

To Love a Man

By

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Chapter 1

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?” the big man roared, stalking towards her with a hypnotically intent stare, like a lion towards a wounded zebra. “Get the fuck out of here!”

Ellie could feel her cheeks blazing an ugly shade of red as all of those beautifully coifed heads turned to stare accusingly at her. She knew that it had been a bad idea from the start, despite her intense curiosity.

She wasn't supposed to be there.

How she'd let her friend convince her to come she'd never know, but she'd bet it had something to do with their recent girls' night and her ingesting entirely too much tequila, as well as her friend's reassurances that 'he wasn't *supposed* to be there.' But then she'd been completely sober when she'd gotten dressed, when she'd gotten into the car and when she'd walked through the front door, so that really didn't pan out as an explanation.

The only one that really worked was that she had a death wish.

And it wasn't as if she was even enjoying being there again for the first time in nearly a decade. She was spending all of her time looking around nervously, just waiting to lock eyes with someone she'd known back then, or much, much worse, the one person in the world she least wanted to ever see again. Consequently, she was constantly ducking behind the artfully arranged potted plants whenever she heard a man's deep voice.

Of course Ashley – who had promised to stick by her side the entire time – had deserted her immediately upon finding what looked like a well-heeled guy to talk to. How could she have possibly believed that her best friend would do anything else? Ashley was pushing her mid-thirties and her biological clock had long since abandoned its sissyish ticking, it was jackhammering its way through her nerves and consciousness. She was deep in the baby plank tow, and nothing but nothing was going to deter her from her goal.

And what better place to latch onto someone who was not only good looking but also filthy rich than the annual Jennings summer BBQ and charity auction? Although, she'd hardly be alone in that pursuit. Ellie wouldn't be surprised to find that she was the only female there under a hundred who *wasn't* looking either for what currently passed for true love or at least a reasonably well to do one night stand.

Feeling a bit peckish, she perused the buffet table. It might be known as a barbecue, but there wasn't much there resembling the usual fare. There was lobster, shrimp the size of a fist and caviar instead of the usual hot dogs, hamburgers and – if the hosts were feeling flush – ribs. Lord knew the Jennings didn't have to worry about money.

Few people knew that quite as well – or as personally – as she did.

Deciding instead that her nervous tummy wasn't going to take to food very well, after relieving a waiter of a glass of what tasted like extremely expensive champagne, Ellie skirted the perimeter of the party as if she were a member of an elite military surgical strike team. Her eyes were darting here and there, ears open to overhear any reference to him that might help her to determine whether he was already there, or whether or not he was likely to appear, but no one seemed to be talking about him at all.

She found a strategic spot, well out of the general crush of bodies, on the edge of the patio and sipped her drink. She felt it begin to loosen her muscles and wondered whether or not that was a good idea, considering the situation she could find herself in at any moment. But the longer she was there without seeing him – and the more champagne she consumed – the more all of her worrying seemed like a silly thing to do.

There was some kind of commotion in the main house, not far from the row of sliders onto the patio where everyone was, and she figured that was her cue to leave, even though she hadn't been there for very long. She'd been pushing her luck, and she had a bad feeling that it was just about to end.

But her impetus was just a second or two too late, though, and she froze at the sight of him. How could she have forgotten just how enormous he was or how thoroughly intimidating he could be? She stood rooted to her spot as the curious onlookers parted for him.

The behemoth descended upon her, black eyes entirely pitiless and the hand that gripped her upper arm not aspiring to be anything but cruel, each finger squeezing hard enough that she was going to be wearing the individual reminders of his painful grip for quite some time to follow.

Ellie found herself being dragged behind him through the crowd, taking two or three steps to each of his long strides, desperate not to lose her footing on heels she wasn't very used to, as she was force-marched towards the door.

She was so far behind him when he finally got to it, reaching with his free hand to pull it open, that when he jerked her arm powerfully, practically throwing her through it, he sent her stumbling onto the decorative, but slightly uneven cobblestone steps. Her foot landed wrong, the heel of her cheap shoes gave way and, as her ankle twisted painfully beneath her, she sprawled in an ignominious heap just to the other side of the doorway.

But he wasn't done with her yet.

As he looked down at her from his lofty height, so big his body filling the entirety of her field of vision, he sneered, "I'd better *never* see your face on my property again or I'll have you arrested for trespassing, and I'll press every charge I can think of against you to the fullest extent of the law! Now get up! I won't have trash the likes of you soiling my front steps."

Her ankle was hurt so badly at first that it took her two tries to get up, all under not only his murderous glare but also the censorious eyes of the rest of his guests who peered curiously around him when they could. No one – not *one person* came to help her up. She knew better than to think that Ash would be of any assistance. She was probably already blowing her

newfound friend in the carefully manicured bushes and was completely oblivious to the scene of Ellie's complete humiliation. But there wasn't one gentleman in the crowd? Not *one*?

She shouldn't even have wondered about that. Chivalry was dead, thoroughly trumped by money. If you had enough of it, you got to treat people as he was treating her, and no one was brave enough to stand up to him.

Not even her, really.

Ellie stood, what remained of her strappy sandals dangling from one finger as she looked up at him for a long moment, eyes surprisingly tear-free. She wasn't going to say it, and then she couldn't stop the words – no less cutting for their brevity or her hushed tone – from coming out of her mouth. “Carter would be ashamed of you.”

The shock in his eyes – she refused to believe it might be hurt – was more than enough payback for what he had done, as far as she was concerned. But, when he took a menacing step towards her, Ellie knew that she had realized the extent of her bravery and quickly turned and limped painfully down the small steps as quickly as she could, onto the walkway that led to where the guests had parked their cars. She was frankly amazed that he hadn't come after her.

She had no idea where Ash was, and frankly didn't much worry about it. If history was anything to go by, Ash would be brought home to her apartment by whatever guy she'd latched onto, so she wouldn't be needing a ride from Ellie, anyway.

She heard him hurl another order at someone else – he was good at that; she knew from personal experience – and suddenly there *was* someone walking next to her, on her hurt side, carefully not touching her.

And she nearly stopped dead at the first thing he'd said to her. “I'm sorry about – about Mr. Jennings.”

Ellie was surprised that he'd spoken to her at all. One glance in his direction revealed that he was younger than Cal, dressed in a plain, serviceable but hardly expensive black suit, his eyes hidden behind cheap mirrored sunglasses, the bulge beneath his left arm denoting, to anyone who bothered to look, that he was wearing a gun. He was obviously a security guard or bodyguard of some sort, although why a man Cal's size felt the need to sic him after her she'd never know. It wasn't as if he couldn't finish the job he'd started himself, if he was so inclined. But then the great and powerful McCallum Jennings didn't need to get his hands dirty on the likes of her. He had flunkies to do that.

She didn't say anything to his apology but kept her head down and concentrated on trying not to fall again, knowing that she hadn't heard Cal shut the front door and that all eyes were still on her mortifying walk to her car.

All of a sudden, though, she – as well as their rapt audience – gasped loudly as her feet were no longer on the ground and she was so surprised to find herself in his arms that hers automatically wound around his neck. “Put me down!” she huffed, trying to struggle.

Whoever he was didn't say a word, just contracted his arms the slightest bit, easily stilling her pathetic attempts to escape. “Which car is yours?”

Her eyebrow rose. “The crappiest one, can’t you tell?”

He smiled and it changed his whole face, even though a large percentage of it was still hidden behind those glasses.

“It’s over there.” She pointed to an old blue Toyota Corolla that had seen much better days. She fumbled in her purse for her keys and hit the button to unlock the doors.

He leaned down to open it, causing her to clutch at him more tightly for fear he would drop her and making him smile again. “You don’t have to worry, miss. I’ve gotcha.”

Ellie wasn’t sure whether to be reassured by that statement or not.

He deposited her with amazing care onto the driver’s seat, and when she would have gathered her legs into the car, his hand on her injured leg stopped her cold as he removed his glasses, tucking them into the inside pocket of his suit.

One hand cupped the back of her calf in a less familiar than practical manner as the fingers of his other hand probed her already swelling, slightly discolored ankle with a gentleness that belied his size. “This is a pretty bad sprain, although you still have too much range of motion for it to be a break, probably, unless it’s a hairline fracture. Regardless, you should go to the ER and get this looked at.”

She snorted. “Not likely. I’ll ice it and keep it up as much as I can, at least until work Monday morning.”

The look he gave her would have stopped her dead in her tracks if she’d been walking. Luckily, she wasn’t, and she chose to ignore the unmistakable dominance within it. Unwilling to admit just how he was making her feel, she asked, “Are you an EMT?”

He gave her a small smile that didn’t soften his disapproving look in the least. “No, I started out as a field medic in the Army.”

“Oh. Well, thank you for your service.”

There was a genuine smile that reached his eyes. “You’re very welcome, miss. Again, I’m sorry for Mr. Jennings’ behavior.”

Well, at least he was smart enough not to ‘ma’am’ her, or she would have had to smack him upside the head. But her eyebrow did rise considerably. “That’s probably not a very smart thing to do if you wish to remain in his employ. I can’t imagine that Cal would approve of one of his employees apologizing to the enemy on his behalf.”

“Are you his enemy?” A blunt question, uncompromisingly asked.

Ellie extracted her leg from his warm hands and tucked both of them into the car with a sigh. “He obviously thinks so.”

The big man – he was at least as big as Cal – stood, leaning on her car door, offering his hand to her. “I’m Cruz Montoya, by the way.”

“Ellie Blanchard.” She shook his hand, but was surprised and, if she admitted it to herself, but wasn’t going to, charmed when he pumped hers twice, but then brought the back of hers to his lips.

“Ellie – is that short for something?”

Apologizing for the boss and fraternizing with the enemy. He definitely wasn't going to have a job to come back to. "Elise."

Why was his smile now small and somewhat rueful, she wondered.

"A beautiful name for a beautiful woman." Somehow, coming from him, in that rich baritone, the smooth line sounded much more sincere than it might have.

She began to blush, but then he distracted her by saying, "This is a standard."

Ellie nodded. "Saves on gas."

"You can't drive a standard with that foot."

She frowned up at him. "I don't have much choice. I'm not about to leave my car here. He'd have it impounded in a heartbeat." But she did do a test push on the clutch, her other foot carefully on the brake, unable to suppress either a wince or the hiss that whistled through her pursed lips at the pain.

"That's it. Move over."

"Wha—"

Before she knew it, he had ducked into the low-slung car, smoothly reaching beneath the seat to adjust it as far back as it would go with one big push. Then he lifted her with a big arm around her waist to move her over to the passenger's seat, his other hand low on the calf of her injured leg to keep it from getting knocked around as he did so. Then reluctantly and carefully relinquishing control of it to her so that she could rest it on the floor of that side.

How he managed to wedge himself into her car without a very big shoehorn, she would never know, but there he was, practically crowding her out her own door. A big hand presented itself palm up just in front of her. "Keys?"

Ellie contrarily clutched them that much tighter to her.

He raised a bushy eyebrow at her and stared down at her in what she knew he wanted to think was an intimidating manner, but she just raised her own eyebrow, lifted her chin and stared back up at him, in what she knew for certain he *wasn't* going to think was an intimidating manner in the least. To her surprise, he leaned his face closer to hers, so, of course, she had to meet his action, and pretty soon they were practically nose to nose.

"You know," he said, and she could feel his breath on her face, "I'm trying to ignore the urge to kiss you."

Ellie gasped as he reached for the keys – almost in slow motion, the cocky bastard – and took them from her limp fingers with a big grin on his face, starting the car and roaring them away from the scene of her greatest humiliation.

Which he had come very close to making her forget entirely about. She had to give him kudos for that at the very least. "That was sneaky, rotten, and underhanded."

He executed as much of a bow as he could in the cramped confines of the car. "Thank you. I majored in Sneaky, Rotten and Underhanded. It's nice to know my degree didn't go to waste."

Despite the fact that a few minutes ago Ellie would have sworn that she would never smile again, she found herself wearing a stupid grin. “Why am I not surprised?”

He drove the car with the easy confidence of someone who had been trained to do so in the worst of situations. “So, you and the boss have a history?”

Her smile disappeared as if it had never been and he was loath to see it go, but he was also incredibly curious. He’d never seen Cal react to anyone that way – he was usually almost freakishly controlled.

“You could say that.”

The smarter thing probably would have been not to bring the subject up at all. But he was curious and it was for sure that he wouldn’t get any information from Cal. He wasn’t even sure if he was going to be fool enough to bring it up to him. So he mused gently out loud, “What could a cute little girl like you *possibly* have done to a man like Cal Jennings to get him to throw you out on your gorgeous behind like that?”

Despite what she considered to be his backhanded compliments – she hated to be called ‘little’ and her behind was much too big to be ‘gorgeous’ by today’s wraithlike standards – Ellie did not deign to so much as look at him, much less answer his musing question, forcing herself to be content staring determinedly out the window.

“All right, I’ll stop asking stupid questions.” As much as he wanted details, he realized that it was definitely the wrong time for that particular tactic. He wanted her smiling, not looking as if she’d just lost her best friend.

Or, perhaps more accurately, hadn’t quite gotten over a lost love?

“That’ll be a refreshing change.” The snarky comment slipped out of her mouth before she had a chance to catch it, and then – despite his chuckle – guilt washed over her. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to be nasty when you’ve been nothing but kind to me. You’ve gone way out of your way and probably put your future with Cal Jennings in grave jeopardy, and I do appreciate it.”

“That’s all right and you’re welcome.”

She guided him to her house and Cruz flatly refused to just let her make her own way in. Since he had retained his possession of her keys, she didn’t have much choice but to let him have his way. She couldn’t get into her house without them.

He came around to the passenger’s door and tsked at her for trying to get out herself, lifting her as if she weighed nothing and carrying her to her door, where she took the keys from him and opened it. And he didn’t just deposit her on her stoop as she’d imagined – far from it. He walked right in to lay her gently on her small loveseat, propping her injured foot on a convenient throw pillow. Then he went so far as to rummage in her freezer, returning to the small living room – which his large presence only seemed to make even tinier – with a bag of frozen peas that she’d been saving for a beef stew that was, instead, carefully placed over her already puffy ankle.

“The ride over here with it hanging down couldn’t have helped much. Are you hurting?” he asked squatting down beside her.

Ellie sighed and covered her face with her hand. “Yeah. I have some ibuprofen in my—” He was already out the door to retrieve her purse.

When he returned, not only with her purse, but also a glass of water and three of the anti-inflammatories in the palm of his hand, she took them with surprising obedience, saying, “Thank you so much for everything you’ve done.”

Cruz smiled down at her. “You’re welcome. Is there anything else I can get you or do for you?”

“No, thank you.”

“I wish you’d go to the ER for that, though.”

“I know, and if it gets worse, I promise, I will.”

He continued to stare intently down at her, making her almost more nervous, all of a sudden, than she had been before Cal had discovered her presence. She wasn’t at all used to having a strange man in her apartment, and despite his chivalric acts towards her, he *was* a stranger.

“I guess I should be getting back.”

“I hope you have a job to get back *to*, considering how blatantly disloyal you’ve been – gallant and gentlemanly, no doubt – but you know Cal isn’t going to see it that way,” Ellie mused ruefully.

He startled her by chuckling at her concerns. “Don’t you worry about Cal and me. It would take a lot more than this for him to get rid of me.” He walked over to her door. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call me.”

Ellie looked puzzled. “I don’t have—”

“Yes, you do. When I got your purse, I used your phone to call me. Now we have each other’s numbers.”

Normally she would have been incensed at his invasion of her privacy, but somehow she couldn’t quite summon the level of indignation she should have felt, considering what he’d done for her. A thought struck her, and she had to admit to a certain amount of curiosity. “But how are you going to get home now?”

He grinned down at her. “At the same time I called my phone from yours, I used mine to call a buddy who is also on staff at the ranch.”

The Jennings estate didn’t really have a name. Everyone just called it ‘the ranch’.

“Ah, well, that’s good. Thank you again, Cruz.”

He smiled and managed to make her feel as if everything was right with the world, somehow, even though everything really was in the crapper. “You’re very welcome, Ellie. Stay off that foot.”

Wearing a patently false smile, she rolled her eyes and singsonged, “Yes, sir.”

“That’s more like it.”

He closed the door on her snort, leaving Ellie to spend the rest of the afternoon and evening stewing, considering the possible ramifications of what she'd done.

Her ankle hadn't swollen too badly and was only a little dark looking. She kept her blood levels of ibuprofen steady, and that almost eliminated the pain. And, although it was sore and stiff, she managed to hop around on it on an as needed basis. She tried to be as efficient as she could when she felt she couldn't avoid using it, getting up to hit the bathroom, grab a nutritious dinner of chips and dip, and turning on a marathon of *Lost* on Hulu to be instantly reminded of just how much she'd loved it the first time around, even though she was somewhat bummed to already know the ending.

She fell asleep relatively early, but was awakened around twelve-thirty by the sound of knocking, and looked to the TV first, but it had already responded to its sleeper timer and shut off. But it couldn't possibly have been anyone knocking at her door. No one who knew her would ever think of coming over without having called or texted her first; as affectionate and gregarious as she was with her friends, she was a very private person.

But then there it was again, much louder, much more insistent and demanding this time. Someone was definitely not knocking on her door, they were banging on her door.

The question was: did she feel inclined to answer it, considering that it was the middle of the night and she was injured, and whoever it was didn't sound in the least friendly?

Then she realized she was not going to be given a choice.

"Open up, Elise. Your car is in the driveway and I know Cruz brought you home."

What the fuck was he doing here? Who did he think he was? Did he think he was going to throw her out of her own home after having thrown her out of his?

As if he'd read her mind, the next thing he said was, "I'm not leaving until I talk to you, Elise."

She recognized that tone and was horrified to realize that it still had the power to affect her – her panties were growing wetter by the second.

"And don't think I won't call your landlord – who is Jim Evans, I believe – and make—"

Fed up and frustrated beyond belief, Ellie swung the door open abruptly. "Make him open the door for you? Make trouble for me? Make him evict me?" she filled in, trying to mirror his foot-wide-apart power stance, but wobbling so badly on her injured foot that she finally just brought it up next to her good one and balanced it on her curled toes. "Do your worst. But, then, oh, gee, you've already done that, haven't you?"

When she would have slammed the door in his face, she found that he'd already taken a step in and she couldn't have closed the door around him without a twenty mule team.

And she had thought that Cruz had dwarfed her tiny living room. Cal Jennings practically wore it.

He closed the door and she heard him lock it behind him, but even as he took a threatening step towards her that nearly plastered their bodies together, she continued to stand

there, precariously balanced though she was, glaring up at him, her jaw set, arms folded defiantly across her chest.

She was not going to let him bully her in her own home.

But she was entirely unprepared for what he did next, bending down to pick her up in his arms – *What was this thing men had all of a sudden for carrying her around?* She wondered – and stalking to her couch, claiming the middle of it and positioning her with surprising gentleness on his lap.