

The Drummer Boy



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Dedication

The path to this book's publication has been long and strenuous for me. I've moved through many changes since my last book—some good, some bad, some mediocre—that kept me from finishing this book in a timely manner. I am incredibly grateful for the love and support of my family during the difficult times, as well as during the good times.

My fantastic husband, Robert, who has been with me for more than twenty-one years...more than half my life. His strength is incredible. His love is unending. I cannot put into words what he means to me. I can only tell him that my heart is his forever.

My parents, who have always been there for me, literally and figuratively. I am so grateful for their presence in my life. I am lucky to have them with me for so many years.

My brothers—Michael, Alan, and Bill. Near and far, I know they are always there for me no matter what.

My Aunt Fran, who went into a new life without her husband of more than sixty years, and impressed the hell out of me by living every day with exuberance and joy. I miss her terribly but am happy to know she has been reunited with the love of her life.

I lost my sweet Bailey-girl in September 2011. I miss her every day. She was a joy to love. My life is forever changed because of her time with me. My life is forever changed because of her passing.

I am so thankful for the additions of both Lucy and Piper, who bring me joy and laughter and lots of frustration on a daily basis. They are good dogs.

I also want to thank the readers who continue to enjoy my books. I wish you all the love and happiness you deserve, in the body you have right now.

Chapter One



Hot lights beat down on his head, making his scalp itch. It was one of the things Elias Springs would never get used to, no matter how many times he performed on stage. The ever-growing number of fans was another thing. Because even if no one listened, Eli would still be writing words and music the exact same way he was now. There was no denying the gnawing in his guts as songs forced themselves from inside him. It was as if he were merely a vessel for his music, and not a human being.

One song ended and Eli seamlessly led his band into a slower ballad. Co-founder and lead singer, Nikolas Vincent, sat at the grand piano on the left side of the stage. He was accompanied by the only woman in the band, who was also their sax player and backup singer. She also happened to be Eli's half-sister, sharing a father but not a mother. If Nik was the crooner of the band, Jessica Springs was the belter. Big in body and personality, Jess was known for her almost bluesy-jazz sound, and she brought a depth to the band that had been missing before her arrival six years prior.

The audience cheered and applauded as the song came to an end, and the lights onstage went off.

With over a decade of experience, Eli stepped down off the drum riser in the dark, then made his way to the side of the stage. Lights backstage were also low, but his eyes adjusted quickly as he followed his bandmates along the maze of hallways to the lounge. There the five of them, plus their manager, Willow McManna, downed bottles of icy water and fueled up on sandwiches and snacks.

The scheduled intermission lasted thirty minutes, allowing everyone a few minutes to decompress and get a second wind.

Laughter echoed through the halls as they made their way back to the stage to finish their performance. Nik stayed behind in the wings to make his entrance, while the other members of the band dispersed to their waiting instruments.

In the darkness, Eli strode to the riser where his drum kit waited, finding his seat with ease. As he waited for his bandmates to join him, he considered his position in the group. Being one of the two co-founders gave him seniority, but it didn't make him particularly popular with the fans, or propel him to be the face of the band.

Women didn't seem to show that much interest in him. He wasn't sure if it was because he was a behind-the-scenes kind of guy, preferring to leave the spotlight to others in the band, or if they passed him by because he was too "deep" for them. When it came to talking to the media, Willow was always telling Eli that he was too intense for the reporters. He scared them off when he started rambling about his writing, and how he came up with the music that put them on the map. Nik, on the other hand, exuded a confidence and authority that drew reporters right to him. It was that same ease with himself that also drew groupies to him, much to his new wife's amusement. Brage Connell, their bass player, drew the groupies because of his charm and sex appeal. Women flocked to him everywhere he went, and reporters followed him hoping for some kind of titillating story. Fortunately for Brage, his new steady relationship had mellowed him, so he spent more time telling tales than causing them. Reporters liked guitarist Chris Niles for his jovial attitude, but they rarely asked him anything serious. Women followed him around, hoping to be the recipient of one of his easy-going smiles, but these days he only seemed

to have eyes for his girlfriend, Andrea. Then there was Eli's half-sister, seven years his junior, who merely pouted at a reporter to distract them from their questions. Equally, she could throw any male fan a look and have them panting at her feet. She seemed intent on doing the latter as often as possible, while at the same time focusing more on music than any part of her personal life.

But in the end, Eli didn't really care if he was popular with the media, or even if he was popular with the fans. He only cared that he got to write his music and play his drums. With that thought in his mind, he allowed himself to be swept back into his joy...the music that permeated every part of his life.

With long strides, Eli crossed the non-descript, small, beige lobby. He wasn't late for his meeting, but if he missed the waiting elevator, he would be. The cars were notoriously slow, stopping for an oddly extended period at each requested floor, which made a full car ride almost unbearable. But luckily for him—and his not quite late meeting—there was only one lone figure in the car.

He stepped into the elevator, joining the woman who was already inside. She looked up, but the way she swept her gaze over him and returned to the smartphone in her hand told him everything he needed to know. *Not interested, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars.* Even her stiff stance indicated she was not interested in chit chat, or even a polite greeting. Shrugging, he punched the eleven button, noting that number ten was already lit. Interesting, considering that the record label company he was heading for occupied both the tenth and eleventh floors exclusively.

As the doors slid closed, he studied the woman out of the corner of his eye. Pin straight, dark brown hair hung down her back, and bangs covered her forehead down to her arched eyebrows. Despite the length and style, not a hair was out of place, nor did he notice any frizz. He knew frizz, because his own blond, shoulder-length hair often got frizzy in the sometimes humid East Coast weather. With her hair tucked behind her ears, her simple hairstyle left her face wide open, showing off its oval shape and porcelain clear skin. Long lashes—which he could see easily from his angle—framed round eyes, that at the moment remained focused on the

phone in her hand. A long, sloped nose led down to full red lips that were pursed in thought. His own lips tingled at the thought of discovering exactly how soft her mouth might be.

He should have followed his instinct and ignored her, but something in him kept him from doing so. Instead he let his eyes continue to roam as the elevator chugged into gear, drawing them upwards past the first and second floors.

She had dressed her curvaceous body in a flattering ankle-length skirt that seemed to flow from her hips downward, barely skimming her legs. The matching navy blue top was form fitting, with three-quarter-length sleeves and a vee neck that was accented by a single diamond on a gold chain. Matching diamond studs graced her earlobes, and a simple gold bracelet hung around her left wrist. Dark brown boots disappeared under her skirt, making him wonder how high they went, and how much fun they would be to take off.

The thought ping-ponged through his head as the elevator ground to a halt and the overhead lights popped off. He counted to thirty, expecting the emergency lights to turn on, but when they did not, he ground his teeth together.

Evidently she was doing the same thing, because right about the time he was considering their next option, she muttered a low, “Shit.”

He silently agreed with her commentary on the situation. Unfortunately, cursing wasn’t going to get them anywhere, so he reached out toward the panel that housed the buttons, searching for a telephone. He’d been in and out of these elevators numerous times, but at the moment, he knew more about the appearance of the woman next to him than the elevator. No phone-shaped object appeared under his fingers, and in the pitch blackness of the elevator he jammed his hands on his hips.

Still, as they stood together in the oversized coffin, she said nothing other than her original epithet.

After another few minutes of silence, he began to wonder if she’d passed out, or was in shock. “It’s going to be okay,” he murmured, hoping to reassure her. “They have to know people might be in the elevators. I’m sure they’ll come looking.”

No response.

Really worried now, he yanked his iPhone from his pocket and tapped the screen to get it to light up. Choosing a browser window—the brightest option he could think of—he held the phone up to see if she was passed out on the floor or what.

She was standing in the far corner of the elevator, one hand still occupied by her phone, the other clutching the decorative railing running around the elevator at hip height. Although he couldn't see her face very clearly, she seemed to be okay. She certainly was taking rudeness a little too far in his opinion.

Well, if she could be so rude, he could, too. He turned away, using the phone to locate the emergency button on the elevator panel. Yanking it hard, he waited for some kind of alarm to sound. No luck. As a last ditch effort, he brought up an email window on his iPhone, but as he was typing, he noted that he had absolutely no signal.

“Shit.” *Now what?* “Got any bright ideas, lady?” Again he looked over at the woman who was trapped alongside him.

She stared at him, but there was no comprehension on her face.

Maybe she didn't speak English. The thought made him feel foolish, and he searched his mind for foreign languages. “Español? Francais?” Dammit, that was all he knew, and still she gazed at him in silence. In desperation, he pointed to her phone, hoping she would understand his meaning.

Holding up the phone, she shook her head. “No signal.”

Well, at least she spoke English to a point. Her husky words told him as much. The light on his phone went out from disuse, leaving them both in darkness and silence...again. Shoving his iPhone back into his pocket, he held his hands out in front of him, feeling for the seam in the doors. When he found them, he began pounding on the metal barrier, yelling, “Help! We're trapped in the elevator! Someone! Help!” As he was taking in another deep breath to shout again, she spoke.

“I'm deaf, so I have no idea if you're talking to me.”

He whipped his head around, mouth hanging open. Suddenly he was glad for the dark interior of the elevator, because he was sure he looked like a complete idiot. *Deaf*. That would explain why she hadn't answered his questions or responded to his comments.

Palms flat against the doors, he considered his options. How did she communicate with someone who didn't sign? Maybe she read lips. But it was too dark to do that at the moment. Retrieving his iPhone, he opened a memo window, gaining some light as he stepped over to where she was standing. Typing quickly, he held the phone up so she could see. *Any ideas?*

Simone Joffe tilted her head, impressed with his creative thought process. "Is there a phone somewhere? You see those in the movies, you know?" Two strides took her to the panel on her side of the doors, where she began feeling around. After a minute, her fingers ran over a seam that didn't seem to fit with the rest of the wall. Finding the top corner, she pressed hard and felt the magnetic catch give way. She swung open the hidden door, feeling around inside for what she hoped was the emergency phone. Finally, her hand closed around the receiver, which she yanked out and held up for him. With great anticipation, she watched him take it and press it to his ear.

He handed it back to her, then typed into his phone. *Dead.*

Angry and frustrated, she slammed the phone back into its cradle, saying, "The phone, or us?" To her surprise, he grabbed her hand and pressed it to his chest. Under her palm she felt the steady beat of his heart, and her fingers contracted against his shirt. He tapped his first and middle finger against the back of her hand along with the rhythm of his heart. A scene from *Dirty Dancing* came into her head, where Patrick Swayze was trying to teach Jennifer Grey a new dance for an upcoming performance. *Ga-gung, ga-gung, ga-gung*. Heat rushed over her, making her scalp tingle, and her toes curl in her boots. She could hardly remember what this man looked like in the light of day, yet her insides were turning to *goo* over a simple gesture.

Tugging her hand out from under his, she took a step back, banging her hip into the railing she'd been clinging to earlier. Too bad building management had spent so much money on the décor of the elevator and so little on emergency preparedness. "Is there an alarm going off at least?" she asked, flipping her hand toward the panel of buttons on his side of the space. When he threw her an odd look, she realized that if there were an alarm going off, he

wouldn't be able to hear her. "Oh."

Again he was typing on his iPhone. *I'm sure they will check the elevators. We just have to be patient.*

She let one side of her mouth pull up into half a smile. "Not my strong suit."

His lips parted and his head tilted back a bit, which she assumed meant he was laughing. *My name is Eli. What's yours?*

"Simone," she told him.

What do you do?

"Catering." And she was now late for a meeting with the woman who handled catering for RNR Records, a mid-level record company in downtown Philadelphia. Of course, if power was out in the building, the woman had probably evacuated, effectively canceling the meeting.

I love to cook. It's a favorite avocation. I find it relaxing. Chicken parmesan is my specialty.

"A classic."

I do pretty well with Italian food and standard American fare. I've always wanted to learn more exotic recipes. Do you have a specialty?

"No, I cook everything."

He nodded and smiled, then stared at her like he was waiting for her to say something else. Belatedly she realized he'd been asking all of the questions. "What do you do?"

Drummer. He made a motion like he was playing a set of drums. *I don't suppose you've heard of us.*

She looked up from the phone to see a crooked smile on his face. His self-deprecating humor was nice for her. Most people treated her deafness like a taboo subject, never mentioning it for fear of upsetting her. "Depends on how loud you play."

His smile widened and his shoulders moved up and down like he was laughing again. Then his eyes widened and his head shot down to his iPhone. Snatching it closer, he began typing furiously, his long fingers flying over the screen.

She wondered briefly how those fingers would feel flying over parts of her body. Shocked at herself at the outrageous thought, she straightened, shoving it aside. "What?"

After a few more seconds, he showed her the screen on his

phone, pointing at the signal indicator. It showed a very low signal. *I sent a text message to my buddy. The signal is low, but it might work for a text only message.*

Nodding, she checked her own phone, but it still showed no signal. Looking back at Eli, she saw his face change as he studied the screen on his smartphone. Then he held it up so she could read the message on the screen.

Are you shitting me? I'll call Will to see if she's in the building. If not, I'll call around until I find someone who is.

Well, at least now someone was alerted to the fact that they were stuck on an elevator. "What did you tell him?"

Said we were stuck without lights or emergency phone or alarms. Said we didn't know what was happening, or if anyone knew we were here.

"So now we wait." She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling a little relieved they had made contact with someone in the outside world. "Do you think power is out in the whole building? Or is it just us?"

Don't know. Seems weird that we don't even have emergency lights in here.

"Yeah."

He checked his phone again, a frown crossing his face. He offered her the screen.

Bad news...power is out in the whole building. Both elevators stuck with people in them. Good news, you don't have a crying baby in there with you.

"Crying baby?"

After a minute of typing and waiting, he came around to stand next to her so they could both read the screen at the same time.

Will is stuck in the other elevator with seven people and a screaming baby. The text message I got from her had a lot more cursing than yours.

Simone laughed, though it felt more like a hysterical burst of air. "Who is Will? And were you meeting him here?"

Willow McManna is the band's manager. And if you think you have a problem with your patience...

A woman. Her name made her sound tall and slender, with a neck like a swan and legs that went on forever. "Does he say how

long before they get to us?”

Again, when the message came back, he pressed his shoulder against hers so they could see the small screen together.

More bad news. Talked to someone in building management. More people in the other elevator, so they are priority. Update you when I know more.

Groaning, Simone leaned heavily against the elevator wall, covering her eyes with one hand. “We’re going to be stuck in here forever.”

He tapped her arm, then showed her the phone. *We could play charades.*

“I’m going to go stir crazy!” Anxiety rippled through her as she realized the predicament they were really in. “How safe are we? What if the cable snaps? What if we go plunging to the basement!”

Grabbing her chin, he tipped her face up slightly and pushed into her personal space. Holding the phone under their mouths, he spoke slowly.

After a moment she realized he meant for her to read his lips by the light of his iPhone.

“We’re safe. We’re safe. We’re safe.”

Tears pressed against the back of her eyes. This man, this stranger, was one of the kindest, most compassionate people she’d ever met. She nodded, taking a deep breath, inhaling the clean, male scent of him. “Thank you.”

With a nod, he stepped away, then pointed to the floor.

The two of them settled onto the ground, shoulder to shoulder, backs resting against the wall, feet out in front of them toward the doors.

“This isn’t how I saw this day going,” she told him, arranging her skirt over her legs. “I had a meeting at RNR Records, to talk to them about catering for their holiday party this winter. And I was hoping to talk to them about catering for some of their artists’ concerts.”

Sounds like big plans.

“I only got the meeting by persistence. I’m not sure they were really going to give me either job, but if nothing else, I work hard.”

I understand that. Working hard is important. Loving what

you do is equally as important.

She nodded.

Even if no one listened to me play, I'd still be writing music and drumming. It's under my skin.

“If I didn’t cook for work, I’d still be cooking for my family. It’s not about the money. For me, it’s about how those people feel when they’re smelling and eating the food I’ve made. The things I make bring people back to a time, and bring up feelings and emotions...it’s more than just eating. I can take someone back to their grandmother’s house with a certain meal, or even with one dish. I can make people remember happy times, and bring back good memories every time I put a plate in front of them. It’s heady stuff, you know?”

Not unlike music. You can transport people to another place and time. Change their emotional state with their senses...yours is taste and smell, mine is sound.

She hadn’t considered that their respective jobs had so much in common, considering how different they really were. Staring at the still-closed doors across from her, she thought about how similar they were turning out to be.

He tapped her on the shoulder, then held up his iPhone. *Are you from around here?*

Giggling, she watched as he made a face at what he clearly knew was a clichéd question. “Born and bred. My family has pretty long roots in their community. My parents still live in the house I grew up in.”

Your parents are still together?

It was interesting that it seemed more common that families were divorced rather than together. “Yeah. What about you?”

I'm from New Jersey. My parents divorced when I was a kid. Both remarried.

“You have siblings?”

Steps and halves. Dad remarried pretty quickly, then had a kid with her. Mom remarried later, to an older guy, who already had adult kids.

“Big family, then. Lots of people to have holidays with. Sounds nice.”

He frowned, as if he were considering her statement. *We don't*

all get together. I take turns going to one or the other.

Of course not. What was she thinking? “I only have one brother, younger.” She shrugged. “He’s a good kid, and fortunately we get along as adults.”

Do you live at home?

She tried not to shudder, but he must have felt the movement because he raised an eyebrow at her. “No, I have a place of my own. I love my family, but I’m glad to be on my own. What about you? Are you on the road all the time, or do you have a permanent address somewhere?”

I have a place in New Jersey. 1920s Cape Cod, small, with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. It’s enough for me when I’m there, but it required a lot of work to get it to be livable. These days, since our base seems to be Philly, I’m not home much. I’m considering selling it and getting a place here. Maybe something that needs less work.

“If your house is in New Jersey, but you’re here all the time, where do you stay?”

His thumbs flew over the virtual keys on his phone. *Nik and I started the band together almost thirteen years ago, so we’re close like brothers. I used to stay at his place when we’re in Philly, but now I’m spending more time at the hotel where we normally reserve rooms for our out-of-town band members.*

“Why?”

He’s recently married, and I wanted to give them some privacy. He wagged his eyebrows at her. *They keep saying it’s not a problem, but newlyweds should have the freedom to be together...alone.*

As she opened her mouth to respond, the emergency lights overhead snapped on, throwing them into a dim but serviceable glow. “Well, that’s a bonus. At least now you can rest your fingers.”

He ducked his head over his phone, typing in a message. When he looked up, he spoke with exaggerated slowness. “I messaged Nik to get an update.”

Patting his hand, she smiled. “You can talk normally. I’m pretty proficient at lip reading at this point.”

A flush crept over his cheeks. “Sorry.”

“No big deal. Just didn’t want you to worry about it. As long

as I can see your lips, I'll be okay."

He adjusted his body so he was facing her, leaning his shoulder against the wall. "Maybe we'll be rescued soon."

She nodded, but a part of her was enjoying her time with the man next to her. Now that they had a little light, she was able to better study Eli, who was sitting cross-legged. His body seemed lean in its current position, and despite his claim to be a drummer in a rock band, he looked more like a banker who was a couple of months overdue for a haircut. Dark colored slacks and a short-sleeve button-down shirt, both loose-fitting, along with dark loafers, made him look like he had just tossed aside his jacket and tie after a nine-to-five day. He had a wide forehead, equally wide cheekbones, and a larger-than-average nose, matched to his wide, full lips. All-in-all, not what she would normally consider to be a hunk. Maybe it was because she had gotten to know him personally before having the opportunity to study him physically, but she felt attracted to him in a way she had never felt before.

He held up his iPhone, shaking it in her line of vision. "Nik says they've got the door open to the other elevator, a couple of floors up, and they're unloading people." Fumbling with the phone, he seemed to peek up at her. "So we can't be far behind."

"Right. We'll both be free to go about our business, finish our day...as best we can, anyway."

They were silent for a few minutes, then he nudged her thigh with one of his feet.

She looked at him again, raising one eyebrow in question.

"How did you get started in the catering business? Did you work in a restaurant? Or for another catering company?"

"It would be kind of difficult to work in the kitchen at a restaurant, because a lot of what they do is verbal." She shrugged, picking at a stray string on the hem of her shirt. "I went to culinary school, then went right into business for myself. Mostly I did personal chef stuff, a lot of which came to me through my family and their community. The work expanded through word of mouth, and from there I started getting larger, more 'catering' type jobs."

"What does a personal chef do?"

"It's a bit like catering on a smaller scale. I've prepared and served romantic dinners for two, business dinners for four to six

people, holiday dinners, family reunions, birthday parties. The main difference is that I go to people's homes to make and serve the food." She sent him a smile. "It was definitely a learning experience to do that. You figure out how to work in different environments really quickly, and you learn to work with different personalities."

"It must be hard to work in someone else's kitchen. Even the difference in an oven can really mess up your meal," he said, making a face. "I know I've messed up some good food because an oven didn't maintain temperature, and I didn't know it beforehand."

She patted his knee, restraining herself from leaving her hand on the hard muscle. "Sometimes the appliances are the least of your problems when it comes to personal chef work."

"What do you mean?"

"When you're dealing with individuals in their own home, a lot of odd things can happen." She paused, trying to decide which story would be a good example. "I had one business dinner, arranged by the wife for the husband's work, where the husband ended up asking for a divorce ten minutes before I was ready to serve dessert. So I ended up stuck with the wife as she's crying hysterically, while the husband is packing his bags upstairs."

"You're kidding? That's terrible!"

"I had to show the business colleagues out while the wife was sobbing in the dining room. It was crazy." Another deep breath brought his cologne or soap—she couldn't be sure which—into her system again. Spending so much time with food, her smell receptors were sensitive, and she liked that he didn't seem to bathe in any kind of heavy scent. "I thought I had seen everything at that point, but I had no clue. People can be so inappropriate, it's frightening." Feeling her face turn pink, she continued, "I had a female client call to set up a romantic dinner. Nothing out of the ordinary for me at that point, and I went into the job feeling like it was going to be a simple evening. Three courses, dessert, that's it. And generally for a romantic evening, I leave the client to serve dessert, so there's no weirdness to end the evening. I'm paid in advance, so I can pack up my things while they're eating their entrée, and be gone by the time they're ready to have dessert."

“Sounds like a cut-and-dry job.”

“Done them dozens of times before.” She nodded. “But this time, well, I can honestly say it’s the entire reason I quit doing personal chef jobs.”

“Uh oh.”

“I made appetizers, finger foods that they could feed each other. I made a salad that the client had specifically requested, that mixed both greens and fruit, with a tart balsamic dressing. They were working on both while I was in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on the entrée. I generally schedule out my serving, like any restaurant or caterer would, and it was time for me to bring the entrée out. I expected to retrieve the dirty plates from the salad and appetizers, so I had my mind on what needed to be done before I could prep the dessert, pack my things, and leave. Entrée in hand, I round the corner from the kitchen into the dining room, and I look up...” She paused dramatically, watching to see if he caught on, but he had a blank look on his face. “I look up, the plate balanced in my hands, and I see my client with her back on the table and her legs in the air.”