could scare the quills off a porcupine. But, oh God, was he sexy! Ellie gave herself a mental slap. An intimidating man who was built like a monument and could melt iron with his menacing glare—this was what she was attracted to?

The agent who had been kneeling stepped forward and put out his hand. “I’m Agent Tom Bradley. Sean Goodman’s my partner.” He introduced her to the two agents on his left and then to the man in front of her. “Agent Max Daniels.”

She nodded. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get to the OR.” She didn’t wait for permission, but turned and ran back to the hospital.

Thirty minutes later she was dropping the bullet she’d retrieved from Sean’s shoulder into a small metal pan. “Bag it and get it to one of the agents waiting outside. You know the drill.”

Then the real work of repairing the damage began. Ellie had learned over the years that there was no such thing as a simple bullet wound. Bullets had a way of doing considerable damage before settling, but Agent Goodman was lucky. His bullet hadn’t penetrated any major organs or nerves.

Once she’d closed, she followed the patient to recovery, wrote orders, and went to talk to the crowd gathered in the surgical waiting room. A dozen people with worried faces sat waiting for the news. Agent Daniels was standing, leaning against the wall with his arms across his chest. His gaze followed her as she entered the room, and her heart began to race. She knew she looked a mess. She pulled off her cap and threaded her fingers through her hair. Why in heaven’s name she wanted to look good for him was beyond her comprehension, and yet she did.

“The surgeon’s here,” Daniels announced.

A petite young woman jumped up and rushed forward, followed by Agent Bradley and a crowd of worried relatives.

“The surgery went well,” she began and then explained some of what she had repaired, trying not to be too technical. “I expect him to make a full recovery.”

Sara, his fiancée, was crying as she stammered her thank-you. She shook Ellie’s hand and held on to it.

“You can see him in about an hour,” Ellie told her. “He’s heavily sedated and he’s not going to know you’re there,” she warned. “He’ll be in recovery for a while, then they’ll take him to ICU. Once the nurses in ICU have him settled, they’ll send someone to get you. Any questions?”

A frazzled-looking nurse appeared in the doorway. “Dr. Sullivan?”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind looking at Mrs. Klein for us? She’s Edmonds’s patient, but he’s in surgery.”

“I’ll be right there.”

She patted Sara’s hand and pulled free. “All right then. It’s all good.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Agent Daniels smile as she turned to leave. She walked down the corridor and had just turned the corner when he caught up with her.

“Hey, Doctor.”

She turned around. Her stupid heart went into overdrive again. “Yes?”

“We’re going to need to talk to you about the shooting. You’ll have to give a statement.”

“When?”

“How about after you check on that patient?”

She couldn’t resist. “Gee, I don’t know. I hate to miss soccer practice.”

She was laughing as she pushed the doors aside and disappeared into ICU.

Max Daniels stood there staring after her, a slight grin crossing his face.

“Damn,” he whispered. “Damn.”

TWO

Agent Daniels waited for her in the hallway just outside the ICU doors. He was leaning with his back to the wall, one ankle crossed over the other, looking half asleep and thoroughly relaxed.

Ellie was impressed. It had taken her years of sleep deprivation to perfect the art of falling asleep on her feet. Never during surgery, of course—that was definitely frowned upon—but in between emergencies when she knew she had only a couple of minutes before she was paged again. Five minutes here, ten minutes there—it seemed to be enough to keep her refreshed and alert. She still didn’t know how to relax, though, no matter how hard she tried. Daniels made it look easy.

Ellie was pleased she hadn’t kept him waiting long. All she’d had to do for Mrs. Klein was adjust her medications. Mr. Klein was the real concern. Ellie had to once again order him to keep his hands off his wife’s tubes and IVs and to stop trying to wake her up. The stubborn man couldn’t quite grasp the notion of a medically induced coma, but he did understand that he would be banned from the ICU if he didn’t behave himself. Janet Newman, the head nurse, was convinced Mr. Klein was attempting to kill his wife and blame it on the hospital. Janet pointed out that Mrs. Klein was twenty-nine years older than her husband, way too old to be considered a cougar, and she was also extremely wealthy. It was obvious to the nurse that the sneaky bastard—Janet’s name for Mr. Klein—had married the poor woman for her fortune only.

Although Ellie didn’t believe Mr. Klein wanted to harm his wife, she gave Janet new instructions: If there was another incident with the tubes, she was to call security and have Mr. Klein removed from the floor. Dealing with the families took compassion, patience, and understanding; and on days like today, after working such a long shift, Ellie ran low on all three. It had been a grueling week with double shifts and very little sleep. She wondered if she looked as tired as she felt. The interview with the agent shouldn’t take long, she thought, and then she could go home, take a hot shower, and fall into bed. That lovely thought made her sigh. Earlier, she had grabbed a few minutes to take a quick shower in the doctors’ quarters, but it wasn’t at all the same as showering in her own bathroom with her own apricot-scented shampoo, her body lotions, and her soft towels. She couldn’t wait to get home.

Ellie should have known she wouldn’t get out of the hospital that easily.

As she walked toward the agent, she said, “That didn’t take any time at all, did it, Agent Daniels?”

“No, it didn’t take long,” he agreed. “Call me Max,” he added.

She smiled. “And you may call me Ellie.”

She had almost reached him when the ancient intercom crackled to life. “Dr. Blue to ICU. Dr. Blue to ICU.” The summons was the not-too-subtle code for a patient crashing, a code blue. Everyone in the hospital knew what it meant, including every patient over the age of ten, but the administrator refused to give the code a different name.

Ellie stopped abruptly, took a deep breath, then turned to go back into the ICU.

She called over her shoulder, “Agent Daniels . . . I mean, Max . . . if you want, you could leave your number with reception, and I’ll get hold of you just as soon as I’m finished here.”

If he replied, she didn’t hear him because the doors were closing behind her as she ran to the patient in trouble.

This time she was gone a little longer, but not much, just fifteen minutes, and when she once again stepped out into the hallway, she was surprised to see that Max was still there waiting for her. He was talking on his cell phone, but the second he spotted her, he ended the call and headed toward her.

It suddenly occurred to Ellie that the agent might be worried that his friend had been the patient who coded, and she hurried to reassure him.

“The code wasn’t for Agent Goodman.”

“Yeah, I know. I asked one of the nurses to go in and find out.”

She nodded. “I just checked on him. He’s resting comfortably.”

“That’s good,” he replied. “The code?” he asked, curious. “How did that turn out?”

“The patient’s back with us, so it’s all good.”

He smiled, and Ellie felt a flutter in her chest. How could anyone that tough looking have such a devastating smile? He was an imposing figure, tall and broad shouldered, with huge biceps and a wide chest that appeared to be all muscle. His jaw was hidden beneath a scruffy beard, but the slight dimple creasing his cheek was still noticeable. His thick hair needed a trim, and he looked as though he’d been to battle and back. There really wasn’t anything “pretty boy” about him, nothing remotely gorgeous like Dr. Andrews; yet, cleaned up, this man had the potential to be a real heartthrob. But not for her. Been there. Almost done that.

Ellie forced herself to concentrate on the reason he was here, the shooting. She needed to explain that, if he wanted to question her, they would have to find someplace outside the hospital. As long as she was on the premises, the nurses and doctors would continue to page her. And the two older surgeons on call tonight would be happy to let her do their job while they watched ESPN in the doctors’ lounge.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” she began. “Otherwise, the interruptions . . . oh no.” She groaned the last words. “Great,” she whispered. “Just great.”

Max turned to see a tall, round-shouldered man with a giant forehead and very little hair come barreling toward Ellie with a glare plastered on his face.

“Who is he?” he asked quietly. He could have sworn he heard her whisper, “A dinosaur.”

The man marching toward them was a doctor, an uptight one at that. He wore an immaculate white coat with a stethoscope dangling from one of the pockets. Pale blue, long-sleeved shirt, bold striped tie, black pants with perfect creases, and tasseled loafers that looked new—he was impeccably dressed. Max wondered if the man’s personality was as starched as his appearance.

Dr. Brent Westfield was the chief of surgery at St. Vincent’s. He had just rounded the corner. Spotting Ellie, he barked, “What are you doing here, Prod? Aren’t you off this weekend? Of course you are. Do I have to remind you that, as of two weeks ago, we are all following new guidelines? No exceptions. You know that.” He glanced at his Gucci sports watch and added, “You should have signed out two hours ago.”

New guidelines. Right. Exasperated, Ellie simply nodded. It was true. According to the new hospital policy, residents and fellows could be on duty only a certain number of hours in a twenty-four-hour day; but there was a big loophole, one little phrase in the guidelines that made them useless: unless there was an emergency. And funny thing, there was always an emergency. Ellie was certain the contingency was just a clever way for the hospital to appear to be following the guidelines while working the residents until they were dead on their feet. In reality, the new guidelines weren’t that different from the old ones, and Westfield knew it. He was just in the mood to hassle her, she decided, probably because he was irritated that she hadn’t signed a contract to stay with the hospital . . . at least not yet. She was still contemplating where she wanted to live and what she wanted to do—trauma center or general surgery. And she also had to take into account Evan Patterson. Where was he hiding? How could she make a decision without knowing where he was? Ellie was so tired now, nothing sounded good to her, but she knew she would have to make her decision soon because, even with all the scholarships and grants she had received, she owed a little over two hundred thousand.

“Do you want me to get in trouble with the board?” he demanded.

Was he kidding? The board of directors loved him. It was such a bogus question, she didn’t bother to answer. Westfield abruptly turned to Max. “And who is this?”

Ellie knew he had noticed the FBI badge hooked to the left side of Max’s belt and the gun holstered on the opposite side, but she didn’t comment on it or mention that Max’s navy blue T-shirt had big yellow FBI letters conspicuously printed across the back. Instead, she quickly made the introductions, and the two men shook hands. The chief had always been a commanding figure to Ellie because of his position of power, his aggressive tactics, and most important, his skill in the operating room, but standing next to the FBI agent who towered over him, Westfield suddenly didn’t seem so intimidating. Max was more imposing. The agent radiated strength and confidence. She strongly doubted he was as contentious as the chief, though.

“I heard there was a shooting outside the hospital doors. Is that right?”

“Yes, it happened close to the hospital,” Max answered.

Westfield waited for the agent to expound and was sorely disappointed. Usually, the chief’s intense frown, pursed lips, and unnerving silence was enough to make the people he was interrogating so uneasy they would blurt out all sorts of information. His tactics weren’t working on Max.

“Three men were killed?” he prodded.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Another ten seconds passed in silence. Then the chief asked, “An FBI agent was shot?”

“Yes.”

Ellie was trying not to smile. Westfield had to be frustrated. By using his stern tone and his most serious scowl, he was doing his best to push the agent into giving an explanation, but it wasn’t working. Apparently, Max couldn’t be intimidated.

The chief abruptly turned to Ellie. “Who did the surgery on the agent?” And before she could answer, he added, “It couldn’t have been you because you’re off duty, aren’t you? And you aren’t on call this weekend. So who did the surgery? Was it Walmer?”

Westfield knew she had operated on the agent. The man knew everything that went on inside the hospital. He was just trying to exert his power and make her squirm. Four more days under his thumb, she reminded herself, just four more days and she was free. She needed to suck it up until then.

“No, sir, Dr. Walmer didn’t do the surgery.” Taking Max’s lead, she didn’t say another word.

“Edmonds?” he snapped.

“No, sir.”

“Then who operated?”

“I did.”

The glare was back in place. “Even though you were off duty?”

“Yes, sir, even though.”

“Don’t give me attitude, Sullivan,” he said, pointing a finger at her.

Max kept expecting Ellie to tell Westfield that Agent Goodman had pleaded with her to do the surgery, but she didn’t. She didn’t offer any excuses. She simply stared Westfield in the eyes and waited.

“Help me understand,” he began in his best sarcastic voice. “Why didn’t you notify Walmer or Edmonds to hightail it to the OR?” And once again he didn’t give her time to answer the question before posing another.

“Do you think you’re a better surgeon than they are?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes, sir, I do. Absolutely.”

Max could tell Westfield was pleased with her answer but trying not to let her know it.

“You’re arrogant.”

Ellie was about to say, “Thank you,” but caught herself in time. “Yes, sir, I am.”

And it was true. When it came to her work, she was arrogant, just like all the other surgeons in the hospital. It came with the territory and, in Ellie’s opinion, was a necessary requirement. When a surgeon held a scalpel in her hand and was about to cut open a patient, she had better have skill and almost superhuman confidence. Ellie honestly didn’t think there was such a thing as a timid surgeon, and if there was, she certainly wouldn’t want him cutting on her.

Unfortunately, none of her self-assuredness and arrogance spilled over into her personal life. During her last trip home, she had been told by her sister Ava that she was depressingly insecure. But, since Ava was the sister who was marrying Ellie’s ex-fiancé, she wasn’t inclined to listen to anything she had to say. Ava’s twin, Annie, was living in San Diego and hadn’t had a chance to weigh in on Ellie’s faults. She would side with Ava, of course, but she would be much kinder about it. Despite her sisters’ persistence, Ellie would disagree with both of them. She wasn’t depressingly insecure. Just mildly so.

Ellie suddenly realized she was zoning out. Now wasn’t the time to think about personal problems. She’d have plenty of time for that once she was home. Focus, she told herself. Westfield was chatting with Max again, probably telling him how to do his job. She took a deep breath in an attempt to get more oxygen to her befuddled brain.

Westfield turned back to her, his index finger just inches from her face. “You. Get out of here. Now.” He didn’t snarl the order, but he came close.

Ellie watched him as he strode toward ICU. He shoved the doors out of his way, looked over his shoulder, and snapped, “And sign the contract.”

The doors automatically closed behind him. She sighed and, in a faint Southern accent, said, “Isn’t he sweet? We all just love him to pieces.”

Max laughed. “How long have you been taking orders from him?”

“Forever.”

“Why does he call you Prod?”

She shrugged. “He likes to.”

She started walking down the long hallway with Max at her side.

“What does it mean?” he asked.

When she didn’t immediately answer, he glanced down at her and saw her cheeks were flushed. She was embarrassed, and that only piqued his interest all the more. He let the question go for now. “Did I hear you call him a dinosaur? When I asked you who he was . . .”

She smiled. “You don’t see the resemblance? Actually, I usually call him ‘T. rex.’ I think it’s more personal. When he’s on a roar—which is ninety percent of the time—he does remind me of a gigantic, prehistoric beast.”

She was moving at a fast clip.

“Ellie, hold up. Where are you going?”

“Upstairs to get my keys.”

“We have to sit down and—”

“I know.”

She kept right on going. Max was becoming frustrated. “Do you run everywhere you go?”

“Pretty much,” she admitted. She slowed to a normal pace . . . normal for her, anyway. She noticed that Max had no trouble keeping up with her. In fact, with his long legs, he barely had to increase his stride beyond a stroll.

She glanced over at him. He was definitely out of her comfort zone. The man had so much testosterone, he made her nervous. He didn’t scare her, though. When he smiled, the corners of his eyes creased, and there was a glint in them that made her shiver inside.

Jeez, get a grip, Sullivan. She was acting like a sex-starved teenager. Granted, it had been a long time since she had been with a man—a long, long time—but, still, her reaction to Max went beyond bizarre. It was completely contrary to her usual calm, rational nature. When she had time, she would figure out her weird behavior. There had to be some logical explanation. But then, maybe she didn’t really have to worry about it at all because, as soon as Max questioned her about the shooting, he’d be on his way, and she would be sane again.

Max noticed that she kept looking at him with a puzzled expression on her face. “What is it?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing important.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not going to be much help with descriptions I’m afraid,” she said.

“We have to take your statement anyway.”

“We?”

“Another agent, Ben MacBride, and I are working this together, and we have to question you.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Where is he?”

“At the crime scene,” he answered. Where I should be, he silently added.

“Why don’t you start asking your questions while you walk with me.”

“Doesn’t work that way. I’m going to record what you say.”

“Okay, then we need to find someplace quiet, right?”

“Right.”

Ellie passed a bank of elevators and continued on to the stairs. "I'll grab my things, and we can get out of here. I stand a better chance of actually leaving if you're with me."

"How's that?"

She smiled. "You've got a gun."

Max kept pace as she ran up three flights. "You have a thing against elevators? A phobia?"

"This is the only exercise I get."

"You were running the track when the shooting started, weren't you?"

"How did you figure that out?" she asked, taking the steps a little slower while she waited for his answer.

"I'm an FBI agent, trained to be observant," he said.

"Oh, please. You thought I was one of the kids on that high school soccer team."

He laughed. "Yeah, I did," he admitted. "One of the other agents told me you were running the track."

He could laugh at himself. What an appealing trait, she thought. She liked that quality in a man . . .

Seriously! What was happening to her? She really needed to get away from him as soon as possible.

"You haven't answered my question. Is it a phobia or just a quirk?" he wondered.

"I do the stairs and I run the track and I don't particularly like being crammed inside a little metal box with a bunch of other people."

He grinned. "So that's a yes. You do have a phobia."

Probably, she thought, but she wasn't going to admit it. She did ride in elevators with patients when she had to. She didn't like it, but she did it anyway.

"Where do you keep your things? On the roof?" he asked.

"Just here." Ellie entered the hallway on the fourth floor and opened the door to a dark room filled with lockers. She switched on a light and walked to the third one on the left. Had she been alone, she would have locked the door and changed into jeans and a T-shirt, but she wasn't alone, so she was going to have to stay in her scrubs. She didn't like wearing them outside the hospital, but she didn't have a choice now. She pulled out her backpack, put some of her clothes inside, grabbed her keys from the top shelf, and was ready to leave.

She followed him to the stairwell, appreciating the fact that he wasn't pushing the issue with the elevators.

When his cell phone rang, he stopped on a landing to answer, and she stopped to wait for him.

Max's partner, Ben MacBride, was on the line and wanted help with a couple of uncooperative witnesses.

"Yeah, okay, I'll be there in five."

"Hold on," Ben said. "Agent Hughes wants to talk to you."

While Max was waiting for Ben to get Hughes, he turned to Ellie. She stood on the step above him, and her eyes were level with his. He found it impossible not to stare at her. The woman was breathtaking. Her eyes were the most intense shade of blue. Her nose was dotted with freckles, which he found damn alluring, and her mouth . . . ah, man, he really needed to stop staring. He was already conjuring up all sorts of fantasies involving her full, luscious lips, and he was going to be in real trouble if he let his eyes wander lower.

Max didn't wait for Hughes to get on the line. He abruptly ended the call, turned, and continued down the stairs.

"Where are we going to do this?" she asked.

He smiled. Now, that was a leading question, considering where his thoughts had been.

"Go home." His voice was brisk.

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said, glancing back at her. "You can go home, and we'll come to you."

"Great," she said. "I can get out of these scrubs. Let me give you my address . . ."

"I've got it."

"Cell phone?"

"Got that, too."

"But how—"

"You're a witness. I had all your information downloaded to my phone while I was waiting for you."

“You Googled me?”

“No, I didn’t need to.”

Ellie wondered what she would find if she Googled him. Under “occupation” would it say he was an FBI agent and give her the number of criminals he’d apprehended . . . and shot? No, of course not. His profile probably wouldn’t tell her whether he was involved with anyone or whether he was married, either. She had taken the time to notice that he wasn’t wearing a wedding band, and something told her that, if he was married, he would always wear it.

Now, why would she make that assumption? She wasn’t clairvoyant, and the truth was, she didn’t know anything about him other than he carried a badge, could be quite intimidating at times, and had a great smile. Was she making him admirable because she wanted him to be? From what she knew about the FBI—which was precious little—outsiders weren’t privy to personal information, but she might Google him anyway just to appease her curiosity.

Okay, she really needed a life outside of the OR. Then maybe she wouldn’t have such a strong reaction to a man she barely knew.

They reached the main floor on the south side of the hospital. Ellie’s ancient SUV was parked in the doctors’ lot adjacent to the hospital. Max opened the exit door for her. She brushed against him as she walked outside and got a hint of his masculine scent and just a trace of aftershave. For a man who looked as though he hadn’t picked up a razor in quite some time, he smelled really good.

She knew what she smelled like. Disinfectant. Unfortunately, that had been her perfume for the past several years. It could be worse, she thought. The pathology residents smelled like formaldehyde, even when they were off duty. The odor seemed to permeate their skin.

Max walked her to her car. It was a gentlemanly thing to do, but not at all necessary since it was light outside and there were police cars all over the campus. The crime scene team was still there, combing the park for additional evidence. Ellie didn’t believe she could be any safer.

“Do you walk out here in the middle of the night?” Max asked as he looked around.

“Yes. Why?”

“I count only six lights, and this is a big parking lot with countless places to hide. Not good.”

“If I’m leaving during the night, a guard walks me to my car.”

“What happens when you get called to come in?”

I park my car, then run like lightning to the doors with pepper spray in my hand, she thought but didn’t say.

“I try to park as close to the hospital doors as possible, and I’m vigilant,” she stated with a nod.

“Vigilant, huh?”

His smile could stop traffic. She couldn’t tell if he was teasing her or laughing at her.

Max opened her car door. “I’ll see you later. It will probably be a couple of hours before we get to your place. Don’t go anywhere. Stay home.”

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