

## Chapter 1

It has been seven months since I told William I loved him and I meant it. When I brought in the deed to my house and showed him where I added his name, his smile touched my heart in ways I never imagined. We spent the entire day with skyrockets, William's fabulous food, Chocolate Melting Cake and learning everything we could about each other.

Come to find out, William is not the carnivore I am.

When we crawled out of bed because my stomach growled, I asked if there was any of the prime rib we ate last night in the refrigerator, and William said, "To be honest, Constance, I can't eat as much red meat as you."

"You don't enjoy red meat?" I asked, finger-combing my short blond hair and pulling on my blue robe.

"It's not that I don't appreciate a rare steak, it's that my cholesterol levels don't."

"So you've been fixing meat for me and clogging your arteries at the same time?"

William nodded. I slugged him.

"Ouch!" He grabbed his shoulder. "What was that for?"

"You're an idiot," I told him and went into the kitchen in search of food.

From that point on William would sometimes eat meat and I would sometimes eat fish. Most nights, he makes a sauce and I pour it over a nice rare steak and he, atop fresh fish. It worked and was one of many compromises we made after we got to know each other. I'm surprised that William and I are compatible, as we are as different as night and day. He likes to sleep until ten and stay up late, I prefer an earlier bedtime and am up by seven.

When we choose movies to watch, I enjoy stories with a high body count, he likes romances.

"As an FBI profiler, Constance, I get enough death and devastation in my job, I don't want to watch it," William said.

"Well, I used to be an FBI agent and now I'm Chief of Police, William, but I want to figure out the who, what, when, why and how I could be a better killer and not get caught." I held up a movie. "In this one, the idiot used a regular wood chipper to dispose of the body. You should always use an industrial wood chipper and feed the remains to pigs."

He laughed. We ended up playing board games which always landed us in bed. Making love with William was all skyrockets like on the fourth of July, and my favorite pastime anyway.

Today, I'm on the swing on our back porch enjoying the peace and solitude, sipping on a cup of Earl Grey tea, watching the sun rise over the trees in my backyard which a few days ago exploded with the colors of fall. The roses William planted around the perimeter of the yard actually resemble plants rather than sticks jutting out of the ground. William is asleep in *our* bed. I love the sound of that. It hadn't been so long ago that I considered it *my* bed and *my* house. Although, it is a new bed. William prefers a soft mattress and I need mine as firm as a board. We couldn't find a mattress that both of us could live with, so we bought a Sleep Number bed. His sleep number is 30, mine is 100.

Cheezy, our gray Russian Blue cat, and Sadie, our beagle puppy, lounge on each side of me. There is detente between them at the moment, but their relationship changes with the wind. One minute they are best friends, snuggled together in Sadie's bed or chasing each other in the backyard, while other times they are bitter enemies. Cheezy will lie on top of the refrigerator; when Sadie walks by, she launches and digs her claws into the poor dog, who yowls with displeasure and confusion. Sadie doesn't understand why the cat is mad at her as she loves everyone.

Cheezy tries to climb on my lap but I push her back to the seat, "You stay there. If I let you up, Sadie will bark and want up, too, and my lap isn't that big."

Cheezy stands, turns her back and jumps off the swing. As soon as she is gone, Sadie puts her head on my lap. I stroke her fur. "I don't get that cat, but she's bent out of shape again, so watch your back."

I enjoyed the solitude as I finished my cup of tea. When a gust of cool wind brushed against the collar of my uniform, I sighed and stood. I needed to get to work. The Chief of Police of Arroyo isn't a taxing job, but it is something I keep an eye on daily. If I don't, my officers play Minecraft on the station's computers all day long.

When I walked into the house, William was braced against the counter that held his espresso machine. He clutched a massive cup of the black coffee as if his life depended upon the thick black liquid. It always smelled so good, but I found it bitter and undrinkable. He was a lesson in dichotomy. Six-foot-four frame, solid muscular body with wide shoulders and a narrow waist made him an imposing man who could take out any opponent. Yet his Italian olive skin, thick wavy jet-black hair, green eyes with the longest eyelashes I'd ever seen on a man, and round face made him appear as an angelic cherub. He was naked except his night shorts.

I chuckled, which brought his half-closed eyes toward me.

"I can get you an IV from Doc's office, if you need one," I told him.

He frowned, tilted the cup and took another pull of coffee.

"Why are you up, William? You got in late last night from Oregon and, given the way you are clutching that mug, it appears you need another few hours of sleep."

He raised his eyes to mine. "We've got to find a compromise on our sleeping arrangements."

I walked over and put my arms around his waist and he set his head on my shoulder. At five-foot-ten, my frame fit with his, like two halves of one whole. His body relaxed into mine as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer.

After a few minutes of standing there, I asked, "What's wrong with our sleeping arrangements?"

He raised his head, chuckled low and continued, "I guess I mean *my* lack of sleeping, Constance. Even when I don't get in late from a case, we go to bed on your schedule, which is around nine-thirty. I'm not tired so we end up 'not sleeping' for an hour or more. You get up at before the sun which is fine, but the pets in this house are on your schedule, too. Sadie barks to be fed by eight since you've been up for a while. Then Cheezy starts in because she wants her

canned food and that can opener is the loudest damn thing I've ever heard. I think there are airplanes that make less noise." He set his head back on my shoulder.

"I am open to suggestions or any changes, William, except the 'not sleeping' part, I'm keeping that no matter what," I told him.

William raised his head and smiled. "That's my favorite part, too." He leaned in and brought his lips to mine.

It started slow but the desire he always stirred in my body demanded more. If I didn't step away from him, we'd be back in bed and I would never get to the station. At least once a week after William and Jonathan rescued Rick and me from the hole in the ground last spring, I wouldn't show up to the station until noon and everyone in the place knew what William and I had done that morning. The teasing got so annoying I threatened to shoot my second in command, Bob, more than once to get him to stop giggling when I walked into the station.

I stepped out of his arms. "Remember we said no kissing in the morning."

William chuckled. "I'm awake now."

"Yes," I glanced down his body. "But I need to go to work."

"I could have that uniform off you in a few minutes, Constance. It would be worth being late to work." His eyes glistened with mirth and desire, a deadly combination.

"No, you don't have to listen to Bob giggling every time he sees me for the rest of the *entire* day, William." Time to change the subject before he could talk me into his way of thinking. "You didn't say last night, but did you find the murder weapon?"

"Yes and it tied the case up. I found the murder weapon in a chest the killer left his son when he died three years ago."

"So the guy died and that's what stopped the killing?"

William nodded. "He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and was dead six months later. It's a painful way to die."

"Karma's a bitch." I chuckled, thinking about the people he killed with that butcher knife and thrown in his makeshift graveyard. "So what's on your agenda for the day?"

William sighed and finished that last swig of his coffee. "I'm still reviewing the case from Michigan I got a few days ago and Jane's taking care of the restaurant. I'll be there later in the afternoon to cook tonight's special."

"What's it going to be tonight?"

"I don't know yet." He looked into his mug and frowned.

"Okay, well, make yourself more coffee and I'll talk to you later," I told him as I unlocked the cabinet he had installed in the kitchen. Ever since Ron, a local restaurateur and serial killer, kidnapped me and Martin forced me to leave with him to save Rick and we ended up buried in a hole with the water rising, William had insisted that I have a cabinet in each room where I kept one of my service guns. When I chose a six-digit locking mechanism, he insisted I needed quicker access to my firearms, so he added a trick to open each of the cabinets. In an emergency, you could push in the handle and turn it to the right, then left, but I always used the code because I didn't want to get used to doing it the easy way.

I slipped the gun into my utility belt, kissed him on the cheek and left the house. The temperature had warmed up a few degrees since I watched the sun rise this morning, so I took off my jacket and threw it on the passenger seat as I got into the white Ford 4x4 Explorer assigned by the town council.

The engine roared to life and I flipped the radio to a country western station, since I gave William a ride home from the airport late last night and he put it on a jazz station. Jazz is okay but I prefer songs that tell a story. I pulled out of the driveway and started toward Main Street and the station.

There wasn't much traffic since fall is turning out to not be a busy tourist time for Arroyo. For the last several years, the weather has turned cold the first week of October, ending our Indian summer weather and sending the tourists home. Arroyo is a small town flanked on one side by the Sierra Foothills and the other by rivers and its own man-made lake. With snow and water sports being so popular, we have a busy winter and summer tourist season. There are several antique shops in town and they carry the town during the other seasons, but it's nice to not have tourists, in various stages of drunkenness and revelry, in every shop, restaurant, and bar.

As I drove, I considered Jane and William's restaurant, the *Get Away Diner*, and its cursed history. The *Arroyo Diner* was the first food establishment opened in Arroyo over a hundred years ago. The original owners died in a plane crash and one of their sons, Jake, took over the restaurant and changed the name to *Jake's Diner*. He got cancer and passed it to a nephew who changed the name back to the *Arroyo Diner* and hanged himself in the diner's kitchen five years later. It stayed closed for eight years until the Burkhardt family spotted it when they went camping in the National Forest near Arroyo. They owned a small café in their city and fell in love with Arroyo's small town atmosphere so they bought the building and named it *Betty's Place* after their youngest daughter. Ten years later, they packed up Betty in the family car and drove her to college. The entire family died when a drunk driver crossed over the center divider on the highway.

The building sat unoccupied until Ron and Erma Jolsen bought the diner ten years ago, remodeled it, and reopened it as the *Get Away Diner*. But the owner and chef, Ron, turned out to be the serial killer known as the Jackal whom I had chased when I was an FBI agent. He kidnapped me and left me in a ditch – raped and gutted, causing the death of my unborn child. It destroyed my marriage to Matthew, my FBI career, and I started an affair with William Carlotti, the profiler assigned to the Jackal case.

I came back to be the Chief of Police in Arroyo when my mom got sick and my dad died. I didn't even call William to tell him I left. The affair was over and I had set the rules from the beginning – no commitment and no strings. But then Ron continued the game by sending me a note. He embroiled me into his world again and I took a bullet intended for William. Then William moved into my home, my life, and my heart.

After Martin, Rick, and the muddy hole, William went into partnership with Jane Mitchell. She was the local owner of a bed-and-breakfast inn who took over running the *Get Away Diner* to supplement her income since the inn wasn't busy during fall and spring. William loves to cook

and had always wanted to open a restaurant, but I wondered if a part of him just wanted to stay close and make sure I didn't get kidnapped again. Jane was eager for a partner who could cook and teach her to make more interesting food than typical diner fare.

He and Jane reopened the new *Get Away Diner* on June 1st. Given the diner's history, I tried to get them to change the name and décor but new signage and remodeling are very expensive and, practical man that William is, they kept it. It had a U-shaped counter, circa the 60's, that swept around a section that housed the cash register, milk shake machine, revolving pie case and soda fountain. Around the back of the restaurant were several rounded red leather high-backed booths. Stainless steel square tables, each with four chairs and red patent-leather cushions, adorned the front windows.

Originally, William wanted to take a leave from his profiling job so he could spend the first six months on the restaurant and teach Jane how to cook his fabulous recipes. It didn't work out that way. He compromised by only working cases where the original team assigned comes up against a brick wall in their investigation. Otherwise, he would be involved from the beginning and need to leave for longer periods of time with little notice. He thought this would limit his caseload but the Feds call him all the time and, as much as William loves to cook, I think it was hard for him to go from being the top profiler in the country, maybe the world, to a chef in a small-town diner. It's even more difficult for him to reject cases when people's lives depend on finding a killer, so he works until five on his profiling cases and then goes over to the restaurant to cook the evening's special. While he's cooking, he's teaching Jane, and she's turned out to be a quick learner. Several of William's specials have become staples on the menu and Jane prepares them.

The only ones unhappy with Jane and William's partnership in the diner are the officers at my station and half the town who used to show up at the station to mooch lunch when William was in town since he would often cook enough for an army and bring it to the station. Now they go to the diner and pay for their meals. To pacify them, William established a resident discount of ten percent. It covers the tax and part of the tip but it made everyone happy.

As I got to the outskirts of Main Street, I called into the station.

"Good Morning, Chief," Becky, our new dispatcher, answered, her voice bright and cheery.

We went through six dispatchers before we found Becky after Evelyn, the wife of one of my officers, Trent, went out on maternity leave, then extended that leave with family bonding time. Afterwards she couldn't leave the baby and so stayed home. Becky is a great dispatcher and an efficient office secretary. I had to learn to handle her cheery phone voice. She could tell you your dog died and you'd swear it was the best news you ever heard.

"Anything happening this morning, Becky?" I asked.

"Nope. Bob came in because Sheila had an early appointment and he is trying to fix the copy machine again. I'll call the service man when he's done molesting the thing. Trent is over at the high school greeting the kids as they arrive to increase his visibility since they are still having problems with graffiti on the back of the gym."

“I told them to install a motion detector floodlight back there and a camera or two. That will stop the little brats.” I was happy that I promoted Trent to School Resource Officer. He took his job seriously.

“Trent asked for them twice but it is not in Mayor Benson’s budget for this year,” she replied without even breaking into a chuckle. How diplomatic.

“Right,” I huffed. “The only thing in his budget is new paint for the council members’ businesses and the cost of those colored posters he has stapled everywhere in town so he can guarantee his re-election in November.”

“Now, Chief, he is having those posters made at his own expense,” Becky chided.

“Sure, and that’s why Don’s printing company won the bid for the new maps and tourist pamphlets for the next two years so he can get those posters at cost,” I reminded her.

“So true. Are you on your way into the station?”

“Yes, but I think I’ll stop at the diner and have breakfast. Since Bob came in hours before his usual arrival time, tell him I’m here,” I turned the car into the parking lot next to the diner.

“Oh, thank you, Chief. It will get him away from the machine before he breaks it beyond the serviceman’s ability to fix.”

“Call if you need me.” I pulled into a parking slot a few spaces from the front door.

“I will, Chief. Have a good breakfast and thanks for taking Bob off my hands,” Becky said.

I laughed and pushed the button on my steering wheel to end the call. A bored Bob – nothing new there. Sergeant Bob Linden was my lead officer, over fifty and stocky, with a beer belly and a boyish face that matched his personality. He had been my dad’s lead officer, too. When Dad died, he should have become Chief, but he hates dealing with people and their personal problems and, in a small town, that’s most of the chief’s job.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the diner, there were three vehicles I didn’t recognize, a gray pickup, beige van, and white sedan. I made a note of the license plate numbers. It was a throwback from being an FBI agent and always looking for killers in a crowd. The other four vehicles were locals and I could tell you who was in the diner. Mitzy Turner’s beat-up brown Toyota sat parked between two spots. Doc’s white pickup was here which was unusual since he usually walked from his home at the end of Main Street to his private-practice office. He must have stopped for breakfast before his first appointment at his office or the hospital since he was the hospitalist for Arroyo General Hospital. Stan Stewart’s massive SUV sat next to Doc’s truck and Jay’s little black Porsche rested under a shade tree toward the back of the lot since he was always afraid someone might hit his car.

As I came through the door, Mitzy looked up from one of the rounded booths in the back. She was a petite woman with long blond hair who wore too much makeup. Under teal blue lids, her eyes were blood shot and she held both her hands around one of Jane’s supersize coffee mugs inhaling coffee quicker than even William. It was a typical Monday; she was nursing her hangover from her weekend jaunt. Mitzy put her right hand up and said, “I dropped the boys at the high school and made sure they went inside.”

Her twin boys, Ryan and Jed, were the bane of my existence. I picked them up more than anyone else in the entire town combined. If they weren't shoplifting at Steward's Sporting Goods store, the mini-mart at the gas station or the market, they were causing problems someplace else.

"I'm glad, Mitzy," I told her. She loved her boys but wasn't much of a role model or mother. They have always been on their own.

I heard Jay mutter from his counter seat, "That doesn't mean they're still there."

Jane's oldest son, David, who stood behind the counter, chuckled, covered his mouth and gave me his best, 'I'm sorry, Chief' look. It hadn't worked on my dad when he caught him kissing Sandra Harper behind the high school gym when he was sixteen and it didn't work on me, either. David's tall, lean body was wearing his normal attire of jeans, T-shirt and a white apron. He never went to college because he took over being the man of the house when he was only fifteen. His dad died in a boating accident on Lake Arroyo that involved too much alcohol and not enough good sense.

I frowned at him and he said, "I've got to clean something in the kitchen."

"Chicken," Jay huffed at him.

David went into the kitchen.

Jay gave me his best award-winning smile. "Good morning, Chief."

He wore in his typical attire, too – black jeans and black polo shirt because he thought it made him appear more mysterious. He's our local mystery writer, a few years older than me, several inches shorter than six feet with a stocky muscular build. Most women in town swoon over his good looks, occupation and obvious enjoyment of the opposite sex.

"Good morning, Jay. How's the editing, or is it research going? I figure you can't be writing if you're here at the diner."

"Nope, I finished my latest last week and now I'm editing. I hate editing so I take as many breaks as I can."

"Well, you've been missing for three weeks, so it's nice to see you again," I sat on the stool next to him.

"You know how I am, Chief. If I'm writing, you won't see me until I get that first draft done. I can't interrupt the flow of ideas. If I do, I can't get back into the story."

"True," I said to him.

Jay looked over at Mitzy, who was busy pushing the eggs and bacon around on her plate and not eating. Although she did finish a piece of William's delicious apple pie. "Over or under?"

I rolled my eyes. This was Jay's newest quirk. He always wanted to bet an over or under score or timeframe or something with you. "Over or under what?"

"Over or under an hour before Mitzy goes to *O'Brien's* and starts her day with George making her a bloody Mary for breakfast instead of the eggs she's trying to eat now."

"Oh, that's easy. I say under."

"I'd have to agree with you, so no bet." Jay turned back to the veggie omelet he was eating.

I glanced over to the other end of the diner and saw Doc sitting in a booth with his office manager, Ashley Harper. Doc was tall, fifty-six, with black hair graying at his temples. He wore

his typical attire, too – white lab coat over his street clothes of khaki pants and a colored polo shirt. Today was Tuesday, so his shirt was green. He was more dependable and predictable than the weather.

Ashley Harper was fifteen years younger and quite a bit heavier. Her haggard face showed the stress and unhappiness of her hard life. Orphaned at six when both of her parents died in a house fire, she got pregnant and married at eighteen into an abusive marriage. Ashley got out of the marriage when my dad arrested her husband and he ended up in prison for putting her in the hospital with a concussion, broken arm, three cracked ribs and two black eyes. Her daughter, Sandra, only four at the time, witnessed the entire ordeal and, without any other family around was hustled between several Arroyo families until her mom was well enough to take care of her. She was a defiant aggressive child that no one could control except Ashley and I remember my dad and mom discussing whether she was that way because of her father's genetics or the environment she had been raised in.

Doc told me last week she was having health problems and was considering taking time off. Doc would miss her because she was more than his office manager, she was 200 pounds of pure spit and vinegar and the Doc's watchdog. The patients always came first with her, a good quality, unless you want to talk to the Doc during office hours.

David came out from the kitchen and handed me a mug, teapot full of hot water, and an Earl Grey tea bag. "What's it going to be, Chief?"

"I'll have my usual and I'll move to a table. Bob's joining me in a few minutes."

"Okay, I'll tell Mom to start your Pig Lover's Omelet and his Eggs Benedict with the usual sides of red potatoes and fruit."

"Does she ever get out of that kitchen?" I asked.

"She'd be out here greeting customers but right now she's trying to master William's pie crust and there is mumbled swearing under her breath, flour flying, and dough hitting the trash can so I'll give her the order and run." David said as he turned back to the double saloon doors that separated the kitchen from the diner.

I put the tea bag into the pot, dunked it two times and removed it to pour the entire contents into my mug.

"You might as well drink hot water, Chief. You're not getting much flavor from the tea by not letting it steep in the water." Jay sipped his own cup of tea that was stronger than any coffee served.

"You drink it your way, I'll drink it mine," I told him and took a long sip of the hot liquid. It was perfect, not bitter at all.

Jay ate the last bite of his omelet and stood. "Well, I've procrastinated enough for the morning, I've got to get back to work."

I lifted my mug at him. "Happy editing."

He huffed and walked out of the diner. He didn't need David to give him a bill. That's something else William started when he became Jane's partner. The locals could give them a credit card and open an account. That way you could come in and order, eat and leave. You



would be charged for your meal, less the ten percent discount, plus taxes and an eighteen percent tip.

I took my cup to a table by the window. I used to sit in the back at a booth, with my back to the wall and eyes pointed at the door, but last year I decided to make changes and not sitting in a cop's position was one of them. Now I sit at the window and watch my town. Maybe I'd just chosen a new cop position.

Stan stood and turned toward the door. He played football in high school and college and still could bench press a Buick with his over six-foot tall stature and three hundred pounds of muscle. He must have stopped by after taking his son, Zack, who's a sophomore this year, to school and before he needed to open his store.

"Hey Chief, how's it going?" Stan asked as he passed me.

"Okay, Stan. How's the sporting goods business?"

"Slow this time of year with the weather turning so cold."

"Zack playing football this year?"

"Nope, he hates the sport. I don't understand it, he's built like a linebacker, runs fast like a receiver and can throw like a quarterback."

"He doesn't have a competitive bone in his body, Stan."

"No, he doesn't."

"Is he still writing games for the computer?" I asked.

"Yep, now *that* he loves." Stan laughed.

"We've got to do what makes us happy, Stan."

"That's what my wife keeps telling me, Chief." Stan sighed, waved and left the diner.

Stan is married to Leslie, a lovely woman who sings in the church choir and works in Bob's girlfriend Shirley's salon doing manicures and pedicures. It's a wonder he is still married after his blatant affair with Georgette last spring. In a surprising show of strength I hadn't known she possessed, his wife threw his clothes and his tools on the front yard when she found out. It wasn't until he agreed to go to marriage counseling and adhere to a ten o'clock curfew, which was thirty minutes after his store closed each evening, that she let him back into her house last month. Jonathan, our resident keeper of the town's Kept Secrets, those secrets that people know but don't discuss, says he still hasn't made it back into her bed.

When Bob walked through the front door, David yelled, "Your food will be ready in a minute."

"Thanks, David," he called and sat in the spot across from me.

"How's everything at the station?" I asked.

"Quiet as a cemetery, Chief. It's not the right thing to say, but I liked it when we had serial killers in our town. At least it made the job interesting."

"That kind of interesting we don't need, Bob, and I think with two in a population of 4839, we've filled our quota for this decade," I said as David placed our breakfasts on the table.

My omelet oozed with bacon, ham, sausage, cheese, mushrooms and spinach. The first bite melted in my mouth and made me want to sigh with delight. William stopped making these for

me when he decided there was too much meat in it. Now he makes me choose one type of meat to go into my omelet so I ask for waffles instead. Why bother with an omelet if you can't stuff it with meat?

“How can you fill an omelet with that much meat and order a vegetarian pizza at Jack's Parlor?” Bob said before he slid a forkful of Eggs Benedict into his mouth.

“It's because of the red tomato sauce. I don't enjoy meat in my spaghetti sauce either.” I shrugged and kept eating.

Ashley coughed. I heard Doc say, “Are you okay?”

I turned to see her grab her throat and gag.