

Excerpt from
I Want You to Want Me
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Something woke her.

Erika struggled upright, blinking around, trying to get her bearings. She was in the living room on her brocade sofa. Brushing the tangle of hair from her face, she fell back against the cushy, body-warmed pillows.

She must have dozed off as she'd been studying her work, analyzing, again, what might fix it. She glanced at the coffee table, where her second glass of pinot noir sat, half-drunk.

Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to drift. Sleep was often as much a creativity sparker as work. Or at least she was going with that theory for now. The warm, enveloping couch felt lovely.

Then she heard it. A distinct bang directly above her head. Her eyes popped open, and she stared at the ceiling she'd painted sky blue when she'd moved in. She remained still, listening.

Just when she'd decided that she must have imagined the loud clunk, another noise echoed from above her head. The scrape of something being dragged across the floor.

She glanced over to her cat. Even Boris stared intently up at the sound. His ear twitched.

For once, the grumpy cat was giving a definite reaction, but of course, it was when she'd much rather have seen his usual bored or apathy demeanor. She sat up; her eyes still locked on the ceiling as if someone was going to suddenly manifest from the floor above.

There was an apartment over hers. But it was empty. Empty and neglected, since Ren hadn't bothered with the place for several years.

Her heart leapt, pounding in an uneven, breath-stealing way as she heard more sounds. The distinct creak of feet on a hardwood floor. A sound she easily recognized, because the old hardwood in her apartment squeaked the same way.

Careful to make no noise herself, she rose from the sofa and moved to the front door. Her apartment and the upstairs apartment shared the glassed-in front porch.

Her heart still pounding, she peeked out her with window. Light from the courtyard illuminated a swathe of the porch, leaving the corners shadowed in darkness.

Behind her, she heard walking. She spun, expecting someone to be right behind her. She jumped as she saw a figure in the center of the room. Then she realized it was her distorted creation in the center of the room. Before she'd considered the sculpture to be frustrating, disappointing, and mostly a disaster. Now it looked almost ominous.

She sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm her rocketing pulse. Calm down. Calm down.

More footsteps. But overhead--not in the same room. Nothing was going to hurt her. The assurance didn't persuade her heart to stop hammering against her ribcage.

She looked back out the window, trying to angle her head so she could see up the staircase to her right, leading to the upstairs apartment. The stairs, as much as she could make out, just ascended in to pitch black.

Hesitantly, her hand went to the doorknob. She turned it slowly and eased the door ajar. Sticking her head out, she squinted into the darkness. And she listened.

Nothing. Not a sound.

She glanced around the door to Maggie and Ren's. Aside for a dim glow from a lamp in the living room, their house was dark too.

She looked back up the staircase, debating on whether she should go up and investigate. Peering into the menacing blackness, she decided that was a colossally stupid idea. Instead she pulled the door closed, carefully clicked the lock into place, and went in search of her cell phone.

"See," she said to Boris as she rummaged through her purse, then amongst her art supplies, only to find the phone buried under a pile of clay-caked rags. She grimaced at the grimy phone, then turned back to Boris.

"See, I'm not that foolish woman in the horror movies, who traipses off to investigate the noise from the attic."

Another creak sounded directly above her head. She quickly swiped off the worse of the filth and flipped the phone open only to see the faceplate wasn't illuminating. She pressed the On button. Nothing. She pressed again, harder. Still nothing.

She stared at the useless phone, knowing that even if she plugged it in, the battery would need a while to accept enough charge to even turn on.

"Okay, so I am apparently the foolish woman in a horror movie who has an ancient cell phone that never holds a charge." She snapped the phone shut. "Crap."

Now would be the time to regret not getting a landline turned on. She glanced toward the windows. She could go to Maggie and Ren's and use their phone. She debated the idea of leaving the security of her apartment, then decided she really had no choice.

"It's dumber to stay in here, listening to someone robbing the place," she told the cat. He blinked, but she wasn't sure if that was in agreement or not.

She rifled through her purse again, looking for her voodoo doll keychain which held Maggie and Ren's spare key. Then she tiptoed to the door.

"Wish me luck."

Boris had already curled back into a black ball of disinterested fur. She shook her head. "It couldn't have been a stray dog that showed up at my door, could it? At least a dog would care if I was going out to greet my imminent death."

She took a deep breath, then unlocked and eased open the door. Everything was quiet, but she didn't take the time to survey the murky corners. Instead she stepped out and rushed to the porch door, which led into the better lit courtyard.

"Hey."

Erika's already tensed muscles reacted on instinct as soon as she heard the male voice close behind her.

She spun toward the faceless voice and hurled the object in her right hand. Without waiting to see if she made contact, she shoved open the porch door and propelled herself out into the courtyard, her legs pumping under her as she raced toward Maggie and Ren's carriage house. She fumbled with the keys, even as she ran. Thank God those weren't what she threw.

"Wait! Erika!"

The words called out from behind her took a moment to register in her panicked brain. But gradually realization seeped into her brain that the disembodied voice had just used her name. She stopped, the key poised to enter the lock of the carriage house door.

Slowly she turned.

At first she couldn't locate the speaker in the shadows and greenery of the courtyard. Then a figure stepped forward into the glow of the courtyard's dim garden lights.

Erika squinted. "Vittorio?"

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