

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

★ **ABBY  
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*USA Today and New York Times  
bestselling author of Yours Truly*

*Worst*

**WINGMAN**

*Ever*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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# Holly

## CHAPTER 1

**T**here was an envelope taped to my windshield.  
I immediately clicked on the door locks.

It was 3:00 p.m., and I was in the middle of my shift. I had to do a quick pharmacy run, and I figured now was the best time. Grandma's bridge club was visiting, and the apartment was bursting at the seams. I didn't like to leave my patient for long, even when she had guests, so I'd jogged to the car in a hurry and hadn't noticed the card under the wiper until I was in the front seat.

I'd seen waaay too many cautionary videos about this exact situation: a kidnapper puts something on your car, you pause to look at it, and he grabs you while you're distracted and takes you to be murdered. I was not getting unalived on Valentine's Day, on principle. Some girl would be on YouTube three years from now, doing her makeup while she covered the chilling Valentine's Day death of a local single Burbank nurse, who died because she didn't have a boyfriend to walk her to her car. No, thank you. Kill me tomorrow.

I called my sister, Jillian, while I backed out of the space. She answered on the first ring. "Hey, what's up?"

"Can you stay on the phone with me for a bit?" I caught a glimpse of a red heart sticker on the back of the envelope. "Someone put something creepy on my car."

"Creepy how?"

"A card with hearts on it."

"*Oooohhh* what if it's from a secret admirer?"

I scoffed. "It's not. Trust me."

“No, seriously. What if—” She gasped. “What if it’s from *Jeb*?”

“I think I prefer the murderer.”

Jeb was my ex. We dated for two years and broke up three months ago after I found out that he’d been cheating for most of the relationship when I saw his picture in a local Are We Dating The Same Guy Facebook group. And yes. We’d alllll been dating the same guy.

“Want me to come meet you with a shank?” she asked.

“No. I’m running to the store. I’ll just pull up somewhere public and see what it is.”

I drove to the pharmacy, checking my rearview the whole way. I parked a few spots down, in front of the Kintsugi Day Spa. I was pretty sure I wasn’t being followed, but I still made quick work of snatching the card and jumping back into safety the second I got it.

It was a white envelope with a metallic-red heart sticker on the seal. I opened it up. A Scooby-Doo Valentine’s Day card that said “I Ruv You” on the front. The message inside was handwritten in black ink.

*Andrea, you're the best thing that's ever  
happened to me. Have a great day at work.  
I love you, Happy Valentine's Day.*

Then there was a coupon, redeemable for “One Dicking Down” on the date and time of your choosing. No expiration.

I rolled my eyes and slid it back in the envelope.

“Well?” Jillian asked. “What is it?”

“It’s a love letter. And it’s not for me. Someone must have gotten the wrong car.”

“Awwww. That’s sweet. Kind of weird he doesn’t know what his girlfriend’s car looks like, though.”

I shoved it in the glove box. “So what did you do today?”

“I dodged suitors.”

“Ha.”

“I’m serious. I felt like a ninja. That guy who owns the wakeboard place brought me doughnuts, and I had to do the whole duck-and-roll thing behind the counter. I kinda hurt my shoulder. Can you look at it?”

“You know where I’ll be.”

My sister was an adorable ADHD bundle of chaos. She was delicately pretty, thrifted every single thing she wore, always had a different hair color, and never committed to anyone, which seemed to make the male frenzy over her worse.

“How’s Grandma today?” she asked.

“The same. In good spirits.”

“And you?”

I shrugged. “I’m fine.”

I wasn’t really. I hadn’t been fine in a while.

I put my head in my hand and leaned against the window.

I was always really good at compartmentalizing what I did for a living. I think that was part of my gift. I had the compassion that the duties required, but also the ability to leave it behind the moment I stepped out the door.

Now when I left my assignment, I got in my car and cried. Because my assignment was to watch my grandmother die.

There was no way I wasn’t taking the job. I was a hospice nurse, the obvious choice. And it was an honor to be the one providing the bulk of her care. But it was so draining. I’d gone from a traumatic, unexpected breakup to a new city in a new apartment that still felt like a hotel to

me, then right into Grandma's diagnosis. And the responsibilities of it being family made it harder.

I was the one updating the CaringBridge page so the out-of-state cousins could follow her end-of-life journey. I was also planning a funeral with Mom. I didn't get days off, and the never-ending caretaking was wearing me down. But I didn't want days off, I wanted to be with Grandma. What I wanted was more time.

Time is such a precious thing. How you spend it, how you waste it. And it becomes even more valuable as the hourglass runs out, because you will never get more of it. I see it every day. The panic as the last grains of sand fall.

I think that's why I was so bitter about Jeb. He wasted my time.

He also stole my neti pot, which for some reason pissed me off more than the cheating. He does *not* deserve clear sinuses.

"Here's what we're not gonna do today," Jillian said. "We're not gonna cry over some medium-ugly man with a receding hairline who left a four-in-one shampoo in your shower. You are a beautiful death goddess, do you hear me?"

"Death goddess. I need that on a T-shirt," I mumbled.

"I'm coming over. We're getting chocolate-wasted. And do not spiral deeper into your dark place. Get out of the car and touch some grass."

I nodded even though she couldn't see me.

We said goodbye and hung up.

I stared out at the spa in front of my car, at a big yellow sign advertising mud wraps and flotation tanks.

It would have been nice to get a card on my windshield today. One that was for me. But I had to accept that I wasn't getting anything I wanted and wouldn't be for a very long time.

# John

## CHAPTER 2

“**Y**ou had literally ONE JOB.”

My brother, Frank, was standing next to my ladder.

“I’m sorry,” I said distractedly, looking at the wires hanging out of the hole in his living room ceiling. “Who knew there were so many white Hondas?”

“Now she thinks I didn’t get her anything.”

“I will tell her it’s my fault. I messed up, it’s on me. Did you do this? Is this electrical actually something that a human person put together? It looks like the work of a family of raccoons.”

“I’m not an electrician, I’m a dentist. That’s why I called you. You know, you gave a stranger my free sex coupon.”

I twisted to look at him. “*That* is what I delivered? Are you kidding me?”

He shrugged.

I shook my head. “Now I’m thinking I did you a favor, losing it. And I’m also thinking I have to find the car I put it on and apologize.”

He snorted. “Dick.”

I climbed down and looked at my watch. “I’m gonna run to Home Depot and pick up the ceiling fan. What else do you need me to do?”

He looked around. “The faucet’s leaking in the kitchen, the windows need new screens. Oh, and the dishwasher isn’t working right.”



I glanced at it. “That’s because it was born in 1974. You need a new one.”

He puffed air from his cheeks. “Fine.” He dug in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Get whatever one you think is best. Are you sure I can’t pay you for the labor?”

“Consider it a housewarming gift. It’s not every day you buy your first condo,” I said.

He handed me his Amex. “I think I’ve just hit the age where I get why people are so excited to win appliances on game shows.”

“Just wait until you have to start paying those HOA fees.”

He laughed. “You sure you have time for this?”

I didn’t have time. But I was going to do it anyway.

My brother had been there for me last year during my breakup. It was by far the shittiest time in my life, and I had *not* been good company. The least I could do was make sure he didn’t electrocute himself to death.

I made quick work of the trip. I stopped for sandwiches and pulled back into the parking garage an hour later. The white Honda was there. The back right tire was a little low. It made it easy to recognize.

The complex was huge. A mixture of apartments and condos with an enormous parking garage and no assigned spots. The chances seemed unlikely I’d see this car again. I figured the universe was sending me a sign that yes, I did need to apologize to the poor recipient of my brother’s free peen voucher.

I dug in my glove box and found a pen. Then I scrawled a note on the back of my Subway receipt and slipped it under the windshield wiper.

# Holly

## CHAPTER 3

I was on my way to my car when I saw the paper flapping on the passenger side of the windshield. I pulled it off and got into the front seat. It was a note, written on a receipt.

*Hi. I was tasked with putting a Valentine's Day card on my brother's girlfriend's car yesterday, and I guess I got the wrong car? I'm sorry. I understand there was a coupon in there that nobody should ever have had to lay eyes on. I hope I didn't cause any problems with you and your S/O. —The worst wingman ever (Obviously)*

I laughed dryly. I folded it in half and put it in the cup holder.

The mystery Valentine's Day card was yesterday. It was still in my glove box, I wasn't sure what to do with it. I was thinking maybe there was a community corkboard for the building somewhere that I could tack it to? It didn't feel right to throw it away.

I drove home. When I got inside, I shrugged off my sweater and dropped it on the arm of the couch. Then I stared around my apartment wearily.

I didn't know this place yet. It was full of my stuff, but I hadn't been home an entire day in the eight weeks I'd lived here. Not since they sent Grandma home on hospice. I

hadn't unpacked, I hadn't made it my own. It was as foreign to me as the rest of my life at the moment—somewhat familiar but alien too.

I wandered around, watering neglected plants. I sifted through mail, paid a few bills. Folded a pile of laundry. Then I dropped into bed and passed out.

The next morning when I pulled back into the garage at Grandma's complex, I left a Ziploc bag containing the Valentine's Day card under my wiper with a short note.

*It's what I get for having the most common car in the US, I guess. Even I can't figure out which one is mine sometimes. I don't have a boyfriend so you're in luck, nobody cared lol. I thought you might want the letter back.*

If it was still there when I returned, I was going to look for that corkboard, but I figured it was worth a shot. Save me a trip around the building.

I came out three hours later to put Grandma's walker in the back seat, and the Ziploc was gone, replaced with a page torn from a ceiling-fan-installation pamphlet.

*Thanks. Maybe a bobblehead on the dash would help? Haha*

It made me smile. A little.

When I came back up, Grandma was where she always was, in the hospital bed in the middle of the living room, surrounded by flowers and draped in a colorful afghan, laughing loudly with Jillian, who was telling some dramatic story. Mom was clinking dishes in the tiny kitchen.

Grandma's sister, my great-aunt Lucy, was standing on a stool by the window, hanging crystals.

This was a good place to die. It had good energy.

Everything around my grandmother always did.

She didn't like the sterilized hospital thing or any reminder of what was actually happening here. She'd made me drape a floral scarf over the IV stand, and I wasn't allowed to wear scrubs. Not for this assignment. She liked things pretty and soft and comfortable. Food cooking in the kitchen, people around her. So that's what we gave her. I wore my regular clothes. Blousy tops and flowy skirts. Jillian brought candles she'd made and Nadia Cakes cupcakes, Mom simmered pasta sauce, and we watched Grandma slowly decline.

"I'm back," I said, clicking the door shut behind me.

Lucy pointed at the crystals. "How about this?" she said, louder than necessary. Her hearing aids were off again. "Is this in the right spot?"

Grandma turned to look. "We won't know until the sun's on that side."

"WHAT?"

"I said, we won't know until the sun's on that side," Grandma said, louder. "For Pete's sake, turn your hearing aids on."

Lucy climbed down. "I can't hear a thing you're saying. We probably won't know until the sun's on that side."

I laughed to myself as I came over to the bed and lowered the rail. "How's your pain?"

"Good," Grandma said.

I arched an eyebrow. "Are you just saying that?" I asked, taking her pulse. "I know you don't like the way the morphine feels. We can do something else."

She waved me off with her free hand. "I'm fine."

There was a thump against the wall from the neighboring apartment, followed by the sound of a power tool.

“What are they *doing* over there?” Mom asked.

“New tenants,” Grandma said. “Probably fixing it up.”

“Well, I wish they’d be quieter about it,” Mom said, wiping the counters down.

I checked Grandma’s catheter bag. Then I pulled out my stethoscope and listened to her chest. I didn’t like what I heard. I never would.

I wrapped my stethoscope around my neck, trying to keep my feelings about this off my face. “Something funny happened a couple of days ago,” I said.

Grandma perked up. “Oh?”

“Someone left a love note on my car.”

“It wasn’t from Jeb, was it?” Mom said.

“No, it was for someone else. Very anticlimactic. But it had a sex coupon in it,” I said, amused.

“I hope you kept it,” Jillian said. “You need it.”

I scoffed. “Thanks.”

“You know where you need to go?” Jillian said.

“Where?” I asked, checking Grandma’s ankles. She had some edema. This was new.

“Home Depot,” Jillian said.

“For?”

“To wander the aisles, looking confused.”

“Why would I—” I gave her a look. “I am *not* man-shopping at Home Depot.”

“She’s right, Holly. There’s lots of good men at hardware stores,” Grandma said.

“Stay away from the garden and paint sections,” Jillian said. “The men over there are gay or married. Stay out of

the lumber section too. Real carpenters have timber delivered on-site; you won't find anyone in the lumber section who knows what to do with their wood."

"You are unbelievable," I said, rolling fresh socks on Grandma's feet. I glanced up at my sister. "What else?"

Her eyes sparkled. "The tile aisle is where it's at. Those guys are ripped and they make good money. Also, they're good on their hands and knees."

Grandma was snickering.

"Plumbing and electrical fitting is another good one. They're trade guys. Professionals. But the place to go, the pot of gold, the fishing hole of the hardware world"—she paused dramatically—"is the tool aisle."

We were all watching her now, captivated.

"You want the guys buying the red tools," she said, making eye contact with each of us. "Red tools are a green flag."

"Why red?" Mom asked, drying a bowl with a rag.

"Those are the expensive, professional ones." She propped her foot on the edge of Grandma's bed and did a hamstring stretch. "You could make an exception for a guy with yellow tools if he's cute enough. But never green. *Ever.*"

"No green," I said, smacking her foot off the comforter. "Got it."

Mom was shaking her head. "Where did you learn all this?"

"I drink iced coffee and I know things."

Grandma chuckled.

"Good information," I said, finishing with the socks and tucking the blankets around Grandma's feet. "But I'm going to take a break from dating for the foreseeable future."

"Why?" Jillian asked.

*Because my self-esteem is shattered? Because I'm not ready to trust someone yet? Because my heart is about to be broken in a way I've never known, and there isn't room for more?*

“He just did a number on me, is all.”

Grandma watched me as I sat down with my coffee.

“Holly, did I ever tell you about my first husband?” Grandma asked.

I paused, mug midway to my mouth. “You had a first husband?”

“Before your grandfather. Never had any children with him. We were married only eight months before he died. Lucy, remember Chip?”

“What?” Lucy shouted.

“Chip! Do you remember Chip?”

Lucy grimaced. “He was a bastard.”

“Handsome as a fox but mean as a snake,” Grandma said. “I’ve been wanting to tell you about him, I keep forgetting.”

“Why did I never know this?” I asked.

“I don’t like to talk about him,” Grandma said. “I don’t think I breathed his name once during the fifty years I was married to your grandfather. Only started thinking about him recently. We’ll talk about it later.”

Mom stood in the doorway. “Holly, you can’t let what Jeb did get to you. The cheating says so much more about him than you. And what kind of a man steals a neti pot?”

“One that should have his dick in a guillotine,” Jillian said.

“A what?” Lucy asked.

“A DICK GUILLOTINE,” my sister repeated. “A tiny one.”

Mom laughed before turning back to the kitchen. “Lucy, we’re leaving in thirty minutes.”

Jillian nudged our great-aunt with her elbow. “Leaving in thirty minutes,” she shouted. She did a side bend. “I’m leaving in a bit too. I’m taking the kids to the beach.”

Her kids were guinea pigs.

She put them in a mesh tent and took them on outings.

My sister volunteered at three different animal rescues, where she was known as “the guinea pig girl” because she loved to foster them. For work she sold homemade skin-care products at farmers markets. They were really good, I loved her lavender lip scrub.

Jillian, Mom, and Lucy left. I was glad there was going to be a break in the visitors.

Grandma was lying to me.

She was in pain. She just didn’t want to take anything that would make her sleepy or fog her memory when people were here. She wanted to be present, so she wouldn’t accept anything that would actually take the edge off.

A night nurse came every day at 8:00 p.m. so I could go home to sleep. The night nurses told me that she’d ask for morphine the second I’d left.

The sand was running out of the hourglass. And she didn’t want to waste a single grain of it.

Grandma didn’t feel like a person with only a few grains left. I think that’s why this was so hard.

When Grandpa died, he was tired. His dementia had taken a lot of him. We lost him months before we lost his body too. But Grandma still had so much vitality. She didn’t feel ready to go yet.

I wasn’t ready for her to go either.



# John

## CHAPTER 4

When I opened the apartment door, the smell hit me. “Hello? Maintenance.”

No answer.

I groaned internally.

I’d been the on-site maintenance man for this building for two months. I’d been happy to get the job. Ecstatic. Brenda and I had broken up four months earlier, and I needed a new place. They gave me a fully remodeled unit, I lived there for free, and the pay was great. Driving in LA is a nightmare, and now I didn’t have to. I worked where I lived, all the stars aligned, and I moved in.

Every day since had been like a horror show.

I’d found a *body* on my second day.

An elderly man had died in his tub, and the tenants below him called because there was brown water leaking from the ceiling. I thought I was going to fix a broken pipe, and instead I was calling a coroner.

The building had a hundred units, no vacancies. It was fifty years old and showing its age. I could see why they wanted an on-site person, because a lot of the repairs were backlogged. Some people had been waiting for months, so they were already pissed off when I got there.

Traveling across town to help Frank every few days with his new condo was starting to feel like a vacation. At least *they* were happy to see me.

I was going back today after work to help him install a new sink in the second bathroom. By help, I mean I was going to be doing it by myself, and my brother was going to be taking me out to eat Mexican food when I was done. His

dishwasher got delivered, and I'd gone over to install that yesterday. When I'd pulled up, the white Honda was there.

The tire was still low. Worse than the day before.

She'd said she was single in the note she left. Maybe she was an older lady? I'd noticed a walker folded up in the back seat yesterday. Maybe she didn't have any help, didn't know how to put air in a tire? The car had to have sensors. It was a new model, she had to know it was leaking.

I should have left a note.

I told myself I'd look for the car when I got there later to see if the tire had been fixed yet. It was bugging me. But for now, I had to deal with my real job.

This morning, someone called to tell me there was a bad smell coming from the apartment across from theirs. The tenant wasn't answering calls, and their rent was overdue.

I was pretty sure it was going to be another body, especially when I opened the door and the stink rolled out.

"Hello?" I called again, breathing into my elbow. It echoed off the walls.

I flicked on the light. The unit was empty. At least what I could see of it from the door. A little bit of trash, but no furniture.

I let myself in and started looking around. It took me about five seconds to figure out what the problem was. The smell was coming from the fridge. It was unplugged and everything in it was rotten. I gagged on the stench I released, opening it. I'd have to tape it shut and take it to the dump. I was unlocking the sliding glass door to air out the room when I heard the noise from the bedroom. A low whimpering.

I poked my head in the door.

There, in the middle of the floor in a wire crate, was a dog.

---

Four hours later, I sat on my sofa, elbows on my knees, looking at the puppy while he chewed on a rolled-up, frozen rag I'd made him, stuffed with beef jerky.

He was a Lab mix. Black with a white spot on his chest, floppy ears, maybe six months old, tops. He'd been caked in poop, with urine burns on his paws. It took me a solid hour to scrub him clean, but once I did, besides being hungry and thirsty, he was in good shape.

What the hell was wrong with people? Who could do something like that, abandon a living creature to die? I filed a police report, but I doubted anything would come of it.

And now I had a dog.

I'd always wanted one, but Brenda hated animals.

I scoffed internally.

We'd dated for three years. We'd been house hunting, talking about marriage, looking at rings. Then out of nowhere, she announced she was moving to Japan.

It wasn't entirely out of left field. She spoke the language and had family there. She'd been offered a teaching job. She wanted to go, she felt it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that she couldn't pass up. I was willing to go with her. That's what you do, right? When you find love, you follow it.

Except she wanted to go alone.

Found out later that she'd met someone online and she was moving there to be with him.

At the time I'd been devastated. I couldn't even get out of bed. Frank helped me move. Let me stay with him until I got the place and job I had now.

There was a time when I thought I would never get over it. But after a few months of thinking about it, I kept coming back to the same thing.

Who doesn't like *dogs*?

Honestly. I mean, it's one thing if you've had a bad experience or you're allergic or they don't fit your lifestyle or something. That, I get. But who sees a puppy and doesn't want to play with it? That was Brenda.

There was something fundamentally wrong there. Some red flag that had been waving that I was too in love to see. I'd dodged a bullet, I saw that now. But regardless of my new, healthier state of mind around my breakup, my life was still sort of . . . off.

My apartment was depressing. I didn't have the time or drive to decorate and furnish it. I preferred to build my own stuff or refurbish things, and I just didn't have the motivation to do it. I wasn't dating. I didn't have the motivation for that either.

Maybe I just needed to get my feet under me. Get used to the job, get through Frank's to-do list. I'd have more time when that was done.

Speaking of Frank . . . I looked at my watch. I had to head over there.

When I got to the parking garage, I looked for the white Honda. Found it.

The back tire was flat.

I blew out a long breath.

I put the truck in Park and looked at the dog in the passenger seat. "Well, looks like today I'm going to show you how to use a compressor."

# Holly

## CHAPTER 5

When I came out at 8:15 p.m., there was another note on my windshield. It was written on the back of a brown paper bag from a pet supply store. I took it and sat in the car to read it.

*Hey, it's me again, worst wingman guy.*

*I noticed your back right tire was a little low the other day. I figured you'd get the sensor alert and put air in it, but it was lower yesterday. I told myself if it was still low today, I'd leave you a note, but then when I got to the parking garage, it was flat. I felt bad for not saying something sooner, so I went and got my compressor and put air in your tire. I think you might have run over a nail. You should be able to get to a tire store now, but it'll keep leaking if you don't get it fixed. Also, I'm realizing how completely unhinged this long note on this bag looks, but this was the only paper I had in my truck. I'm done touching your*

*car now without your permission lol. Have a nice day. P.S. Seriously, please get it fixed, it's giving me anxiety.*

I laughed. Then I lolled my head back on the seat.

I knew the tire was low. The repair shops weren't open by the time I went home, and it wasn't like I was getting days off to run errands.

I shuddered to think about the absolute breakdown I would have had if I'd come out to a flat tire after the day I had today.

Grandma was starting to fade.

She wasn't eating or drinking anymore. She was getting weaker. The swelling in her ankles meant her kidneys and heart were failing. Nobody else noticed these little things, but *I* knew what these changes meant. She didn't have much time left.

I looked down at the paper bag in my lap.

This was really kind, what this person did.

I wiped under my eyes and googled a tire shop and got their hours. Then I called the agency and asked if they had someone who could cover me until 10:00 a.m. so I could go get it fixed. I let Mom know I'd be late tomorrow and to tell Grandma when she got there in the morning.

I picked up the bag and looked at it again. Then I navigated to the store it came from. I had just enough time to get there before they closed.

# John

## CHAPTER 6

**T**here was an envelope on top of her back right tire.

It was two o'clock, the day after I'd filled it. It looked good. She must have gotten it fixed.

I picked up the card. It was addressed to me.

*To the Worst Wingman Ever,*

*You, kind sir, have restored my faith in humanity.*

*I did see the sensor alert. I stopped and put air in it before I parked it the first time you saw it. I was hoping it was just a slow leak and I could put off going to a tire store until my schedule opens up a bit, but I guess the plan failed.*

*I'm a hospice nurse. I'm caring for someone in the building, and it's been very time consuming and mentally and emotionally draining. I think coming out and seeing a flat tire would have done me in. I can't thank you enough for helping me.*

*Here's a small token of my appreciation. I trust your anxiety over the air in my tire will ensure you find this before a thief does. If it doesn't and a thief is reading this instead of you, have the day you deserve, jerk. —H.*

There was a twenty-five-dollar gift card to the pet store the bag was from.

I smiled and tucked the gift card in my pocket and looked down at my dog. “She got you a present.”

He wagged his tail.

We headed up in the elevator to Frank’s. The doors pinged on the fourth floor. When they opened, a woman was waiting to get on.

A very beautiful woman.

I wondered for a split second if this could be H. I’d wondered that every time I saw any woman walking around this complex over the last few days. But then H said she was a nurse. This woman wasn’t in scrubs.

She was my age, maybe twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Brown hair in a loose braid, a long flowing skirt, gold sandals. I’d never seen her before, and God knows I would have remembered bumping into *her*.

The dog was pulling on the leash, trying to meet her. She was in white, and I didn’t want him to jump so I held him back. I nodded at her while we edged past. She smiled at the dog.

She took my spot in the elevator, and I was still facing her, trying to get my puppy to move in the direction we were going, when her eyes dropped to my tool belt.

“Red,” she said, almost to herself.



Then the doors closed and she was gone.

I looked down at myself. Red what? My tools?

I didn't have time to figure it out because the dog was pulling again. He'd been here once and already knew where he was going. He dragged me down the hall, and I let myself into Frank's apartment and unleashed him.

Andrea was sitting at the kitchen counter, and she squealed. "A dog? Where'd you get him?"

She hadn't been here when I came over yesterday.

"Found him abandoned in a unit," I said, dropping the leash on the counter.

"Are you serious? Poor baby!"

She hopped off the stool and leaned over so he could lick her chin.

Frank came around the corner, holding an electric screwdriver. "Hey."

I nodded at his hand. "Uh, what are you doing with that?"

"Hanging a shelf."

"Did you anchor it?"

He paused. Then he turned and hurried back the way he'd come.

"What's his name?" Andrea asked.

"I haven't named him yet," I said.

The Doobie Brothers were playing from somewhere outside the apartment. "Listen to the Music."

The neighbors were a little loud. The other day someone had shouted, "DICK GUILLOTINE!" at the top of their lungs. No idea what *that* meant, though it sounded like a great name for a band.

Band names ...

“What about Doobie?” I asked, looking down at my dog.

Andrea ruffled his ears. “Yeah, he looks like a ‘Doobie.’”

I crouched to pet him. “Do you like that? What do you think?”

He wagged his tail and licked my nose. “Okay. Doobie it is.”

Andrea stood. “How’s the new job?” she asked.

“Disgusting. They sent me in to check out a vacated apartment today. It was hoarded. Floor-to-ceiling garbage. And the toilet had stopped working at some point, so they used the bathtub instead. I had to call in a hazmat team.”

She looked horrified. “Ewwwww ...”

“Ewww is right. Then I got stung by a hornet.” I looked at the welt on my arm.

“Did you put anything on it?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t have anything. It’s fine.”

Something crashed in the other room, followed by cursing. I pushed off the counter. “And that’s your boyfriend tearing the drywall.”

I went to help my brother find a stud.

# Holly

## CHAPTER 7

“This is exactly what they mean when they say, ‘If he wanted to, he would.’”

Jillian was holding up the brown paper bag. I’d gone to get it from the car because she wanted to see it after I told her the story.

We were sitting in the sun on the small, plant-filled balcony outside Grandma’s living room. She was napping.

Grandma didn’t nap.

She especially didn’t nap when people were over to visit.

I’d texted the family group chat today and told them it was time to start saying their goodbyes, that if they wanted to come, they should come now.

“You should find out who this guy is,” Jillian said.

“I think he’s old,” I said.

“Why?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. He does old-guy stuff? He travels with a compressor.”

She nodded sagely. “Yeah. That does give me ‘dad’ vibes.”

We had the Doobie Brothers playing softly from a small speaker. We were sitting in the sun, drinking iced coffee. I hadn’t spent enough time outside recently. It was nice.

Speaking of nice ...

“I noticed a cute guy in the elevator earlier,” I said.

My sister arched her eyebrow. “You did? What did he look like?”

“Kind of rugged? Beard. He had a dog and a tool belt. Red tools.”

“Red tools, green flag. Did you talk to him?”

I shook my head. “I’m not in a decent headspace for that right now. At all. But it was nice to finally notice someone again. Good to know there’s still a sex drive in there somewhere,” I mumbled.

We sat in silence, listening to the music while she peered at me through her sunglasses. “So how long.”

She didn’t have to tell me what she meant. I gazed out over the railing at the pink trumpet trees in bloom. “One to three days. That’s my best guess.”

She let out a slow breath through her nose. “She had a great life.”

I nodded. “She really did. And she’s going to have a great death too. Surrounded by people who love her, at home, not in pain.”

“I hope I die like that,” she said. “Or doing what I love.”

“Not me. I wanna die doing what I hate. Put me out of my misery, kill me on the stair-stepper.”

She laughed and balled up her napkin and threw it at me.

She tipped her head back and closed her eyes. “This is so hard. Like, seriously. How do you do this for work?”

“It’s easier when it’s strangers,” I said.

“No, it isn’t. I’d be a hot mess doing this, you’re built different.”

“I’m not. It’s hard as hell. Even for me.”

“Did you know that it’s not ‘hard as hell’?” she said. “It’s hard as *hail*.”

I tilted my head. “Is it?”

“Yeah. You know who told me that? This homeless guy at the farmers market.”

“No. I’m googling this.” I picked up my phone and typed. “Oh my God. You’re right. I mean, the internet is a little divided on it, but there’s definitely a ‘hard as hail’ camp.”

“It makes sense. Hail *is* hard.”

“Hell is also hard, though,” I said.

“Well, we’ll never know. Neither of us are going.” She checked her phone. “I gotta take off,” she said, getting up. “I’m getting a new guinea pig foster.”

“You and your guinea pigs.”

“I love ’em. They only need four hours of sleep a day.”

“Like someone I know.”

She stuck her tongue out at me.

When Jillian was gone, we had a rare lull in visitors again, only this time the energy was very different. Grandma wasn’t awake, talking to me. The apartment was buttoned up, the lights were off, and the curtains were drawn. It was eerie. It was never this quiet during sunlight hours.

She’d sleep more and more now. That was normal. She might start to have visions, see people who’d passed on before her. Her mother, Grandpa. She might see a light or an angel. A tunnel.

All normal.

Some patients wait until the loved ones they want to see have come. Then they let go. A lot of people rally right before they pass. They have one really great day where they’re awake and alert. They might even ask for food or something to drink. Then when everyone leaves, they slip away.

I hoped for that the most. I wanted her last moments to be her, surrounded by everyone who loves her.

I sat at the tiny table and pulled out my book.

“What are you reading?” Her frail voice surprised me.

“Just a romance,” I said.

She sat up. “Did I fall asleep? What time is it?”

I looked at my watch. “Six fifteen.”

“Early still. I must be worn out from yesterday.”

I think she knew why she was worn out. We both did.

“Do you need anything?” I asked, getting up.

“No. I’m just enjoying the quiet. It’s been a train station around here this week.”

“Do you want me to shorten the visits?” I asked.

“Oh no. I’ll rest when I’m dead.”

“Ha.”

She smiled. “Come over here. I want to give you something.”

I put my book face down on the table and made my way to her bedside.

She slipped her jade bracelet off her wrist. “Here. This is yours.”

My face went soft. “Grandma, I can’t take this. Grandpa gave you this.”

“You *can* take it. I don’t want to be buried in it. In fact, I don’t want to be buried in any of my jewelry.”

“What about your wedding ring?” I said.

“No. People bury the silliest things. Why would you throw something like that away?”

“Because it’s yours. It should be with you.”

She shook her head. “Let it be with someone who will love it. Sell it if you don’t want it. Let it be a gift for a stranger. Things should bring joy. If these organs weren’t

ninety years old, I'd say don't bury these either. Donate them so someone else can live."

I smiled a little. That was very her.

I peered around the dim room, the sunlight etching the edges of the drawn curtain.

"You know what I wish I would have done?" she asked.

"What?"

"Had sex with strangers."

I barked out a laugh.

"What?" she said. "It's true. That's not how things were for women back then, we didn't have birth control like we do now. Lord knows I would have taken some of those men up on the offers I got—before your grandfather, of course."

"Of course."

She sighed. "You're so lucky to be young when you are. When I was your age, women couldn't even serve on a jury. Couldn't run a marathon or get a credit card without your husband's permission. Now you don't even have to get married." She took the bracelet from my hand and slipped it on my wrist.

I held it up to look at it.

"It's perfect on you," she said. Then she closed her eyes again. "I just need to rest a little. I still have so many things to tell you. Maybe tomorrow. I think I will take a little of that pain medicine," she said. "If you have time."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and went to get her morphine.

When she fell asleep, I slipped out for a few minutes to get some air. There was a courtyard in the complex. It had some pretty landscaping and a bench. I wanted to sit there, clear my head. Touch some grass.

I stopped at my car to get a sweater first. When I got there, I checked the tire to see if the card was still there. It wasn't. There was a nurse bobblehead instead.

She was in light-blue scrubs with a stethoscope around her neck. She had brown hair like me—a coincidence, I'm sure. There was a little note attached.

*Hi, I saw this and I had to get it for you, so you can tell your car apart in the endless sea of white Hondas. Thanks for the gift card. I was glad to help.*

I laughed and held it, leaning against my door. I loved it.

I don't know how, but it felt like this stranger was a guardian angel. Like the universe had put him here to be there when I needed him with his small giant acts of kindness.

That's the thing about kindness. You never know how big the ripple is. How one little selfless gesture can make all the difference for the person who receives it.

When I got home, I was going to make a small Thank You sign out of cardboard and glue it to the bobblehead so it looked like she was holding it. I'd put it on my dash in my car so he'd see it the next time he walked past. I hoped he got to see it.

Because I wouldn't have a reason to come here much longer.



# John

## CHAPTER 8

I was out in the courtyard, walking Doobie. We'd just gotten back from the store. I'd had to run out to Home Depot again for caulk. Frank said he got some, but what he actually got was a bottle of glue.

How my brother and I sprang from the same parents and were raised in the same house was beyond me.

Anyway, the store had this assortment of bobbleheads at the checkout. I got one for the white Honda lady. She probably wouldn't even use it. It was probably going to end up in a donation bin or in some white elephant gift exchange next year, but it was too perfect not to grab. I left it on her tire.

I let Doobie get his zoomies out in the little dog run off the courtyard. Then I walked him until he pooped. I'd just cleaned it up and was about to head in when someone came up behind me. "Can I pet your dog?"

I turned and to my surprise it was the woman from the elevator. She stood there, the setting sun at her back, holding her sandals.

It might seem a little melodramatic, but she felt like a fairy or a spirit standing there. The flowers were all in bloom and butterflies were floating around, and this beautiful, ethereal woman appears out of nowhere.

"Sure," I said, trying not to stare. "I'll hold him so he doesn't get your skirt muddy. Sorry, he's still learning not to jump."

"It's okay," she said, crouching. "If I get dirty, I get dirty. I don't really care today."

I looped a finger in his collar to keep him from pummeling her anyway. He wiggled and cried, and she

scratched under his chin. “What’s his name?”

“Doobie.”

She smiled up at me. “That’s a good name. A good name for a good boy.”

I watched her play with him for a minute. She had on a jade bracelet.

I cleared my throat. “I’ve never seen you here before.”

She talked to me but looked at him. “I don’t live here. I’m just visiting family.”

“Oh. Me too.”

“What kind of dog is he?” she asked.

“I think he’s a Lab mix. I’m not really sure; I rescued him.”

She pivoted to look at me. “Oh. My sister volunteers at a few rescues. Which one?”

“None, I found him. He was abandoned in an empty apartment.”

“Oh my God.” She looked at him with pity. “And you kept him?”

“I did. Not my job to question the dog distribution system.”

She laughed. Then she noticed my arm. “What happened there?”

I twisted my elbow to look at the welt. “Occupational hazard. I was knocking down a hornet’s nest at work. One of them got me.”

“Ouch.”

“Better me than a little old lady.”

She smiled. Then she sat back on her heels and dug in the small purse she had on. “Here. It’s prescription cortisone.”

Doobie was calmer now, so I let go of his collar to take it. The second I wasn't holding him up, he rolled onto his back so she could rub his belly.

She looked down at him with hearts in her eyes. "He's so sweet," she said.

I put a pea-size amount on the sting. "Do you have any pets?"

She shook her head. "No. It's hard when you live alone."

"I live alone too. But I work where I live, so I can check on him." I handed the tube back to her.

"Keep it. In case you need to save any more old ladies."

"Ha. Thanks." I slipped it into my pocket.

"It's pretty swollen," she said.

I pressed on the walnut-size welt. "It hurts too. It's hard as hell."

"It's actually hard as *hail*," she said. "Did you know that? I just learned that today."

"Is it? I guess it makes sense. Did you know that when someone says 'Break a leg' to an actor, it's because they're hoping they end up in a cast?"

Her mouth dropped open. "Is that true?"

I was smiling. "I don't know. I would definitely fact-check me."

She looked amused at my joke.

"Did you know that the first episode of a show is called a pilot because it's the first time it's on the air?" she asked.

"Really," I deadpanned.

"Really. But I would definitely fact-check me too."

I laughed and it made her laugh. We shared this small moment, and we held each other's gaze for a split second. Then she looked away from me and stood up. "Thanks for

letting me play with him. It's been a rough day. I needed it." She slipped her sandals on.

"Yeah."

She stood there for a beat. "Have a good night." Then she turned and started walking back to the building.

Somebody told me once that it only takes a few minutes to know if you like someone. That our initial impression is usually the right one. I liked her. I had the strongest urge to call after her and ask her name, ask for her number, ask her to coffee. I almost did it. I was *so* close.

Then I realized how I looked.

I was in work clothes. I had paint on my jeans, my steel-toe boots were scuffed. My beard was grown out, I needed a haircut.

I hadn't given two shits about my appearance since Brenda. What was the point? Who did I have to impress? I wasn't dating, I wasn't even looking. But suddenly I cared how I looked. I cared a lot.

I cared enough that it stopped me from stopping her.

So I just let her go. I watched the door close behind her, and the moment was gone.

I beat myself up about it the whole way back up to Frank's.

When I got there, Andrea was still sitting at the counter.

Andrea was a hairstylist. She did Frank's hair, and she did a good job.

"Hey, when do you work next?" I asked. "I was thinking about getting a haircut."

"*Yeesssssss!*"

I knew instantly that I'd made a mistake. She was way too excited.

"I've been wanting to get my hands on your head for *months!*" She bounced. "This is going to be the most epic

‘before’ and ‘after’ *ever*.”

“I just want a haircut, Andrea, nothing big.”

“Oh, we’re going big. We’re hitting brows, beard, skin care—I’m about to transition you out of your caveman era. Frank, he’s finally letting me do it!”

“The end of caveman era?” my brother called from the other room.

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve talked about this?”

Andrea nodded, wide-eyed. “Definitely. *Many* times.”

“Wow. You two are obsessed with me.”

“Here’s the thing, John.” She put her hands together. “You are a *giver*. You do everything for everyone else before you do a single thing for *you*. I honestly think that’s why the Brenda thing hit you so hard. Instead of being like, ‘Wow! This is a great guy!’ she took it for granted and screwed you over, and when she left, you had nobody to love, and you didn’t know how to love yourself.”

I blinked at her. That was oddly insightful.

“You deserve self-care,” she said, going on. “You deserve to feel good and to look good and to let someone do something for *you* for a change. Just let me.”

She looked at me earnestly.

I let out a puff of air. “Fine.”

She did a little dancy thing in her seat.

The next day I was Pretty Woman’d within an inch of my life.

Did I look the best I’d looked in years? Yes. Was it at the expense of my dignity? Also yes.

She insisted I participate in a “before” and “after” video for the salon’s social media. She refused to let me pay her, so I felt guilty into agreeing to it.

All the comments on it were backhanded compliments.

**It's like one of those videos where the  
guy quits drinking and they do a before  
and after**

**Was he homeless or is this just some  
guy? He's cute now tho for real**

**Okay, but why did he look like Encino  
Man? It's giving Brendan Fraser 🥰**

I had to stop looking. Apparently the transformation was jaw-dropping, that's all I needed to know. I now had the confidence to approach the mystery woman if I ever saw her again.

If.

In the meantime I had a lot to think about, because Andrea was right. I did put everyone before myself. I always had.

Maybe it was time I learned to take care of me.

# Holly

## CHAPTER 9

The next two days, family came and family went. Grandma drifted in and out. She no longer took breaks from the morphine. It was a vigil now. We didn't hover around her laughing and joking anymore. We whispered and spoke quietly so she could sleep.

The whole family had been here today. Everyone came and touched her hand and talked to her, even though she didn't wake up for it.

I'd hoped for the rally. It looked like I wasn't going to get it.

At 7:00 p.m., Jillian, Lucy, and Mom all went to dinner at a restaurant close by. I stayed. I wouldn't be going home anymore. No more night nurse. Mom and I were sleeping bedside because we were too close to the end.

Once everyone had cleared the apartment, I put the railing down. Checked Grandma's vitals. Her blood pressure was low. Her hands and feet were cold because her circulation was in service to the organs that were failing.

I brushed the hair back off her forehead, put some of Jillian's lip balm on her lips. Lit her favorite candle. Then I picked up her hand and pressed the back of it to my cheek and closed my eyes.

I was going to miss her so much.

I wasn't ready.

My job was to help others be ready, but I couldn't do it for myself.

I felt like I couldn't do *anything* for myself right now. I couldn't unpack my apartment or ask a cute guy for his name in a courtyard. I couldn't even put air in my tires.

I knew my life would kick-start again. But it wouldn't happen until hers was over. It would happen *because* hers was over and I had no choice but to keep going on.

"I never told you about my first husband," a voice said quietly.

My eyes flew open. Grandma was awake. I smiled at her. "Hey."

"Hello, my sweet Holly."

Hearing my name made the knot bolt to my throat. Because the truth was, I thought I'd already heard her say it for the last time.

"You thought I was a goner, huh?" she joked tiredly.

I laughed a little. "Not yet."

"I couldn't go without telling you."

"Telling me what?"

"About Chip," she said. "I didn't forget. Sit. I don't think we have a lot of time."

I sniffed and sat on the comforter and took her hand. "What is it, Grandma? I'm listening."

"I've never told anyone what I'm about to tell you."

"Okay. Say whatever you need to say. It stays with me."

"I don't care who you tell," she said. "Anyone who cared is long dead. I'll be gone before they can arrest me, and Lucy will never confess."

I wrinkled my forehead. "Confess—"

"I killed him."

I jerked to stare at her. "*What?*"

"I did," she said matter-of-factly. "Chip was a mean drunk. He liked to hit me. One day he came at me, and I just knew that was it. I wasn't getting out alive. I clocked him on the side of the head with a cast-iron frying pan."

I blinked at her.



“Lucy and I put him in the back of my station wagon. Drove to the river, rolled him into the water. I called the sheriff the next day and told him my husband went drinking and never came home. They found him a few weeks later. Called it an accident. They thought he probably fell off a bridge or something.”

I was in shock. “Grandma . . . ,” I breathed.

“Feels good to tell someone,” she said, closing her eyes.

I licked my lips. “It’s okay,” I said. “Get it off your chest.”

She opened her eyes again. “Oh, it’s not on my chest. I’d do it all over again. He’d have killed me. No, the whole point in me telling you this story is to remind you that we need to manifest our own destiny. I never accepted less than what I deserved ever again. Never ignored a red flag or excused bad behavior. I asked for what I wanted, and I protected those I loved, and I demanded the things I needed, and I had a *beautiful* life. Got seventy more years of living because I decided not to lay down and die that day when some weak man who deserved a dick guillotine made the choice to hurt me.” She held my gaze for a long, meaningful moment. “Take responsibility for your own unhappiness, Holly. If you don’t love your life, change it.”

It was like the words took all that she had left. She lay back against her pillow and closed her eyes. Then she went eerily still.

My heart started to pound. “Grandma?” I shook her gently. “Grandma, wake up,” I said, panicking. “Please. I can’t have your last words contain the phrase ‘dick guillotine.’”

She chuckled weakly to herself, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’re gonna have so many people waiting for you in heaven one day, beautiful girl,” she said quietly. “I’ll be the first one in line.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “I love you,” I whispered.

She didn't whisper it back. She'd said all she ever would.

She passed the next morning surrounded by everyone she loved.

# John

## CHAPTER 10

The white Honda had the nurse bobblehead on the dash when I got to Frank's two days after I met the woman with the jade bracelet in the courtyard. It was holding a little Thank You sign through the window. There was also a succulent on the back right tire with a card.

*To the Worst Wingman Ever, Thank you for your kindness over these last few days. You will never know how much it was needed. I hope both sides of your pillow are always cold, and your cell phone is always charged, and your brother always delivers his own Valentine's Day cards (and sex coupons).*

*I'd like to leave you with some parting words of wisdom that someone recently gifted me. I very much needed to hear this. Maybe you do too.*

*"Take responsibility for your own unhappiness. If you don't love your life, change it."*

*I hope you love your life. But if you don't*

...

—H

I laughed a little to myself when I was done reading it. I did need to hear it.

And I never saw that car there again.

# Holly

## CHAPTER 11

Jillian and I were at the funeral, standing over Grandma's coffin, peering down at her.

It had been a week since we lost her.

She looked peaceful. Her hands were folded delicately in her lap, and she was wearing purple, her favorite color.

I'd been through a kaleidoscope of emotions over the last seven days.

I'd debated who to tell about Grandma's confession, or if I should tell anyone at all. In the end I decided Mom didn't need to remember her mother that way. She would have too many questions, and she'd go to Lucy for them, and I didn't want to put my aunt through it. I had to talk to someone about it, and Jillian would never tell a soul, so I told her.

"Grandma killed a guy," Jillian deadpanned.

"Believe me when I tell you at no point in time did I know where that conversation was going," I whispered.

"Are you sure it wasn't a hallucination?" she asked quietly. "Doesn't that happen at the end?"

"It does, but no. She was lucid. I googled it. I wanted to verify it before I told you. He was a real guy. I saw the death certificate, the marriage certificate, and the newspaper article about his drowning. I'm telling you, she killed him," I whispered. "And Lucy helped her get rid of the body."

My sister mouthed the word "damn."

"Okay, but that is such a boss bitch move, though," she said.

"I *know*."

“An absolute queen. And Aunt Lucy!”

We turned to look at her. She was wiping her nose with a crumpled tissue, over by the guestbook. She looked like Mrs. Claus dressed in black.

“She makes me needlepoints of Bible verses for Christmas.” Jillian shook her head. “She disposed of a dead guy?”

We looked back at Grandma, lying in state.

“I mean, you know how it was back then,” I said quietly. “There wasn’t a lot of recourse for domestic abuse. Your husband could pretty much do anything he wanted to you. Marital rape wasn’t even illegal until 1993. I guess you had to take it into your own hands sometimes.”

“I guess.” She made a face. “Imagine having to kill a guy named Chip,” she whispered. “That would piss me off. Like, you’re gonna have a stupid name *and* be an asshole? Pick a struggle.”

I snickered through my nose. “Jeb had a stupid name.”

“*And* the audacity,” she whispered. “I’d shove a dead guy into a river for you. I’d shove a live one in there too.”

“So would I.” I looked at her. “Do you think Grandpa really didn’t know? I mean, you’d have to give off at least a little ‘I Can Kill You’ energy after that, right? ‘I’ve done it once, I can do it again’ vibes?”

“You know he was a good one if he got to live,” she said.

I choked on my spit. This made her laugh and we both descended into a fit. Mom shot us an “Are You Kidding Me” look from across the room, and we leaned into each other and tried to contain it. The giggles eventually turned to tears.

I felt delirious. Drunk with grief.

But also somehow okay.

I *was* going to be okay.

I was ready to take responsibility for my own unhappiness.

I was going to take some time off. Process what I'd been through the last few months, start a new hobby, get some exercise, get back out there. I was going to make Grandma proud. I probably wouldn't kill a guy, but I would definitely never accept anything less than what I deserved, ever again.

"I'm gonna miss her," I said, wiping away tears.

"Me too. What a mic drop, though. Brava."

"She would have loved this," I said.

"Oh, she one hundred percent did this on purpose. This was exactly what she wanted us talking about, standing over her dead body. A fucking legend." She sniffled. "It's still hard, though."

"It is hard," I said. "It's hard as hail."

# John

## CHAPTER 12

I walked Doobie in the courtyard every time I came over to Frank's, looking for the woman in the jade bracelet. Hell, I came over even when I didn't need to. When a month had passed without a sighting, I finally gave up. I had to accept that I'd lost my shot. But I wouldn't lose it the next time with the next person. I was officially out of my caveman era, and I was accepting responsibility for my own unhappiness.

I decorated my apartment. My place actually looked nice now. I refurbished some furniture I found; I started a potted garden out on my patio and put the succulent from H out there. Painted. I even got some artwork. I maintained the haircut. Kept the beard—I liked it—but I trimmed it daily.

The job got a little easier too. I was almost through the backlog of repairs. People were starting to know me in the building; I got friendly head nods now. I got on a first-name basis with some of the elderly residents. They needed someone to check up on them, and I was glad to do it. They liked the visits from Doobie. I felt like I had a community. A purpose.

I kept that last note from H on my fridge. A reminder to control the things that are in *my* control.

I still thought about the woman in the jade bracelet from time to time. How she appeared that day in the courtyard like magic, then vanished without a trace.

It was weird to say, but I felt like I might think about her for the rest of my life. Like she would be my one “What If.”

I guess in the grand scheme of things, a single “What If” isn't too bad.



But still.

# Holly

## CHAPTER 13

“I’m going to Home Depot tonight to wander the aisles looking lost and confused,” I said to Jillian over the phone. “I need paint. I’m doing the kitchen. Do you want to come and help me pick colors?”

“Hell yes I do.”

I was standing at my sink, doing dishes wearing the Death Goddess shirt she got me for my birthday last week. The Doobie Brothers were playing, and my nurse bobblehead was bouncing on the windowsill next to my herbs. She still had the little Thank You sign.

I’d moved her from the car to the apartment. I wasn’t working right now, so I wasn’t driving much, and I wanted to look at her. She made me happy.

“I’ll go with you,” Jillian said. “But just so you know, I’m only looking at the hot men with tools; I’m not shopping for one.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

Silence.

I gasped. “Who?”

“He’s just this guy who adopted one of my guinea pigs. It’s very new.”

“Oh my God. Does he use four-in-one shampoo?”

“If he did, I’d let it slide.”

I shut off the water. “Woooooow.” I leaned my back against the counter. “The bar is coming down.”

“I think you underestimate the sex appeal of a man snuggling a guinea pig.”

I laughed.

“So you’re really ready to get back out there, then?” she asked. “Red-tool time?”

“I think so,” I said, drying my hands on a towel. “It’s what Grandma would have wanted for me. And love isn’t going to come find me in my living room.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“I gotta go. The maintenance guy is here. Six?”

“Six works.”

I hit the “End Call” button and took out my earbuds and went to open the door.

The man standing there was in a gray tee, jeans, and a tool belt—red tools.

“I’m maintenance, you called about a door?” he said, looking at his phone.

“Yeah, hi, come in.”

He glanced up and froze. Then I froze too.

He looked familiar. Where did I know him from?

“I . . . I know you,” he said.

“I think I know you too.”

“I met you in the courtyard at the Rose Roof Apartments. A couple of months ago,” he said. “I had my dog.”

I broke into a grin. “Doobie. I remember.”

Wow. He’d looked good to me then, but he looked fantastic now. He’d gotten a haircut, trimmed his beard.

He was staring at me like he’d seen a ghost.

“So you work here?” I asked.

“I live here. Yeah, I’m the maintenance guy.”

I smiled. “This is where you got stung by hornets?”

He nodded back the way he came. “Over in the parking garage.”

“So *that’s* who took that nest down. A hero.”

He chuckled, still looking at me wide-eyed.

I couldn’t believe it.

He’d crossed my mind a lot since that day. I couldn’t seem to shake that little connection we’d had, but I never in a million years thought I’d see him again.

He cleared his throat. “So you have a broken door?”

“The sliding glass door in the living room,” I said, putting a thumb over my shoulder. “It’s sticking?”

“Okay. Let’s have a look.”

I stepped aside and let him in, and he headed for the balcony. I watched him as he went.

He filled the room, and he did it in the best way. He was tall and imposing but with a friendly sort of gentleness about him.

I knew him by reputation. He checked on the elderly tenants in the building; my next-door neighbor had mentioned it.

I didn’t know what to do with myself all of a sudden. I felt nervous, like I did on a first date I was really excited about.

I tucked my hair behind my ear. “So have you lived here long?” I asked.

He glanced at me. “Not long. You?”

“Since December.”

He started sliding the door back and forth. A nice biceps flexing.

“I never see you,” I said, admiring the view while he wasn’t paying attention.

“I’m on the other side of the complex.”

“And do you like living here?”

“I do. But the job’s hard as hail.”

I laughed at the inside joke, and he gave me a smile. It broke the weird tension.

“So how have you been?” he asked, crouching to look at the track. “The last time I saw you, you mentioned having a tough day?”

I put my hands in my back pockets. “Good. Great, actually. I’ve been making some changes I needed to make. Taking responsibility for my own unhappiness.”

He stilled. “I’ve been doing the same thing . . . I’ve never heard anybody use that saying before,” he said, looking at me strangely.

“Which one?”

“The responsibility unhappiness thing.”

“Oh. Yeah, I kind of live by it now.”

He was studying me. “So do I.”

There was a weird break in the conversation.

“Sooo the door . . . ,” I said.

He seemed to snap back into the room. “I think the track needs to be replaced. I want to do it tonight; I don’t want to leave you with a door that doesn’t close properly. I need to run to Home Depot.”

“I was going to Home Depot too.” Then I paused. “I’m not saying we should go together,” I said quickly. “I just wanted you to know that if you see me there, I’m not following you.”

“What project are you doing?”

I nodded at the kitchen. “I was going to paint.”

He looked toward the sink and stared. “Where’d you get that bobblehead?” He looked back at me.

“It was a gift.”

Silence.

“Are you a nurse?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m a hospice nurse.”

He paused. “Do you drive a white Honda?”

“Yes ...”

Something moved across his face. “I gave you that.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“I also filled your tire with air and accidentally put a Valentine’s Day card on your windshield.”

I was speechless.

“That was you?” I breathed.

“That was me. John. Worst wingman guy . . . *You’re H?*”

“Holly,” I said, my heart pounding.

We held each other’s gaze. The same way we did that day in the courtyard. Only today I was in such a different place I didn’t need to look away.

I felt like I couldn’t breathe. It was too good to be true. My guardian angel.

He licked his lips. “I don’t do this. I have really strict rules about hitting on tenants, and feel free to tell me to go to hell. But do you want to go out sometime? Just, you know, for coffee? Or dinner? I could take you to Home Depot. We both need to go; I could probably help you find whatever you’re looking for there.”

I had to laugh.

“Yes,” I said. “You can definitely take me out. And I think what I’m looking for is already here.”

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2022 Ryan LaPlante*

Abby Jimenez is a Food Network winner, *New York Times* bestselling author, and recipient of the 2022 Minnesota Book Award for her novel *Life's Too Short*. Abby founded Nadia Cakes out of her home kitchen back in 2007. The bakery has since gone on to win numerous Food Network competitions and, like her books, has amassed an international following. Abby loves a good romance, coffee, doglets, and not leaving the house.



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