

OLIVE

*M*y neighbor's eyes stare back at me, holding a haunting accusal like he knows everything inside my head, inside my soul.

It's only a drawing. Only a black and white sketch I did freehand from countless memories of peeping through the hole in my door, but it's my best work yet.

I nibble the eraser between my teeth while forcing myself to hold the stranger's gaze. It wasn't by accident that I drew him in black and white. The unusual color of his eyes isn't something I'm ready to attempt to mimic, but even if it was, my drawings are getting too vivid. Too personal. It's telling just how many I've made.

I know for a fact he isn't in the building, but I still find myself holding my breath while I run my fingertips over the thick, dark hair, and after hours—days, if I'm honest—spent wondering why he hangs it in his face, I've come to the conclusion that he does it to cover his strange eye. One is perfectly normal, a soft brown, but the other iris is the color of the red candies my parents put in my stocking every Christmas up until a year ago when I became unwelcome. I

imagine him being self-conscious of it, trying to hide himself from the world as thoroughly as I do, but I also wonder if he has any idea how much more menacing that hair makes him look.

Or maybe that's the way he wants it. Maybe that's his point.

I don't know. I don't know who the man in 3B is, and I spend far too much time wondering.

When my phone buzzes on the table, I jerk up with a gasp, the pencil falling from my mouth. My racing heart pulses in my fingertips, and my knees shove into my chest, sending the sketchbook hurling to the floor.

A half second passes before I realize how ridiculous I am.

With a palm pressed to my forehead, I look up at the ceiling and groan.

Outside on the street, a man starts slurring curses that reach through my open window. A woman shouts back while I snatch my cell off the end table.

My chest tightens while peering at Creeper's name on the screen. Two simple words wrap around my throat and squeeze until they steal my breath.

Missing you.

I slap the phone face down on the table as if I can erase the action altogether. As if I can undo the words I've read.

Missing you.

He isn't supposed to talk to me. He knows this. He along with the state of Nevada knows this because it's laid out in the restraining order a judge granted a year ago when we ... broke up, if you could call it that.

It isn't unlike Creeper to believe he's above the law. He's already broken the restraining order a dozen times since I got it, but it's been two months since the last I've heard from him, so I thought we were past this. I thought we were moving on. That *I* was moving on. *Free.*

My insides start to itch. On impulse, I run my palms up my arms, over the scars marring my mind more than they now do my flesh. No scabs. No holes. I'm clean. I won't ruin that tonight. Creeper won't ruin it.

The couple outside keep hurling insults back-and-forth, the woman wailing and screaming about her bag, and I wonder if they know how obvious it is to everyone around them that they're addicted to crack. They aren't *high*. Not yet. That's why they're being crazy. It isn't who you are on the drug that's the worst part, in most people's cases. It's who you become when you don't have access to it.

My mouth suddenly feels dry, so my eyes drift to the kitchen, and I carefully uncurl myself from the couch, planting my feet on crunchy carpet that no amount of detergent can soften, despite my best efforts.

I fill up a cup with tap water then gulp it down, all the while trying to ignore the cravings gnawing at my brain. The pan of brownies I made earlier rests on the stove. I select a corner piece then nibble at the crunchiest part I always save for last, making an exception this time.

Eating isn't a great distraction, but I praise myself for it anyway. I've gained twenty pounds in the last year and still can't get over a size two, despite how much I've thrown myself into baking as a hobby. There are only so many hobbies that don't require leaving the apartment.

"Help, someone help!" the woman outside screeches. "Help me!"

"Shut up, you bitch!"

"Fuck you, cock sucking motherfucker!"

Chewing slowly, I walk to the window, prepared to close it for the night. When I step in front of it, I freeze, brownie to my mouth, as I spot the man from 3B walking down the sidewalk toward our building.

I gasp and jerk back like I've been caught, which is, of

course, ridiculous. I was just closing my window. I wasn't spying on him. I didn't even know he was there.

After setting the brownie on the kitchen table, I press against the wall and angle my body just so I can peek out the window. The man passes the screaming couple without so much as a passing glance, despite her resuming pleas for help.

So ... he isn't a good Samaritan. Not a naïve one, at least.

His face is shadowed, so I can't see his expression from here, but I wonder what he's thinking. Where he's coming from. If he even noticed the pair or if he is as good at ignoring the world around him as he seems. He's certainly never noticed *me*.

As if he heard my thought, he looks up.

I whip around, slamming my back against the wall and flattening my palms at my sides. Sharp breaths enter and exit through my nose as I stare wide-eyed at the front door.

Did he see me?

No.

Just because he looked up doesn't mean he was looking at me. I was barely visible. It's dark in here. All I have on is a standing lamp next to my couch.

He didn't see me.

He *didn't*.

I press a fist to my mouth and bite down. "Oh fuck," I groan around it, rocking on my heels.

Six months. He's lived across from me for six months, and we've never spoken a word to each other, never even made eye contact. I've been completely off his radar.

But I watch him every day. I'm weird. I'm a freak. I...

He can't know.

I lower my fist when I get an idea and frantically whip my head around in search of my shoes. If he doesn't think I was in my apartment, he won't think I was watching him.

I find them by the couch then hurry to put them on before yanking my coat from the kitchen chair and hustling out the door. We live on the second floor, so it isn't worth it to take the elevator down to the mailboxes. Instead, I sprint to the stairwell, throwing the door open and barreling down the stairs while pulling on my coat.

When I burst through the lobby door, I'm breathing like I've sprinted across town, not just down a flight of stairs. I don't slow down until I get to my mailbox where I struggle to unlock the combination with shaky fingers.

The front door opens just as my mailbox does, and my neighbor walks in.

My heavy breaths silence as I grind my lungs to a halt, trapping air inside. I tip my head forward so my hair covers my face as I lean toward my box and pretend to be looking for something. It's empty. I checked it hours ago.

I don't expect it to matter because I think he'll just walk past, but when he strolls up next to me, I let out my breath and take in a slow, shaky inhale as quietly as I can, as if he'll find any amount of breathing suspicious.

"You're out late," he comments, opening the mailbox right next to mine.

My hand on the box door stiffens, and I shift to make an unnecessary amount of room for him. I can't feel my lips.

He spoke to me.

He isn't supposed to do that.

He *knows*.

I clear my throat and work my numb lips, not at all sure what to say. "Y-yeah... You too."

Not really. It's only eleven. I've seen him come in at all hours of the night. For him, this is early.

Does he know I know this?

No. Jesus, stop being paranoid.

He grabs the envelopes from his box and shuts it before

taking a few steps toward the stairwell. Surely, this is it. He'll walk away. We'll spend another six months, maybe longer, with no more interactions.

"You coming?" he asks.

Am I...?

Slowly, I turn my head his way. I look like a sociopath, don't I? Standing here waiting for him to leave so I can follow after him. I don't even have any mail.

Of course we're supposed to walk together.

I should've stayed in my apartment.

I didn't think this through.

"Umm yeah, right." I shut my box and cross my arms over my chest before walking toward him with my head down. Worms wiggle beneath my skin, and I shudder, rubbing my hands up and down my arms to get them to stop.

My neighbor opens the stairwell door for me, and I scurry through it with a feeble *thank you* on my lips that I can't even voice because his scent drifts into my nostrils when I pass.

It nearly stops me cold, but I force my feet to keep moving as I swallow. Tingles spread over my neck as I climb the stairs with him behind me, his eyes naturally on my back, I'm sure. I wish I would've washed my hair. Or worn cuter jeans. Do I have dandruff? Do I smell?

I press my nose to my shoulder then sniff as slyly as I can, but all I seem to smell is his lingering scent. It's like a tattoo on my senses. It's another thing I'll never be able to capture on a page.

"You left your window open, by the way."

My steps halt for a moment as my knees lock, but then I force myself to keep moving, even as my heavy breathing returns. He'll think it's the stairs. I hope.

"Oh."

"And a light on."

When we reach our floor, I walk a little faster, but slow when I remember my door isn't locked, and I don't have a key to pretend to unlock it. He'll know I was home if he doesn't already.

I want to cry.

Mercifully, he steps around me and up to his door when I start shuffling my feet. I breathe his masculine scent, unable to help myself yet again.

It's a chilly January night in Vegas, so he's wearing his usual black, fleece jacket that matches his black jeans and dark hair like someone told him he didn't look villainous enough. It could be part of his look, or it could be to blend into the darkness to hide the crimes he must be committing. Up to this point, I've been content to never know. To just imagine. Dream. Let him be the bad boy across the hall who quickens my heart rate and excites my nerves. But watching him now, I wish I had the courage to ask which it is because up this close, I'm dying to know.

I turn to my door but stop when he speaks to me yet again.

"Hold on a second, I have something for you."

My hand on the knob, I feel my muscles go taut while I stare at the splintered wood around the peephole. His key turns in his lock, and he goes inside his apartment, returning a minute later.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I turn around.

For the very first time, the man in 3B and I lock eyes.

My breath hitches.

My heart stops.

My throat closes.

A humming in my ears has me straining to hear him before he ever even speaks. I can feel my lips part, and I want to close them, but I can't. My jaw won't shut.

I am pathetic. Horribly, truly pathetic.

Because all at once, in an innocent, normal, everyday look, he captures me in his strange eyes and steals my free will. I can't move or breathe or look away. He doesn't know my name or care, but right now, he owns me.

When he holds out his hand, I don't react right away. Not until his beautifully odd eyes start to narrow.

Blinking, I look down at his outstretched hand with an opened envelope in it.

"This was in my box by mistake. I thought you might want it back."

Hesitantly, I reach out to take it.

"Sorry, I opened it." He shrugs like he isn't sorry at all. "I assumed it was mine."

"It's fine," I murmur, glancing over the letter from my father that accompanies the check. My face heats, and I dip my head in an attempt to hide my reddening cheeks.

It would be bad enough if he saw the check and knew I needed my family's help to fund this horrendous apartment. But the letter attached ... the one that basically says if I use the money to buy booze or drugs, there will never be another check again...

That's humiliating.

And typical of my father. Typical of him to mail it instead of hand delivering it, and typical of him to take the opportunity to kick me while I'm down.

My stomach turns as I raise the papers in acknowledgment. "Thanks," I croak.

"I didn't look through it, of course," the man says. "As soon as I noticed it wasn't for me, I put it away."

My eyes are aimed at the thin, blue hallway carpet until his soothing words bring my gaze to his. He doesn't smile. Doesn't make any kind of expression at all. Pity is certainly lacking.

Maybe he really didn't read it. Maybe it's just me who has a shameful disregard for others' privacy.

"Thank you."

He dips his chin.

I scratch my arm and glance at my door. I don't know what I expected of this man, but he's been surprisingly kind. Intimidating, but kind. He didn't read my mail. If he had any idea how often I've been watching him, he would've thrown it in the trash instead of talking to me right now. He would probably think I'm a stalker.

He's... He's not so bad.

As he turns toward his door, I open my mouth and summon courage to be the one to speak this time. "Hey, do you like brownies?"

He pauses to look over his shoulder. "Pardon?"

I crook my thumb at my door and force my lips into an awkward smile. "I made brownies earlier. Can I give you some, as a thank you? I can never eat them all, so I wind up feeding them to the alley cats."

I smile wider, thinking he'll return it, but he doesn't. He just stares at me.

"Sure."

My heart racing, I spin and fling open the door to my apartment, closing it behind me instead of leaving it open like he did. I want to be kind, but there's no way I'm risking him coming in. Not before I've cleaned.

Am I seriously thinking about 3B coming into *my apartment*?

My pulse jumps, and tingles spread over my arms at the thought. It's just a thought. A fantasy, if you want to get technical, but it pulls my lips into a genuine smile as I grab a plastic container and place five brownie squares in it, not even hesitating when my hand chooses all three remaining corner pieces.

I carry it back to the hall where he's leaned against the wall waiting for me with his hands in his pockets. He's expressionless, but then again, he always is. Even when women come back to his apartment with him, I never spot him smiling, never hear him laughing or flirting. He's just ... kind of cold. And mysterious. And dangerous. Definitely dangerous. He's everything I should stay far, far away from, and everything I'm drawn to. If I could help it, I would.

But it isn't like I'm trying to date him. Jesus, I would never do that. Even if he was the most normal man who existed—a veterinarian, a teacher, a retail clerk—I wouldn't consider dating him, or any other man, ever again. I learned my lesson a year ago. Romance is off the table for me.

I'm just looking. From afar. Except for right now.

"Here you go," I say, my voice so low it's basically a whisper as I hand him the container.

When he takes it, I don't wait for anything else to be said. I slip back inside and shut the door, letting my smile fall before blowing out a long breath as I press my eye against the peephole.

He stares at my door for an uncomfortably long time, his eyes trained on me so directly I have to remind myself he can't see me. He stands there so long, it's me who breaks away, quietly backing up from it in case he can hear me.

I'm paranoid. I know I'm paranoid.

But for the rest of the night and the next two days, I don't look out that peephole again.