

Finding Love

Faye Valentine

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Disheveled from a lack of a change of clothing, musty from lack of access to a shower, starving from a week living on the streets without access to a source of food more reliable than the dumpsters she was lucky enough to dig through before they were emptied, Caitlyn walked into the Emerald Grove Police Station seething with unmitigated rage. Marching up to the front desk where a male officer in his late thirties sat, she slammed a crumpled piece of paper down. I am not missing and I sure as hell ain't mentally disabled," she seethed.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but what are you talking about?"

"This!" Caitlyn huffed as she poked the missing person's page. "I don't know what game my parents are playing but I'll sooner starve on the streets than go back home. And the information is all wrong. I'm eighteen, not fourteen. I didn't run away, I moved out. And I'm far from mentally disabled."

"No disrespect, Miss, but maybe that missing persons posting doesn't pertain to you."

"Oh, it absolutely pertains to me and I'll be damned if I ever step foot in their house again so call the damn search off and leave me alone!"

"Please calm down. I'm not in charge of the case so if you'll have a seat over there I'll get Detective Gould and she'll be able to help." Eyeing the distraught young woman up and down, Officer Eddie Perkins felt instant sympathy for her. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

"I don't need your..." belly aching painfully, Caitlyn's shoulders slumped. "Yes please. T-Thank you."

"What would you like?"

"Anything. I've barely eaten in a week and I'm not picky."

"Alright, let me go get Detective Gould and then I'll have some food brought in for you."

"Thank you. And I'm sorry I yelled but I'm so sick of my parents controlling my life that I'd rather die than spend another second with them."

"Apology accepted. Sit tight and Detective Gould and something to eat will be with you as soon as possible."

Sitting silently, Caitlyn watched as the officer disappeared into the deeper depths of the precinct. Hanging her head to avoid making eye contact with anyone passing by, she fidgeted nervously as the minutes ticked by. Hearing the click-clack of heels on the tiled floor, she meekly looked up to see a stern-looking woman in her later twenties with long black hair pulled back in a tight bun and glasses framing piercing green eyes wearing a dark gray skirt suit and lavender blouse.

"Hi. I'm Detective Lillianna Gould. Officer Perkins tells me you're our mission Caitlyn Barrett. Do you mind answering a few questions?"

"O-Okay."

"Please come with me and we'll talk somewhere a little more private."

"Yes Ma'am." Getting up, Caitlyn nervously followed the detective through the police station well-aware that all eyes were on her every step of the way. After weaving their way around several cubicles, they went down a hallway and then into a small interview room.

"Please take a seat. Before you say anything, I want to assure you that you're in no trouble whatsoever. You're not under arrest and are free to go whenever you like. Do you understand?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Eyes quickly darting from one dirty, scar-covered arm to the other, Detective Gould's heart sank in her chest. "Before I ask for your story, are you okay?"

"No!" Caitlyn shouted before immediately apologizing. "Sorry. I'm just very hungry and dirty and I don't want to go back to that horrible place or those terrible people. Please, please don't take me back. I'm an adult. I'm free to leave whenever the hell I want!"

"It's okay. We're not going to take you anywhere you don't feel one hundred percent safe," Detective Gould said as she sat opposite the upset young woman. "An officer should return shortly with something for you to eat. In the meantime, let's start with your name."

"I'm Caitlyn Barrett."

"And what is your date of birth Caitlyn?"

"May seventeen, two-thousand-five."

Looking down at the crumpled missing persons posting, Detective Gould sighed. "According to this, we're looking for a fourteen-year-old with severe mental disabilities. What makes you believe you're the same Caitlin Barrett?"

"Because my parents are manipulative bastards that will do whatever it takes to get me back under their control. Including lying to the police about my age and mental state. I've seen missing persons postings before on TV and they all have a picture of the missing person on them. I'm willing to bet my parents said they didn't have a single picture of me which is why there isn't one on mine. Speaking of them, their names are Aiden and Jaylynn and they live at thirty-nine-sixty-five Monroe Avenue. How much information do you need before believing I'm who I say I am?" Caitlyn said as she fished two documents from her front left pocket. "Here! I took these before I left. They're the only things I have proving my identity. My name as well as my parents' names are on my birth certificate."

"I believe you, but why would your parents lie and tell us you're an underage runaway?"

"Because they're manipulative, controlling bastards that'll stop at nothing to ruin my life. I see you looking at my scars. I've never cut myself and they're not the only ones I have. I'm eighteen years old and the first time I've ever stepped foot outside of the house was when I left a week ago. I don't mean their property either. I wasn't even allowed in the yard. I have no friends. I don't have a car, phone, job, or place to live. The only knowledge I have of the world is from the hour a week I was permitted to watch TV. The only access I had to a computer was for schooling and my parents made damn sure I didn't do anything on the internet not pertaining to my lessons."

"Are you telling me your parents caused the scars on your arms?"

"Not just my arms. I've spent my entire life being verbally, physically, and emotionally abused and I'm telling you right now that if you force me to go back I'll kill them. I'll grab the biggest knife I can and I'll slit their fucking throats! Two-hundred-ninety-three. That's how many scars I've counted on my body – all of them caused by their brutal punishments. They want me back because they're afraid their secret will get out, not because they have even an ounce of love for me."

It was then the interview room door opened and a young beat cop in his mid-twenties walked in carrying a large bag of food and a holder containing four drinks. "I didn't know what you wanted or liked so I got you a variety," he said, putting the food and drinks on the table.

"Thank you!"

"You're quite welcome." And with that, the officer walked out pulling the door closed behind him.

"Help yourself," Detective Gould said.

Reaching out, Caitlyn stopped with her hand inches from the bag and then pulled back. "I... after you, Ma'am."

"Oh, I've already had lunch. This is all yours."

"I... r-really?"

"Really. Is there something wrong?"

"At home I wasn't allowed to eat until my parents had their fill."

"You're not at home anymore, Caitlyn. No one here is going to hurt you so please put some food in your belly. But if you haven't eaten much in the last week you'll want to take it slow. "You said they brutally punished you? Can you tell me more about what they did?"

"They beat me with belts, switches, canes, and paddles. And when they were particularly mad at me they used a whip."

"A whip?"

"Yes Ma'am," Caitlyn said as she reached in and pulled a burger from the bag. Tearing the wrapper off, she hesitantly took a bite. Then another. And a third. Scarfing it down, she grabbed a handful of fries and stuffed them into her mouth. After swallowing she rinsed it down with several mouthfuls of sweet tea. "This is so good! My parents never let me eat fast food."

"Eat as much as you want but you don't want to make yourself sick. You're an adult so you're free to say no, but would you consent to having your scars medically documented to use as evidence against your parents?"

"Evidence?"

"If your parents caused the scars then that's abuse and if convicted they may face serious prison sentences. Having them documented by a medical professional will allow us to use them as evidence in court."

"What do you mean by documented?"

"You'll meet with a doctor and they'll take pictures of them and a statement of how you received them."

"They're all over my body."

"I know it's not ideal and may be embarrassing, but it's the best chance we have of bringing charges against your parents."

"Will you stay with me?"

"If that's what you want."

"O-Okay."

"Afterwards we'll get you cleaned up and taken to a safe place."

"C-Can I stay with you?"

"You don't have any family?"

"NO! I mean, yes, but none I feel safe with."

"Do they abuse you as well, Caitlyn?"

"Some of them have. If you don't believe me go there and look in their basement. Demand to see the video recordings."

"As much as I'd love to do that, we cannot just walk in without a search warrant unless someone living there gives us permission," Detective Gould said, giving Caitlyn a knowing and apologetic look.

"Y-You mean me?"

"You don't have to if you don't want, but if you went home and gave us permission to look around then there's not much they can do about it. Especially if they're not present at the time. Do they work?"

“Y-Yes. They’re both doctors and are gone most of the day.”

“What’s in their basement, Caitlin?”

“It’s where they take me when I’ve broken one of their many, many rules. There are cameras all over the house too so they can keep an eye on me when I’m home alone.

“Are there rooms without cameras?”

“No.”

“What about bathrooms?”

“There are multiple cameras in every single room.”

“I see.”

“Even if I wanted to go back I don’t have a key so I can’t get back in if they’re not home.”

“That’s okay. Please feel free to say no if it makes you too uncomfortable, but if you allow us to take you back...”

“NO!”

“Please let me finish. We will be at your side every step of the way and they will not be able to touch you. If they acknowledge you as their daughter then as a legal adult resident of the home you can give us permission to search the premises. If we find evidence backing your claims they can be taken into custody and you’ll be safe from them ever harming you again.”

“You promise you won’t leave my side?”

“I give you my word. All you have to do is tell us you don’t feel safe around them and we’ll remove them from the house while we search. Again, we can get the evidence without you going home, but it’ll take longer and give them time to potentially destroy it.”

“O-Okay. I’ll help, but if you’re lying they won’t be the only ones I kill,” Caitlyn said with stone-cold seriousness.

“I’ll chalk that up to emotional distress, but you’ll want to be careful about making death threats in front of the police. “

“I’m sorry. I’m just so worried they’ll somehow talk you into handing me over and... and I... please don’t let them hurt me anymore,” Caitlyn said, dropping her second burger on the table as she burst into tears.

“I know we’ve only just met and you have no reason to trust me, but please believe me when I say I’ll do everything in my power to ensure they never lay a finger on you again.”

Let’s say you take them away and put them in prison. What happens to me? Sure, I graduated high school, but I was homeschooled and have no practical knowledge of the outside world. I’ve spent the last week eating out of dumpsters. I found that missing persons posting four days ago. That’s how long it took me to figure out where the police station was. What am I supposed to do when I don’t even have basic life skills?”

“You rely on those around you to help.”

“I don’t have anyone around me.”

“You have me, Caitlyn.” Reaching out, Detective Gould gently placed her hands over the scared young woman’s. “I mean it. I will help you however I can for as long as you want it. But we don’t want to get ahead of ourselves. First, we have to do something about your parents.”