



AULD LANG MINE

A **HOPE ISLAND**
ROMANTIC
COMEDY



TEAGAN HART

Auld Lang Mine

*A Small Town Second Chance Holiday Romantic
Comedy*

Teagan Hart



Lightning Strike Press

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Content Notes

This extended length, third person novel contains profanity and is **not a clean romance**.

It is a plot-focused, emotional slowburn HEA with realistic characters and no instalove.

The MMC is a green flag / cinnamon roll hero.

While part of the Hope Island Holiday Romance series, it can be read as a stand alone, and has no cliffhanger.

As Max our MMC is a disabled combat veteran, Auld Lang Mine includes depictions and discussion of war, combat injuries, PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

As Andi, our FMC, is a veterinarian, Auld Lang Mine includes discussion and depiction of animal injury, treatment, pregnancy, and birth.

It also includes discussion of death of a family member, grief, pregnancy, and neurodivergence.

For our veterans. All gave some, some gave all.

*Please consider supporting our disabled veterans via the
Wounded Warrior Project*

<https://support.woundedwarriorproject.org/>

*For our pets; the way they love us teaches us to love
ourselves and love each other.*

*To Lucy Score and her incredibly supportive and loving
BRAs*

And to all of my Hopeful Romantics! <3

Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today.

- Thich Nhat Hanh

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1

Andi

“Holy hell, did we get crop-dusted by Cerberus or something?” Amelia coughed, stomping into the kitchen, Nintendo Switch in hand and baggy flannel shirt falling off her shoulders. Bert, the shaggy Old English sheepdog padded in behind her. His long gray and white hair covered everything but his smile and his tongue as he licked his lips and searched the room like a mutant mop.

Andi stopped prodding the mixture in her mixing bowl and gave her sister a blank look. “Huh, I don’t smell anything. Do you smell toast? Maybe you’re having a stroke.” Amelia stuck her tongue out at her.

Their mom frowned at them both before turning her attention back to the cutting board. “What’s ‘crop-dusting’?” she asked.

“Farting and then walking away,” Andi muttered, trying not to breathe in the fumes from the stubborn mixture in her bowl that didn’t want to combine.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” their mom said, pausing, lost in thought. She shrugged and went back to chopping green

beans. “I just thought that if you ‘dealt it, you had to stay and smell it’.” Amelia and Andi glanced at each other and then looked away.

“What school of farting did you attend?” Andi asked. She wrinkled her nose and looked down at the ground beef, pumpkin puree, eggs, and oatmeal mixture she was stirring. The thing that was really stinking up the place was the liquid vitamin crap she’d added. She sighed. “I’m starting to realize that I’m seeing this mixture before it goes *in* and I’ll be picking it up when it comes *out*.”

“Oh the glamorous life of a vet,” Amelia snorted, her voice muffled while she dug in the fridge. Andi’s mom winked at her before walking behind Amelia and poking her butt with a wooden spoon. Amelia jumped, hit her head, and swore. She retreated from the fridge, rubbing the top of her head and glaring at Andi and then their mom who each pointed at the other in blame. Amelia grumbled something about conspiracy, pulled a soda out of the fridge door, and hopped up to sit on the nearest counter before cracking it open. “Explain to me again *why* you’re making these ridiculous homemade treats for the dogs at the shelter?”

Andi sighed. “Because I already have to make homemade *cat treats* for the Slurpee twins and the dogs overheard and they ... got jealous.”

“Slurpee twins?” Amelia asked, deadpan.

“May I?” their mom asked, looking over at Andi.

“Go ahead,” Andi said with a nod as she put the bowl on the counter and wiped her hands on her apron.

“Two brother cats that came in. One has seven toes, and the other one has eleven. 7-Eleven. Therefore Slurpee twins,” she repeated, glancing over at Andi who gave her a thumbs up.

“Well,” Andi added, “that, *and* they tag-teamed Annabelle’s blue raspberry Slurpee when she left it on the back table. They tried drinking it, but then they got mad at it for being cold and just started slapping the ice around, coating the walls and each other ... and Mr. Giggles, Slomo ...”

Amelia blinked up at the ceiling and then shook her head. “And you’re going to try to get those goobers *adopted*?”

“Yeah,” Andi said, frowning. “They deserve a good home.” She turned her attention back to the bowl, gave up on the spoon, and dug in with her hands. “They all do.”

“You’ll get them all adopted, sweetheart,” their mom said. “With your help, I’ll bet they all have a home by Valentine’s Day.”

Andi stared at the treats mix and tried to swallow the hard lump in her throat. “I need to get them all adopted by the end of January. Doc Simmons says he’s worried about the shelter’s bottom line.” Andi chewed her bottom lip. The thought of any of her furbabies at the shelter being shipped away to another shelter on the mainland and an uncertain fate ... her stomach started twisting itself into knots. She had to figure out how to get them all adopted. She had to think of something that would

work. So far, her ideas had all fizzled out when she'd tried to put them into practice.

She gripped the edge of the counter and tried to breathe. She heard panting behind her and a moment later, Bert sat his shaggy butt down on her foot and grinned up at her with his mouth open. She scratched the top of his head and smiled. Just like his previous owner, Bert always knew when she was on the verge of a panic attack and did his best to make her smile. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Anyway,” Amelia said, “*Why* do these ridiculous cats get homemade treats?”

Andi cleared her throat and straightened up. “Wheat intolerance.” The kitchen door opened and their dad walked in, paused, and made a face when he caught a whiff of the treat preparation smells. “The manufactured ones give them diarrhea. It shoots out of them like a fire hose,” Andi continued. Their dad turned on his heel and left the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind him. Bert was on his feet and panting again as he trotted across the floor to follow him out. It hadn't taken Bert long to figure out that outside the kitchen, her dad knew where all the good snacks were stashed around the house.

“Oh! That reminds me,” their mom said, getting to her feet and retrieving a cardboard box from the countertop by the back door. “Esther caught me in the street on my way home yesterday. She said she saw the fliers you put up around town

about the shelter pets and she made you some cat and dog toys.”

“Oh ... kay ... I guess that’s ... logical.”

Her mom set the box down next to Andi and opened the flaps. “What the ...” Her mom withdrew her hand from the box, holding what looked like a red felt rocket, complete with two blasters.

“A red rocket,” Andi said, immediately biting her lip to keep from losing it. Behind her, she could hear Amelia choking on her soda.

“Esther, I swear ...” their mom muttered, tossing the rocket back into the box and picking up another toy. “What is this? Is it ...”

“It looks like a crocheted ...” Amelia started.

“Don’t say it,” their mom snapped. She shook the long, knobby toy and it jingled.

“That’s ... festive,” Andi snorted.

Her mom quickly dropped the toy back into the box and refolded the flaps. “You can check the rest of these out later.” She straightened up and Andi could see her trying to recover her holiday spirit while she mentally closed the box on all the comments she had for Esther about her pet “toys”. With a sigh, she turned back to face Andi and Amelia. “Alright. Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. Let’s get the excuses out of the way. What are the two of you up to?”

“Well,” Amelia said, turning her attention back to her Switch, “the gang and I were planning on knocking over a liquor store and then mooning Santa over at the Grotto. Then, if time allows, we’re planning on pulling up all the candy canes in the obstacle course and playing hockey with the plastic peppermint ‘stepping stones’. While all the tourists and kids stand around with their mouths hanging open.”

“Sounds good,” Andi said with a nod. “Count me in. Though, I want to be in the back row of mooners this time. The view from the front sucks.”

“I know right?” Amelia said with a nod. “If you’re in the front row, you’re essentially putting your face in the second row’s ...”

Their mom squeezed her eyes shut and sighed. “Why do I even bother?”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “We’re kidding, Mom. I’m staying home to do homework and vigorously clean my room. Then I’ll sit quietly in said spotless room, gazing out the window and reflecting on what kind of person I am and what kind of person I want to be.” She paused and grinned at their mom. “Now you don’t know where I’m coming from.” Their mom narrowed her eyes at Amelia, pointing at her with the knife she’d been using to chop the green beans. Amelia held her hands up in surrender. “Ok, ok. I’m probably just going to play video games all day.”

“No you’re not,” their mom muttered. “We have a Christmas dinner to prepare and if those thumbs can push

joysticks, they can ‘combo’ stuff a turkey.”

“Ew,” Andi muttered.

Their mom turned to look at her. “And what are you up to tomorrow?”

Andi shrugged. “Working a twelve-hour shift.”

Amelia sighed before their mom could. “Andi. You’re spending *too much time* at the shelter.”

“It’s my job,” she muttered, holding the mixing bowl at the edge of the table while their mom slid the chopped green beans into it.

“No,” Amelia said, shaking her head. “It’s your *life*. Seriously. You’re there twelve hours a day, *at least*, almost every day. I know you love being a vet, but you practically live there and ...” She took a deep breath and gave Andi a serious look. “I hoped I wouldn’t have to say this ... but I think you’re coming down with ...” she paused for dramatic effect. She squeezed her eyes shut, “Doolittle syndrome.”

Their mom gasped, playing along. “No! Not that. *Anything* but that!”

“Yes, that. Last week when you made me take her lunch, I walked in on what I’m assuming is the missing Shakespeare play being acted out by loose animals everywhere while Andi sat cheering in the front row.”

“No! It can’t be,” their mom said, putting a hand to her head as if she had “the vapors”.

“It was open play time,” Andi muttered. “We were just messing around.”

“And she had one of the cats strapped to her chest in one of those baby belt things.”

Andi rolled her eyes. “It was a sling and Pickles had just had surgery. I was monitoring him for ...”

“I’m just waiting for the line of penguins to follow her home from work one night,” their mom added. Andi ignored them and turned back to the counter to mix in the green beans.

“Seriously, Sis,” Amelia continued. “You talk to them, play with them, clean up after them, try to make them happy, and now you’re *imagining* perceived slights for them to be pissed about. I know this is going to sound strange to you, but the dogs *aren’t* jealous because they overheard your plans to make homemade cat treats. And the Slurpee twins would probably be just as happy snorting a line of catnip as they will be with whatever horrible treat you’re planning on making for them next. Which ... considering cat food smells a hell of a lot worse than dog food, I can’t even fathom what that nose abuse will be like.”

“I’m ordering pizza,” their dad shouted through the kitchen door. “The kitchen smells like there was a grisly murder in there three weeks ago, and it was just been discovered by a gassy truck driver.”

“I’ll bet your dad knows about crop-dusting,” their mom muttered. “Oh, Andi, I almost forgot to tell you. While Esther

was dropping off the box of what I'm beginning to suspect were just pet toys she couldn't offload at her shop."

"*Some* kind of toys," Andi and Amelia said together.

"She mentioned," their mom continued, louder to drown them out, "that the pet park project on that empty lot they own just off the square is actually going to happen."

Andi paused. "Really?"

Her mom nodded. "Yep. And you'd think she was up for sainthood by the way she was crowing about it." She rolled her eyes. "But it sounds like there are already several people in line, asking Esther and Stanley for something in the park ..."

Andi took a deep breath. "Ok. So ... I need to get in line."

"Probably the sooner the better," her mom said softly.

"You'll need to do more than that if you want something from Esther," Amelia snorted.

Great. Another opportunity for my dazzling idea and planning skills to crash and burn. Merry Christmas to me.

"What ... what do you think I should do?" Andi asked.

Amelia grinned. "How attached are you to your ears, your sanity, or your free will?"

"Don't you have an imaginary field to hoe or imaginary errands to do for imaginary cartoon friends?" their mom asked, glaring at Amelia.

"It's a *game*, Mom. It's not *imaginary*," Amelia huffed, picking up her Switch and pushing through the kitchen door.

She collided with Bert on his way back in, but they both managed to keep their footing and glare at each other as they passed.

“Don’t listen to her,” her mom said when the door swung closed and Bert had gone back to snuffling the floor. “I’m sure there’s a reasonable woman . . .,” she cut her eyes to the box of pet toys, “... *somewhere* inside Esther.”

Andi nodded. She was about to reply when she heard her phone ding in her back pocket. She headed for the sink to wash her hands before digging it out to check the text. It was from her almost sister-in-law, Michelle.

M: Hey.

M: How’s the memorial brainstorming coming?

Andi took a deep breath. It had become a daily question from Michelle. She felt some of her tension release as she realized that today, she at least had a lead on something.

A: We have a new pet park being planned here on the island. I think he would have liked it.

Andi paused and swallowed hard to dislodge the hard ball of emotions in her throat.

A: We used to take Bert to all the dog parks in Seattle. He always said that if the energy in a dog park could be harnessed, it would light up the world.

She looked over at Bert who was smiling again, sitting on the ground and scratching his ear with an uncoordinated back

paw. Andi turned her attention back to her phone and held her breath. *Please, Michelle, let this be ok.*

M: So ... would the whole park be dedicated to him?

Andi felt her heart fall.

A: I don't think I can make that happen. I was thinking maybe a bench? He always liked the dog parks with good seating the best. He said they were more welcoming.

Michelle didn't reply. After a few minutes, Andi slid her phone back into her pocket and dug her hands back into the dog treat mush.

"How's Michelle?" her mom asked. Andi didn't miss her careful, tight tone.

"She's ok. Just ... just checking in about ... his memorial," Andi said. She kept her head down, scooping and pressing the mixture into the dog bone-shaped cookie cutter on the baking tray.

"Which she's foisting off on *you* to do," her mom muttered.

Andi sighed. "It's fine, Mom. She's his sister. She has enough on her mind. I ... I can do it."

"She's asking a lot of you, Hun. He was ... no, Bert! Get down!"

Andi turned to see the shaggy beast squeezing his way between her mom's legs at the table, trying to get to the green bean leftovers.

Saved by the Bert, Andi thought. She chuckled watching him licking her mom's face while she tried to scold him. Bert was a rescue and he'd been raised with a family of wiener dogs as foster siblings. They'd bullied him and kept him in line and as a result, he was a big dog, but with submissive little dog energy. Of course, that didn't stop him from using his height to his advantage when there was something on a table or countertop that he wanted.

With a sigh, her mom slid a piece of bean over to poke Bert's searching tongue and he woofed it down, making the table move with him as he tried to get out from under it.

"About Michelle, Andi," her mom said after Bert had freed himself and returned to snuffling around on the floor.

"What about your friends at work, Mom?" Andi said quickly, desperately wanting to change the subject. "Do you think anyone might be interested in adopting one of the best pups or kitties in the world?"

Her mom sighed. "I'll ask again, but only one person took the last flier you sent in with me."

"Oh, I have more," she said, turning to look at her mom. "I have fliers for Slomo and Tookie now too!"

Her mom smiled sadly and stood to scoop the green bean stems into her hand. "I wish you didn't have all this extra stress on you, love. If it wouldn't cause a riot, I'd slap Doc Simmons. I can't believe he's thinking about shipping off the ones that don't get adopted. And now you only have until the end of *January* to find them homes?"

Andi nodded. “He’s just thinking about the shelter. We’re a small town. Animals need care, and food, and ...” She caught herself before she started to tear up. She cleared her throat. “But if it were *my* practice, I would be trimming the fat in other areas so we wouldn’t have to worry about how many pets we were sheltering. And we need a mobile vet in this town.” She knew her mom was humoring her, but saying it out loud always made her feel more certain, more confident about it being a possibility, even if she didn’t quite have a plan as to how to make it happen. “Since Hope doesn’t have much in the way of non-pedestrian transportation, it makes it hard for folks to bring a hurt pet in ... and there’s so much opportunity to help people connect and care more for their pets. And now that I *finally* have him on board with helping train and secure service pets and working with Hope Health to secure emotional support animals ...” she took a deep breath and paused. She’d reeled off the list so often to her mom, that Andi noticed she was nodding in time with every suggestion. Andi shook her head. “If we did all *that*, we wouldn’t have to even *think* about sending anyone away ...”

“And if crotchety old Doc Simmons won’t wise up and let you do it here, don’t worry. You’ll have your own practice again one day,” her mom said softly. “Just ... give it time. Give yourself time.”

Twenty minutes later, they’d thrown open all the kitchen windows and the door to the back porch in an attempt to destink the kitchen. Andi slid the tray of dog treats into the oven and wandered over to the back door to stare out at the yard.

She'd been avoiding looking out the windows or going into the backyard since she came home that summer. She didn't want to see what was still standing there, front and center. But it was almost Christmas and the gentle blinking lights from the Melrose's fence were now illuminating the damn thing like a dimly lit sign, asking her why it hadn't been used and what her plan was for its future.

Her dad had built the archway for them as an early wedding present, right after they'd gotten engaged, almost a year ago now. It was made of aspen logs, twigs still attached and woven together. It was beautiful. She hadn't looked at it on their wedding day, November 5th. She'd spent the day in bed with the curtains drawn, but she was willing to bet the archway had looked stunning with the last of the leaves falling around it. At least, that was how she'd planned for it to look when she walked down the aisle in her parents' backyard. But the whole thing was a cautionary tale about why you should never plan for something more than six months in advance.

She turned her head to look at the white porch swing, hanging from the heavy beam under the tin porch roof. It looked like it always had, the whole time Andi was growing up here. She left the doorway and moved over to stare at it, to make sure it really *was* still there. Lately, Andi had been having a hard time feeling certain about anything. Even things right in front of her. After all, he'd been right in front of her ...

Carefully, she sat down on the swing's red cushion that she and her mom had made for it when she was in high school. They'd cussed, and stabbed themselves repeatedly as they

tried to sew on the buttons and gather the fabric to look like the YouTube video. They'd watched it so many times, they could recite along with the woman's squeaky voice as she repeated the "nip, then tuck, don't tangle your thread, pinch it together" instructions.

Andi pushed against the concrete, letting the swing start to rock her. Then she scooted back, lifting her feet, and letting the momentum carry her. She tried to breathe.

They'd been sitting in this swing, almost exactly a year ago, when he'd put out a foot to stop them. She'd been cranky about it. They were warm and cozy, wrapped in a soft blanket from the living room. They didn't have to go back to life in Seattle for another day and she wanted to be lazy.

"Just hold on a minute," he'd said, laughing at her as she reached out to try and snag him by his sweatshirt so she could pull him back under the blanket with her. *"Just hang on. I need to do something."*

And then he'd gotten down on one knee, slowing the porch swing. For a minute, she'd panicked, misunderstanding what he was about to do, down on his knees, and almost between hers. She'd hissed at him that they couldn't do *that* at her parents' house in broad daylight, *especially* in Hope where everyone had their Eagle Scout badges in "neighbor watching" and "gossip milling".

"That ..." he sighed and shook his head. *"That's not what I was going to do. Give me a little credit, woman."*

Instead, he'd pulled a black velvet box out of his hoodie pocket and grinned up at her with that toothy smile, his curly hair in a mess all over his head from just waking up. Her heart had stopped beating and even now, thinking back on the memory, she could hear the roar in her ears as her brain tried to wrap around the fact that this was actually happening.

“Andrea Morgan, will you marry me?”

She'd been crying and blinking and trying to make sure she actually *was* awake when she'd blubbered her “yes” and he'd pulled her to her feet, hugging her against him. Instantly, her mom and dad, and Amelia were around them. Amelia had sparklers she was swearing at while trying to get them to light, her mom had been crying, and her dad had been calling Brandon, “Son”. Her dad had started working on the archway for the wedding the day after she and Brandon had gone back to Seattle. She'd lived in a cloud of delirious happiness for six weeks.

And then she'd gotten the phone call.

“Burning! Burning! Something's burning!” Her mom yelled from the kitchen. Andi jumped off the swing and skidded sideways into the kitchen, nearly losing her footing as she ran for the oven.



“Sorry, Mom,” Andi said softly, trying to bite down on her lip so she wouldn't laugh. They were staring at a scorch mark on

the wallpaper above the oven. It had a vaguely dog bone shape to it. When Andi had pulled the flaming, smoking treats out of the oven, one had been on fire. In fear and without a lot of thought beyond “*fire*”, her mom had grabbed the biscuit with an oven mitt and thrown it at the wall, rather than in the sink. It had scorched the wallpaper before falling down to land back on the tray, still on fire. This had led to her mom trying to put out the fire with the spray bottle by the stove, forgetting that it was the one filled with olive oil, not water. Now the entire smoking batch of ruined biscuits were in the sink, wet, and smelling worse than they had before.

“Why are you sorry?” she asked, turning to look at Andi. “I’m the one who threw the damn thing. Oh well. I was never a big fan of this chicken-patterned wallpaper anyway. Maybe now I can talk your dad into the renovation.” She sighed and looked around at the dated kitchen.

“Though I doubt one burn mark will be enough to convince your father.”

“Well, I *do* have to make a new batch of treats now. And after that, there are the cat treats. Where else can we do some damage?” she asked, looking around.

Her mom sighed and for a moment Andi thought she was considering the possibilities. Then she said, “I know this Christmas isn’t how you expected it to be.”

The carefully constructed wall that Andi walked the parapet of every day in her mind, started to rumble. *No. No waterworks. Hold it together.* “Yeah,” she said finally, clearing

her throat and double-checking her mental masonry. *Still holding. We're ok.* “I don't think it's how any of us expected it to be.”

“But, honey,” her mom turned to look at her, taking Andi's hands and squeezing them in hers. “I know this won't help today or tomorrow or even in the next month or so, but ... everything *will* be ok.”

Earthquake under wall, sector two. She did her best to nod and force a smile. “Um, I need ... my phone charger. My battery is almost dead ... and I still need to look up a cat treat recipe,” she said quickly, side-stepping her mom and heading out of the room. Her mom didn't question the excuse. After being home with her parents for six months, Andi guessed her mom recognized when her daughter was in “damage control” mode. Instead of heading for the front stairs in the living room, she headed up the backstairs from the kitchen. She took them two at a time, feeling her vision blur, causing her to trip on the top stair.

She stumbled down the hall, feeling the hardwood floor and the thin runner carpet under her feet, and beating back the memory of stumbling down that same hallway a year earlier, hand in hand with Brandon. They'd been tipsy and on their way to bed after having too many celebratory drinks with her family, the night after they got engaged. She pushed open her bedroom door and fell face-first on her bed. Without looking up, she groped for one of the pillows and rolled to her side, putting her whole face in it when the sobbing started. It had been almost ten months since his funeral, and the best she

could say was that the mental gut punches were getting easier to manage. The periods of wishing she was dead or that she'd been with him when the boat accident had happened were still there, but over the months, she'd cobbled together a routine for getting through them.

Once she'd cried herself out, she took a deep breath and slowly rolled onto her back. She kept the pillow on her chest like a soft, muffling barf bag, in case she wasn't done mentally hurling. She stared up at the ceiling, making awkward eye contact with Viggo Mortenson's Aragorn poster.

"We've gotta quit meeting like this," she muttered to him. Her throat felt raw and her eyelids were swelling. Crying always made her feel like a Muppet. Like a hand had just been quickly, and not very carefully, withdrawn from her throat and her eyelids were made of padded felt over bloodshot ping pong ball eyes.

She stared at the curled edges of the fourteen-year-old poster above her that had witnessed so much and yet was still gripping his sword. Maybe tighter *because* of what he'd seen. *You can do that*, she told herself. *You can grip your sword and yell and charge into battle, by yourself, even when the odds are against you and your plans fall apart.* But her vision was starting to blur again, as she choked on all the memories that she and Brandon had talked about making but never did and now, never would. And she felt tired and weak. She was Frodo, holding onto the edge of the crumbling ledge over the fiery pit in Mt. Doom. And there was no Sam to keep her from letting go.

Andi

“Incoming!” Amelia screamed from the door. With an innate sisterly self-preservation instinct, Andi drew her legs up. She curled into a ball to protect herself from the cartoon whirlwind of eighteen-year-old boney elbows, chin, and knees coming at her. Amelia hit the mattress with enough force to launch Andi into the air.

When she landed, Andi turned her head to glare at her sister. “Hurricane Amelia has apparently made landfall.”

Amelia grinned and pinched her.

“Ow! What are you wearing?!”

Amelia held up her hands which were covered in what looked like knit lobster claws.

“What the hell are those?” Andi asked, trying to roll away from her.

“Paw Claws!” Amelia said, crawling towards her, trying to pinch her again through the yarn abominations. “I found them in Esther’s box. The note said they’re to keep paws warm on

cold days. They're supposed to look like lobster claws, you know, for the island?"

"Despite the fact that the lobsters in the Pacific don't make it this far north," Andi muttered, trying to get out of pinching range.

"These ones must be for Bullmastiffs or something," Amelia said, collapsing back on the bed to study her hands. "They're huge." Andi sat up and dropped a pillow on her sister's face. "Hey!"

"Consider it a warning shot across your bow to keep your claws to yourself," Andi muttered, getting to her feet. "Be glad I'm not actively smothering you with it."

Amelia batted the pillow away. "It's a good thing you're my sister and a lot of cute animals depend on you because those are fighting words." Andi felt the pillow bounce off the back of her head.

"What do you want, Bedelia?" she asked with a sigh, bending down to pick it up.

Amelia groaned. "I thought we agreed, after the last time I kicked your butt that we would *not* be saying *that word* ever again." Andi turned to stick her tongue out at her sister. For a second, she caught Amelia's expression flickering to worry as she surveyed her, but then she tried to cover it with another "evil sister smile" as she burrowed deeper into Andi's bed. "I just thought this might be a good chance to pick the brain of a true prank master."

Andi knew better. She knew what Amelia was *actually* doing. Reconnaissance for her parents. They'd probably sent Amelia up to check on her. But, if Amelia wanted to play games, she'd play along. She did her best to tune her expression to "genuine surprise". "I'm not a prank master. I was a cheerleader and in the honor society ..."

"And you also let a herd of goats into the school on the day of a pep rally, filled the high school hallway with helium balloons, beach balls, hay, and packing peanuts during finals week, and coordinated the 'alarm clock-out' where no less than one hundred alarm clocks were scheduled to go off one minute apart before being hidden all over the school." Amelia narrowed her eyes at her, daring to deny it.

"You think *I* did all that? When all of those things happened, the rumor around the school was that S.I. was behind them," Andi said, fighting to keep a straight face. "I mean, they were always signed somewhere as 'S.I.'."

Amelia rolled her eyes. "And everyone knows that 'S.I.' was you and Max Lyons."

Hearing that name after so many years sent a new twinge of pain through Andi's chest. Hazel eyes and dark hair filled her memory and she shivered. But the memory belonged to another life. One that, despite her location back on the island, didn't exist anymore. *At least that screw-up was entirely my own, she thought. Though it would have been nice to rail at the universe for that one too.*

She cleared her throat and tried to keep her face innocent.
“No, S.I. was Stuart Irving.”

Amelia sighed. “Yeah, the chess team captain and president of the library club?”

“And all-around prankster supreme,” Andi added quickly. She couldn’t help the smile now. That had been, to her at least, her greatest high school achievement. Poor Stuart, who’d been picked on from the time they were all in first grade, had finally gained notoriety and popularity when they were in high school, all because of the awesome pranks he was rumored to have pulled off. It had been her idea, but it was Max’s perfectly executed plans that made it happen. And they’d always made sure he had a solid alibi when the pranks occurred so he wouldn’t get in trouble with the teachers, but still get credit for them amongst the student body. Seeing him smile and strut around the school their senior year had made all the heavy lifting worth it.

“Look, Andi, I’m not a teacher, or Mom and Dad, and I’m not going to turn you in. But it’s my senior year, and we *need* to pull off something epic before we graduate. I need ideas. I’ll even pass them off as *my* ideas so you won’t be implicated.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Andi muttered.

“Please? People *still* talk about S.I. pranks and you’ve been gone for eight years.” Andi opened her mouth to argue again but Amelia held up her hand. “Save it. Now, I heard you and Max once swapped around every teacher’s center desk

drawers. That could be fun, but some of the teachers moved to those standing-sitting hydraulic conversion desks.”

Andi sighed. “It won’t work then. It only worked the last time because all the teachers had the same ugly bought-in-bulk metal desks.”

“Ah-ha!” Amelia said, pointing at Andi. “J ’accuse!”

“So I *heard*,” Andi said, flopping back down on the bed next to her sister.

“Yeah, right.” Amelia sighed. “I don’t understand *why* you just won’t take credit for being S.I., especially after pulling off the best graduation prank in high school history.” Andi frowned at her. Amelia rolled her eyes. “Don’t play coy with me. The Duck Hand-Off? At graduation, you made sure everyone had a rubber duck to hand to the principal when they shook his hand and so the diploma table was just ... *full* of rubber ducks by the end.”

“I was an innocent bystander!” Andi protested.

“You had the box of ducks and were handing them out!”

“Because someone *told* me too,” Andi said. “Remember, I was just a stereotypical cheerleader ...”

“By that you mean diabolical and half the brains behind Hope High’s Prank Machine?”

Andi sighed. “It was a long time ago. And besides, if I just *give* you the ideas for your senior pranks, you won’t *appreciate* them. You’ve got to work for them, *Amelia Bedelia*.”

“That’s it,” Amelia growled, pouncing on Andi. With a shriek, they both rolled off the edge of her bed and hit the floor. Andi couldn’t breathe. Amelia was a black-belt assassin tickler with a wicked scissor hold. Andi always felt it was an unfair advantage that her *little sister* was half a foot taller than she was. The only advantage Andi had was speed. But since neither of the Morgan girls were all that coordinated growing up, whenever they chased each other through the house, their parents would exchange a dark look and immediately move to brace whatever nearby breakable might be in danger. Their daughters were the human equivalent of the Bumpus hounds on fast forward. Not that it mattered at the moment. Amelia had gotten wise over the years. Despite the “Paw Claws” still covering her hands, she currently had Andi pinned to the floor on her stomach while she sat on her butt, tickling with claw hands *and* bare feet. And unfortunately, as she was a teenager who couldn’t be bothered to bend over to pick up things that she dropped, this also meant that Amelia’s podiatric dexterity was lethal.

“Ss-stop,” Andi hissed, kicking her feet. She was flailing around, trying to connect with Amelia and knock her off her butt. She managed to get a hand on one of Amelia’s feet and she held on for dear life. When Amelia pulled back to try to free her foot, Andi was able to wrap both legs around her sister, pinning her in a scissor hold of her own for once. They heard footsteps in the hall, accompanied by the weary sigh of their dad. Both girls paused and looked up at him as he

stopped in the doorway to sigh again and shake his head, looking from one girl to the other.

“Nothing fills me with more pride than to see my two children, one a fully licensed veterinarian, top of her class, and successfully practicing for the past two years, and the other,” his gaze shifted to Amelia, “an eighteen-year-old, gifted computer programmer, who has been accepted to colleges up and down the west coast, as they wrestle on the floor, like possums fighting over a corn cob.”

“Sorry, Dad,” they muttered.

“Amelia, your game thing is making that beeping sound and the screen keeps saying ‘low battery.’”

“Shit,” she said, releasing Andi and staggering to her feet, the Paws Claws still covering her hands. She “pinched” them at their dad before moving around him and heading for the stairs, muttering, “shit, shit, shit”.

“Think of the baby angels, Bedelia,” their dad called after her. Andi felt herself smile. When they were kids, Andi’s third-grade teacher told her that every time she cussed, the words killed a baby angel. It had scared the crap out of her and when she’d gotten home that night, she’d told her two-year-old sister Amelia. The two of them had cried hysterically that night when their dad had stubbed his toe and let out a string of curse words. They’d cried again later when their mom had burned dinner. After a trip to a therapist and a talking-to that neither their mom nor their dad could get through with a straight face, it had become a family joke.

“And Andi, your mom is making a grocery list. She was hoping you could run to Bumble’s since her hair is already in curlers.” She saw the look of pity cross her dad’s face, but thankfully he didn’t say anything to try to coddle her. It was a rule she’d had to set a few months before. Before the rule, every time she broke down, her parents and Amelia would swoop in and hold her and cry with her and it just ... made everything worse. She wasn’t entirely sure that pretending the emotional breakdowns weren’t happening was much better, but the logical part of her brain told her they *had* to be. *Less* people were sobbing into pillows and wishing they’d also died in boating accidents. That *had* to be better, right?

“I think the curlers were intentional,” Andi muttered, following her dad back down the hall to the stairs.

“Strategic curler-ing, you think?” he asked. “You think she planned the flaming dog biscuit, ‘kitchen smelling like the seventh ring of hell’ thing too?”

Andi rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. Why does she need me to go to Bumble’s *tonight*?”

He sighed. “Well, for one, you two chef geniuses used up all the eggs, bacon, and sausage.”

She frowned. “We used ground ...”

“Sausage,” he finished. “Your mom was planning on making biscuits and gravy with it in the morning. And it wouldn’t be such a big deal, but now with no eggs or bacon ...”

She rolled her eyes. Damn her lack of planning. “So now there’s a breakfast food shortage, better known as a ‘Code Bread’ at the Morgan house since it means we’ll all be having PB&Js for breakfast at this rate.”

He nodded. “Unless someone makes the perilous trek to get us restocked.”

“And why aren’t *you* able to go to Bumble’s, just out of curiosity?” she asked as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Why, because I’m the *man* of the house,” he said with a grin. “Pipe and slippers, the newspaper, and football on the TV. I’m the hunter, not the gatherer, like you women folk.” And with that, he winked at her, stepped over Amelia’s legs which were currently propped on the coffee table, her feet wearing *his* slippers, and sat down on the couch. Next to him was her mom’s currently unoccupied spot. Andi saw him eye the remote before looking back at the screen where an episode of *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* was currently paused while her mom was in the kitchen. With the sigh of a man who was mildly inconvenienced, her dad lifted one of Amelia’s feet, picked up a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine from under it, and settled back into the couch to read. Of the whole family, Andi had a feeling that the coffee table magazines were only ever read by their dad while he waited for their mom to return to the couch and unpause whatever they’d been watching. *Man of the house he may be*, Andi thought, chuckling to herself as she headed into the kitchen, *but his castle is made of fashion shows, women’s socks, and chocolate, surrounded by a moat of estrogen*. Not that he ever seemed to mind that much. Though

this carefully orchestrated trip to the store for Andi was a little obvious. Less-than-stellar plans seemed to run in the family.

She knew she shouldn't be surprised. It was just the latest ploy in the campaign that her mom, dad, and Amelia had been waging for the past six months. They wanted Andi to get out of the house. Not move, but spend time outside of it, and work didn't count, according to them. The manufactured grocery store trip felt like they were grasping at straws. Maybe that meant they were starting to think about waving the white flag. She paused for a moment to send a thought to the universe, hoping that was the case.

She pushed through the kitchen door and barely gagged on the smell of burned dog biscuits clinging to the air. "Dad said you wanted me to go to the store?" At that moment, she didn't think she'd mind a little pity if it meant she could get out of having to go out in the cold wind and rain to Bumble's. Unfortunately, her mom wasn't feeling overly maternal at the moment.

"Yep. Don't worry. I've got a list for you. It shouldn't take long. But ... take your time. I know besides work you haven't been around town much. You should see the canned good dioramas they have up in Bumble's, and the Frosty ..." her mom trailed off when she turned to look at Andi.

"Mom. I grew up here, remember? You were there. I could walk blindfolded through the street and besides knocking into some tourists on their way to either blow the horn or get a Quickie over at De-Floured, I'd be able to make it to Bumble's

without a problem.” *Hmmm. A blindfold.* No. It would mean *she* couldn’t see the townsfolk, but they could still see her. She wouldn’t be able to *see* the sympathetic looks on their faces, but she’d still be able to hear them in people’s voices. Hope wasn’t exactly the number one destination for grieving people. Instead of sticking their nose into each other’s business, people in Hope stepped *all* the way in, and then sucked in their collective guts so they could still get the door closed behind them.

“People are getting *quickies* over at De-Floured?” her mom asked.

“Really? *That’s* your takeaway?” Andi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s a bakery ... people are getting *quickies* in a bakery?”

Andi sighed. “It’s a new special Miss Mandie is running. It’s a breakfast burrito with whatever you want in it. But you can get them any time of day. Bart just cooks up all the ingredients in a really hot skillet as fast as you order them, then rolls the whole thing up and hands it off by the time you’re done paying. Personally, I think he has most things already cooked. He just throws them into the skillet to warm them up so he can kind of half-ass it.”

Her mom sighed. “Sounds like a quickie to me.” She handed the list over to Andi and started shooing her toward the front door. “It’s just a few things. And the fresh air will do you some good. Can’t hurt after the burned dog biscuit fumes.”

Andi grumbled while she pulled on her jacket, but her mom also ignored her and stepped over Amelia to reclaim her seat on the couch. Bert looked up from his spot on the floor in front of the Christmas tree, still panting with his tongue hanging out. But when her mom sat without holding a treat out to him, he lowered his head back to his paws.

By the time Andi slung the grocery bag over her shoulder, her grumbling had been drowned out by her dad muttering, “finally,” and then applause as the show was unpaused. She was about to head out when she remembered the stack of fliers in her bag from work. At least this trip could serve another purpose besides getting her out of the house. She could put them up at Bumble’s and with a little luck, maybe a few more of the Hope Shelter’s pets would have a home for the New Year. It was a nice thought, even if she didn’t believe it. Nothing seemed to be working this year. She’d given up hoping that would change. *But we’ll try anyway*, she thought grimly as she tucked the fliers into a grocery bag. With one last sigh, she zipped her coat and headed outside.

The street was lined with houses decorated for the holidays and the gentle glow of LED lights looked slightly blurred in the misty rain that was coming down. *Ah yes, I’ve been dreaming of a wet Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.* She smiled remembering her parents laughing at her and Amelia for always singing that song as “Wet Christmas”. But in their defense, “white Christmas” didn’t make sense to them, growing up on a Pacific Northwest island.

She took a deep breath as the first evening greetings reached her from the neighbors who were on their porches or in their front yards. She tried to avoid stopping as often as she could. In Hope, it was easy for a twenty-minute errand to turn into an impromptu sleepover at a friend's house due to the late hour when the talking finally ceased. There were, of course, a few exceptions.

“Hey Tessa,” she called when their neighbor from across the street turned the corner in front of her. Tessa Cartwright wasn't from Hope and of all their neighbors, Andi felt like she could have a nice, safe, and short interaction with the easy-going blonde. She was carrying a bag of groceries from Bumble's and she looked as tired as Andi felt. “Long day?”

“You could say that,” Tessa said, barely mustering a grin. She'd moved into the old Shultz's house just before Andi had moved back six months earlier, and they'd become friendly. If Andi had to guess, she'd say Tessa was only a few years older than she was. Early thirties, maybe. Tessa hadn't met Brandon, but like everyone else in Hope, she'd heard what had happened. After telling Andi how sorry she was the first time they talked, she hadn't brought the subject up again, which made her gold in Andi's book. “How are *you* doing on this fine, slow drip of an evening?” Tessa asked, glancing up at the nearest old-fashioned lamp post whose outline was blurred by the mist.

“Probably mildewing where I stand,” Andi said. “How about you?”

“Ready for Sage to take a chill pill so I can get some sleep tonight.”

Andi frowned. Sage was Tessa’s cat. “What’s up with her?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. She’s got a wild hair up her butt and she won’t calm down at night. She just paces and goes to the window and meows and when I go to her, she just paces around the room, meowing. It wouldn’t be such a big deal, but she’s making it impossible to sleep.”

“Hmmm. Sounds like it might be some anxiety. Do you have time to bring her in tomorrow? We could run a couple of tests just to make sure she’s ok.”

Tessa gave Andi a relieved smile. “That would be wonderful. And a calm cat would be the best Christmas present in the world right now.”

“Consider it a date. Tomorrow is light on appointments with the holiday coming up. Just drop by whenever you have a chance.” Tessa thanked her and said goodnight. Andi trudged on, feeling the rain starting to soak through her sneakers and wishing she’d taken the time to change into her boots.

She was doing ok, keeping her thoughts on Sage and her wet socks, until she got to the town square. There was a children’s Christmas concert in the gazebo and she felt her feet pause. She’d stood in the same spot next to Brandon the previous year, days before he’d proposed. They’d just stood and listened, and he’d talked about “when *they* had kids” ... *Stop it. No more tonight. You already had your cry session. Just ... walk around the gazebo and get into Bumble’s.*

She was feeling pretty proud of herself as she bustled through the front door of Bumble's. She hadn't cried or lingered at the concert. And to keep it off her mind, she was repeating her mom's grocery list like some kind of farmer's mantra of "eggs, bacon, sausage" while she grabbed a shopping cart and headed down the nearest aisle.

"Andi!"

She tensed when the voice reached her. It was Mr. Bumble. He was one half of the couple that she was sure on some level would be in charge of organizing the day-to-day activity schedule for the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse when the end came. But, in all fairness, he was definitely the more impatient and less talkative half. She took a deep breath and turned, forcing her face into a smile.

"It's about time you dropped by. That donation box is full and it's confusing the shoppers."

"Wha ... what?" Andi asked, blinking at him.

"The box we set up for you in the front of the store. Folks wanted to buy and donate pet supplies to the shelter after they saw your fliers, and now the box is clogging up the egress next to my checkout stands. On top of that, people can't figure out if it's something for them to donate *to* or take donations *from*. And I'm tired of answering questions about the labeling."

"Oh! Well ... thank you! I can pick up the donations tomorrow."

He shook his head, looking like someone exchanged the omnipresent Werther's hard candy in his cheek with Pop Rocks. "You can take them tonight." He jerked his head at her cart. "I'll let you take that trolley home with you. Just bring it back in the morning."

"Oh ... ok. I'll pick them up when I check ..."

"I need to count out Tony at the check stand. Come get them now and I'll load you up. Then you can shop and check out. I've marked the donations." Andi followed Mr. Bumble to the front of the store and paused next to a cardboard box that had been carefully wrapped and labeled as the donation box for the Hope Animal Hospital and Shelter. Andi felt the corners of her eyes start to sting.

"This is so nice," she said softly.

Mr. Bumble didn't look at her. He gave her a short nod and started moving items from the box into her cart. "Now, all of the donated items have these misprinted labels stuck on them so Bridget will know if you're trying to sneak in something that wasn't donated."

Andi blinked again and shook her head. "Uh ... good." She glanced down at the misprinted barcode on a bag of kitty litter. "Orgasmic Blueberries?" she read. *Starting to understand where the questions about the labels might be coming from.*

"Machine screwed up," Mr. Bumble snapped. "And Lisa didn't want to waste them. So I had to come up with another use for them. Damn thing had printed six hundred before I caught it."

That's a lot of orgasms. “Well, maybe we’ll get six hundred donations,” Andi said, trying to choke back her laughter at the look of horror on Mr. Bumble’s face. “You can just call the shelter the next time it’s full and I’ll come empty it.”

Mr. Bumble gave her another short nod. “Just remember to bring that trolley back in the morning.” He muttered before stalking off.



She was thankful that it was late in the evening. The store only had a few other shoppers and with strategic cart steering, she’d been successful in avoiding them so far. Even Martha Washington, who burst into tears every time she saw Andi these days. She was supremely thankful that Martha didn’t have a pet. Without one, their paths didn’t cross too often. She’d even been able to get the fliers posted on the community bulletin board without running into anyone.

But apparently, Andi was getting too cocky for the universe, because as she rounded a corner all the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. She knew without looking what had happened and in her head, she heard the screech of the Nazgul. Mrs. Bumble, the Eye of Sauron in Bumble’s, had spotted her. She wasn’t a tall woman, but she usually stood sentinel on the elevated concrete step that led up into the store’s back office. From her perch, she acted as a greeter, spy, and security camera all in one.

“Andi! I haven’t seen you in a while. Been home for six months and it still feels like you’re living off the island. Though, I guess if Whiskers ever needed more than just the yearly checkup we’d be seeing more of you. I hear you’re always at the animal hospital.” Andi did her best to rearrange her face into a smile before she turned to look at the woman.

“Hi, Mrs. Bumble.”

The woman came down off her cement pedestal and crossed to Andi, x-raying her with those calculating gray eyes. If there was pity in her expression, it was well hidden under a layer of “well-meaning” assessment. “Our daughter is back in Hope, you know. Jordan. You remember her?”

“Uh, yeah,” Andi said, feeling a wave of relief wash over her. *Yes. Let’s talk about your daughter. Lead the way. I’ll follow you.* “Just home for the holidays or ...”

“No. She moved back. She’s trying to get established and you know how it is here. Why, you just did it yourself. Anyway, she could really use some folks supporting her and helping her get settled in, so she’s starting a group.” Mrs. Bumble reached into the front pocket of her apron and pulled out what looked like a business card. “Would you do her a favor and go to this little get-together she’s having? It’s Monday night, the 26th. I know it’s the day after Christmas but your mom told me you’re all staying put for the holidays this year.”

Andi tried to ignore the stab of pain in her chest. Last year at Christmas, right after the engagement, she and Brandon had

volunteered to host Christmas this year at their new apartment in Seattle. If things had been different, at this moment she would have been decorating or making cinnamon Christmas cookies in their sixth-floor apartment rather than standing in Bumble's getting an emotional prostate exam. She braced herself, waiting for Mrs. Bumble's cold verbal finger to start probing.

"Anyway, it sure would mean a lot to Jordan *and* me if you'd stop by." She held the card out to Andi and for a moment, she was mentally prepared to give the universe a high five for letting her off easy.

"Sure," she said, taking the card. "I can stop by."

"Wonderful," Mrs. Bumble said, smiling at her. The phone rang in the office behind her and she turned to answer it. Andi looked down at the card in her hand. There was a *lot* of print on the tiny card. She had to squint to read it.

A Cup of Kindness Support and Social Group. First meeting, Monday, December 26th, 7pm, Hope High School Cafeteria. "Should auld (old) acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? We'll take a cup of kindness yet for days of auld lang syne."

"Well played, Mrs. Bumble," Andi muttered, staring at the office door as it snapped closed behind the woman. "Well played."

Max

He still said “shoes”. Before heading up the stairs to his room, he’d told his mom, “*Let me get my shoes*” even though he only needed to retrieve one. And in an inside joke that the universe was probably peeing itself over, the one shoe he always seemed to find these days was the one he didn’t need.

A jerk of pain shot through his knee and he gritted his teeth as he rubbed the puckered skin tucked under his knee joint. The continuous buzz of anger in his gut flared inside him. It was all he could do to resist the urge to drop down and force himself to duck walk like he was back at basic, just to prove he could. But ... he couldn’t now. The only thing that stopped him from trying was the logic that if he did, he would tip over. He glared down at the loose fabric below his knee, wishing for the thousandth time that humans had evolved to be more like iguanas, able to regrow limbs when they lost them. Unfortunately, because mankind had wasted time with fire and being warm-blooded he wasn’t able to grow his leg whole again. He couldn’t even train it back into being through discipline and hard work, the way he’d been able to train the men in his fire team to follow commands quickly and

efficiently. That thought alone was a knife twist to his gut. He scowled as he gripped his knee joint and tightened his grip, trying to punish the pain away.

It had been six months and it still felt alien to him, like what was left of his leg wasn't actually his. If he closed his eyes and took his meds, he usually felt like he still had two legs and two feet. But when he reached down to scratch a phantom itch on his right calf, the feeling of the hard plastic and metal under his fingers broke the spell. "Amputee" was a new title he'd had to get used to. He never used it, but the VA did. And it wasn't the only title now thrust upon him.

"Veteran" he'd been ok with. "Retired serviceman" was harder. He was only twenty-six. What regular Joe retired against his will at twenty-six? Or moved home to live with his mom in his hometown? That was the hardest part to swallow. He wasn't in the Army anymore. He was back to living in his old room, in his old house, in his old town. And less of him returned than had left. He was physically less than the man he'd been in high school, when, as Vonnegut said, "everything was beautiful and nothing hurt."

And it was Christmas time. The worst time to be back in Hope, especially after the crappy year he'd just had. Everyone was home and everyone had questions and pity in their eyes. He felt his stomach starting to churn as he caught a glimpse of himself in the small mirror over his dresser. His crew cut had grown out while he'd been in the hospital in Germany, and he hadn't bothered getting it cut while he was in physical therapy in New York. And when he'd gotten back to the island, his

hair was the last thing on his mind. It was weird though, with it grown out, every time he passed a mirror he felt like he was living in some high school flashback. But, to be fair, his hair wasn't the only thing reliving his high school glory days. The rest of the town seemed to be caught in the same damn loop. He couldn't walk through town without running into at least one person who wanted to greet him like they used to and ask him about the upcoming game or track meet. But then they'd realize what they'd been about to say, and he'd watch the parade of expressions on their face; horror, pity, embarrassment, and finally they'd just greet him awkwardly and walk on. It would be funny if it didn't happen all the time. He didn't understand why he was the only one on the island that seemed to remember he wasn't in high school anymore. And he didn't remember all the time. Waking up in his room every morning made him feel like he was in some sci-fi movie, trapped between two time periods.

His gaze fell on the cracked sheetrock near his bedroom door. It also didn't help that nothing in the old house seemed to have changed since high school. Despite his crappy mood, he smiled, remembering the time they stole all the weights from the high school weight room and replaced them with foam and plastic stand-ins. He could still remember the way Coach Hendricks' eyes had bulged when he walked into the weight room that morning to see the whole team bench pressing and lifting all the weights the school had. Coach had almost swallowed his tongue when Rudy Callahan had loudly

complained that they needed more weights since there wasn't a single one left to lift.

The crack in his wall had just been prank-fueled collateral damage. It was the result of tripping over a fallen dumbbell and throwing the armload of plate weights he'd been carrying at the wall. Andi had been right behind him carrying ...

An older pain stung his chest. He hadn't felt it in a while, but when he did it was a reminder, like a deep breath with a permanently cracked rib. It was always there with him. *She* was always there with him.

He gave his head a shake and tried to focus. The sheetrock. That crack was another project to add to his list.

"Max," his mom called.

He searched the ground around him. He'd taken off his prosthetic because his knee had been hurting and somehow, he'd managed to knock the thing under his bed.

"Coming," Max called back, grabbing the hockey stick by his nightstand. He swept it under his bed, trying to hook it on the stupid thing and fish it out. He could hear her coming down the hall and he scooped faster. He needed to get his prosthetic back on, his pant leg pulled down over it, and be standing before she came through the door. He'd done more in less time in Iraq. And with worse consequences, if he didn't get it done. Though, at the moment he didn't think he could take another round of seeing the sadness in his mom's eyes when she looked at his leg and then tried to smile at him and act like everything was ok.

The end of his hockey stick caught on something and he dragged it toward him. The prosthetic emerged along with a bunch of other crap that looked like it had been under his bed since he left for basic training. He grabbed the hard plastic and metal leg and he'd just fitted it back around his knee when his mom appeared at the door. She was a small woman but built sturdy. Being a war widow with both of her sons in the service, he guessed "sturdy" came with the job description. She crossed her arms and leaned against the door frame, smiling at him. He did his best to return it as he reached down to grab his solitary left work boot. But then his gaze fell on the pile of everything else he'd dragged out from under his bed.

"Sorry," she said, chuckling. "I wanted to leave your room just like you remembered it. I changed the sheets and dusted, but I must have forgotten to sweep under the bed. To be fair, I was afraid of what I might find under there."

Max felt his ears start to burn as he realized what he was looking down at. There was a copy of *Playboy* on top of the mess. He moved his foot to try to cover the title before looking back up at her.

"Uh ... No big deal, Mom. Do you have that grocery list?"

She nodded. "Downstairs. I ... I can bring it to you?" She looked torn and he didn't miss the way her gaze drifted to his leg.

He forced a chuckle while he tugged his pant leg down over the prosthetic, hoping to bring her attention back to his face.

“Nah, that’s ok. I’m already going that way, you know, to get to the store?”

Her expression changed to a genuine smile and she rolled her eyes. “Well, it’s good to know you didn’t leave your sass in Iraq.” She looked around his bedroom. “Or maybe it’s just this room. If these walls could talk, they’d probably be the first four witnesses at the trial for the case of who let the goat herd loose in Hope High where they proceeded to eat gym equipment, sheet music, and *everyone’s* homework.”

Max blinked at her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mom. I heard that S.I. was behind that prank.”

“Yeah, and I heard that Stuart Irving, the fabled King of Pranks was at an appointment with his allergist when ‘the goating’ happened.”

Max shook his head with a smile. “That guy was good.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I just got off the phone with Nadine and she’s about had it with the kids being home on break. She’s desperate for them to find something to do until school resumes.”

Max froze. “Danger Will Robinson, Danger.”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry. I’ve got work down at the office for Turk and Jake to do. Those two won’t know what hit them. I’ve been wanting a paperless office for years. They’ll be so sick of pulling staples and scanning files, they’ll be *begging* to go back to school when we’re done. But ...” She paused and for the first time since she’d met him in New York

off the plane from Germany, he saw her confidence falter. She was nervous about something.

“Mom, what is it?” he asked, mentally bracing for her answer.

She blew out a sigh. “None of us Lyons are very good at subterfuge, are we?”

He groaned and closed his eyes. “Mom, if you’re about to ask me to babysit the Whorleys at night or something ...”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just ... Jackson, he’s only twelve. And he’s ... quiet. Nadine doesn’t know what to do with him. The other four boys I’m convinced are some uncharted natural disaster. But Jackson is just ... he doesn’t talk. But he’s good with his hands,” she added quickly, trying to sell Max on the idea. “I thought ... maybe he could help you with the repairs around this place.”

To say Max was less than thrilled with this prospect would be putting it lightly. “I don’t know, Mom ...”

She shrugged. “Maybe just try for one morning, and see how it goes?”

He sighed. “Fine. One morning.”

“Good,” she said with a sigh of relief. “Because he’s coming over tomorrow.”

Max narrowed his eyes on her. “So it wouldn’t have really mattered what I said.”

She shrugged. “No. But it’s less awkward this way.”

He sighed. “Alright. Tomorrow morning, but if it doesn’t work out ...”

“I’ll tell Nadine that she’ll have to find a better arrangement for Jackson,” she said quickly.

“Promise. I wouldn’t have offered at all, but ...”

She didn’t have to finish her sentence. They’d moved out to Hope Island after his dad died because of the office manager job at the Whorley Fishing Company. His mom was coming up on fifteen years with the company and the Whorleys were like family. Horrible, destructive, chaotic family in the case of the four oldest boys, but family nonetheless. He supposed he couldn’t throw too many rocks considering that he and Gray hadn’t been choir boys themselves at that age. He nodded at her. “It’ll be worth it to just see a *quiet* Whorley.”

She nodded. “I’ll have Ripley’s on standby.”

He chuckled. “I better get to the store before it closes.”

“Are you sure ... I mean, shouldn’t you rest? I can go,” she said quickly.

He stomped on his immediate flare of annoyance. It wasn’t really for her anyway. “I’ll go,” he said, doing his best to keep his voice friendly, but firm. “Baskin called and the baseboard we ordered is in. I’ve got to pick that up anyway, especially if I’m going to have ‘help’ tomorrow.” He didn’t meet her gaze, but he could feel the expression on her face. He hated feeling like he was fragile. Every time his mom started looking at him like she was at the moment, or offering to do things for him,

he felt like he was living in an even more b-movie version of *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*. She looked like she wanted to argue with him, so he pulled out what the rest of his fire team called his “Sergeant Smile”. It appeared friendly on the outside, but he gave it mostly to privates who felt the urge to buck orders.

“Fine,” she said with a sigh. “But you have to take the cart this time.” She turned around and headed for the stairs before he could protest.

Now it was Max’s turn to sigh. It was something he’d forgotten about in his years away from the island. His hometown of Hope didn’t use cars. People had them, but for the most part, they stayed in driveways and garages until they were slowly coasted down the backroads to the commercial ferry to take over to the mainland. It probably made the tiny five-mile island a national leader for low fossil fuel use. But it also meant that when a person in town needed groceries, at least more than a bag full, they had to push one of the little collapsible grocery carts that always made Max feel like he was pushing around a walker. Which he had actual practice with now, and he wasn’t in a hurry to improve on those mad skills.

He paused to think before he stood, just like he’d been trained. “Balance out,” he muttered to himself. It was the phrase his physical therapist, Col. Sutters had barked at him over and over. The therapist was a retired Army man himself and if Max closed his eyes, he could still feel the weight of the man’s prosthetic hand on his shoulder and his good hand under

his right elbow while Max learned to move his own prosthetic. Sutters had been able to size up Max in a single meeting and he was channeling a drill sergeant by their second meeting which always made Max feel more motivated. For those three months, he hadn't felt like a used shell casing; left and discarded after he'd fulfilled his purpose. He'd felt like he was still in the Army.

But then it was over. He had the papers on his dresser to prove it. Like a bad ice machine in a roadside motel, he was out of active service. He scowled at the floor as he shifted his weight, balancing out between his foot and the prosthetic. He gritted his teeth as he took a step with the new gait he was still getting used to. It wasn't smooth or fast. He couldn't move like he'd been able to on the track or the football field. Or even when he was carrying 45 lbs of gear in Iraq. Now when he moved, it was awkward and halting. But at least he didn't need the walker or crutches anymore. He still had to use a forearm crutch from time to time, but he was determined to get rid of that too.

He looked down at the pile of crap on the floor and held onto the edge of the bed as he bent to pick up the *Playboy*. He thought about throwing it in the trash can in his room, but then his mom would see it, probably *again* (she *had* laughed when she'd seen the pile at his feet). He could take it out to the can himself, but there was *still* a good chance she'd see it when she took out the kitchen trash since she always blocked him from doing it. He slipped on the sidewalk one time and now

anytime he moved toward the trash can, she practically knocked him down on her way to get to it before him.

When he and Gray were growing up, taking out the trash had always been one of their chores. But his mom had been alone for the last four years. Gray had left for the Navy after graduating, just like Max had left for the Army four years before that. Neither of them had opted for the Marines like their dad, mostly because their mom had sat them both down and told them that she was *not* burying another person she loved in Marine dress. Max thought he was being cute when he asked her how she felt about Army dress. Her reaction was the first of only two times he'd ever questioned going into the service. He'd never seen her so angry. But she hadn't shouted. She'd scowled at him like she'd *wanted* to, as tears ran down her face. Her silence felt like it lasted an eternity. Then, she'd just said, "*Your father would be proud.*" And she'd hugged him with her fierce Mama Bear strength that always made him feel small, even though he was a foot and a half taller than she was and could probably carry her on his back like his ruck. When she'd let him go, she'd put a finger in his face and said, "*But you're coming back alive.*" It wasn't a wish or a hope. She wasn't a Mama Bear at that moment. She was Mama Lyons. And it was her voice that he'd heard in the desert that day. With the heat of the sun competing with the blaze of the fire from the burning wreckage of his Humvee, she was so loud, she roared in his ears over the sound of RPGs and gunfire. *You're coming back alive.*

She was the reason he was back in Hope, sleeping in his old bedroom, and battling the constant feeling that time had passed for him but not for the town. If he couldn't serve his country anymore, at least he could do something for his mom. And tonight, she wanted to make mac and cheese for dinner. "So follow your orders, soldier," he muttered to himself, smiling grimly at his reflection in the mirror over his dresser.

He looked down at the magazine, still in his hand. If he took it with him, he could toss it into the dumpster behind Bumble's before he went into the shop. Problem solved. It couldn't be traced back to him and his mom wouldn't have to see it. He rolled the magazine and tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans, pulling his bomber jacket on over it. He glanced back down at the rest of the pile, still on his floor. He didn't know if he was naturally tidy, if it was because of the way his mom and dad had raised them, or if it was his military training over the last eight years, but the pile ... annoyed him. He took a deep breath and bent over. *Balance out*, he reminded himself automatically as he scooped up the mess. He hobbled across the room and tossed the clothes in the hamper, and the trash in the little can by the door. There.

His gaze fell on a strip of color that had fallen out of the clothes. He bent to pick it up, almost stumbling this time. He gritted his teeth to keep from growling in frustration. He hadn't thought about the movement a second time. He was focused on the object. *And when you don't think ...* He picked it off the wood floor and held it up to the light. It was a green and white braided friendship bracelet. The ends were frayed

where they had broken. He felt a wave of old sadness wash over him as he realized what it was. He turned and sat back down on the bed, hard. The bracelet was old. The white thread had turned gray with the dust from under his bed. Parts of it were braided perfectly, but he smiled, running his little finger over the parts where the creator had messed up when Max had been trying to distract her. He closed his fist around it and did his best to close his mind on the memory. *This isn't helping*, Sutters would say. *Looking back doesn't do anything for keeping an eye on your current position.* And he couldn't argue with the logic of it. Not that it made the act any easier. When the bracelet had broken, he'd used it as a bookmark for years, until he'd apparently lost it under his bed. How many years ago had that been? He racked his brain, doing his best to avoid all the landmines of memories that would trigger if he thought about them. He couldn't remember the last time he'd used or even seen the bracelet. He should probably just throw it away. He glanced at the trash can. *Later*, he thought. He'd throw it away later. He carefully set it on his nightstand and concentrated on getting back to his feet.

He felt something fall out of his back pocket and turned to look at the magazine lying on his bed. The girl on the cover was straddling a horse, standing in the stirrups, her dark wavy hair loose and her hands ... *Pick the damn thing up, and get it back in your pocket.* The last thing he needed was another round of depression today. FaceTiming with Gray had been depressing enough as he walked around in the shipyard, pointing out the aircraft carrier he'd be on for the next four

months. *He* was still in the game. And Max was sitting on the bench. No. Not even on the bench. Max was out of the game. He was in the fucking stands now. Somewhere he'd *never* been before or wanted to be. But that was the road in front of him now. Forever. The muscles in his jaw flexed.

He snatched the magazine off the bed and crammed it back into his pocket, doing his best to not growl as the phantom pain shot through his leg on his way down the hall. He did some mental drills as he went down the stairs and by the time he was in the kitchen, he was mission-oriented. *Go to Baskin's and get supplies. Then go to Bumble's and get groceries. Then deliver them and assist.* And repair. The Lyons' house was an old two-story farmhouse that had resigned itself to its fate decades ago when not one, but two destructive boys were brought into it. Now, his room wasn't the only place with a hole in the wall. There were cracked baseboards everywhere, a leaking roof, scarred countertops, more holes in walls, and peeling paint, all of which he felt compelled to fix as an apology for being such a hellion. And when Gray came home on leave, he was enlisting him to help with the roof.

"You don't have to fuss with the baseboards," his mom said when he came into the kitchen.

"They're fine. They've been that way for the last fifteen years."

"Ever since Gray and I decided to play hockey in the house. No, Mom. You deserve a nice place to live. I'm fixing it."

She sighed. "I swear, what is it with you Lyons men? You're all so stubborn that if a train was coming you wouldn't move off the track unless you were the ones to *decide* the train was going to hit you if you didn't."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Well, that just sounds like we're not too bright."

"Sometimes you aren't," she muttered.

"Is that how a *mother* talks to one of her only sons?" he asked.

"When she's a military mom and has plenty of past battles to back up her claims? Hell yes." She held out a piece of paper to him. "Here's the list, *Sergeant* Lyons. As requested. And if you could be back in the next three hours that would be excellent. I'm craving that mac 'n' cheese and my blood sugar is getting low. I can tell because I'm getting cranky."

"Well we can't have that," he snorted. *That* was the mom he knew. Feeling a little lighter, he snapped her a salute. He heard her mutter something that sounded like, "Sergeant Smartass," before heading back to the sink, slapping a dry towel over her shoulder, and going back to the dishes. For a moment, he felt like he was sixteen again, being sent on an errand by his mom who knew that he was going to go mess around with his friends and take his sweet time getting back home.

"Alright, see you in a bit," he said, turning towards the living room and front door.

"Don't forget the cart!"

He sighed as he pushed the noisy metal cart through the streets. Just what he wanted, a rattling, clanging announcement to tell everyone in town that he was walking by. He plastered on the best smile he could force and waved and nodded to the townsfolk that greeted him. As he pushed, he calculated the quickest route to Baskin's by taking back streets and alleys so he wouldn't have to see as *many* townsfolk. He knew they meant well, but everyone giving him those sad, pitiful looks really pissed him off. It was one of the benefits of his decision to stay home and work on the house. He'd been back in Hope for two weeks and barely left the house except to catch the ferry to the mainland for doctor's appointments and the occasional errands.

Seeing Coach Hendricks the day after he'd gotten back had been a huge driving factor in his decision to stay home. Even the memory of the look on the man's face drove needles into Max's chest. He'd been the quarterback his junior and senior years at Hope High. Coach had told him at the senior homecoming game that the scouts in the stands wanted to talk to him about recruitment to U Dub. Coach had been disappointed when Max had reminded him he was going into the Army, but he'd clapped him on the back, smiled, and told him he understood. Now though, the way Coach looked at him, like he was a broken tackle sled, made Max feel like he'd made a bad call.

Jamie Baskin was behind the counter when Max got to the office door. Baskin's was a construction company, but they also sold lumber and ordered specialty supplies to help the

Honey-Do hardware store out. They already had the space and they were the biggest lumber customers on the island, so everyone just went to Honey-Do for nails and hammers, and Baskin's for the wood.

“Hey, Sergeant Max,” Jamie said, getting to his feet when Max steered the cart through the door. Max had to suppress the desire to shake his head. Jamie had been a freshman during Max's senior year. Coach had brought the kid up to the varsity team because of his size. Jamie was a nice guy, but he was a leaf on the wind when it came to life. Not that it was a bad thing. He was just a complete one-eighty from the guys Max had gotten used to being around in the Army.

“Just Max, Jamie,” Max said. “I got a phone call from your dad. He said my order was in?”

Jamie's head bobbed like it was on a spring as he hustled around the room, checking things off on a clipboard and loading them into Max's cart.

“That should give you a leg up on getting that drywall patched, too,” Jamie said, smiling down at the contents of the cart. Then, as his words started to land in his head, he turned to look at Max in slow motion. His eyes were wide and his mouth had fallen open in horror.

Max laughed. The sight of Jamie's mortification was too much. He knew it was probably morbid, but he did find leg humor pretty funny. His family had always had a dark streak of gallows humor in them. It paired nicely with the hospital corners and their cussing. Of course, he didn't find his

situation all that funny but hearing all the sayings to do with legs and all the puns did make him laugh.

“I’m ... I didn’t mean ... I’m so sorry.”

“No,” Max chuckled. “I know you didn’t. Have a merry Christmas, Jamie.”

Jamie’s face was still beet red as he mumbled the same to Max. With a final wave, Max pushed the cart back out the front door and started his shorter, but more exposed route to Bumble’s. The square was filled with spectators gathering around the gazebo for the children’s Christmas concert. He was immediately on his guard, wishing he was invisible in case a bored townsman, listening on the edge of the crowd, happened to spot him. If that happened and they tried to flag him down to talk, he decided his best plan of action would be to abandon the stupid cart and flee as fast as he could, hoping he could still outpace his pursuer. *But don’t let that happen*, he muttered to the universe. *You owe me*. On the bright side, because the cart was now weighed down with his order from Baskin, it didn’t rattle nearly as much.

He cut down a side street alley, only stumbling once when his prosthetic got caught in a pothole. He *was* supremely thankful at that moment that he hadn’t had an audience to witness the swearing and not-so-graceful stumble he’d performed. He finally hobbled into Bumble’s and cut down the aisle closest to the door. Granted, he was six foot four and it wasn’t easy for him to hide with the six-foot-tall shelves on either side, but some cover was better than no cover. The

grocery store was sweltering. Something he'd also forgotten about. In their junior year, he and Andi had volunteered to help with the weird food display holiday dioramas. And as they'd peeled their sweat-soaked shirts away from their skin when they were leaving, they'd discussed the possibility that Mrs. Bumble suffered from whatever was the opposite of hot flashes. He tugged his bomber jacket off and draped it over the cart.

He dug the list out of his coat pocket and read through it, rearranging the items in his head, mentally thinking through where everything was located in the store. He was thankful for once that Bumble's never changed. He had a plan. It was efficient and limited the possibility of social interaction. There was just one scenario he *hadn't* planned for.

He had just grabbed the last item on the list when he rounded the dairy aisle and came under fire.

"Max Lyons! I knew you were home but I hadn't gotten a chance to see you yet," Mrs. Bumble announced to the back half of the store. He saw a few heads turn in his direction. He forced his lips to smile again as he turned to nod at her.

"Good to see you, Mrs. Bumble." He started to push his cart past her, but in a flash she had a bony hand wrapped around the top of its frame, holding him in place.

"You know, I heard about everything that happened to you over there, and I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," he said automatically. "It's good to be home." That was usually the line that stood like the social Dead End

sign to the conversation and prompted whoever he was addressing to move on. But he'd been away too long. He'd forgotten that Mrs. Bumble gave signs like that a stiff middle finger and instead just floored it and launched over the curb and through yards until she found the road again.

"I'm glad you say that," she said quickly, digging in the front pocket of her apron. "Because my daughter, Jordan ... You remember Jordan, don't you?"

Vaguely he remembered the teenage girl who'd been in the store wearing a green Bumble's apron, bagging groceries, and making faces at him and Gray when they were barely tall enough to sneak candy onto the check-out belt behind their mom. "Yeah, I remember Jordan," he said, hoping she'd keep the topic on her kid and the conversation short.

"Well, she's back in town and she's trying to get established. So she's having this little get-together and I know it would mean a lot to her if you'd come by. It's on Monday." She thrust a white business card at him.

"Mrs. Bumble," he started to say. "I ..."

"Great, I'll tell her to expect you there. It'll mean *so much* to her." Mrs. Bumble smiled at him with the bottom half of her face, but her eyes were narrowed, daring him to say no and telling him she'd take it as a personal insult if he did. He wanted to tell her no and just walk away, *but your mom has to keep living in this town*. It was the same reason he couldn't verbally or physically wipe the pity smiles off of everyone's faces in town. There was a social protocol in Hope. Greetings

were returned, invitations were accepted, and if you had beef with someone, you didn't make a scene in Bumble's. You smiled. You lied through your teeth when you had to. And that was when he realized that the woman had given him a gift. Not the card or the invitation ... but if he said yes right now he could end the conversation and move on.

"Sure," he said, tucking the card into his coat pocket.

"Excellent. Well, merry Christmas to you and your mom. I don't suppose Grayson is coming home for the holidays?"

"Uh, no. He's about to ship out for another four months and he didn't have enough leave to get home from the east coast and back before ..."

"Oh that's too bad," she said. "Well, merry Christmas, anyhow. I'll tell Jordan she'll see you on Monday!"

And then he was free. With a final nod, Max shoved the card in his coat pocket and turned his cart down the nearest aisle, picking up speed. He was afraid if he slowed down, she'd call after him and ask something embarrassing for the whole store to hear. He was almost to the check stand.

Crash!

A cart he hadn't seen, whipped around the corner just as he reached it and they banged into each other. He threw out a hand to brace himself on a nearby shelf. He winced when he heard the crash of cans hitting the floor around him.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!" the woman behind the cart said, covering her face. "I wasn't paying attention and ..."

Max felt his heart stop when she dropped her hands and met his gaze. Her dark wavy hair was longer than he remembered it, but the curve of her lips, her green-hazel eyes, and her freckles were permanently etched into his memory.

“Max?” she breathed. She was ahead of him. He was having a hard time forming words at the moment. “I didn’t know you were back.”

He just nodded. *Nice. Make her think you also can’t hold a conversation anymore.* “Andi ... I, wow.”

The shocked expression on her face was starting to fade. She smiled and it was like pulling back the shades on a window to see a sunrise. There were deeper creases than he remembered at the corners of her eyes and she looked ... thin. Like she’d been sick maybe? But she was still so beautiful. “I ... I just got back ... the week before last. I didn’t know you were ... here either.”

She nodded and he saw her smile falter. “I’ve been back for about six months. But I don’t go out much these days.”

He nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“What happened?” Mrs. Bumble’s voice was loud, bordering on hysterical behind them. Max turned to see the woman hurrying down the aisle, glaring at him and Andi, and then down at the mess he’d made when he stumbled sideways into the shelves.

“I’m sorry, I ...” Max froze when he saw Mrs. Bumble bend down and pick up something off the floor. It was the *Playboy*.

Shit! He'd forgotten it was in his back pocket. When he knocked into the shelf it must have fallen out.

“What the ...” Mrs. Bumble flipped open the cover, staring down at it as if it was something she'd never seen before. The awkward silence was only interrupted by the swish of pages as Mrs. Bumble flipped through the magazine. Her eyes grew wider with each page she examined. At this rate, he was afraid that like a bad set of blinds, the cord would get stuck and Mrs. Bumble wouldn't be able to close her eyelids ever again.

“That's mine,” Andi blurted out behind him. Max and Mrs. Bumble turned to stare at her. She kept her gaze on Mrs. Bumble, even as her cheeks started turning pink. “I ... I like to read it ... for the articles. It ... it has good tips.”

Mrs. Bumble looked suspicious as she flipped the cover closed quickly and held it at arm's length as if it was something that might be contaminated. She looked like she was about to tell Andi exactly what she thought of her reading *Playboy*, but she paused, staring at something on the cover. “The date on here says it's nine years old.”

“Oh,” Andi said, moving around Max to stand in front of Mrs. Bumble. “Yeah. It's ... it's my favorite issue. I ... take it with me everywhere. It's my ... security blanket ... magazine.” She held out her hand to Mrs. Bumble and the woman glared at her for a moment before handing it over.

“You shouldn't be bringing something like *that* out in public, Andi. I thought you had better sense than that.” Mrs. Bumble looked around at the aisle.

“I’ll clean this up,” Max said quickly. “I’m so sorry I tripped...”

She waved a hand at him, the pity back on her face. “Well, it’s mostly canned goods, so I guess no harm done. Just make sure it’s back to the way you found it. Any canned goods that got dented ...”

“I’ll be buying and taking home with me,” Max said. Mrs. Bumble smiled and with a nod at them, headed back down the aisle toward the office.

He and Andi let out a simultaneous sigh of relief. He turned to the mess and Andi dropped down to her knees beside him.

“I’ll help.” He felt his face burn as she chased the cans that had rolled under the shelves. “I’ll hand them to you, you fix her anal display.”

He bit down on his lower lip and shook his head. “Rephrase, please.”

She handed him a can of creamed spinach and the evil grin on her face threw him for a time loop harder than being home had. It was the look he called, “Andarchy”. The facial expression of chaos. “Wanna go repeat this scene over next to the Santa sleigh made out of summer sausage.” She jerked her head to their left. “It’s only an aisle or two over.”

He couldn’t stop the grin that was taking over his face, but he tried. “She’d know it was us. And I saw that sausage sleigh. It’s nowhere near the exit. Do you *want* to be volunteered to work the next dozen town events?” He shook his head, trying

to keep his expression serious. “You have to think ahead, Andarchy.”

“And you have to remove the ruler out of your ass, Max Buzzkill,” she huffed as she handed him the last can. His fingers brushed hers and he almost dropped the can. She dropped her gaze and the spell of the moment passed. They weren’t two bored high schoolers, trying to pass the time with a prank in Bumble’s anymore.

“Thanks,” he said, awkwardly when they finished. “I guess I got off easy. Just two cans of ...” he picked one of the dented cans up to look at the label. “Stewed prunes. And a can of pineapple puree.” That look was back in Andi’s eyes. How did she switch it on so easily?

“Well, I know what S.I. would be doing with the prunes,” Andi said, her voice barely above a whisper as she looked around.

Max decided to play along. Just for the moment. It was ... nice ... to just screw around again. He’d almost forgotten what it felt like to plot. “I think I’ve seen this movie before,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Something about ensuring that Mrs. Bumble’s fiber intake is adequate?”

“The only thing any good citizen *would* do with stewed prunes,” she agreed, nodding at him. “She really likes those Little Debbie cupcakes, remember? I’ll bet we could just slip one or two in through the bottom and leave them ...”

He chuckled in spite of himself as he tried to solemnly consider the idea. “We’d need to innocently buy a package,

find a can opener for the prunes, steam open the package, drain the prunes, and use the handle of a spoon to shove them into the cupcake from the bottom ... “

“You’d go in from the bottom?” Andi asked, scratching an imaginary beard on her chin. “Interesting.”

“Oh, it’s the only way. She’d notice if we stuffed them in from the top or the side. Then, we’ll need to secure them back to that little piece of cardboard, and steam the bags closed again. We’ll have to come up with a backstory as to why we were gifting or anonymously leaving them for her in the back room. I’d go the anonymous route. She knows us too well. She’ll be suspicious if we give them to her. Then, to get them into the office, we’ll have to cause a distraction, and *then* make sure no one else eats them. After that, we just need to be far away before the fallout happens.” He paused to draw breath and Andi sighed.

“You’re right, too much work.” She was grinning and then he saw her gaze drop to the *Playboy* she was still holding in one hand. “So, now that we’re alone, how do you suppose this *did* happen to get here?” The heat was burning up his face and neck again.

“It’s a long story,” he muttered. “The short version is, I found it under my bed and I didn’t want my mom to see it, so I took it with me to throw away in town ...”

“And ended up accidentally handing it to Mrs. Bumble, the town’s reigning heavyweight gossip champion? The great Gab Hope?” she asked.

He sighed again. “Yep. Pretty much.”

“Good plan,” she said, chuckling. “Sorry I screwed it up.”

“You didn’t ...” he paused. “Why did you tell her it was yours?”

She shook her head, still smiling. “I knew the look on your face. It was the ‘oh crap I’m in trouble’ look. I thought it would be *way* more awkward for her to tell the story if she thought it was my *Playboy*.” Andi looked down at the magazine again and a new wave of embarrassment shot through him knowing that he’d had that magazine under his bed when they’d been dating. And how he’d held onto it ... because the woman on the front reminded him of Andi. As she turned the pages, nodding in approval, he felt his embarrassment soaring to a new level he didn’t know was possible.

“I’ll throw it away,” he said quickly, holding out his hand.

“Nah, I can do it,” she said, tucking it into her bag. He didn’t miss the pink flush at the neckline of her sweater or in her cheeks. She cleared her throat. “You’ve got your hands full.” She nodded to his full cart. Her phone dinged and she pulled it out of her bag and checked the screen. She sighed. “I better go.” She met his gaze and now the “Andarchy and Max Buzzkill” moment had passed. The awkwardness was palpable. “It ... it’s really good to see you, Max. W-welcome home.”

“It’s good to see you, Andi,” he said. And he meant it, though, as she disappeared down the next aisle, the full horror

of what had just happened began to set in. He'd started out with a plan to toss the old porno magazine so his mom wouldn't see it. And instead, he'd managed to show it to Mrs. Bumble and then hand it off to his ex-high school girlfriend who he'd imagined on the back of that horse on the cover...

Wow. He needed a whiteboard to draw out how badly he'd screwed this up.

He made it through the checkout line, thankful that his brooding silence and scowl were strong enough to encourage the checker to forego the usual Hope Island small talk. He waited until he was out in the cool night air to pull his jacket back on, finally feeling some of the heat in his face start to dissipate.

As embarrassing as the situation had been, one small miracle came out of it. Well, two. First, the fact that they'd been able to joke like they once had, so easily, even after everything that had happened between them. That still felt unreal to him. And second, Andi hadn't looked at him with even a hint of pity on her face. If anything, she'd been ... playful. For a minute, it felt like they were back in high school again. It was something he hadn't felt in a long time and honestly, had never expected to feel again. He made it outside and took the long way home through dark streets, thinking of Andi Morgan's eyes and her smile and how she still smelled like apples and summertime. And the scientists must have been right about the power of olfactory memories. Just seeing her face and catching a whiff of her shampoo was enough to kick-start the movie reel of memories in his head. The film

started to stutter though as he got closer to home and the vision of Andi as she was now, grew clearer in his mind. When she'd put the magazine in her bag, he hadn't missed the engagement ring on her finger.

Andi

He was alive. He was wounded. But he was alive. Andi felt a skip trying to develop in her step and she did her best to contain it. How many times had she run to the TV whenever Iraq was mentioned, worried she'd see Max's body in a picture or in shaky go-pro footage? She knew it was completely irrational and that the chances of her ever seeing him on the TV or hearing his name were whatever comes right before "never", but for the last eight years, the news had been her only connection to him. But now he was home, back on the island. He was safe. A part of her started to relax as if for the last eight years, it had been holding its breath and was finally able to exhale. She couldn't make rational sense of how she felt. She and Max had been friends through middle school and dated all through high school. He was her first in so many ways. But they broke up when they went their separate ways after graduation. It was a choice she didn't regret now. It was the right one. But at the time ... an old soreness filled her ribs, like the memory of a knock-down blow.

The more startling thing she had to ponder was how a single interaction with him had been able to slingshot her back to

their carefree high school days, even for a moment? It was unnerving how *easy* joking with him had been. Even after everything that had happened in the last eight years. He still called her “Andarchy”. She shivered, remembering the way he’d whisper it in her ear with his arms around her at the football team bonfires when they’d partially buried a string of Black Cat fireworks in the dirt under the wood, just waiting for Red Callaghan to light it, or superglued the caps on all the beer bottles. And they never got caught. Because of Max and his so-perfectly-conceived-and-executed-it-could-be-really-annoying plans. She chuckled and kicked a rock as she moved across the square, replaying their surprise meeting in her head. But there was something else. Her smile fell away as she realized what it was.

He was hurting. She’d worked with enough animals experiencing phantom pains and nerve and muscle damage to know when a missing limb was involved. She learned to read their mannerisms and expressions. It was just a part of treating patients that couldn’t tell you where it hurt or what had happened. And knowing Max as well as she did ... as well as she *had* ... before ... she had a feeling that though he could tell her ... or anyone, what had happened and where it hurt, he wouldn’t. Not the Max she knew. *Had known*. It had been eight years. And if she was being completely honest, she was surprised he’d talked to her at all. She knew he’d been hurt and mad when they’d broken up. Even if he’d never shown it. But that was just Max. The only time she ever saw his stoic, military-grade calm and reserve slip had been when they were

joking around and pulling pranks. The rest of the time ... well, and there was when they were ... she pushed those memories aside. That was a different life, when they were young and in love. Now, they were adults and life had happened. To both of them.

As she walked, she felt the cold bump against her shoulder of the ridiculously enormous tub of rocky road ice cream Amelia had texted her to pick up. That stupid text and Amelia threatening to call her if she didn't respond had ruined the end of her chance meeting with Max. But then again, maybe he'd been glad it had ended. She couldn't blame him ... not really. "*Examine the facts,*" she heard in Max's impression of Mr. Hubble, their chemistry teacher.

His hands had been just like she remembered them. A few slightly crooked fingers from breaks while playing football. The sleeve of tattoos on his forearm. An Irish blessing in Gaelic his grandmother always wished on them whenever Max had taken her over to visit on the mainland. She'd passed away their senior year. She remembered holding his hand in the church and then later at the tattoo parlor. With his jacket off, she could tell that he'd gotten stockier. He wasn't as lanky as he'd been in high school. A little hormonal thrill sent a shiver down her spine. The plain gray t-shirt, stretched between his shoulders, was speckled with something that looked like paint, but what was under it, had still been clearly defined. He'd looked ... good. She could say that. It was an observation, not a ... *desire*. He did. Other girls in school had thought Max was too serious because he always looked like he was about to give

a speech or step into a boxing ring. His demeanor and her good grades were the reason that no one had ever suspected them while they were in school of being S.I. She had no doubt that his demeanor had served him well in the Army. She bit her lip, thinking of how he'd looked under Bumble's fluorescent lights. *But how well had being in the Army served him?*

He'd been wearing jeans, so she couldn't be sure, but based on how he'd knocked into the shelf and how he'd been standing, she was going to guess he'd lost something on his right side. His leg? His foot? She racked her memory. His feet ... one had been wearing a boot, but the other ... She squeezed her eyes shut, imagining the pain, emotional and physical he had to have felt. Was still feeling? She should have ignored Amelia's text and stayed to talk to him longer. Even if it was awkward. Was he talking to *anyone* about what had happened? The Max she knew in high school wouldn't be. If only their meeting hadn't happened in the middle of an aisle at Bumble's. If they'd prolonged their conversation there, the odds were favorable that Mrs. Bumble would have crawled through the adjacent aisle and laid sandwiched on the shelf between cans of peaches in syrup and pineapple rings to listen to them.

She sighed and shook her head, as she turned down the side street, pushing the Bumble's cart in the direction of the animal hospital to drop off the donations. She had, in the last eight years, somehow managed to forget how good Max looked. And she'd never seen him with stubble before today. Even in

high school, he'd always been clean-shaven. Another thing she assumed was from his family's military influence. But, she had to admit, a five o'clock shadow looked good on him. And his hair was growing out again. She'd never said it to him, but she'd hated his buzz cut. It had made it more fun to call him "Buzz Cut Buzzkill" during their last few months together, but he looked so much better with his dark waves crowding his forehead and curling over his ears.

She unlocked the backdoor to the hospital and pushed the cart down the hall. She could hear Annabelle's David Bowie and Elton John, "Pup Suds" mix playing. But Andi wasn't in the mood to talk at the moment *or* get roped into bath time, especially with her own shift starting in ten hours. She parked the cart in the breakroom and slipped back out the door, locking it before heading home. Her thoughts turned back to Max as she walked home, hiking the grocery bag up on her shoulder. She could feel the goofy smile return to her lips. She was just glad he was home safe. That was all ... right?

Her phone dinged in her pocket and after nodding to some passing townsfolk, she slid it out and dragged her thumb across the screen. It was a text message from Michelle. That was enough to wipe the smile off her face.

M: Hey, I've been thinking about what you said. I think you're right. Brandon would have liked being remembered in a pet park. He always loved animals so much. I think it's one of the reasons he loved you.

Ok, Andi thought. Not going to misread anything into that statement. She took a deep breath and replied:

A: I'm so glad you like the idea. I'm going to find out how to apply and try to get the bench approved ASAP.

After a moment, her phone dinged again.

M: Wait, it's not a done deal? You have to apply and hope they accept it?

A: Yeah. It's a process here. There are other people applying with things they want for the park too. But I think we have a good chance. I mean, who doesn't want nice benches at a pet park?

M: So whether or not Brandon's memorial will even happen will be at the whim of some random island person?

Not just some random island person, Andi thought darkly. Esther Jacobs and my ability to get on her good side.

Suddenly, getting the bench approved for Brandon's memorial felt like a Herculean task, side-by-side with getting all the pets adopted by the end of January. It was possible for a regular person to accomplish two Herculean tasks at the same time, right? Wasn't Hercules multitasking in all those Greek legends? She could do this ... right? "*You have to think ahead, Andarchy.*" She tried to push Max's words away.

Michelle didn't text her back and the burn of guilt started at her toes and slowly radiated upwards, ready to choke her at the first wrong thought that crossed her mind. She did her best to banish any further thoughts of Max. She wasn't entirely

successful and the full blast of guilt hit her when she reached the walkway to her parents' front door. How many hundreds of times had she followed this walkway, hand in hand with Max? She could count on one hand all the times she'd done the same with Brandon. *Not a fair measuring stick*, she snapped inside her head. *I'm not forgetting you, Brandarama*. The guilt eased as she remembered the look on his face when she'd given him the nickname. She told him his hair one morning made him look like the lost member of Bananarama. He'd not been amused at first. But then she'd started putting on the "Cruel Summer" music video every time they had a fight. And eventually, it made him laugh. She raised her hand to her mouth and softly kissed her engagement ring before pushing open the front door.

"Thank god you're back," Amelia called out. "Mom won't pause the episode and dad and I need refills and a bathroom break and ice cream."

"We've paused it too many times already," their mom growled. "We're powering through the end if it kills us."

"It actually might," their dad muttered, shifting on the couch.

Andi rolled her eyes. "Well, I'll be in the kitchen, putting all this food away, and maybe eating all the ice cream by myself."

Amelia looked at her, eyes wide. "You wouldn't."

"I can't," Andi said, rolling her eyes. "The size of the tub you made me get says, 'perfect for parties of fifty or more' on

the side. It came with an overdose warning label. But I *could* take a spoon and eat right out of the middle ...”

“You monster,” Amelia said, shaking her head.

“Yep. So, I hope the end of the runway is nigh for you.” She paused, pretending to consider something. “Hmmm. Or maybe I’ll just carve my name into the ice cream and then start picking out all the rocky road chunks and eating those, leaving just the smooth ice cream for the rest of you.”

“Stop torturing us,” her dad said, shaking his head. “We’ll all be in there to stop you ... in five minutes. Now, shhh.” And the three of them went back to watching the end of *Drag Race*.

In the kitchen, Andi started unloading the bag but stopped when she got to the *Playboy*. She’d forgotten to throw it away on her way home too. She looked around the kitchen. *Crap*. Now she was in the same boat Max had been in. If she threw away a nine-year-old *Playboy* magazine in the kitchen, someone would notice. Then it would become the new headline scandal in the Morgan household, rivaled only by the Missing Kiwi Yogurt Investigation of 2012, and Gate-gate. That was the time someone left the back gate open and their old Basset Hound, Columbo, had escaped. Not that he got very far. His idea of an incredible journey was walking out the back door of the house to pee on their willow tree. Andi had been blamed as the Nixon of Gate-gate because she couldn’t stop laughing. No one else thought that the coincidence of having a dog named after a famous TV detective, who was then the

benefactor of the crime being investigated was as funny as she did.

She heard her family, arguing about Ru's decision on who stayed and who went, getting louder as they headed for the kitchen. She dashed for the back stairs, rolling the magazine up as she went, hoping they wouldn't spot her feet and call to her. She heard the kitchen door swing open and Amelia yelling that she needed carbs if they were going to continue their argument, but no yell for Andi. She breathed a sigh of relief as she headed down the hallway to her bedroom. Once inside, she looked around. Where should she hide it? Her mom still came in to clean from time to time despite Andi's protests, and Amelia came in anytime she needed to borrow something that she couldn't find in her trash-compactor-level of a room. So, would *anywhere* be safe? Maybe the closet, in her underwear drawer? That was one place Amelia wouldn't look. And her mom didn't clean her closet. And Andi had flatly refused to let her mom do her laundry. It was perfect.

Well, almost. She pulled the door open and tried not to look, but it was there, calling to her like a floating white specter of loss. It was the icon of everything that wouldn't be. Her legs felt weak as she turned to look at it. She hadn't had the heart to move it. It felt ... *wrong* to box it up, hide it away, or worse, get rid of it. It would be like she was breaking a promise or breaking up ... with him. Not to mention all the hope and dreams that it had represented to her.

The magazine. She just needed to hide the magazine. Then she could go. She could close the door. She could stop

thinking about ...

She tore open her underwear drawer and buried the magazine at the very bottom. As she was covering it up, she paused. She had to admit, a part of her was a little curious about it. She and Max had been in his room a lot when they were teenagers, but she'd never seen his ... magazines.

Really? That's what you're thinking about?

She pulled her closet door closed and marched out of her bedroom. She forced her feet to head back down the stairs before she could pause in the hallway to reconsider taking just *one* more look at the *Playboy*.

"I heard about it at the Santa Ball and Crawl Organizing Committee meeting," her mom was saying as she shifted the contents in the fridge, rearranging the new groceries.

"And the sun just went down," Amelia muttered, licking her spoon before sticking it back into her bowl of ice cream.

"Seriously, they need to have a shorter name. Or at least go by an acronym."

Their dad had been emptying the dishwasher, but he paused and frowned at Amelia. "SBACOC?"

"Yeah," she said, grinning at him. "Or call themselves the Santa Ball and COC?"

Everyone but their mom started to snicker. "Like living with a bunch of cartoon hyenas," she muttered, going back to the fridge. She spotted Andi and straightened up. "I heard you saw ... Max Lyons at Bumble's."

It wasn't a question and it wasn't just a comment in passing. It was the squeaky ratcheting back of a medieval trebuchet, ready for her response to flip the trigger and launch her into a tirade of questions, comments, and "helpful advice" that would just make her stomach start to twist itself into knots. *Best to get it over with.* Maybe with minimal response, she could speed up their verbal armistice while cutting off the supply line to cripple the attack. *See Max Buzzkill, I can plan.* Well, sort of. She wasn't entirely sure how to do any of it, but it sounded good in her head.

She didn't waste time wondering how her mom could *possibly* have found out about their chance meeting this fast. This *was* Hope after all. Either Mrs. Bumble or some other covert shopper had probably spotted them and immediately started texting her mom.

She decided to try the nonchalant approach first. "Yeah," Andi said, moving back to the counter to retrieve the now-empty grocery bag and hang it back on its wall hook.

"And?" Amelia asked, gesturing with her spoon for Andi to continue.

Andi just shrugged. "We said hi. Then I had to go get some giraffe-legged gremlin, her colossal-sized ice cream."

"Just 'hi'?" her mom asked. "That's it?"

"We said it had been a long time," she added. Beyond their time travel back to their high school pranking days, they really hadn't said that much to each other. Well, unless she counted the stuff about the magazine. But, wild hippos could drag her

through hell and she still wouldn't retell that story. The whole thing sounded so ridiculous that unless Andi fessed up to it herself, there was a good chance it would burn up upon gossip reentry. Even if Mrs. Bumble told her mom about what had happened, there was even money that her mom wouldn't believe it and instead, she'd think that maybe Mrs. Bumble was spending too much time inhaling chemical fumes in the cleaning aisle of the store.

“He didn't say anything about ... or did you see ...”

“Did I see what?” she turned to frown at her mom.

She watched all three of them draw a collective breath but her mom was the first to speak. “We didn't say anything about it to you, honey, because ... well, this year has been hard enough, but ...”

“Max was wounded,” her dad said, his voice soft. “In Iraq. Liza told Hank Melrose his transport vehicle hit an IED. Got several men on his team. He ran back in to drag one out and a second explosion ... the shrapnel t-” her dad sniffed. “Tore his leg up. He ...” He swiped at his face and Andi felt her heart breaking for her dad. He'd always liked Max. He'd liked Brandon too, but Max was the first guy Andi, his oldest, had dated. And he was a *good* guy. She supposed it was the best any dad with teenage daughters could hope for. Of course, she didn't remember him being *this* fond of Max when they were dating. But maybe it was *because* they were dating. And, to be fair, they *were* hellions. It came with the territory when you spent your whole adolescence on a five-mile island, except for

occasional weekend trips and vacations to the mainland. Still, she remembered her dad calling Max, “Son” too.

Her heart was so close to the surface these days. This year had been too much. For all of them. In a few strides, she was across the kitchen, hugging her dad. She wasn’t completely sure why beyond the fact that when her dad cried, she cried too. And something about his reaction to Max’s injuries had made it ok for her to feel it too. It felt like she could exhale something she’d been holding in since leaving Bumble’s.

“He wasn’t even using crutches,” she whispered into her dad’s chest.

“Really?” her dad asked. He tightened his hold around her. “Max always was a tough kid.”

He was. She could tell from the way he was carrying himself that he’d been practicing dealing with the pain. And she’d *joked* with him, probably while he was just wishing he could get home and rest. Being around him had felt so comfortingly familiar. But the Max she’d seen tonight, missing parts of himself, and with that haunted look in his eyes... He was a shadow of the Max she’d known eight years ago. The Max who’d stolen her teenage heart.

Her phone dinged in her pocket again, slapping her sharply back into reality. She heard her mom sigh as she pulled the phone out of her pocket and stared at the screen.

“What does Michelle want now?” her mom asked.

Andi scrolled through the message. “She thought the bench in the pet park was all settled. I told her I’d have to apply and hope it was accepted and she’s kind of . . .,” she paused as her phone dinged three more times. More texts from Michelle in quick succession. “. . . upset,” she finished. When Andi looked up, she saw her mom glaring at a spot on the counter, her lips pinched together so tightly they were turning white. She knew what she was holding back. But as much as she loved her mother, she didn’t understand. Michelle and Brandon had been sister and brother, but they’d also been best friends. Her best option to move the conversation forward before her mom gave herself an aneurysm would be to distract.

“So, does anyone have any good ideas about how I can get on Esther’s good side long enough to get the park bench approved?”

“How attached are you to your will to live?” her dad asked.

“That’s what I asked her,” Amelia said, around her ice cream.

“You asked about my sanity,” Andi muttered.

Amelia shrugged. “Same difference.”

“Well,” her mom said, her face finally starting to relax from “mama bear rampage” to “mild worry”. “What about Esther’s big post-Christmas clearance sale? She’s *always* looking for help with that.”

Andi groaned and covered her face with her hands. “Why couldn’t *Miss Mandie* own the lot for the new pet park?”

She felt Amelia's hand on her shoulder. She glanced at it long enough to see that she was back to wearing the "Paw Claws". She could hear the barely suppressed laughter in her voice when she said, "Sometimes, that's just the way the dog biscuit burns."

Max

He was gripping the rattling cart too tight. He knew it. He could feel the plastic guard bending under his fingers as he walked. The only downside to his backroads way home was the silence around him, where all he could hear was the uneven thunk, tha-thunk of his footsteps. He used to be smooth, silent. He used to *run* on his way home. Running was a distant memory at this point. *Just one more closed door.* He veered off that downhill slope of thinking and tried to focus on the fact that he'd just seen Andi. At first, he thought he'd been hallucinating. But once his brain realized that she was really there, after all the times he'd imagined her being there, he'd felt like he was eighteen again, caught in the aura of this ... beautiful, chaotic mess of a creature.

There was a cold breeze whipping over the island. He paused to enjoy the harsh prickle on his face as he tried to clear his head. *So she was engaged.* Of course, she was. Why wouldn't she be? She was Andi Morgan. He should have been surprised she wasn't married yet. *Wait ...* He paused, a cold realization settling over him with the breeze. *Maybe she was married.* Maybe that was a wedding ring, not an engagement

ring. He gritted his teeth and started pushing the cart again, shoving against its weight and ignoring the white-hot stab of pain that ran from his hip through his knee. *It doesn't matter, either way. Just ... be happy that she's happy.* Yeah. She'd looked tired, but she'd been smiling ... and mischievous, and just ... Andi. *Andarchy and Max Buzzkill.*

“Are ... are you ok?” his mom asked when he rolled the cart into the living room.

“Yeah ...” he said, cocking his head to look at her. “Why?”

She shook her head. “I’ve just never seen you return from a trip to Bumble’s, smiling. There’s a reason we call it the ‘Bumble Mumble’. Did you take a blow to the head or something?”

Not to the head.

“No, just ... excited about mac and cheese.” He smiled as he pushed the cart around her and into the kitchen.

“Uh-huh,” she muttered, turning to follow him. He could tell by her tone that she didn’t believe him. “Why are you smiling, *really?*”

He chuckled. “If I’d known smiling would trigger an investigation, I’d have stomped my way in here and growled.”

“And *then* I wouldn’t have been suspicious,” she said, pulling out a saucepan and cheese grater. He moved around her, pulling down bowls and measuring cups from the higher cabinets for her as they worked. “Did you forget everything I taught you about cooking? Salt and oil that water.” She

pointed her spatula at him and for a moment he felt like he was twelve years old again, caught hurrying and skipping steps so he could go outside and play. As if she could read his mind she asked, “Are the kids down the street waiting for you to go play ball with them or something?” He turned to look at her and her smile faded away as she realized what she’d said. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He chuckled and shook his head, turning his attention back to the pot on the stove. “Don’t be. It’s ok. Besides, you know me better than that. If the kids down the street wanted to play, I’d already be making excuses to get outside.” He heard her snuffle trying to turn into a chuckle behind him as he reached for the salt. He took a deep breath, trying to concentrate on not reacting. It seemed to come in waves sometimes. He and his mom would be able to go for hours without acknowledging what had changed for him. Then, one off-hand comment, or a mention of his past sports achievements, or a story of him and Gray tear-assing around the house, and the mood would shift again. He needed something to distract them ... something unrelated that would pull them back from the edge of the pit. And he needed it fast. Because once his mom started crying, it was hard for her to stop.

“I saw Andi Morgan at Bumble’s,” he blurted out. *Ok. Next time, mouth, check with me before you go rogue.*

“Really?” At least it sounded like the distraction had worked. But his relief was short-lived. “Did you two talk? How’d she look? I heard she came home this summer, but I haven’t seen her.”

*See what happens when we don't plan our distractions
before diving in?*

“Uh, yeah, we just said hi. She ... she looked good ... like she was *doing good*.” He really hoped his mom would let the slip pass. He didn't think he could handle her look of pity over his leg *and* over him seeing his ex-high school girlfriend. A fresh wave of burning embarrassment crashed over him. His mom had been with him on the ferry that day on his way to basic training when he'd read Andi's letter. It was the second and last time he'd questioned going into the Army. But as much as his mom hated that he was going into the service, she'd talked with him. She hadn't tried to sway him one way or the other, but she'd reminded him that Andi wouldn't be staying on the island either. She was leaving for college. So he'd gone to basic. And then his first posting, and then his second, and slowly, bit by bit, the pain of losing Andi had dulled. She'd still sent him a birthday card that first year. And it was signed, “Love, Andi”. When he got it, it had pissed him off. She'd dumped him, but she told him she still loved him. And in his nineteen-year-old wounded pride and rage, he'd torn the card in half and thrown it away. There were nights in Iraq though, when he'd lay on his bunk, staring up at the canvas above him and wishing he still had that card ... and the woman who'd sent it.

A phantom pain shot through his leg, feeling like a deep, burning electrical pulse. And then there was the crippling ache that reverberated through the lower leg he didn't have

anymore. He gripped the counter, knocking the saucepan off the burner as he bent forward to hold on and ride it out.

“Max, I’ve got this. Sit down, Honey. Please.” His mom’s voice coaxed him over to the nearest stool at the bar counter. He didn’t argue. He sat down and automatically pulled off his prosthetic so he could rub at the only source of the pain he could reach. “Well, I’m glad she looked like she’s doing well,” his mom said with a definite air of trying to *not* fuss over him and make things worse. She knew him well. “I heard she’d gotten engaged. But something happened. I didn’t hear the details. Her fiancé wasn’t from the island so I don’t even know his name. And nobody’s said anything to me about it.”

“Probably because you’re my mom,” he said, trying to breathe as another shock of pain shot through him. He rubbed his knee harder. “Everyone in town knew we broke up. They probably figured you wouldn’t want to know.”

“I don’t,” she sniffed. “That girl broke your heart. Good riddance.” He glanced at her and almost smiled. Mama Lyons was fierce when it came to her cubs, but Andi had been one of her cubs too. From the first time she’d come home with Max in middle school after volunteering to be his science partner on his first day, he knew how much his mom had liked Andi. He didn’t miss the flash of worry on her face as she stared into the saucepan. “She broke your heart,” she muttered again.

He felt a twinge of annoyance competing with a desire to hug his mom roll through him. “We were eighteen, Mom. And

you were the one who said it was probably inevitable that we were going to break up, with the distance and everything.”

“You were hurting. What else could I say? But your dad and I ...”

“You two were special,” he said gently. Now a new pain was overshadowing the pain in his knee. He’d thought that he and Andi were special too. He’d fantasized about the two of them getting married. He’d be in uniform, and she’d be in a white dress with flowers in her hair. Then they’d be setting up a house on a base somewhere. Maybe even in another country. Trying the food out, seeing the sights. Welcoming their first ... *landmine trigger. Re-route.* He took a deep breath. None of that mattered now.

“Do you want a mix of the sharp and mild cheddar, or just sharp? I know we used to make it milder, but that was mostly because Gray’s stomach couldn’t handle it,” his mom said. He felt himself smile. Now it seemed *she* was the one grasping for a distraction.

“Since it’s just you and me,” he said, gripping the edge of the counter as he reached down to get his prosthetic, “I say we go sharp all the way.”

She turned to grin at him. “Maybe throw in some pepper jack, just because we can?”

He nodded. “Let’s live on the edge. I’m going to put some jalapenos on mine too.”

“Now we’re talking.” She nodded approvingly and turned back to the block of cheese she was grating over a bowl.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, standing slowly. “I’m gonna go ... wash my hands.”

She didn’t call him back to remind him he could wash his hands at the kitchen sink or in the downstairs bathroom. He took the stairs slowly, gripping the railing on his way up. Going upstairs always felt more difficult than going down these days. In a crusty, boot leather-hard part of him, he found it amusing that physical actions he used to never spare a thought for were now daily obstacles to be overcome.

When he got to his room, he flipped on the light and closed the door behind him before he went to the dresser. It was muscle memory. He’d never shown his mom. He’d never shown anyone except for Gray. And then when everything fell apart, he was thankful he’d kept the whole stupid thing a secret. Just the thought of what he’d almost done was enough to make his face burn in embarrassment. He’d been so naive. A lovesick, stupid kid. He pulled the top drawer open and reached all the way to the back, digging through pairs of socks and boxers, jockstraps, and football gloves. For a moment, his heart stopped beating as panic set in while he dug around, searching. Then his finger brushed the smooth fake-leather surface and his hand closed around the small box. He pulled it out, but didn’t look at it until he was across the room and sitting down on the edge of his bed.

Without stopping to think through what he was doing, he pried open the box, ignoring the squeak of protest from the hinges that hadn't moved in eight years. The black fuzzy lining was dusty around the groove that held the simple ring. He'd thought it was fancy at the time. He'd spent his entire Army signing bonus and his savings from working part-time at the plumbing store to buy it. The band was silver and the two sides came together around the stone, fanning out into broad silver comet tails. The stone itself was an opal. Andi had told him once that she didn't like diamonds. That they were plain and translucent, that there was no mystery about them. She liked opals because they looked like something plucked out of the galaxy, shrouded in mystery and unique. He'd scoured the internet and jewelry shops on the mainland. Finally, Mr. Werner, the owner of the only jewelry store on the island, had helped him design the ring. He'd even offered to do the laser inscription inside the band, free of charge. Looking back on the whole thing now, Max knew he was lucky that Mr. Werner was a quiet man of few words and had kept his secret.

He held the ring in his fingers, debating whether to look at the inscription inside the band. It didn't really matter either way. He had the words memorized. *To My Andi. Just a piece of the galaxy I'll work to give you, every day, forever. Love, Max.*

He closed his eyes and squeezed the tiny ring in his palm until he felt the edges of the stone's settings and the comet tails cutting into his skin. The ache inside him felt like an echo in an empty room. Andi Morgan was a phantom pain.

This isn't helping, he heard in Sutter's voice. He pried his eyes open and forced himself to stuff the ring back in the box. He snapped it closed, got to his feet, and shoved it back into the furthest corner of his dresser drawer, covering it with his socks and boxers to keep it hidden.

He was such an idiot. She was wearing someone else's ring now. There had been other guys in her life. Probably more than one. Not that he'd been a monk since leaving. He'd had a few one-night stands on leave, but there had been a lot of alcohol involved. He'd tried dating a girl in Georgia when he'd been stationed there, but it had ended badly. Then, he'd been deployed and dating had been the last thing on his mind.

Andi, on the other hand, was beautiful and smart and she'd been on college campuses surrounded by guys with nothing else to do but go to class and date. He knew he shouldn't be surprised she'd dated, that she'd gotten engaged. And he shouldn't blame her. She didn't cheat. She moved on. And it was long past his turn to do the same. But seeing her tonight didn't make that thought go down any easier. He opened his bedroom door and headed back downstairs.

"Hey, dinner's ready," his mom called when she heard him on the stairs.

They sat in comfortable silence, only making small talk about the molten heat of the mac and cheese, Gray's assignment, and their plan to FaceTime him on Christmas.

"Crap," his mom said when they were cleaning up. She was looking around. "I had a voicemail from Social Security about

your dad's pension and there was a number I needed to call on Monday. I wrote it down ...”

He met her gaze. “Is something wrong with it?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing like that. It's some administrative thing. They need to run my social security number and compare notes with the VA. Just bureaucracy.” She looked around again. “Damn it. I wrote it down and then I erased the voicemail.” She picked up the notepad she'd written the grocery list on and flipped through the pages, checking the back and front of each one. It was one of the many little quirks about his mom that still made him smile. She'd grown up poor and in the service. Then as a mom with two growing boys and only one breadwinner in the family after his dad died, she'd developed a bunch of little ways to make the money stretch. Her habit of writing on both sides of every sheet of paper was one of the stranger ones. Max only had vague memories of living on the base in Germany as a little kid, then New Jersey, and then long stretches in Seattle when his dad would be deployed for eighteen months, home for two, and then gone again. Until he didn't come back.

Max had been in the fifth grade. Gray had been six. Then they'd moved to Hope Island because it was cheaper than Seattle and his mom had gotten a job with the Whorley Fishing Company, but the money was still tight and every piece of paper in the house was saved until it couldn't be used to store notes any longer. “I bet I wrote it on the back of that grocery list.” She looked up at him. “Do you still have it?”

Max was washing the dishes with suds all the way to his elbows. “I think it’s in my jacket pocket.” He nodded at the hook by the door where his bomber jacket was hanging and then he went back to scrubbing. That was something he *could* do. He could clean. He could take care of the little things for her. At least he’d be able to pitch in now. With his pension from the service, he could at least fix up her home. He could make sure she was comfortable and taken care of for the rest of her life. That was something he could be proud of, something his dad would have been proud of him for doing. And she was the one person who’d never left him. Even Gray was gone now. Though, like Andi and his dad, he couldn’t blame him. He glanced over at his mom as she dug in his coat pockets, thinking how alike they were. They were both a little haunted. By their pasts. By their losses.

“What’s this?” she asked, staring down at something in her hand as she came back into the kitchen. He glanced at what she had and he felt his stomach plummet to his knees. Besides the crumpled grocery list, she was holding that damn card from Mrs. Bumble.

He groaned. “Mrs. Bumble cornered me. She said her daughter Jordan was back in town and having some kind of get-together and asked if I would come. I told her yes just to end the conversation so I could get out of there.”

“This card isn’t a party invitation,” his mom said, reading the front and automatically flipping it over to check the back. “It looks like it’s for ... a support group.”

He frowned, drying his hands on a dish towel before reaching out to take the card from her. He held it under the light above the sink to read. *A Cup of Kindness Support and Social Group. First meeting, Monday, December 26th, 7pm in the Cafeteria, Hope High School. "Should auld (old) acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? We'll take a cup of kindness yet for days of auld lang syne."*

"Well played, Mrs. Bumble," he muttered.

"Are you going to go?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. I just didn't want to stand in the aisle talking to her any longer than I had to. If she'd asked me for a kidney I probably would have said yes just to get away from her." He handed the card back to his mom before turning to finish rinsing the last dish. He set it in the drain and dried his hands again. "I'm going to do some measuring and prepping on that wall in the dining room so I can do the patch and baseboard work first thing tomorrow."

"Jackson will be here at eight to help," she said.

"Can't wait," he muttered.

He glanced at her on his way out of the kitchen. Her expression was tuned to "deep thought" and considering that she was still clutching the card, he had a feeling it didn't bode well for him.

Andi

She was laughing and dancing around in the orange rays as the sun was setting behind the cliff and the Hope lighthouse. She was barefoot and she could feel the soft grass whispering against her soles as she ran in a circle. She was being chased. She could hear his laugh so close behind her. She tried to speed up, but he caught her. His arms closed around her waist and she was being spun in a circle, still laughing, resting her head back against his chest. She looked down at the muscular forearms holding her close and traced a finger over the Gaelic words of an Irish blessing .

Then a blast of “Prizefighter” by The Eels shattered the dream and she was falling. Her legs were caught in some kind of rope but the rest of her bounced off the hardwood floor in her bedroom. Ingrid was still singing. She pried her eyes open and squinted at her surroundings. She was alone and based on the lack of light beyond the soft glow of Christmas LEDs coming through her bedroom window, she was going to guess it was still the middle of the night. She looked down at her legs which were still tangled in her blankets on her bed. With a tug, she managed to free herself, only to then completely fall

on the floor. She reached up with one hand, feeling around on her nightstand for her phone.

“This better be life or death,” she muttered, closing her eyes. The floor wasn’t so bad. Maybe once she hung up she’d just stay where she was. If she hurried, she might get back to that dream ...

“Life,” Annabelle said quickly. There was panic in her voice that had Andi sitting up and feeling under her bed for her shoes.

“What is it? What’s happening?”

“Cinnamon’s in labor. And she’s diabetic. And I’ve never delivered kittens before, and her blood sugar is all over the place.”

“Deep breaths, Annabelle,” Andi said. “I’m on my way. Just keep water and glucose close by and make sure she’s comfortable.”

She heard Annabelle take a deep breath. “Thanks, Andi.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes. Just stay calm.” She hung up and tripped over her trailing blankets on her way to the light switch. It was probably a good thing she’d woken when she had. In her dream, her brain had been trying to fuse two memories together and that couldn’t be a good sign. The sunset on the cliff had been the day she’d taken Brandon up there on his first visit to Hope. But the tattooed arm around her ... had belonged to Max. *It’s just because you saw him for the first time in eight years tonight. That’s the only reason he*

made an appearance in the dream. It was a good enough excuse for her at the moment. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror by her door as she switched the lights on and she almost shrieked. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair was doing weird bedhead things, and her pallor could best be described as “morgue-chic”.

Awesome. It was a very good thing that the animals didn't seem to mind if they were better groomed than she was. She pulled on a pair of yoga pants, and an oversized knit sweater and tugged on her fur-lined boots. She tiptoed down the stairs and paused by the front door when she heard the TV on in the living room. It sounded like a football game. She paused and turned to see who was still up.

“Dad?”

He looked up from the screen and waved the remote at her. “I TiVoed the Seahawks game. Your mom and Amelia had no desire to watch it. I already know they lose, but it's about the journey rather than the destination, isn't it? You wanna watch? You're the only other football fan in this house.”

She smiled at him. “I wish I could. Annabelle just called me. Cinnamon's in labor.”

He frowned, thinking. “Is that the pregnant dog that keeps sitting on the other dogs' faces when they're sleeping?”

She chuckled. “No, that's Ginger. Cinnamon is the diabetic cat with the stubby tail.”

“That’s right.” He looked at her, nervously. “Do ... do you need any help?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You wanna come deliver kittens at,” she checked her phone, “1:30am?”

“I do not,” he said. “But I love my daughter and if she needed help delivering kittens at an ungodly hour I might question her career choice, but I would certainly put on pants and shoes and go help her ... I mean, if she *needed* me to.”

“I’m good. Thanks for the offer though,” she said with a grin. She pecked him on the cheek and headed out the door, power walking toward the town square. She cut down the street leading past the Hope Away From Home Inn and the dark windows of the De-Floured bakery. She blew the building a kiss as she went by, promising to stop back by for donuts and coffee on the other side of Cinnamon’s litter making an appearance into the world. She hustled down the alley behind the Hope Animal Hospital and Shelter and unlocked the back door.

“Annabelle?” she called, frowning when she poked her head into the main operating room. It was empty. She grabbed a handful of glucose strips from the box on the counter and headed down the hallway.

“Out here,” Annabelle called. Andi could hear the strain in the twenty-year-old’s voice so she hustled past the empty examining rooms and the door leading back to the kennels and what they called the “Pet Plaza”. She pushed through the door

separating the back from the waiting room and came to a screeching halt.

“Uh ... why ... the couch?”

Annabelle blew a strand of short blonde hair out of her face and flapped the arm of her vet coat at Andi. “You *said* to make sure she’s comfortable. The couch out here was the most comfortable place I could find.”

Andi tried to bite back her smile. “I just meant, maybe a towel under her? Make sure she has room to stretch out ...”

Annabelle sighed. “Now you tell me. I said I’ve never delivered kittens before. Six months ago, I was a receptionist.”

“Deep breaths,” Andi reminded her, pulling off her coat and hanging it on the hat rack by the front door. “You’re doing fine. You were born to be a vet.” She wasn’t joking. When Doc Simmons had hired Andi on as a second vet so he could take some vacation time, Annabelle had been the first person Andi had met at the animal hospital. She’d had a duckling riding around in her coat pocket, a hamster in one hand, and Leslie Schmidt’s snake, Mac, (short for Machiavelli) around her neck. Annabelle Leeds was a blonde pixie Dr. Doolittle. And she’d just been the receptionist. Which, Andi could tell within ten minutes of being in the office, Annabelle hated.

“*Give me a cat with a cold or a dog with diarrhea over spreadsheets and scheduling any day,*” she’d told Andi. So, Andi had started the two-week-long campaign it had taken to get Doc Simmons to approve Annabelle being trained as a vet

tech. And Shirley Weiss had happily come out of retirement to take over as their receptionist.

Annabelle was starting to sweat. “I ... I’m just. Birth isn’t something I’ve ever been present for. I can take care of them once they come *out*, but ...”

“She’s doing ok,” Andi said, checking Cinnamon’s vitals. The labor was progressing ... fast. She looked at the red couch the cat was sprawled across. “I’m going to grab a towel. Let’s at least try to get her on it.” The cat was huge and Andi was wary of moving her now that she was so far along in her labor. After fifteen minutes of inching the towel forward and gently reassuring Cinnamon that everything was fine, they’d been able to get the towel under her. Now, they were waiting and watching Cinnamon like a pot starting to boil. Annabelle had a syringe of glucose at the ready.

“We need to check her. She looks like her blood sugar might be a little low,” Andi said. Annabelle looked at the spent strips around them. “I grabbed some fresh ones,” Andi nodded toward the hat rack. “They’re in my coat pocket.” She pulled up her stethoscope to listen to the cat’s heart.

“How much longer are we going to have to fight Doc Simmons over getting a digital reader? I swear after a week of constant testing it’ll pay for itself with all the money we’ll save on these stupid self-reading strips,” Annabelle muttered as she dug around in Andi’s coat pocket. The cat’s heart rate sounded normal. Well, normal for labor. Andi lowered her stethoscope in time to hear Annabelle ask, “What’s this?” She

turned to see Annabelle holding a white business card. When Andi realized what it was, she groaned. “What? What is it?” Annabelle asked, hurrying back over to her.

Luckily, Cinnamon chose that moment for the birth to start and Andi was spared having to answer her. As she and Annabelle helped the new mother cat, she kept thinking, “*Great timing Cinnamon. You’re getting homemade treats too.*”

Unfortunately, Annabelle had a memory like a paused Netflix episode. As soon as mom and her six kittens were safely resting, Annabelle unpaused and turned to stare at Andi.

“So, what’s this about?” she asked, holding up the card. Her smile was evil as she surveyed Andi. Like knowing when an animal was trying to fight through symptoms, Annabelle always knew when Andi didn’t want to talk about something. And like her similar talent for getting a dog to barf up a set of swallowed car keys, she was, unfortunately, very adept at getting Andi to talk. Usually out of pure will and unwavering persistence.

“It’s nothing. Just something Mrs. Bumble gave me.” She held her breath, hoping Annabelle would take her explanation at face value and toss the damn card in the trash. *She* should have thrown it away.

“Uh huh,” Annabelle said, closing in on her. No, it didn’t sound like she was going to forget about it. “So are you going to go?”

“I need to go check on everyone,” Andi said, an idea coming to her. “You stay here with Cinnamon and I’ll be back.”

“Cinnamon and the kittens are sleeping. They’re fine. Now it’s your turn.”

“I’m neither diabetic nor about to drop six kittens, so you can pocket whatever diagnosis you’re planning on handing out,” Andi muttered, pushing her way through the door to the hallway and then the door to the Pet Plaza. Annabelle caught the doors behind her, sticking to her heels like a piece of very pushy toilet paper.

“Come on, Andi. You should go. I ... I know this winter hasn’t been easy on you. Hell, this *year* hasn’t been ...”

Andi tried to bite back the bitterness in her voice, but she wasn’t entirely successful. “I’m fine, Annabelle. Let it be.”

But the comment rolled off of Annabelle who didn’t even slow down as she followed Andi down the row of kennels where the cats and dogs were sleeping, most with their kennel doors open.

“I can’t, ‘let it be’. You’re my friend and ... I’m worried about you.” Andi turned to look at Annabelle and she saw the younger woman wilt slightly under her glare. *Good*. She loved Annabelle, but this was something she needed her to drop.

After Brandon’s accident, her mom had encouraged Andi to go to therapy. She’d told her she’d think about it. And she was *still* thinking about it. But she *knew* she didn’t want to go to a

support group and have to talk about everything out in the open. Having a bunch of other townspeople listen to her and ask questions about what had happened would be her version of dropping her *Playboy* in Bumble's and having it picked up by Mrs. Bumble herself.

The memory made her grin reluctantly. That *had* been pretty great. For a moment there, with Max, she'd felt like she was seventeen again when everything was easy and perfect.

She heard Sarge whimper in his sleep and she moved down the line of kennels to him.

"Andi," Annabelle whined, trailing after her. "You're always here or you're back at home with your parents. You never want to go out to get drinks after work, and you haven't so much as had a conversation with a guy that didn't involve the words 'neuter' or 'stool sample'. You're *hiding*."

"I'm not hiding," Andi muttered, kneeling down beside the dreaming husky. "And just last week, Dirk Patterson came in here and I didn't say *either* of those phrases in our conversation."

Annabelle's expression was deadpan. "Were you *flirting* with Dirk?"

"Well ... no. Raccoons got into his garbage and he was afraid he was going to get in trouble with Fish and Wildlife Services because they gorged themselves on the orange peels he'd been infusing his vodka with. Apparently, in a drunken stagger, they knocked over Mrs. Drake's Santa sleigh and eight reindeer in her front yard and then took a dump on her

front porch. She blamed teenagers but he has the evidence on his doorbell camera. He was worried that if they ‘overdosed on vodka orange peels’ it would get back to him and someone might subpoena his camera footage. After telling me all of this, he asked if there was a vet / potential raccoon enabler confidentiality. Just in case they overdosed and the peels turned out to be lethal.”

“Overdosed?” Annabelle asked.

“Direct quote. I’ve seen raccoons survive after eating lead paint and fireworks. I told him not to worry and in the future to look into a varmint-proof can.”

“So sexy. When are you two crazy kids going to see each other again?” Annabelle asked, rolling her eyes.

Andi sighed. “I was just trying to illustrate that your claim had no basis. I talk to people about things *other* than neutering and poop.”

“Point made. Though, I think it’s only half a point since poop was still involved apparently,” Annabelle muttered. “Oh. Speaking of Dirk, he left you a voicemail. Apparently, he heard from somewhere, I’m guessing one of the little cartoon birds that permanently revolves around his head, that you were looking for a photographer?”

Andi blinked at her. “What?”

“Yeah, to take pictures of all the shelter pets for their fliers and the website to help get them adopted?”

Andi relaxed. “Oh, yeah ... I guess I was looking for a photographer ...” She’d been taking pictures with her cell phone, but the quality wasn’t great. Dirk probably saw one of her fliers and decided to go proactive. It sounded like Dirk.

“Well, he wanted to offer you his services,” Annabelle continued. She sniffed. “Though, why he couldn’t just ask you in person during your hot overdosed raccoon porch pooping discussion is beyond me.”

“Awesome,” Andi said, trying to feel as confident as she sounded. Dirk was a nice guy, but he lived in his own world, and trying to convince him he wasn’t a *National Geographic* photographer wasn’t an argument that anyone but Dirk was going to win.

“Also,” Annabelle continued with the air of someone ripping off a Band-Aid, “Martha Washington dropped by today and said she had a dream last night.”

“Uh oh,” Andi muttered.

“Yeah, she said she knew how hard you were working to get everyone adopted, and then it just came to her. She knows the solution.”

“Should I be sitting down for this?”

“A Pet Fashion Show Extravaganza,” Annabelle finished with a dramatic sweep of her arm.

“Yep. Gonna sit down now,” Andi sighed, moving to sit cross-legged on the floor next to Sarge’s kennel.

“She wants to do it for the New Year’s Eve Bash. You know, everyone will be thinking about a clean start for themselves, and their friends. I’ve been thinking about it and you know, it might be perfect, Andi. What do you think?”

Andi paused the part of her that was wanting to make a sassy comment about what Martha, the owner of the local lingerie shop was bound to dress the pets up as. It *was* a plan. Which was more than she had if she was being honest. She was desperate to get them all adopted. The thought of a single one of them ... “Yeah. I think you’re right,” she said slowly. “That is a good idea. I’ll give her a call later today. I think it might be pushing it to do it at the New Year’s Eve Bash though. Maybe we should aim for the Resolution-Redo party on the fifteenth.”

Annabelle grinned and nodded. “Yeah. And you know what *else* is a good idea?”

“Stop while you’re ahead,” Andi said.

But of course, Annabelle didn’t. She held up the white business card again. “This! You should go.”

Andi shook her head. “Fumbled *after* you stuck the landing. Pity.”

“Come on, Andi.”

“Just ... drop it, ok? I’m fine. Now, did Sarge eat all his dinner tonight?”

Annabelle sighed. “Yeah, almost. He’s still moping in the evenings. I think he just really misses his old human.” Sarge

had only been with them for a few weeks. He'd been living with a retired major general on the mainland for most of his life. When the man died, Sarge started getting shifted from shelter to shelter. He was somewhere between three and four years old, so he wasn't a puppy, and his paperwork said he'd been a stray before the major general had adopted him. He'd lost an eye during his stray days and he'd gotten hit by a car and now had pins in his back legs. Sometimes she worried that when he was crying in his dreams like he was now, he was reliving either losing his eye or getting hit by the car. But it wasn't like Sarge could attend therapy to talk out his trauma. And no one would expect him to. For a second, she felt a weird stab of jealousy. What she wouldn't give to trade places with him so she could go back to sleep and he could deal with fending off Annabelle's care-assault.

"I'm serious," Annabelle said, circling back to what she really wanted to talk about. "Just go to one meeting." There was a loud hiss above Andi's head and then dry cat food was raining down on her.

"Great," she muttered, turning to look at Annabelle, feeling cat food fall out of her hair and down the front and back of her shirt. "You woke the beast."

She gave her head a shake and ran her hand through her hair to dislodge the rest of the cat food as she stood up and stepped away from the kennels. The spitting had started and she and Annabelle watched as the mist of spit drifted down from the little barred window in a misty cloud of hate.

“At least his protests are coming out of *that* end tonight,” Andi sighed. “Trying to clean diarrhea off of him ...” Beside her, Annabelle shuddered.

“Don’t remind me. That scene still plays back in my head on nights when I’m trying too hard to fall asleep.”

Andi turned and looked at her. “Your brain is an asshole.”

Annabelle nodded. “And it has a twisted sense of humor since an asshole was prominently featured during that *entire* memory.”

Andi put a hand on Annabelle’s shoulder as they stared at the kennel, rocking back and forth as its occupant tore up another cat bed and began stuffing pieces of it out through the holes in the door.

“It’s ok, Mr. Giggles,” Andi called softly to the cat. It didn’t seem to have any effect. Mr. Giggles finished with the cat bed and then started to hiss and spit again.

“Do you think ... if Mr. Giggles was a Bond villain ...” Annabelle started.

Andi nodded. “And he swiveled around to face Bond, would it just be him in the chair, petting himself? Or would he be in the chair, holding and petting a *smaller version* of himself?” Annabelle turned to look at her. Andi nodded. “Yeah, I’ve thought about it a lot. I think he’d be holding a smaller, hissing and spitting version of himself.”

Annabelle looked back at the kennel, shaking her head slowly. “He’s so ... angry.”

“Personally, I think it’s the name.” She looked at Annabelle. “Think about it. How would you feel if you had to go through life with a name like *Mr. Giggles*?”

Annabelle opened her mouth, paused, and then closed it and shook her head. “Yeah. I’d probably want to kill everyone and everything too.”

“Right?” Andi added. “Anytime someone just said your *name*, you’d feel like they were patronizing you. Why do you think there are so many horror movies with serial killer clowns? They’re all named things like Bubbles and Mr. Boo-Boo. At some point, they just snap.”

They were quiet for a minute, listening to the yowling, plastic-scratching chaos coming from the kennel. Then, Andi became very aware of Annabelle staring at the side of her face. She glanced over at her. “What . . . ?”

Annabelle was wearing her evil smile again. *Not good. Definitely not good.* “If you go to this meeting,” Annabelle said, holding up the business card and fixing Andi with one of her penetrating stares, which paired with the evil smile, made her look slightly deranged. “I’ll clean Mr. Giggles’ kennel for a whole *week*. *And* help Dirk get the new pictures of him for his adoption flier.”

Andi hesitated. The cuts on her chest and the insides of her forearms from the last time she had to corral Mr. Giggles were still healing. The cat *really* hated her. He hated everyone, but for some reason, he felt Andi was his nemesis. She had a feeling it had something to do with her being forced to put a

thermometer up his butt the first time they met. Then, on top of that, she'd had to chase him around the exam room when he got loose, while the thermometer was *still* in his butt. It hadn't set the scene for a harmonious relationship.

But the scratches wouldn't be nearly as painful as having to talk about Brandon to a bunch of strangers, or worse, townsfolk that knew her. But ... just *one* meeting? Maybe it wouldn't be a circle-share thing like in the movies. Maybe it would just be a meet and greet. Maybe Jordan Bumble would be the only one to talk and then she could skip out of there, obligation *and* Mr. Giggles-free for a whole week. From inside Mr. Giggles' kennel, there was a low growl, and then the sound of Mr. Giggles rearranging his food and water dishes before a cup of water was thrown through the kennel door, hitting Andi in the face. Andi swiped at her cheek with her jacket sleeve, reached out, grabbed Annabelle's hand, and shook it.

“Deal.”

Max

The heat was crushing. He could feel his feet slipping around inside his boots from the moisture between his toes. Then, the blast. He was being hurled through the air, his shoulder hitting the metal door frame as he was thrown through the open window. Pain bit into his right leg. Screaming, mixed with heavy gunfire filled the air and the blaze of the flames from the burning Humvee.

IED.

It was his only thought repeating itself through his head as he tried to blink blood, sand, and sweat out of his eyes enough to look around. Curtis was down. Jacobs was moaning nearby.

“Over the ridge,” he bellowed, his voice coming out in a ragged yell, jerking his numb arm at the dune on the other side of the road. Cover. Get them to cover. Curtis and Jacobs started stumbling, helping each other over the edge and dropping down behind it. Max crawled to his hands and knees, vaguely aware of the burning in his arms and legs from the sand and brush scraping against his wounds. Six men. Three left to find. He crawled back toward the fire, yelling for

McKay, Bronson, and Wang. He found McKay first. At least ... what was left of him. He was gone. He'd been in the back of the Humvee, right over where the blast had caught. Damn it, kid. McKay had just turned twenty-one.

"Sarge!" Wang's voice. He was alive.

"Get over the ridge," Max yelled, the muscles in his arm screaming as he pointed. Wang didn't have to be told twice. Bronson. Where was Jax? Someone was crying. He could hear the soft sobs as he rounded the front of the truck, hugging the fender. Fire was coming over the cliff on the far side of the road, but he could hear the response from his team coming from the ridge behind him. He had cover. His right leg had gone numb and he could feel the wet leg of his fatigue crunching with the sand that coated it now as he crawled toward Jax. The Humvee had flipped over and Jax was still inside. He'd been right behind Max on the driver's side when they'd hit the IED. The metal door was crushed and Jax had made it almost out the driver's side window, but Max could see his arm was sticking out at a strange angle and one of the man's legs was twisted as he kept trying to pull himself away from the burning car.

"I've got you, Jax," Max rasped, getting to his side. He grabbed Bronson by his pack and pulled him the rest of the way through the window.

"Get out of here, Sarge. My leg's broken. I can't run."

"Remind me to tear you a new one later, Bronson, for addressing your Sergeant like that," Max grunted, hoisting the

man up, pulling Jax's good arm around his shoulders and gripping the waist strap from his pack as he started dragging him toward the ridge. But progress was slow and pops and whines of near-misses sounded all around him. Need to move faster. He gritted his teeth and growled as he gathered all the strength he could to lift Bronson over his shoulder and run with him. There was something wrong with Max's right leg. It screamed with every step he took, but he didn't slow down. He could hear the other men calling to him and Wang was at the top of the ridge now, covering him as best he could. But even with the haze of black smoke and Wang's return fire, he knew he and Jax were like wounded fish in a barrel. He stumbled and more or less threw Jax over the top of the ridge as he fell. Thankfully, Jax wasn't a big guy. He was starting to crawl over the top himself when he felt, more than heard the explosion as an RPG hit what was left of the Humvee. The searing pain in his leg made him scream.

Max shot up in bed. Even in the pitch dark of his room, he knew he was home. He wasn't in Fallujah. He was home in Hope. He could smell it. His room always smelled like his mom's cooking, salt air, and old wood beams. He was home. He tried to slow his breathing and talk his heart out of the "Moby Dick" drum solo it was attempting.

"Max?" his mom's voice called from the hallway.

"I'm fine, Mom. S-sorry." He must have screamed ... again.

"A-are you sure?" She nudged his door open and by the light spilling in from the hallway, he could see the look of

exhaustion and worry on her face.

“Yeah. I’m so sorry I woke you. You should go back to bed. It won’t happen again.” He wouldn’t let it.

“I love you, sweetie,” she said softly. “If you want to talk ...” She let the thought trail off and he didn’t answer her, but he doubted she’d expected him to. The first night he’d woken up sweating and screaming, she’d asked him to tell her what had happened. He’d looked her in the eyes and told her that he loved her, but there was no way in hell he was going to do that. She was his mom. She didn’t deserve to shoulder the burden of knowing what he’d seen on top of everything else. Especially when Gray was still in the service and she had him to worry about on a daily basis.

“Night, Mom. Sorry again for waking you.” He could hear her hesitate for a moment, before gently tugging his door closed again. He sat still until he heard her soft footsteps retreating down the hall and then her bedroom door closing. His leg was on fire. It always was after waking up from that dream. He rubbed his knee and the puckered skin over his joint, trying to get it to move from the burning-shocking stage of pain to the dull ache he’d gotten used to over the last few months. He was covered in sweat. His sheet, pillowcase, and blankets were soaked through. With a growl of annoyance at himself, he snagged his prosthetic off the floor and fitted it over his knee.

Balance out.

He slowly got to his feet. He turned on the light and with a wave of vicious anger at himself, he stripped his bed. He peeled off his boxers and the a-shirt he wore to bed. He used to sleep without a shirt, but that was before the Army. He looked down at the silver streaks of scar tissue riddling his chest. And his back was worse.

Damaged goods. Sold "as is".

He snorted darkly at the thought and reached into his dresser for clean boxers and a shirt. He knew he wasn't going back to sleep tonight, so he pulled on jeans and a flannel shirt and took his bedding and hamper down to do some laundry. While the washer hummed, he started the coffee and slumped onto a stool at the kitchen bar. The dreams weren't getting better. He'd always thought they would. Other vets he talked to said they got better with time and therapy. But those guys had *needed* therapy. They'd been through much worse.

Jax had survived. McKay had been their only casualty. Even so, Max knew they'd still lost too much. Max had been driving that damn Humvee. He should have seen ...

This isn't helping, Sutter's voice echoed in his head. He *had* gone to therapy. Physical therapy. And he'd *physically* dealt with everything. Now, he just needed the time part to speed up so he could stop waking his mom up at night. He felt a wave of exhaustion roll over him as he rubbed at the pain in his leg. The coffee brew was starting to drip, but he needed something in the meantime to distract him. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened Facebook. While he was killing time, he

might as well check in on Jax and the other guys from his team and see how they were doing. Jax's timeline was full of well wishes from friends. His status showed him shipping back out to Iraq. He'd been on leave with the fracture in his femur and the torn tendon in his shoulder. But after surgery and some physical therapy of his own, he was on the mend and well enough to return to active duty. On his Facebook wall, there was a picture dated six months earlier. It showed Jax with crutches leaning against his chair while a pretty blonde sat on his good knee. She'd been kissing his cheek and smiling. He felt himself smile. Jax was ok. Jax was still in the game. *In more ways than one.* A sharp sting of nerve pain shot through Max's leg and he applied more pressure to his knee. He thumbed over to Curtis' page and paused when he saw a recent picture of Curtis, Wang, and Jacobs with half a dozen other guys from their squad trying to play hacky sack in full gear. He could almost smell the sweat and feel the heat in the picture. They were still there. Still in the desert. Still in service. He imagined trying to lead them in drills, on missions, hell, even to the mess tent with his new, uneven gait. He shook his head and tossed his phone on the counter. A shopping cart collision had almost taken him down. He'd be nothing but a liability to the rest of them now. Not that going back was even an option.

For a moment, his brain tried to put Andi on his good knee with her soft lips pressed against his cheek, like Jax's girl. But it didn't work. Instead, he saw Andi sitting on the lap of some other guy. The guy who'd put the ring on her finger. A guy she

hadn't broken up with. Otherwise, why would she still be wearing the ring? A guy who still had ... *This isn't helping.*

He forced himself off the stool and over to the cabinet. He needed to wake up. He had repairs to do. He groaned as he remembered the conversation with his mom from the day before. He also apparently had a kid to babysit and keep from losing fingers with one of his power tools. And not just any kid, a *Whorley*. He pulled a mug out of the cabinet and put it under the drip stream of coffee while he filled it the rest of the way with what had already made it into the pot. He put the pot back under the stream and took the mug into the living room. The house was always cold in the morning. He remembered coming downstairs as a kid to see his mom cooking breakfast with her winter coat on, over her bathrobe and flannel pajamas, her feet covered in two pairs of wool socks and crammed into his dad's old deerskin house shoes. He moved around the couch and held onto the mantle so he could bend his good leg down to turn on the gas and click the starter on the fire. As the flames ignited, there was something about the warm wash that felt too familiar for comfort. He didn't think before he tried to step back and he felt his balance starting to slip. He redoubled his grip on the mantle to keep from falling and his hand nudged one of the silver picture frames on the ledge.

Balance out.

When he was stable again, he automatically reached up to straighten the frame. It was Gray's headshot in his Navy dress. He was smiling at the camera, but not with the open-lipped,

crooked-tooth grin Max was used to. And the kid had finally grown into those open car doors he called ears. He didn't look like his little brother anymore. He looked like a man. A man in service of his country. Max felt his gaze drop back to the flames and he pushed away from the mantle. He hobbled back to the couch and sat down to drink his coffee in the early morning silence. He knew he should find it peaceful, but these days, silence put him on edge. Like he was waiting for something. Something to drop, or worse, something to sneak up on him from behind when he let his guard down and in his current state, he knew he wasn't as fast as he used to be.

“Max?”

He jumped, sloshing the hot coffee onto his lap. “Shit,” he hissed, trying to jump to his feet. But he didn't pause to think about the mechanics of getting up. His good knee buckled and he fell forward onto his hands, bracing himself on the coffee table, which coincidentally was now covered with spilled coffee.

“I'm so sorry, Max,” his mom's voice cried as she came around the couch. Without asking, she put a hand around his middle and tugged on him until he straightened up. His nerves were frayed and he wanted to shout at her. But it wasn't her fault. And she was his mom. And he *didn't* shout at his mom. *Balance out*. He focused on shifting his weight and then he patted her shoulder awkwardly.

“I'm ok. Sorry. You've just leveled up your stealth skills since I left.” He chuckled. “I remember Gray and I would be

screwing around, usually doing something stupid and dangerous, but we never worried because we could hear you stomping up the stairs or through the house like a draft horse in a parade when you were coming to find us.”

“Being a perpetual witness to you and your brother’s stupid and dangerous crap turned me into a stomper. I always hoped that at least if you heard me coming, you’d knock off whatever you were doing by the time I got there.”

Max blinked at her. “Wow. My whole childhood ... was a lie. We thought we were so clever.”

“You two always think that,” she muttered, moving over to the fireplace. She warmed her hands and then reached up to straighten the picture frames on the mantle. For a moment, he expected her to reach for Gray’s since he’d probably knocked it a millimeter off of its mark. His dad’s influence lived on in his mom as well. Hospital corners, three squares, and everything precisely in its place. But instead of reaching for Gray’s picture or even his dad’s, she reached for his. He was in his Army dress, not exactly smiling, but he’d been thinking about his mom when the picture was taken. She’d told him she’d wanted the picture for the mantle to put next to his dad’s. His dad’s photo sat on the left, Gray’s was on the right and she’d moved his to the middle. He watched her straighten it, pulling it towards her and pausing to make sure it was centered.

“So, are we going to just keep pretending like the sky is green?” she asked, without turning to look at him.

“What?”

She sighed. “Baby, I love you.” She turned to look at him. “And you’re a grown man, so I’m not saying this as a mother. I’m saying this as someone who’s seen a tomato before and is staring right in the face of a big ole hothouse red, telling it, it’s a tomato. You have PTSD, love.”

“I don ...”

“You do,” she said. And the matter-of-fact mom voice was there. This wasn’t a discussion. She was laying out the facts. Or, at least the facts as *she* saw them. “And you’re not going to get through this with wishful thinking, or by ignoring it.”

“I’m fine ...”

“You’re not,” she said, crossing her arms. “You need to talk to someone about this.” She studied his face for a minute and they were locked into a battle of who could outglare the other. He loved her, but she *didn’t* know what she was talking about. He *was* fine. So he had bad dreams. Every six-year-old had bad dreams. He could figure this out and then he’d move on. It wasn’t like it mattered anymore anyway. He wasn’t trying to tick boxes so he could pass muster and be deployed again.

His mom was the first to break in their glare-off. Her eyes lit up and she scurried off toward the kitchen. Instead of feeling momentarily triumphant that he’d won some battle of wills, a sense of foreboding started to settle over him. Liza Lyons didn’t lose battles, especially not with her kids.

“This group,” she said, hurrying back into the living room, staring down at the card in her hand. “A Cup of Kindness support group.” She looked back up at him and tapped the card against his chest. “It’s. Perfect. They meet the day after tomorrow. You can go and talk to someone ...”

He shook his head. “No, Mom. The last thing I want or need is to sit around in a room full of strangers, or worse, people I know, and talk about ... no. I’m not going.” But she wasn’t giving up that easily. He could see her gathering her forces together and regrouping for another strategy. He had to think of something quick.

“I ... I was actually thinking about getting a service dog. They can help with ... everything.” It was true. Jake Miller, a guy he went to basic with had seen some truly terrible crap in Baghdad and when he’d been discharged he’d gotten a service dog. He’d told him that the dog slept on the bed with him and could wake him up by whining whenever it sensed him starting to have a panic attack in his sleep. That could be useful. And he hadn’t had a dog since Misty, the old Elkhound they’d inherited when their next-door neighbor, Mrs. Steiner, had died. It might be ... fun ... to have a dog again. And his mom liked dogs. It was part distraction and part hope that she’d see it as a compromise and let up on the stupid support group thing.

“A service dog would be good,” his mom said, sounding thoughtful. She nodded and turned to set the card down on the mantle. “Ok. But you’re going *today* to fill out the paperwork. I just read in the paper that Doc Simmons at the animal

hospital has started a program to help veterans get service pets.”

“Today’s Christmas Eve,” Max said. “He won’t be ...”

“Yeah he will,” she said. “Animals don’t give a rat’s ass about the holidays. When they need help, they need help. And right now, *you* need help. You’ll go today and get that paperwork started, my boy. Or else,” she picked up the card and tapped it on the mantle. “You’re going to the support group on Monday. Those are my terms.”

“And if I refuse?” he asked, trying to fight down his grin.

“There’s no option to refuse. This is the ‘or else’ clause. And you don’t want to find out what ‘or else’ could be. You think my stealth is good, you should see my ‘watch-your-back’ backhand swing. You’ll think the time I accidentally dyed all your a-shirts pink before football camp was a picnic.”

He held up his hands. “I don’t have a white flag to wave, but I surrender. You got me. I’ll go fill out paperwork after the Whorley kid goes home. The last thing I want is to be constantly looking over my shoulder waiting for you to pull something. God knows what you’d come up with.”

“I did learn from the best,” she muttered, still glaring at him when he leaned forward to drop a kiss on the top of her head.

Andi

“What the hell are you doing?”

Andi jerked awake and tried to roll over, but too late she realized there was nowhere to roll over to. She let out a shriek as she started to fall. The white linoleum floor was rising to meet her.

“Crap,” Annabelle shrieked, running from the doorway. Andi was nose-to-toes with Annabelle’s white sneakers and rainbow shoelaces. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” Andi wheezed, pushing herself up to sit. “The exam table is just a lot narrower than my bed at home.”

“Why were you sleeping on the exam table anyway?”

Andi rubbed the back of her neck, trying to loosen the crick enough to look up at her. “Well, there was a cat giving birth on the couch.”

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “Why didn’t you just *go home*?”

Andi shrugged and immediately winced. Her shoulders, it seemed, weren’t currently on speaking terms with her. Not that she could blame them. The stainless steel was a far cry from

her soft mattress at home. “Because I had to be back here in a few hours anyway. This was less hassle.” She didn’t mention that she was also afraid of what dreams would come to her if she was sleeping comfortably. If she was uncomfortable and *still* able to sleep, she hoped the exhaustion would be behind the steering wheel and she’d be able to just pass out, into blissful darkness. And as far as she knew it had worked. If dreams *had* come, they’d been polite enough to clean up after themselves and leave before she woke up.

“Your shift doesn’t start until eight,” she could hear the annoyance in Annabelle’s voice.

“What time is it now?”

“Seven-thirty,” Annabelle muttered. “I was getting everything ready to hand off to you in thirty minutes. I thought you’d left and gone home, *two hours* ago.”

Andi yawned. “Well consider yourself getting a bonus half hour off. Combat pay for your crash course in cat birthing tonight. You can head out.”

Annabelle looked doubtful. “Shirley’s off for the next few weeks on vacation. And Doc Simmons called an hour ago. Apparently, he ate some sushi at Ledbetter’s Diner for dinner last night and now he’s got the ‘Mr. Giggles’ spraying out of both ends.”

Andi felt her lip curl. “Poor guy.”

Annabelle nodded. “Yeah. So, you’re really going to be all by yourself today. Maybe I should stay ...”

Andi snorted and made a shooing gesture at Annabelle. “No. Take off and go get some rest. I’ll be fine. It’s Christmas Eve. I only have one appointment with The Tully’s cat, Fergus.”

Annabelle gulped. “Shots?”

Andi nodded. “Cat arthritis is the gift that just keeps on giving.”

“And Fergus is the ‘Santa Claws’ of exploratory face surgery,” Annabelle muttered. “Hey, who do you think would win in a fight between Fergus and Mr. Giggles?”

Andi snorted. “I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure the winner would make the other four horsemen of the apocalypse shit their pants.”

She followed Annabelle on a tour of the Pet Plaza as they walked through their changing of the guard duties. They paused in front of the large cat bed in the corner of the room where Cinnamon was licking her kittens awake.

“Cats are weird,” Annabelle said. “How’d you like to be *licked* awake every morning ... by your *mother*.”

Andi chuckled. “I was about to make a comment until you added the last part.”

Annabelle nodded. “Yeah, it didn’t seem that bad when I said it. So I thought I needed to clarify.”

Realization came over Andi and she turned to look at Annabelle. “Why didn’t you just put her on the cat bed *in the first place*? Instead of on the couch?”

Annabelle shrugged. “I don’t know. I panicked. We were having kittens. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Andi shook her head slowly. “You’re like a 1950s dad from a black-and-white sitcom. Deep breath next time, then remember that cats aren’t bombs. Helping them give birth isn’t exactly ‘red wire, green wire’. You know what you’re doing. Just ... trust your instincts.” She patted Annabelle on the shoulder and she turned to grin at Andi. “Except when your instincts tell you to use our couch as a delivery room.”

“Monday morning quarterback,” Annabelle muttered. “Still ... thanks for coming in to help last night ... this morning. Whatever. I’m tired.”

“Go home. And Charlotte is coming in tonight, so have a good Christmas. And I’m covering your shift on Monday night, so ...”

Annabelle grinned as she slowly shook her head. “No, you’re not.” She reached over and dug in the front pocket of Andi’s lab coat. She pulled out the white business card and tapped Andi on the end of the nose with it. “You’re going to this meeting thing. Remember?”

Andi groaned. “I was sleep deprived. We were having kittens. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Uh-uh,” Annabelle said, narrowing her eyes. “You were thinking razor straight, my lady. Do you remember what *I* had to agree to just to get you to agree to go to this meeting?”

There was a screeching yowl behind Annabelle and a spray of dry cat food flew like shrapnel through the kennel door. Suddenly, sitting through a ridiculous meeting didn't seem *nearly* as bad as being a merry maid for Mr. Giggles.

“You're right. I'm going. Thanks again for your service to the human race,” she said, nodding at the vibrating, yowling kennel.

Annabelle's look was deadpan as she raised her arm to show off three large Band-Aids on the back of her forearm. “Yeah. My *further* service. I already cleaned his majesty off once today. I'm *not* looking forward to picture day with Dirk. So, if you even *think* about not putting in some effort at that meeting, I want you to pause and remember what kind of effort *I'll* be putting in.”

“Fine,” Andi said with a sigh. “I'll give everyone else's kennel a deep cleaning.” She grinned up at Annabelle. “That way you can just focus on Mr. Giggles.”

“How kind of you.” She looked around the room at the snuffling and snoozing pets. “Don't forget. I fed Mr. Giggles, not that it matters now, but don't feed the rest of them until eight,” Annabelle reminded her. “Unless you want to re-enact that prison riot scene from *The Dark Knight*.” since some of them have to wait until eight because of their meds.”

“I know, I know,” Andi said, waving her off. “Sometimes it's like you forget I *am* a vet and the vet who came up with the ‘Wait until eight, and med before fed.’”

“Well, you *are* sleep-deprived. You better be awake when you give Pickles his shot because if you miss, and end up stabbing yourself, you’re going to end up taking an involuntary four-hour nap.”

“Nah,” Andi said, shooing Annabelle toward the door, “I’m heavier than I look. At worst, I’d be down for an hour or two.”

Annabelle sighed. “Well, have a good day. And if you need me, call.”

Andi waved her out and turned back to stare at the clock. It was only five minutes early. She could start *prepping* everyone’s breakfasts.

It was a slow morning for the first two hours. But because the universe must have been bored as well, the second Andi paused to think about how slow things were, it sent her a present. And the present was in the form of Mrs. Thompson.

“I heard Esther was trying to pass off the pet toys I knitted as something *she’d* made. I sold them to her on commission a year ago and she hid them in the back of her shop so they wouldn’t sell. Now she’s trying to pretend they’re her own creation. Well, I’m here to put a stop to it. And I’ve made some *new* toys for you just so you can see that they were all made by the same person! See how that old vulture likes that.”

Andi blinked at her. “Good morning, Mrs. Thompson.”

Mrs. Thompson batted away her greeting and hefted a laundry basket onto the reception countertop. Andi forced

herself not to take a step back and instead leaned forward to peer in at the colorful creations.

“Are those ...”

Mrs. Thompson sighed. “They were supposed to be cute little dog bones. I don’t know what happened. One end turned out right, but then when I got to the other, I must have dropped a stitch or made a mistake when I wrote out the crochet pattern because the other end just turned into a single knob instead of two. I kept trying to fix it, but every one of them turned out like that. Oh well. Some bones don’t have two knobs on each end, right? They still look like bones.”

They looked like penises. “Uh, sure,” Andi said. *They look like a specific kind of bone.* Mrs. Thompson plunged her hand into the basket of crocheted penises and pulled one out.

“See? I even stitched every one of the pet’s names onto them. I’ll bet *Esther* didn’t even bother doing that with the ones she brought in.

Andi stared at the pink penis in Mrs. Thompson’s hand. “Th-that one says ... Andi.”

“Oh yeah. I practiced with your name first. It’s nice and short. All the pets have more letters in their names than you do. And stitching names on the mice were even harder for the cats. I ended up just going with the first letter.” She handed the “Andi” penis to her and plunged her hand back into the basket, digging around until she came up with a crocheted ball with a tail. “I couldn’t get the ears to look right, so I just left them off. They’ve still got a tail. They look like mice, right?” Andi

didn't know what to say. At first glance, they looked like ... sperm. And the one she was holding had the letter "C" stitched around the ball.

"They look really ... nice." She needed a distraction. The "C" must stand for Cinnamon. She was the only cat they had with a C-name. *Yes! Cinnamon.* "Oh, Cinnamon had her kittens last night," Andi said quickly, gesturing behind her with the crocheted penis.

"Oh really? Can I see those little cuties?" Mrs. Thompson asked. "I can give Mama her toy too. I filled these suckers with catnip.

"Maybe it would be best to hold off on giving it to her at the moment. Catnip always gives Cinnamon the zoomies and she's got six kittens trying to nurse right now."

Mrs. Thompson sighed. "I guess it can wait."

"But come see the kittens," Andi said, moving around the counter and holding the door to the Pet Plaza open. Mrs. Thompson transformed when she saw the little, fumbling furballs. It wasn't uncommon. One of Andi's favorite parts of being a vet was seeing the way people changed around animals. It was something subconscious, something pure in people. The toughest, crankiest people tended to melt when they saw a kitten or a puppy. Andi expected Mrs. Thompson to coo over the kittens, but to her surprise, Mrs. Thompson squatted down and spoke directly to Cinnamon.

"You've done good, Mama. Look at all these little ones. And look how calm you are. You're a good one." She reached

out a finger and petted the side of Cinnamon's head. The tired cat purred and rubbed her face against Mrs. Thompson's finger. "I suppose you'll be trying to get these kittens adopted, right? I heard you have to get them all a home or they're getting shipped off the island."

"Uh, yeah," Andi said, still transfixed, watching the older woman with Cinnamon.

"Well, once they don't need their mama anymore, I'd like to adopt her, if there's no one else in line to give her a home." She turned to look at Andi.

"N-no. She's available to adopt."

Mrs. Thompson gave Andi a quick nod. "Good. Then I'll take her. I don't mind waiting until the time is right. But I can keep her company after the little ones are gone. I've got ... I've got some experience on that front."

Andi didn't know what to say. She'd lived in Hope her whole life and Mrs. Thompson had been widowed longer than she'd been alive. She hadn't had any kids of her own, but she'd been almost everyone's second-grade teacher. She went to all the school sporting events, cheering her former students on as if they were her own children.

"She'll be lucky to have you," Andi said, fighting the burning in her eyes. "If you want, we can take care of the paperwork now."

After Mrs. Thompson left, Andi celebrated Cinnamon's adoption by unloading the pet donations from Bumble's into a

box in the Pet Plaza. The donated supplies would definitely help in offsetting the shelter costs, at least for a few weeks. She spent the rest of the morning giving Cinnamon's kittens their first check-up and standing out in the big side yard, shivering. She had her coat on but it wasn't doing much to blunt the cold edge of the mist falling around her while she waited on Sarge, Bruce, Ginger, and Clipper. They were taking their time peeing on things and refusing to poop on the wet grass. Ginger was the first to trot by her, heading back inside. "Atta girl. Now, don't go sit on Cinnamon or the kittens. Let them get to fighting weight before you butt-check them." She turned back to the rest of the dogs in the yard, pulling her coat tighter around her. "Come on boys, move it or hold it in," she called to them. Sarge, always the leader of the other male dogs, finished first and came back to her for head scratches while they watched the other two, feeling superior for being decisive. When the boys had run past her, back into the dry warmth of the office, she looked around. "Tookie?" There was an annoyed whine from the far side of the yard behind the big oak tree. Andi sighed and trudged over, scooping up the poop in the pooper-scooper on her way. As she suspected, the Weimaraner mix had her head stuck in the fence ... again.

"Took, we've talked about this," Andi said, leaning the pooper scooper against the tree. "Just because your head fits, doesn't mean the rest of you will. And just because your head fits going *through* the fence, doesn't mean you'll be able to get it out. You have these things called ears, and they don't *like* going through the fence. So listen to them. Listen ... to your

ears, Tookie.” God, she was tired. There was more annoyed whining from Tookie and some annoyed whining from Andi as she tried to fold the dog’s ears enough to push her head back through. “There,” she said with a sigh when the dog sprang back and started prancing around the yard, bouncing on all four feet like a goat at her newly found freedom. “Hold onto that feeling, Took. Remember *that* it is the *opposite* of how you feel when you’re stuck in the fence. So let’s try not to repeat that, shall we?” It was a pointless speech, but Andi gave it to the dog so often that it just felt like another part of their daily routine. She’d tried to fix the fence so Tookie couldn’t get her head stuck in it, but that seemed to have just deepened her resolve. When she’d forced her head through the new fencing, it had scratched her, so Andi had removed it. She and the rest of the staff were just resigned now to their daily Tookie-Fence decoupling.

At noon, she locked up and ran to the town square to get a sandwich, but mostly coffee, from De-Floured.

“Hiya, Doc,” Miss Mandie said with a grin when Andi made it to the counter. “I’d ask how your morning is going, but I can tell from your coat that it’s been a rough one.”

Andi looked down at herself. In her haste and bleary-eyed need for caffeine, she hadn’t bothered with throwing her winter jacket back on over her white coat. Her lab coat was smeared with dried blood from Cinnamon’s birthing, a smear of crusty yellow from fighting to get Clipper’s worming medicine down him, and a big green stain on her boob from

the antiseptic she'd used to clean Pickles' belly stitches before the cat had kicked her hand.

"It's been a long one," Andi said with a sigh. "The biggest coffee you have, please. And a sandwich."

"What kind of sandwich and which coffee blend?" Miss Mandie asked, tapping on her register's screen.

"Anything. Surprise me," Andi yawned.

Miss Mandie paused and met Andi's gaze. Then she looked around to see if anyone was standing close enough to overhear them before she dropped her voice to just above a whisper.

"Now, I have some ... good stuff. But I haven't been selling it to anyone else because, well, I don't know if they can handle it. But you handle your caffeine pretty well, and you look like you could really use a pick-me-up today. The regular stuff might not be strong enough for you anymore."

Andi leaned in and stage-whispered, "I dunno, Miss Mandie. I don't want to get in ... too deep with anything ... too hard."

Miss Mandie snorted. "Ok. You win. Too deep *and* too hard? It's not fair you're using my weapons against me. It's like you know what I used to do for a living." She winked at Andi and moved over to the coffee pots. There were three in a line and she paused, considering them, and then picked up the pot on the end which was still full. She looked over at Andi. "I screwed up this morning. You're not the only one dragging ass. Just one more day until Christmas and this season has worn me out. Anyway, this morning, instead of making my

Christmas Chaos mix with half decaf beans and half the high potency ones, I just made it with *all* high potency beans.”

Andi blinked at her. “Shit. Is that even legal?” She kept her voice low, cutting her eyes to the rest of the bakery. It was noon so only a few stragglers, late risers, and second wind-seekers were scattered amongst the tables in the big room. And there was a group in one corner that looked like the bride’s half of the wedding party, all of them giggling over Miss Mandie’s bachelorette cake catalog.

Miss Mandie shrugged. “If I hear one more comment about how they could find the *same cakes in Seattle*, I’m going to switch the mom of the bride over there from decaf to this stuff and watch her radiator overheat.”

Andi thought about commenting but quickly changed her mind. “So what are you calling your new, lethal blend?”

“I’m torn between ‘Potently Perky’ and ‘Turn Your Head and Coffee’.”

“This could just be my medical background, but I’m a fan of Turn Your Head and Coffee,” Andi chuckled.

Miss Mandie gave her an approving nod. “Then that’s what we’ll call it. Special dedication to you, Doc.”

Andi swept her a bow of thanks and pulled out her card to pay.



She was just finishing up her club sandwich at Shirley's desk and trying her best to not drop crumbs on the keyboard when the jingle bell garland on the front door tinkled. She looked up to see an exhausted Tessa come in, carrying a dark green carrier.

"Hey Tessa," Andi said, getting to her feet and going out to meet her. "How are you and Sage doing on this wet and cold Christmas Eve? It's almost like Dickens was reading our diary out here."

Tessa gave her a weary smile. "We're alive. At least I'm pretty sure we are. Sage paced all night and meowed at the windows. But every time I went to look, she'd turn back to look at me and stop meowing. But when I walked away, she'd start right back up again."

Andi frowned. "And you didn't see anything outside? Like a stray cat or dog?"

"Nothing," Tessa said, shaking her head. "I have no idea what's gotten into her."

Sage did look stressed. She gave the cat a full checkup, but when she was done, she just shook her head at Tessa. "Sorry, Tess. There's nothing that seems to be physically wrong with her. We'll still run some tests," she nodded at the blood sample she'd taken, "But it might just be some anxiety she's experiencing. It could be the weather or a barometric pressure shift. Or hell, maybe she saw Amelia doing that weird new dance move off of TikTok in front of the windows of our house. It freaked me out the first time I saw it."

Tessa chuckled. "I'm sure it's nothing. I just want us both to be able to get some sleep."

"I think I have something to help with that." Andi filled a small prescription for some mild anxiety medication for Sage and with a thanks and a hug, Tessa and Sage headed home to sleep.

The door had barely closed behind her when a burly man in a hunting jacket greeted Tessa outside and then pulled the door open, shaking rain and sleet out of his silver hair and beard as he stomped his way inside.

"Morning, Andi," Hank Melrose said, grinning at her from under his bushy eyebrows. "I'd say merry Christmas, but I don't want to jinx it when it's so close."

Andi nodded. "Fair." She grinned at him. "I didn't have a visit from you on my Christmas Eve bingo card. What's the occasion?"

He pulled a tape measure out of his pocket. "Well, I had some time this afternoon. I thought I'd measure that space in your side yard for the outdoor dog houses you wanted to put in. I know you said you didn't need them until summer, but with it being the end of the year, I think I could order the lumber on the tail end of this year's budget and save you some money."

Andi felt a weight drop in her stomach. "I'm so sorry, Hank. I completely forgot about it. We're ... we're having to make some budget cuts ..." Andi wished she could be anywhere else in the world at that moment. Anywhere that wasn't under the

evaluating look on Hank Melrose's face. He'd already taken time off from his handyman business to come and measure. She hadn't even thought to call him and cancel the project when Doc Simmons had told her it wasn't happening. *See? This is what happens when you don't plan, Andi.*

"How bad is it?" Hank asked. The usual gruff edge to his voice was gone.

There was a stinging behind Andi's eyes, but she was *not* going to make things worse by crying. "We ... we have to get all the shelter pets adopted by the end of January or ..."

"That bad, huh." It wasn't a question. "I've seen your fliers around town. I know you've been trying to get them adopted, I just ... I figured it was because it's the holidays, not because ..." They stood in awkward silence for a moment, only broken by Hank clearing his throat. "Well, I'm already here. Might be able to donate that lumber and I'll see if I can donate my time ..."

"Oh, Mr. Melrose, that's too much ..."

He chuckled. "I'll do it if you'll stop calling me Mr. Melrose. You're making me feel old."

She grinned at him. "But you've always been 'Mr. Melrose'."

"Yeah, when you were eleven and mowing my lawn for \$40 a month. Now you're an adult and a vet, and it makes me feel ancient."

She nodded. "Ok ... Hank."

With an approving nod, he headed through the door into the Pet Plaza. “Won’t take me but a few minutes.” He headed out the side door and Andi blew out a sigh. She turned back to check on everyone and paused when she saw Tookie’s body next to Ginger, her head hidden under Ginger’s butt.

“Up, Ging. Tookie’s already had a hard morning. I know your butt is probably warm on her sore ears, but you know she panics when she can’t breathe.” Hank came back in while Ginger was dancing around, her pregnant belly swaying as she bounced up and down on all fours.

“Shouldn’t be too much of a build. We talked about making the dog houses big enough for a couple of them to get in each one.”

Andi nodded. “They just need a place to get out of the sun whenever they get too hot. Sometimes they’re having so much fun playing, they don’t want to come back inside.” She looked around at the kennels. “I guess if we ever get the doghouses now, it’ll be for the pet hotel Doc Simmons wants to replace the shelter with. No more strays. Just people boarding their pets when they go away.”

Hank shook his head. “It can’t be both?”

Andi nodded. “That’s what I said.”

Hank gave her a half-smile. “Well, you know Doc Simmons is getting up there. In a few years, he might be thinking about retiring ...”

Andi shrugged. “No use thinking about that now.” Sure. She’d thought about staying in Hope, but every time she did, she pictured herself as a forty-year-old woman, still living at home with her parents, and still holding her tongue whenever Doc Simmons dug in on not wanting to make a change. Or, only wanting to make a change for the sake of money. But, the thought of leaving Hope right now, to go back to the mainland alone ... *and what? Start over? Back from the beginning? Try to forge a life alone? Me? The great ‘planner’.* And the alone part was the most depressing aspect. Some people did great on their own, preferred it even. But Andi was a hot mess when she didn’t have someone in her life to tease, hug, sit on a couch next to ... *you have Bert.* And Bert was good. And she had her family. And that was good, but it wasn’t a long-term fix.

Hank cleared his throat and she blinked, pulling herself back to the present. “Anyway, I’d recommend making the dog houses at least four feet by four feet. I think we can fit three along that back fence ...” He paused when Ginger danced over to him, knocking into his legs. Her tongue was hanging out and her eyes were bright as she grinned up at him. She saw his lips twitch as he looked down at her. “What I wouldn’t give to have that kind of energy.”

An ache rippled through Andi’s chest at the memory of what Brandon had said. She nodded at Hank. “If we could figure out how to harness that energy, we could light up the world.”

“In more ways than one,” he chuckled, bending down to pet Ginger. She was licking his hand and whining in happiness as she bounced around. “What is she? A Great Dane?”

Andi nodded. “Great Dane, Pit Bull, Bloodhound mix.”

“You’re a proper mutt, aren’t you,” Hank said. “And about to have a litter of your own.” His expression became thoughtful. “And the puppies ... if you can’t get them adopted?”

Andi was having a hard time breathing. She hadn’t thought of Ginger’s puppies in the equation. Cinnamon was further along, so she’d thought about the kittens.

But Doc Simmons had said *all* ...

“You know, we’ve got six grandkids coming out for Christmas tomorrow. And Lucy told us at Thanksgiving that we’ve got another one on the way.” He scratched his beard. “I always thought one of the best ways to teach a kid to be a good human is to get them a dog. The dog teaches them to be loyal and to care for someone besides themselves. And it’s a friend for life. And Rita says the house is too quiet these days with all the kids gone and me working more than usual ...” He nodded. “Let me make a call and talk it over with her, but if this gal doesn’t already have someone planning to take her, I’d like to give her a home with us. And I’ve helped lots of dogs have their litters in my lifetime. Rita and I could make sure she has everything she needs.” He paused. “What’s her name?” Andi wasn’t sure if he was doing it just for the reasons he said, or because he felt sorry for her. Either way, she’d take it.

“H-her name’s Ginger. And no. No one’s asked to adopt her yet. That would be ... Mr... . Hank, how can I ... thank you?” She was babbling now.

He grinned at her. “I try to plan so at the end of the year, there’s always wiggle room in the budget. At work and at home.” With a wink, he stepped outside to call his wife.

“Ging, you might be getting a home for Christmas!” Andi said, dancing around with the dog. Ginger cocked her head to the side, tongue still hanging out. Andi knew she didn’t understand the words, but Ginger must have understood her excitement. A few minutes later, Hank pulled open the door, smiling from ear to ear as he nodded at her.

“Let’s write it up, Doc. Rita’s running to Bumble’s right now for food, a dog bed, a leash, and god-knows-what-else. She said she’s been dropping hints that she wanted a dog for months now but she didn’t think I’d picked up on them. No harm in letting her think I’m more perceptive than I am, I guess.”

Andi was ecstatic. In one day, Cinnamon *and* Ginger had been adopted! Halfway through the paperwork, Hank’s phone rang and he paused to pull it out of the holster on his hip. “Hank here. Esther, I ...” And that was all he was able to get out before the woman was off. Andi tried to busy herself with straightening paperwork and checking on the animals while he stood there, frowning at the ceiling and listening to Esther’s attempt to literally talk his ear off. “I know that, Esther. Just ... right, just ... decide what you want and I’ll build it. You don’t

have to tell me about every request you get.” He’d raised his voice to talk over Esther. It was a classic tactic, right out of *The Art of War: Hope Island Edition*. When Esther Jacobs is on a roll, your only hope is to increase your volume, say your piece, and hang up, hoping she heard you. A moment later, Hank ended the call, sighed, and shoved his phone back in its holster. “Damn pet park just got the go-ahead and already Esther’s on a tear about it. Apparently, she’s already gotten requests for a giant cat tree, a dog obstacle course, whatever the hell a ‘ferret frolic’ is, and a Ferris Wheel, just for pets.” He shook his head. “Baskin was smart to turn this one down. If I hadn’t gotten cornered ...”

“So, how are people sending in their ... requests?” Andi asked. “For things to go in the pet park.”

Hank raised an eyebrow at her. “You too?”

She dropped her gaze to the countertop. “I was hoping to ... I thought maybe a nice bench would be a good memorial ...”

“Yeah,” Hank’s voice was soft again. “Yeah. That would be nice. And it’s the most reasonable and useful thing that’s probably been submitted, at least, based on the list Esther was reeling off.” Andi met his gaze and smiled. He didn’t say it, but Hank was their neighbor. He knew what *hadn’t* happened in their backyard a month ago.

“You ... you wouldn’t happen to have any insider knowledge about what would give me a leg up in getting my request approved by Esther, would you?” Andi asked, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

Hank chuckled and shook his head. “How attached are you to your sanity?”

Andi sighed. “Yeah, I’ve heard that one before.” Hank paused and scratched his beard.

“Well, I did hear from Rita that there’s a little war going on between Lisa Bumble, Barry Simmons, and Esther over who’s going to have the biggest sign-up list for their ‘resolution club’. They’re all gunning to be crowned the ‘Motivator Monarch’ at the Resolution Redo party this year. And you know how much Esther likes to win ...”

“So you think if I sign up for her club, it might give me a home-court advantage?” she asked.

Hank shrugged. “Can’t hurt.”

Andi swallowed hard. “Any idea what her club is for?”

“Something about food,” he said, frowning at the ground as if he was trying to remember. He shrugged again and grinned at her. “That can’t be too bad, right?”

They finished up the paperwork and she bundled Ginger into one of the pet rain slickers they kept on hand, before passing her leash to Hank. “Oh, she has a tendency to ... sit on other dogs’ heads when they’re sleeping. She usually only does it to other dogs her size, but it might be something to watch out for with her puppies.”

Hank chuckled. “Maybe I can train her to do it to people. Liam always gets up late in the morning. He’s just coming for a visit, but it would be nice if his tendency to sleep in didn’t

screw up breakfast for everyone else on the day after Christmas this year.”

With a final wave at Hank and Ginger, the door closed behind them and Andi did a little dance around the Pet Plaza to let her giddy energy out. *Two adopted, only ...* she paused and looked around at the rest of the pets. Ok. Maybe she shouldn't be celebrating yet. Her phone dinged in her pocket and she felt all her giddy happiness drain away as she read Michelle's text.

“Oh hello there, real world,” she muttered. “I didn't see you standing there.” With a sigh, she slumped down into Shirley's chair and tried to swallow the hard lump of emotion that had immediately formed with Michelle's message.

M: I miss him so much today, Andi. It's raining here in Seattle. When we were kids, he used to say the rain was the sky crying because it couldn't hold it in anymore. Brandon logic.

Andi felt herself smile even as her eyes began to fill. “Brandon logic” was usually the punchline when they'd tease him about the innocent way he looked at the world. Sometimes it was poignant and thoughtful like how when he was a kid, he thought shooting stars were the spirits of friends and family who had passed, waving as they went by. Some were silly, like how he believed chameleons were just shy reptiles. And the loudest fight they'd ever had during their relationship was over whether or not owls pooped. “*They puke everything back up,*” he'd argued. “*That's why there are owl pellets. They don't*

poop.” The fact that Andi was a veterinarian and had studied zoology and biology didn’t deter him in his opinions about animals and with every frustrated explanation she gave, his toothy grin would just get wider. Brandon logic.



MAX

Max *wasn't* nervous. He was ... impatient. He checked the clock again. One minute to eight. Any second now, the Whorley matriarch and her youngest were going to descend upon them and he'd be in charge of returning the kid to his mother at lunchtime with all his fingers and limbs still attached. Lovely. The two oldest Whorley boys, Kent and Garrett, had been a senior and a junior his freshman year and had played varsity football until they were thrown off the team for fighting. The middle two were also only a year apart and he'd heard stories from his mom about the shenanigans they got up to. But not much was known about Jackson, the youngest Whorley. Well, besides the fact that Mr. Whorley didn't come home for the birth or ever again after Jackson was born. The rumor was that he'd taken up with someone down in California. Nadine had divorced him and kept her boys and the company. And now she was looking for childcare for Jackson, and for some reason, Mrs. Whorley and his mom thought Max would be the perfect babysitter. Either they were desperate or the madness of the island had finally gotten to them.

“Sorry we’re late,” he heard Nadine call from the front room. Max took a deep breath. *Balance out*. Everything was going to be fine. It was only four hours. He could do this.

“Oh, you’re right on time,” he heard his mom say as he moved through the kitchen to the living room. Nadine was a very thin, very tall, harassed-looking woman with long mousy brown hair and a permanent no-nonsense expression on her face. Like his mom, he had a feeling that having five sons and being the sole breadwinner had something to do with it.

The boy that stood beside her was tall for twelve. He was all long limbs and sharp angles and for a moment, Max was reminded of Gray. He had the Whorley dirty blonde hair, but instead of the standard issue mischievous gray eyes that had to be from Mr. Whorley, he had dark, serious, brown eyes, like his mother. He wasn’t fidgeting either which was odd, since that was another standard Whorley trait. As Max’s mom put it, *“It’s like the whole family was born on top of a fire ant hill. They couldn’t sit still if you tied them down.”* Jackson had a book in his hands and he was looking at the floor in front of him, matching Patrick’s energy for how little he wanted to be there.

“Thanks again for doing this,” Nadine said quietly to his mom. Why she bothered to speak softly was a mystery since all four of them were standing close enough to each other to hear every word at any volume.

His mom seemed to realize this because she replied at normal volume, “Oh it’s no trouble. Jackson,” the boy looked

up at her. “Max has got a lot of repairs he’s working on. I ... I think you’ll have fun helping him.” He felt a sharp jab in his hip from her elbow but she was still smiling at Jackson.

“Oh ... yeah,” Max said, quickly. “We’ve got some sheetrock patching to do and some new baseboard to put up. It’ll be ... a ... really fun time.”

He could almost *hear* his mom rolling her eyes next to him. He glanced at Jackson, expecting to see disinterest apparent on his face. Instead, he was just looking at Max, like he was x-raying him. Now *Max* was starting to fidget.

“Well, you two better get at it,” his mom said, shepherding Jackson toward Max.

And then there was no going back. Max motioned for Jackson to follow him as he moved through the kitchen to the dining room.

“Does that hurt?” Jackson asked behind him. Max paused and turned to look at him.

“Does what hurt?”

Jackson pointed at Max’s legs. “Your leg.”

Max stifled a sigh. “Sometimes.”

“Is it because you’re wearing two different shoes?”

Jackson’s gaze had drifted down to Max’s feet. He wore his scuffed-up work boot on his left but just the bottom of the prosthetic poked out from under his right pant leg.

“Maybe,” Max said, hoping that would be enough to end the line of questioning. Jackson didn’t ask anything else and Max started to relax as he led the way to the dining room. “Ok, so ... do you go by Jackson or ... Jack?”

The boy met his gaze. “Jackson.”

Max nodded. “Ok, Jackson. Well, thanks for coming over to help today. Have you ever patched drywall before?” Jackson just shook his head. He felt himself starting to sweat. He’d always liked kids, but he hadn’t been one on one with one since high school. And even then, it had just been Andi’s little sister Amelia, and Gray, who was only a year ahead of her. He and Andi had often been volunteered by their parents to babysit Amelia and Gray. He suspected it had been their parents’ sneaky campaign on birth control for him and Andi. But babysitting them had been like living out an episode of *Looney Tunes*. Jackson, on the other hand, was very still, staring at Max like a robot, scanning him for flaws.

“Ok, so the first thing we need to do is apply the spackle to fill the little dents,” Max said, turning his focus to the wall. *Maybe once we get going, this won’t be so weird.*

Jackson was quiet through Max’s explanation and demonstration. Finally, Max handed over the putty knife and the little container of spackle. Jackson hadn’t said a word through the whole exchange. He set his book down on the table and copied with perfect precision everything Max had just done. Max blinked at Jackson as he swept the spackle over

the dents and smoothed them out like he'd been doing it for years.

“Wow,” Max caught himself saying. “You’re pretty good at this.”

Jackson shrugged but didn’t meet Max’s gaze. “It’s like painting. But just with white.”

Max unrolled a piece of wire mesh and started securing it over the three-inch hole he’d been prepping before Jackson arrived. “You like to paint?”

“Uh-huh,” Jackson said. Then they fell into silence again. Max was just starting to think that having the kid around wasn’t as stressful as he thought it would be. He glanced up from his own spackling from time to time to see Jackson working his way around the room, filling every dent he could find. “What happened?” Jackson asked, breaking the silence. He was standing next to Max, so Max just assumed he was talking about the hole in the wall.

“My brother Gray and I decided it was too rainy to play hockey outside, so we decided to play in here. The game-winning slapshot went right through this sheetrock.” Jackson didn’t say anything, but Max realized he’d stopped spackling. Max paused and looked up at him. “Jackson?”

He was staring at Max again. But not at his face. Max was down on his forearms and knees, trying to stay balanced while he patched the low spot on the wall. As he looked back at his own legs, he realized what Jackson was looking at. His prosthetic had worked its way off his knee joint. He hadn’t

noticed it while he was concentrating on the wall. The result was that his pant leg looked strange and the prosthetic was sticking out the bottom.

“Whoops, must have come loose,” he said, trying to act like it wasn’t a big deal. That was one thing he remembered from being a big brother. It was something he and Andi had often used when they babysat their siblings together. Don’t act like something is a big deal and the kids you’re with won’t either. Max shifted his weight onto his left leg and did his best to pull the prosthetic on without having to roll up his pant leg and scare the kid.

“What happened?” Jackson asked again. His tone hadn’t changed. There wasn’t fear or even curiosity on his face. He was just staring and asking a question. Now Max was in a pickle. Did he lie to the kid and try to play it off? Or should he be honest with him and risk scarring him for life? He remembered his dad telling him once, “*Honesty always beats the alternative.*” But then he imagined Jackson’s horrified expression and his mom coming in and trying to calm him down, Nadine getting upset with them for telling him, and the whole thing snowballing from there. So, he decided to split the difference and hope Jackson wouldn’t ask too many questions.

“I was in a car accident,” he said. It was kind of true. He held his breath, waiting for the kid to pelt him with questions or ask to see it or touch his prosthetic which now had *him* horrified. No one touched his prosthetic. He didn’t want to subject even his mom to that. It was too weird, like, “here Ma,

hold my leg.” It was a part of him now. No one else should have to ... handle it.

Jackson was staring at his face again. “Oh.” The kid turned back to a wide dent that Max was pretty sure had come from a chair back when he and Gray were jumping off them, trying to leap on top of each other during their WWE obsession phase.

Max started to breathe again. He went back to the patch he’d been working on, thankful that they’d already gotten through *that* conversation.

“It’s good that you still have another one,” Jackson said. Max looked up at him.

“Another one?”

“Another leg,” Jackson said, staring at him again as if it was obvious. “It would have been worse if you’d lost both.”

Max didn’t know what to say to that.



ANDI

Cinnamon and Ginger’s adoptions, Hank’s visit, and Miss Mandie’s coffee went a long way in giving her a second wind for the rest of the afternoon. She was feeling pretty upbeat, or at least as upbeat as she did these days when it was time to get Slomobius up for some exercise.

“Seriously, dude,” she muttered, picking the cat up for the fifth time and trying to get him to stand on his feet. “We all like a little bake and chill time, but your love of catnip has crossed the line from recreational to turning you into a full-on sloth. Why can’t you be one of the cats that gets wired when you sniff the stuff?”

Slomo rolled over onto his back and lazily kicked his feet in the air, before becoming intently focused on the paw he was holding in front of his face.

“Alright, while you think about how cool your paw is,” Andi muttered, pulling the shift clipboard off the wall, “I’m going to see who ...” A smell reached Andi and she turned to look at Clipper. The German Shepherd’s tongue was hanging out and he was panting. “Oh. Poor buddy. Guess that wormer didn’t sit very well with you, did it?” She turned all the dogs outside for some afternoon zoomies time and kept the door open so she could at least hear them while she scrubbed out Clipper’s kennel. When they came sprinting back in, Slomo moved faster than she’d ever seen him, climbing up the wall of kennels to sit on the top shelf. “Well, it’s good to know you’re motivated by something *other* than the cat-devil’s weed,” she muttered as the dogs ran in like a knee-high cattle stampede. Andi had to be quick to snag Clipper’s collar and lead him over to the dog shower sink.

“Alright buddy,” she said, toweling him dry. “You up for a little pumpkin?” She got the other dogs settled back into their kennels so she could feed Clipper without them trying to steal the pumpkin from him and tried to coax the big dog to eat. She

was half-soaked and she smelled like dog shampoo and the combination of everything smeared on her wet coat. Clipper *really* hated baths. Still, it had been a damn good day.

As soon as she had the thought, she felt herself mentally plant her feet. Every time she'd paused to think *that*, something bad had happened. She remembered that morning in early February, standing in the reception area of her new vet clinic in Seattle. She'd just shaken hands with her new landlord. She was making small talk and smiling and laughing. She was so excited for her first patient who was due at any moment. She remembered thinking, *It's a damn good day so far*. Despite the fact that she could feel the hard edge on her excitement. She'd texted a video tour of the place and a message about how excited she was to Brandon and he hadn't texted or called her back. Three hours later, her life as she knew it, had ended.

There was an ominous click above her head and the low-level growling that had become white noise to her, paused. She turned and in slow motion, the white, fluffy ball of hatred launched himself out of his kennel and onto her face. Right before she was engulfed in the soft fur of destruction, she caught a glimpse of Slomo, on top of Mr. Giggles' kennel, still messing with the latch on the now-open door. And then she was in pain, staggering around like the guy in *Alien* with the face hugger stuck to his head. Mr. Giggles was scratching and swatting and clawing and hissing while she tried to dislodge him.

“C’mon, Mr. Giggles,” she squealed in pain. “I’m sorry about the thermometer, but it was five months ago, man. Let it go.” But he wasn’t letting go. She heard mewling at her feet and now Cinnamon was hissing, probably *at* Mr. Giggles. He wasn’t popular with ... well, anyone. “No, Cinnamon, it’s ok. Go back to your kittens.” Cinnamon moved away, but in a flash, she saw another ball of fur land next to her and start to claw up her leg. “No, Slomo, stop. Why do you have energy *now?!?*”

“Whoa! Hang on, I’m coming,” the voice was deep and despite the feline assault she was now fending off on two fronts, she felt her breath catch in her throat. She thought she was in a predicament when she was dealing with two pissy cats. Now, she was in trouble.

Max

Chaos. Complete and utter chaos. And at its center was the last person he expected to see that afternoon. After Jackson had gone home, Max had dragged his feet, hoping that if he waited long enough, the animal hospital and shelter would be closed. It *was* Christmas Eve after all. And sure, there would be someone looking after the animals, but they wouldn't have *office* hours. Would they? But when he tugged on the glass door it had, unfortunately, opened.

When his brain registered what he was looking at, he realized that if it hadn't opened, he would have had to break in. Andi was in trouble. There was a cat on her head, viciously clawing and biting her scalp and neck, and another climbing up her legs, trying to *get* to the viciously clawing and biting cat. The reception counter was low and he was climbing over it before he stopped to think. Though, he immediately wished he *had* stopped to think it through. The sleeve of his prosthetic snagged on the lip of the counter and he felt it fall off as he cleared it. But he didn't have time to go back and get it. He had to get to Andi. He grabbed the front of the nearest kennel

and tried to snatch the cat off her shoulders with his free hand, but the cat was a ball of fury and fur.

“Don’t! You could hurt him,” she squealed in pain. “I’ve got him.” *That was debatable*, Max thought. Her hands were flailing, trying to block the cat’s savage swipes at her face. But he could tell she was trying to stay calm while she tried to grab him by the scruff of his neck.

Ok. If he couldn’t help with *that* one. The other cat was a big puddle of black fur with huge pupils and a bemused expression on its face as it continued to climb Mt. Andi to get to the other cat. He got down to his good knee and with both hands, started tugging on the black cat to try to pull it off her. The cat clung on though, not ready to go anywhere. The more he tried to remove the cat, the harder it held on. And now it was moving. Clawing its way *between* Andi’s legs and up.

“No! Don’t go up *there*,” he muttered in his frustration, trying to get the cat to stop where it was. But the goofy cat just looked at him and kept moving upward, resolutely digging his claws into her pants leg. He had to get the cat off her. Andi’s jeans weren’t loose and he could tell from the way she was wincing that every time the cat moved, it was digging its claws into her leg. The cat kept moving sideways to get away from him though and finally when he managed to pull the cat off of her, he realized his arm holding the flailing cat was ... *between* Andi’s legs, while his other hand was on her hip. He moved his hand and quickly scooted back on his knee and shin. *Maybe she didn’t notice. She was fighting off that other cat. It was an honest ... mistake. An innocent situation.* Though, the

warmth and the curve of her, even for the few seconds he'd felt them, hadn't made *him* feel all that innocent.

"There!" Andi finally said. He looked up to see her holding the white cat above her head, its claws still treading air and digging into her arms, but out of reach of her hair and face. She was bleeding and her hair was a wreck. He expected her to be glaring at the cat and silently wishing a dark curse on it or something, but instead, she was smiling at the hissing, spitting ball of fur in that reassuringly calm voice of hers. A gentle warmth filled him at the sound of Andi's soothing voice, remembering all the times when he'd had a bad game or was missing his dad, or when he felt like an idiot for not being able to understand something in chemistry. She'd always been there, ready to comfort and make everything just a little better.

"It's ok. You're ok," she cooed at the cat. "Come on, let's get you back where you're comfortable. Well ... *more* comfortable." The cat was still murderous as she gently stuffed him back into a high kennel on the wall behind her and quickly closed the door, just in time for the cat to charge it, poking out a clawed paw to take a final swipe at her. Andi moved with speed and a tired energy that clearly said she'd done this before and often. "Too slow. But that's ok, Mr. Giggles. I'm sure you'll get another chance to finish me off."

"Let's hope not," Max said from where he was still kneeling on the floor, holding the other cat, who'd turned to some kind of cat liquid in his hands, turning its huge eyes to watch him curiously. But all the energy the cat had had in climbing up Andi seemed to have disappeared now.

“H-hi,” Andi said, looking down at him. Her eyes were as wide as the cat’s now, but instead of huge-pupil contentment, he saw a look of horror pass over her and her posture stiffened. “I ... what are you ... thank you.” He felt himself smile. God, Andi Morgan was cute when she was flustered. Her cheeks were pink and she was looking everywhere but at him. “Sorry about Slomo,” she said, reaching out to take the cat that was about to start dripping from his hands. She scooped him up and cradled him in the crook of her arm while she rubbed the bottom of one of his back feet absentmindedly with her free hand. He heard the cat start to purr and stretch his pink toe pads under her touch and for a moment, he felt a stab of jealousy towards the cat.

“Slomo?” He asked, watching her.

“Slomobius, officially,” she said, moving to an open cat kennel door before pouring the cat back inside. “We just call him Slomo because he *usually* doesn’t even have the energy to run around with the other cats. His favorite things are being a cat puddle and catnip which instead of energizes him just kind of ...”

“Makes him high?”

She nodded. Once the cat kennel door was closed on the black cat, she turned to look at him. That was when Max realized he was still kneeling on the ground on one leg. He could do this. He could get up on one leg. He grabbed the front of the nearest kennel and he felt something inside starting to lick his fingers. He let go in surprise and looked around the

wall desperately. There had to be *something* he could hold onto to help pull himself up. Something sturdy. Besides his ex, he had an entire animal audience. Noses and eyes were pressed against the fronts of their kennels, watching him. *You can do this*. If he leaned forward and put both hands on the ground, he could get his leg under him and then push off.

“Max,” Andi’s voice was soft and she was so close to him now he could feel the warmth radiating off her as she held both her hands out to him. But she was so small. There was no way she’d be able to lift him. And how embarrassing would that be? But the longer he drew this out, the more he felt himself sweating and the heat creeping up in his own shame. The woman that he used to lift over his head and swing dance with in high school ... who he’d lift and put on his shoulders after football games ... was having to help him stand. It was ... humiliating. *But the longer you stay here on the floor, the more humiliating it’s going to be*. He took her hands with one of his, and for a moment, a jolt of familiarity moved through his fingers. How many times had his hand found hers for comfort, love, friendship? But that felt so long ago. He was little more than a stranger to her now. *Just get on your feet, soldier*. With his other hand, he found the heavy metal crossbar that ran under the upper level of kennels. With a quick pull, he did his best to put all his weight on the arm holding the crossbar and his good leg, trying to not lean on Andi any more than he absolutely had to. His muscles screamed as he straightened up to stand. But now, he couldn’t let go of the

crossbar or he'd fall. He didn't have a crutch with him. And his damn prosthetic was on the other side of the counter.

"Hang on," Andi said quickly. She'd been looking at the floor around them, and for a moment, he'd thought it was out of *her* embarrassment for what she was having to do. But now he realized she was searching. With him steady, she went to the counter and crawled across it, bending over the far edge to grab his prosthetic off the floor on the other side. She was still in her white, well *once* white vet's coat, but under the thin fabric, he could see her familiar curves and it was like hearing a favorite song he'd forgotten about. "Here we go," she said, holding his prosthetic with both hands as she turned to him. "Can I ... what can I do?"

Shame burned through him as he reached out and quickly took his prosthetic from her. He kept his eyes on the damn thing, wishing he could make it disappear. "I just need to sit ..."

Before he even finished speaking, she was nudging the office chair over. She positioned it behind him and as he started lowering himself into it, he felt the skim of her fingertips at his side. They were over his jacket, so all he could feel was the pressure, but a fleeting thought rolled through his head anyway. He'd been touched more by a woman that wasn't his mom or a doctor in the last fifteen minutes than he had been in the last year at least. And it was *Andi* touching him. She was putting her weight behind the chair, and when it tried to roll when his butt made contact with the seat, he heard her let out a little grunt of strain as she tried to get the chair to

not move a centimeter. Despite the terrible situation, he wanted to smile. “It’s ok. I’m good now. You don’t have to ...”

“Are you sure?” she asked quickly. “I can ...”

“I’m fine,” he said. It had sounded shorter than he’d meant it to. But this was embarrassing. He’d hoped Andi would never see him like this. Yeah, so they were both back in town. But she had a fiancé and a family and friends and he’d hoped that they could just stay out of each other’s way. If only he’d stopped to think through the bargain he’d made with his mom. Somehow he hadn’t managed to put two and two together about where Andi was most likely working in town. “Uh, I didn’t expect to see you here,” he said, keeping his head down. As soon as he said it, he realized how ridiculous it sounded. Of course, she’d finished college and vet school and was now practicing. Still, he’d never expected her to be practicing in *Hope*. “I mean ... I knew you were going to be a vet, but I didn’t know you were a vet ... here.”

She sighed. “Yeah, it’s not where I expected to be either. But sometimes that’s how things go.” There was a hint of bitterness in her voice, but more of the old Andi he knew who just seemed to take things in stride, even when they went wrong. It had always driven him nuts.

They lost a game. *Oh well. It was still a good game.*

He had to work on a Saturday when they had plans. *That’s ok, there’s always next Saturday.*

No anger, no sullen silences, no arguing. He tried to ignore it, but there was something about her reactions to things not

going well that had always bothered him.

He let the silence stretch between them while he kept his head down, turning in the chair as much as he dared. The last thing he wanted was to knock himself off balance and fall, and then require *another* round of help from her. But he didn't want her to see...

She apparently didn't want to see it either. She turned her back to him and moved across the room to check on the animals in the kennels furthest away from him. He yanked his pant leg up and worked as quickly as he could, hoping she'd keep her back to him while he pulled the compression top of the prosthetic all the way up his thigh as high as he could reach under his jeans. He really needed to take his jeans off to fit it back on properly, but there was no way he was going to do that even in the same *building* as Andi Morgan. The socket at the top of the prosthetic had been feeling too loose lately. The docs had told him his knee would start shrinking as the muscle mass depleted and the swelling from his surgery went down. He currently had three socks pulled over his knee. With biting annoyance he thought, *I guess it's time for a fourth one.* He yanked his pant leg down and braced himself on the crossbar again. He took a deep breath. *Balance out. The last thing you want to do is fall and faceplant in front of her.* He got to his feet and shifted for a moment until he felt stable enough to let go. She looked over at him and met his gaze. She was smiling, but it was a nervous smile.

“Thank you, for saving me from the cat-pocalypse,” she said. “I was ...”

“Being attacked on all fronts,” he asked, feeling some of the tension in his shoulders start to relax. If he could just distract her from everything, maybe she’d ... well, he doubted she’d forget. But maybe she wouldn’t say anything about what she’d just touched and seen. She hadn’t held his prosthetic out in front of her like she was disgusted or freaked out by it. She ... she’d held it like ... he didn’t know how to categorize her reaction to it. She was in the medical field. Though her focus was animals. Still, she’d been kind of a *professional* about it. Then he realized. She *was* being a professional with him. That was it. She wasn’t looking at him like he was her ex-high school boyfriend. She wasn’t acting like they were eighteen and in love. That wasn’t who either of them were anymore. They were two adults, in a professional setting, though the cat attack and his prosthetic had made it a *weird* professional setting.

“Yeah,” she shook her head, still smiling. “I didn’t have much of a plan as to how to end the cat attack either. I was kind of hoping that after Mr. Giggles managed to tear my scalp off, he’d tire himself out and I’d be able to get him off my head. But I didn’t count on Slomo flanking me.”

“If it helps, I think the black cat was trying to defend your honor. He seemed more interested in getting at ... did you say that hell cat’s name was ...”

“Mr. Giggles,” she said, nodding.

“*Ironic* name, or ...”

She sighed. “He wasn’t always who he is now. He used to be the McAfee’s cat when they lived on the island. And their little boy Jeffy named him. He was apparently a very sweet cat. But he developed hepatic encephalopathy. And one of the unfortunate side effects of the disease can be extreme aggression and a personality change.”

“And they just ... *abandoned* him? Because he was sick?” Max asked. He could hear his outrage coming out in his voice and apparently so could Andi because she quickly turned to look at him.

“It can be a *really* expensive condition to treat. And you know it’s just Mrs. McAfee. And she has *four* kids to support.” Andi shook her head, looking sadly up at the still low-growling kennel. “I was able to do the surgery pro bono, and a bunch of us pitched in for the medication he needed ... but unfortunately, the neurological damage was done. I ... I keep hoping that he’ll get back to the sweet cat he used to be. But ...”

The damage is done, Max thought. He took a few steps, trying to find his balance again as he moved over to look into the kennel. The cat was glaring out at the world from the far end of its kennel.

“Usually he doesn’t have the energy to do much besides hiss and sleep. But apparently, today is the day for subverted expectations. Usually, Slomo just lays on the floor when I get him out for some playtime. Today, he decided to aid and abet a jailbreak. And then scale me like a ...”

“Slomo ... that cat that’s part ... soup? He *let* the other cat out?” Max asked.

Andi nodded, shifting her gaze and annoyed expression over to look at Slomo who was now lying in his kennel on his back with his paws in the air. “Yeah. Though, knowing him, it wasn’t a coordinated plan. More of an ‘I wonder what this latch does’ kind of thing.”

“Isn’t that how *all* animals plan?” Max asked.

She nodded. “Animals and babies ... and me, I guess.” She turned to look at him and added quickly. “Not that I know first-hand on the baby front.” She’d gone from pink to red now.

A volley of emotions were cascading through Max now, but he didn’t want to look at any of them. *This isn’t helping.*

“So, what brings you *here* on Christmas Eve?” Andi asked quickly and with the air of someone who just needed the conversation to put the shovel down and stop digging its own grave.

“Uh ...” She’d already *touched* his prosthetic. Did he really want to admit to Andi, the woman he ... he’d loved in high school that he needed a service animal because he had *bad dreams*? No. He was pretty sure he’d had enough self-humiliation for one day. She was studying his face and he felt his heart rate starting to pound in his ears. He had to think of something. Fast. “My mom,” he said quickly. *My mom, what, genius?* “She’s ... I was thinking of getting her a ... cat.” He started to breathe again. “You know. For Christmas. She’s ...

she's lonely at home these days. You know with me and Gray both being gone."

"Oh, that's right. Gray's in the service too, isn't he?"

"Navy," Max said, nodding. He hoped Andi would only pick up on the pride in his voice and not the bitter taste the word had left on his tongue. *Gray* was still in the service. He wasn't.

"Wow," she said, smiling fully at him for the first time since he'd come in. "Your mom must be so proud."

"Proud ... pissed," he weighed the words in his hands. "I'd say fifty-fifty."

Andi chuckled. "I remember that. She was so mad at you when you told her you were going. I ... I remember her crying."

Max nodded and they just stood in awkward silence for a moment. What Andi *didn't* say was how it hadn't been just his mom crying. She'd cried too when he'd told her he was going. And what *he* didn't say was how seeing her cry like that had almost broken his resolve.

"Well, you've come to the right place," she said, and he saw her turn on her professional smile. "We've got cats here. You've of course already met two of the candidates." She turned back to the row of kennels and started talking about each of the occupants. He watched her face as she smiled and opened the kennel doors to show him each of the other five cats at the shelter. "And of course, there are the Slurpee twins,

but they're kind of a package deal. Littermate brothers. It would be really hard on them if they were separated." She moved around him, keeping her gaze on the floor. "But if you're looking to get her a kitten, I'm afraid you won't be able to take the kitten home with you today. Cinnamon just had her litter last night ... well, this morning. But they won't be ready for adoption until ... March. I like to make sure they're fully weaned and get their first two rounds of shots before they're adopted." She paused to look at him and Max quickly nodded.

Now what?

"Of course, I know you all had a dog when you were growing up, so if you're not set on a cat, we do have some canine friends looking for a good home." He watched her face light up as she moved from kennel to kennel, letting out each of the pups who wagged their tails and clung to her side or sat down on her foot to look up at her before coming over to sniff Max's hand and get some head scratches from him. Andi had clearly found the line of work for her. Even though her white coat was stained with god-knew-what, her face was scratched and exhausted, and her hair was a mess, it was easy to see that she loved her job. They'd reached the last kennel and Andi got down on her knees to open the door. "And this good boy is Sarge." The husky hobbled out, his mouth hanging open in a smile as he panted and licked Andi's face. He was missing an eye and one of his back legs moved like the bones had been fused to not bend. He looked up at Max with his one eye, closed his mouth, and sat down. For the first time in over six months, Max felt like he was standing for inspection. He and

the dog just looked at each other for a moment. And then Sarge stood, moved over to Max, and started licking his hand. Max scratched the dog behind the ears and he felt Sarge lean against him.

“He was owned by a retired major general on the mainland,” Andi said softly. Max looked up to see her surveying the pair of them, still smiling. But there was sadness in her eyes. “Sarge was a stray before the general adopted him. Somewhere during his street life, he lost his eye and he was only brought to the shelter after he was hit by a car and broke his hip. He’s only about four years old. But that hip is going to bother him as he gets older and ... no one’s ...”

“Wanted him?” Max asked. He’d stopped petting the husky, but almost immediately, he felt Sarge’s snout searching out his hand. With a smile, he started petting him again, feeling something deep inside him ache for the pup. It wasn’t his fault this was the hand life had dealt him. “I’ll take him,” he said. He had a momentary panic, realizing he hadn’t thought the whole situation through. But as soon as met Sarge’s gaze again, he knew it was the right choice. He felt Sarge burrow his nose into his thigh above his prosthetic and for the third time in his life, he felt as sure about something as his own name.

The first time he’d felt it was when he was eleven years old and he knew he wanted to go into the armed services. Just like his dad. And the second time was in the sixth grade when they’d moved to Hope. He’d walked into his first class on his first day in a new school, already feeling self-conscious about

his old clothes and not knowing anyone. And there she'd been. Andi Morgan. She'd been wearing a white oversized cable knit sweater, her long dark hair spilling over one shoulder. She'd been quietly reading while the rest of the pre-bell class had been chaos around her. But as if she'd been waiting for him, she looked up from her book while he stood at the front of the room on the brink of panic, not knowing where to sit. She'd smiled at him and waved. Then she'd reached out to tap the empty desk next to her. And at that moment, he'd been sure. Andi Morgan was going to be his friend and one day, if he didn't screw everything up and if he was very, very lucky, she would be his girl. She was his first friend in Hope. The first best friend he'd had in his life. He felt a pain tighten in his chest. She was his first in a lot of things.

She was smiling at him now, just like she had that day in the sixth grade. Like some part of her had been waiting for him to show up. "I think Sarge was waiting for you."

Max smiled and looked down at the husky, trying to keep a handle on the memories and emotions kicking around inside his head. "Sorry it took me so long to get here, buddy." The husky looked straight up at him, dropped his mouth open in his husky smile, and gave him a short whine.

"Mostly, we figure that means 'you're forgiven'," Andi said, laughing. "He's a talker. Like most huskies. I'm ..." she paused and Max met her gaze. "I'm so glad you ... came by. Seeing you two together ... it's like a Christmas present for me." She dropped her gaze and cleared her throat. "Ok. Well, let's do some paperwork." She moved around the little office

area, pulling forms and putting them on a clipboard, and Max watched her, still petting Sarge absent-mindedly. She still moved like the athlete she'd been. She'd been the captain of the cheerleading squad their senior year and they were on the track team together. His mom had called them the "high school fairy tale couple". But whatever fairy tale they'd been living had ended the day he'd shipped out. The day he'd gotten her letter. A flash of light off her hand as she searched her pockets caught his attention. She raised a hand to pat the top pocket of her jacket and he saw it again. Her engagement ring. A door closed softly inside him. *She's not your girl anymore. She belongs to someone else now.*

"Where the hell did I put that pen?" She started pulling things out of her coat pockets and dumping them onto the countertop. With a sigh, she opened the top drawer of the desk and pulled out a pen, set it on top of the clipboard, and held it out to him. "Sorry. I just hope I didn't put it through the sterilization washer again with all the thermometer tips." She gave him a weary smile. She was standing so close to him now. He could see the way her coat hung off her shoulders, her collarbone sticking out of the neck of her baggy sweater. Her face was drawn and slightly gray, despite the angry scratch marks on her skin.

If the asshole she's marrying is doing this to her ... He caught himself. *She's not your girl anymore*, he repeated to himself. *She's picked someone else. Deal with it.* But, if she needed something, he *could* still be her friend. She looked from him to the rolly chair. "I'm so sorry. There's a lot to fill

out. Do you ... want to sit?" He didn't want her to have to brace his chair again. He moved over and lowered down to sit on the edge of the counter. Sarge followed him and flopped down at his feet.

Andi chuckled, looking down at the dog. "He's a smart one. I think he already knows that he's going home with you."

"Of course he does," Max said, nodding approvingly down at the dog. "He's a military dog. He knows that a unit moves as one." *Good. Just keep the conversation light. Don't say anything else humiliating or let her know ... anything.* He glanced down at the pile of random garbage she'd emptied onto the counter from her pockets. There was a white card under a medication wrapper that looked ... familiar. With the tip of his pen, he pushed the wrapper aside and looked down at the card. "I see you got one too," he said. It was the "A Cup of Kindness Support Group" card.

"What?" Andi had moved across the room from him and was weighing out food, but she looked up from the scale to meet his gaze.

"This support group thing," he said, nodding down at the card. "I got one too."

Andi sighed. "You weren't able to escape Mrs. Bumble either?"

He shook his head. "Nope. She's too wily for me."

"That makes two of us," Andi muttered, shaking her head. "We must be getting old. We *used* to be able to elude her."

“We were faster and we were stupid teenagers,” Max said.
“Well, *I* was a stupid teenager.”

“You’re joking, right?” she chuckled. “You were the ‘man with the plan’, Max Buzzkill. You were always the one talking me out of our worst ideas.”

“Only the ones we couldn’t come up with a foolproof plan for. But you were the ones with ideas. The *good* ideas at least.” He grinned at her before he could stop himself. “I never had your *vision*, Andarchy.”

She laughed, and then silence fell between them again. He turned his attention back to the clipboard, filling out the boxes and signing his name while he tried to come up with something else to talk about.

“So ... are you going?” he asked, forcing himself to keep his gaze on the paper he was pretending to read.

“Going?”

“To the meeting,” he said, shrugging as if he didn’t care one way or the other.

He heard her sigh and he couldn’t resist the urge to look up. She was frowning at the bowl of cat food she was preparing on the counter in front of her. “Yeah, I guess.”

He felt himself smile. “You guess?”

She looked up at him and then over at Mr. Giggles’ kennel. “Annabelle, my vet tech, told me she’d get Mr. Giggles to pose for his flier picture *and* clean his kennel for the next week if I went to the meeting. And after our interaction today

...” She raised a hand to touch the back of her neck and sucked in air through her gritted teeth before checking her fingertips for blood.

He was moving before he realized what he was doing. Thankfully, he regained his senses before he’d made it to her and was able to keep from falling down. *Balance out.* Sarge was on his heels when he paused beside her. She took a step back from him and he hesitated, about to raise a hand to touch her cheek. It was muscle memory that he hadn’t used in eight years. It was a visceral reaction for him whenever his ... whenever Andi was in pain.

“I ... I can look at your scratches ... if you want? It’ll be hard for you to see the ones on the back of your neck. Just to ... make sure they don’t get infected?” Her eyes were boring into his, but she nodded.

“Ok ...” The word came out of her on a soft exhale and Max moved over to the stainless steel sink before he could think about what he was about to do. He pulled some paper towels out of the dispenser and ran them under warm water. Andi had moved over to the sink and when he turned to look at her, she slowly turned her back to him and shifted her hair out of the way.

The sight of the back of her bare neck, the way they were standing with him right behind her, the way she was holding her hair out of the way ... he remembered helping her get her dress unzipped and then back on the first time they’d ... *This isn’t helping.* He tried to refocus his attention on the deep

angry scratch running the length of her slender neck. Below it, he could see the tops of her vertebrae sticking out. Had she been ill? How many times had he stared at her shoulders and back? How many nights in his bunk in Iraq or on base had he closed his eyes at night and reminded himself of every detail of her face, her smile, her laugh, the things she'd said to him, and then every curve of her body, every freckle, every scar. Something *was* wrong with her.

“That bad, huh?” she asked, her voice muffled from her chin resting on her chest.

“No. I mean, it's a pretty bad scratch, but,” he gently dabbed the warm wet wad against her wound and he felt her shiver. “Sorry. But it doesn't seem to be bleeding anymore.” As gently as he could, he started to wash off the dried blood around her scratches. Forcing himself to keep his mind on the task at hand and not that he was standing so close he could smell the apple blossom scent in her hair. *God. She hadn't changed her shampoo in the last eight years?* He still remembered being able to smell her on his pillow after that night ...

“Are you coming?” she asked quietly.

“What?” He shifted uncomfortably.

“To the meeting,” she said. “That support group thing. Since I'm not getting out of it. I just ... wondered if you were going to be there.”

Did ... did he imagine it, or was there something in her voice that made it sound like she *wanted* to see him there? He

cast his mind around for an excuse. He glanced down at Sarge who was resting with his head on his paws looking up at him and Andi. Technically, Sarge wasn't a trained service animal. But, his mom would probably let him off the hook when she met him and not press the meeting. But ... Andi didn't need to know that.

“Yeah. My mom. She's making me go.”

“Or else?” Andi chuckled.

“Yep. The famous Lyons ‘or else’ threat which no one knows what the full consequences would be if they happened, but everyone has a healthy enough fear level to be able to imagine.”

“It's a sound military strategy,” Andi said, turning to smile at him. She was still so close he could see the flecks of gold in her eyes. “I can't remember if it's Sun Tzu or just Stephen Spielberg, but the enemy you can't see is ... a thousand times scarier than the one you *can* see. Or ... something like that.”

Max could barely breathe with her so close to him after so long without her. “Spielberg,” he said. She pulled her lower lip between her teeth and he held his breath.

For a moment, time stopped. And it was just him and Andi. His hands were moving on their own, remembering steps to a dance he hadn't done in almost a decade. He cupped her cheek, his thumb running across the smooth plane of skin. Her eyes fluttered closed and his brain decided to step out for a smoke break. He brushed his lips over hers and he almost groaned. He was seventeen again and they were sneaking beer

and a blanket out to Hope Hill to watch the stars. He was in the emergency room with a dislocated shoulder after the Selton game and she was kissing him to keep him conscious every time the pain made him want to pass out. She was air and he was suffocating. She let out a pleading sigh and without thinking, he wrapped his free arm around her waist, pulling her against him. Every nerve ending in his body was on fire, as he felt her pressed against him. She parted her lips under him and he felt himself growl when he felt the flick of her tongue on his lips. Something was ringing off in the distance.

Andi pulled back from him suddenly as if she'd heard the thought that had charged through his mind like a "brasshole" major storming through camp to make a statement. The look on her face was a mixture of surprise and horror. The horror part made him drop his hands to his sides and take a step back.

"I ... I'm so sorry," Andi said, her voice was soft but her eyes were so wide they looked like they were screaming.

"What?" he asked. He was surprised, but he could hear the hard edge of his embarrassment in his voice. "Why are you sorry? I kissed you."

"But ... I wanted ..." She covered her face with her hands and for a horrible moment, he was afraid she was crying.

"Andi?" he asked, thankful that his voice had softened. When she finally dropped her hands, he realized she was laughing.

“I’m so sorry, Max,” she said to her palms when she managed to stop laughing. “I just ... this is only the second time we’ve seen each other since we both got back, and ...” she finally glanced up to grin at him, though he saw her grin falter. He tried to move his face away from the resting scowl he’d developed in the Army. “Both times, it’s been like ... time travel. I just ...”

“I know what you mean,” he said, nodding quickly. *Good. At least ... if she felt like this was a mistake, she doesn’t sound like she’s holding it against me.*

“I’m so sorry. I just ... I slept two hours last night, this week has been hell, please ... just ... if you can forgive me, let’s just forget this ever happened.”

Max nodded, but the whole sentiment left a bitter taste in his mouth. *Forget this ever happened.*

She sighed, her grin turning to a full-on smile as she bent down to scratch behind Sarge’s ears where he sat between them, looking up at her and then up at Max. “Easier times, huh?”

Something shifted in his chest and he tried to breathe. “Yeah ... easier times.”

“I ... I’m really glad you’re . . . ,” she took a step back from him and leaned on the counter, “that I won’t be the *only* person there that Mrs. Bumble strong-armed into going to this meeting.” She was trying to look nonchalant, but her face was still flushed and her eyes were giving her away. She was ... regretting this.

“Yeah,” he said, looking down at Sarge and trying to match her nonchalance. “Me too.”

Andi

Oh my god, I just kissed Max Lyons. It was the only thought in her head as she waved to him as he led Sarge out the front door. And it was the only thought in her head as she started the evening checklist, pausing only for mild panic attacks that crept up on her when she realized what she'd just done.

I just kissed the man I broke up with eight years ago. No. He kissed me. But I wanted him to kiss me. That makes me a jerk.

And what about Brandon?

Her guts were on fire with the guilt surging through her. In penance, she'd decided to deep clean the breakroom. The vacuuming, scrubbing tabletops, and releasing whatever slime creature had been living in the fridge back to the wild had helped. She'd gotten the hard surface cleaner in some of her Mr. Giggles' scratches and the constant burning had helped feel like atonement in her head so the pain in her gut wasn't as bad. She still didn't know what had come over her.

Muscle memory, she'd finally decided. It had to be. How many times had she felt Max's hand on her cheek and the thrill

in her belly? Felt the pleasure of seeing that serious face relax and those soft lips brush against hers? And the comforting possessiveness of that strong arm, wrapped around her, pulling her against him, making her feel like she was the only thing in the world he wanted or needed. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the break room wall and glared. *You're a jerk. You're lonely and you took advantage of what was probably Max's muscle memory.* Had ... had she seduced him? Animals let off pheromones to attract ... oh *god*. Had she *pheromoned* Max? It had to be that. Otherwise, why would he ever want to kiss her after she'd broken up with him? *But if that was muscle memory*, a tiny voice whispered in her head, *he hasn't forgotten a thing.* A fresh tingle echoed through her, remembering the taste of him, the growl rumbling through his chest that made her toes curl. *Mmmmm and the stubble was new, but kind of fantastic.* The voice was getting cocky now. She scowled at the wad of what looked like Amelia's blue raspberry gum stuck to the bottom of the table and started scrubbing, feeling the cleaner run down her arm and into her scratches. The voice finally shut up. *Good*, she thought as the sting hit her. *That's enough out of you, missy.* She just needed to do the same thing she was sure Max was already doing and forget it had ever happened. They'd just been lucky that the only witnesses were non-human or word would already be all over town. For the first time in her vet career, she was thankful that most animals couldn't talk.



“Sorry I’m late,” Charlotte called at seven o’clock when she stomped in through the backdoor of the clinic, making Andi jump. She’d been back in Hope, working at the clinic for the last six months and she *still* wasn’t used to Charlotte’s showstopper entrances. Charlotte Massey was six foot tall and built like the kind of woman you definitely want on your side in a street fight. And she stomped ... everywhere. The first two months Andi had known Charlotte, she’d thought the woman was perpetually pissed off. But then she realized that Charlotte was just a stomper. Once, when they had three animals recovering from surgery and needing extensive around-the-clock care, Charlotte had come in at the last minute to help cover with Andi. She’d stomped in wearing her pajamas. Andi didn’t think it was possible to stomp in soft-bottomed poo emoji slippers, but if anyone could make it happen, it was Charlotte.

“I *would* have been on time if I hadn’t gotten caught in the tide of snockered Santas making their way to Town Hall.”

Andi groaned. “That’s right, tonight’s the Ball and Crawl.”

“Didn’t you get conned into ... doing something for it?” Charlotte asked, pausing in the doorway to lean against the frame.

Andi shook her head. “No, thank god. I *almost* did. But when I told them I had to work on Christmas Eve *and* Christmas day, they let me off the hook. Martha Washington and Mrs. Bumble weren’t happy about it, but they finally

agreed.” *Of course, now I have to go to this stupid support group meeting, so Mrs. Bumble got her revenge.*

“Well, since you’re off the hook for the Ball and Crawl, why are you pulling a Frosty right now?” Charlotte asked.

She frowned up at her and Charlotte waved at her own face. “White and frozen.”

Andi sighed and looked back down at the notes she’d been writing for Charlotte’s shift. She wasn’t about to tell her about Max and the mental gymnastics she’d been doing all day, thinking about their kiss and how much of a jerk she was. So she settled for something safer. “Because, so far, I’ve been pretty good about keeping a low profile around here, which is a dying art in Hope, as you know. But now, with the whole town flooding the square on their way to this ridiculous red and white polyester tradition, my chances of slipping through unnoticed are ...”

“Whatever comes right after zero?” Charlotte asked.

Andi tapped her nose. “And a button nose, with two eyes made out of coal.”

Charlotte made a face. “Yeah, I always thought Frosty sounded creepy as hell if you just went off the song’s description. Can you imagine how terrifying the thought of Frosty must be to blind people? Snow, this cold wet crap that falls on you, comes to *life*, wears clothing, has eyes that are literally pieces of *coal*, dances around, and talks to children without a guardian present.”

Andi opened her mouth to speak, but then she narrowed her eyes at Charlotte. “You know, I was having a good day.” She motioned at the kennels. “We were *all* having a good day until you brought that up. I’m never going to be able to look at Frosty the same way, ever again.”

“Merry Christmas,” Charlotte said, perching on the edge of the counter and holding her hand out to Andi to take the clipboard of notes from her. “What have we got going on tonight?”

Andi walked Charlotte through how all the animals were doing and who would need some extra care.

“I’m glad Ginger found a home. Hank and Rita are good ones. She’ll fit right in with the Melrose clan. And it always seemed strange to me that Mrs. Thompson didn’t have a cat. She has pretty powerful cat lady energy. And Cinnamon’s such a sweet girl.” Charlotte paused next to the last empty kennel. “Where’s Sarge?”

“He got adopted today too,” Andi said, feeling the heat already starting to roll over her. She tried to suppress it, but she was having a hell of a time not thinking about him. She managed to shy away from the memory of the kiss for the moment and just focus on everything else. He was still Max. His mannerisms, that deep rumbling growl of a voice, his stoicism. She’d always assumed it came from a strict military upbringing, but his younger brother Grayson was a class clown, so she had a feeling that it was just Max.

“Really? Who took our good boy home?”

“Uh ...” Andi blinked and realized Charlotte was talking about Sarge. “Max Lyons.” Andi held her breath, waiting for the inevitable.

“Your *ex*?” Charlotte asked, eyes wide but still zeroed in on Andi’s face. Under Charlotte’s scrutiny, she could practically feel the skin on her face starting to bubble and melt from the intensity.

“Yeah,” Andi said with a shrug, hoping she looked nonchalant even if her voice didn’t sound like it. She turned her back on Charlotte and went to get her coat, pausing to check on Cinnamon and her kittens who she’d moved to the largest cat kennel on the second shelf. Everyone seemed to be doing well. They’d eaten and were all sleeping at the moment. “Most of the kittens seem to be doing fine, but that one on the end with the white stripe is having a hard time nursing. We may need to hand-feed her if she’s still struggling tomorrow.” She was hoping to deter Charlotte with a topic change.

“I know how to take care of new kittens. What I *don’t* know is how your ex came in and adopted a dog and it *wasn’t* the first thing you told me when I came in. Girl, I thought we were friends.”

Andi sighed and focused on Charlotte. “We are friends. But it’s no big deal. He’s just my ex from *high school*. Eight years ago. He was getting a pet for his mom for Christmas. End of story.” She couldn’t help smiling, remembering the way Max and Sarge had looked at each other. Of course, Sarge was going to be more of Max’s dog than Liza’s. The two looked

like they'd bonded almost immediately. Now, if she could just convince *herself* that seeing Max wasn't a big deal ...

“By the way, what the hell happened to you? You look like you lost a slap fight with a rake,” Charlotte asked, crossing her arms.

And then Andi remembered *how* Max had found her. “Yeah, Slomo was out, I was dealing with the dogs. Then Slomo got a wild energetic hair up his butt and he climbed up on top of the kennels and ... freed Mr. Giggles.”

“Holy shit,” Charlotte whispered, looking from Andi to the kennel that had started growling as soon as its occupant heard his name.

Andi nodded. “Yeah. Mr. Giggles pounced on my head and then Slomo was trying to get *to* Mr. Giggles, either to defend my honor or offer to share his catnip stash with him.”

“How are you not dead right now?” Charlotte asked, shaking her head. “I swear that cat spends all his time in that kennel dreaming up ways to garrote us with our stethoscopes or guillotine our necks in a kennel door.”

“Max grabbed Slomo, so I could get Mr. Giggles off my head,” she said.

“Oh, Mr. Quarter ‘back-that-up’ was back *here? Helping?*”

Andi rolled her eyes. “He walked in, right in the middle of the chaos.” *And he was so bent on getting to her that he'd climbed over the reception desk.* A strange, warm heat was moving through her now. *It's just because I haven't seen him in*

so long and because he was so ... thoughtful. That's all, she told herself. *Sure. Let's go with that*. It had nothing to do with the look in his eyes, or the kiss ...

She didn't want to wait for one of Charlotte's predictions on the situation. Charlotte believed that she could sometimes see the future. She was rarely right, at least that Andi could tell, but the few times she had been, were enough to get Andi moving toward the door. "Ok. That should be everything. I've got my cell on me if you need anything. Apparently, Doc Simmons is down for the count ..."

"I heard," Charlotte said with a nod. "Broken fire plug, spraying out of both ends."

Andi shook her head, trying to dislodge the image. "And on that note, Merry Christmas."

"And a happy few beers?" she asked, looking over at Andi and pausing with her pen above the checklist she'd started reading through.

Andi shrugged. "Maybe. I *will* have the house to myself tonight with the rest of the family out at the Ball and Crawl and Amelia off with her buddies."

"Well, have one for me," Charlotte called as Andi buttoned her coat and headed out the back door with a wave.

When the door had closed behind her, she paused to take a deep breath. "Not bad, but you better watch yourself, Morgan, before everyone *else* around here hears how Max saved your life on Christmas Eve," she muttered as she started the long

trudge home. She wasn't willing to chance saying anything else about the encounter aloud, even if it was just to herself. Hope-ians could be hiding in the hedgerows listening. It had happened before.

Instead, she turned all her mental energy to the journey in front of her. She could *almost* make it all the way home by cutting down side streets. Almost. If she didn't live on a damn cul-de-sac, she could make it the entire way. As is, if she wanted to try to avoid the square and still make it home, she would have to scale the Garrison's eight-foot privacy fence and play nice with their three Dobermans, Larry, Curly, and Mo. And she was pretty sure that even if the other two didn't, Mo remembered her from the summer when she'd had to neuter all three of them. But, a reunion with three newly deballed and possibly pissed guard dogs on their home turf at night started to feel like a pretty good option when she hit the first wave of singing, drinking Santas on their way to Town Hall.

"Santa Claus is coming to town ..." one sang.

"Shut up, Fred, we're already ... already *here*."

"Yeah," a third one shouted. "We already *came* to town."

"But that's not how the song goes," Fred said, pausing in his tracks. Andi put her head down and tried to carefully walk around the three Santas.

"Hey it's Andi, I'll bet she'll back me up on this," Fred said. Andi squeezed her eyes shut and wished that humanity had spent its time developing teleportation instead of Twitter. Fred

Brewer, her grumpy retired fifth-grade teacher, staggered over to her.

“Is Santa Claus coming to town?” he asked.

“Not if you let the mayor’s wife catch you with your beard down on your chin like that,” Andi said, nodding at the furry wad slipping down his chin. “Then Santa will be manning the bar next year, sober as a judge.”

Fred scrambled to pull his beard back up, only managing to get it hooked properly over one ear. “I just ha-hate,” he paused to cough and spit, “this damn thing. Stupid fake hair gets in my mouth, it’s up my nose. I woke up last year with a mouthful of the damn hair, but the beard was across the room.”

“*None* of us want to know how that happened, Fred,” Miss Mandie muttered, coming up behind them. “What you and your Mrs. Claus get up to for your own shits and merriment is your business. You three better get a move on. I saw your names on the keg-movers volunteer list. Those bars need to be stocked before the doors open.”

“Man,” Fred muttered, still slurring his words, “why ... why did we drink so much *before* moving the kegs?”

“Yeah, we really should have waited until *after*,” the second Santa said as the three of them crossed onto the sloping lawn of City Park next to Town Hall.

“We’ll be *fine*,” the third guy said, stepping on the back of the second Santa’s boot. Second Santa tripped forward,

snagging Fred by the front of his costume and taking him down with him into the grass. The third Santa was still walking as if he hadn't noticed what had happened to the other two. "They're just kegs. We just have to pay attention."

Andi sighed. "So glad I won't be body swapped into one of those three in the morning."

"For a lot of reasons," Miss Mandie said, nodding. She turned to look at Andi and only then did Andi realize that she and Miss Mandie were standing alone, outside of De-Floured. She started to sweat under her jacket. *Oh no.*

"Doc, do you have a minute to give me a hand?"

Andi gave an inward sigh. She may have been in Seattle for the last eight years, but the islander in her was strong. It was the same reason she hadn't been able to tell Mrs. Bumble to go to hell when the woman cornered her into saying she'd go to the support group meeting. When a fellow islander asked for help, or even a stranger asked for help, the Hope genes *compelled* you to at least say yes. You could disregard it later, but usually, at your own peril. People on the island not only had the memories of elephants, they could hold grudges like them too.

"Sure," Andi said, her voice resigned as she followed Miss Mandie back inside, "What do you need?" The bakery was dark except for the dim security light behind the counter.

"Oh I've just got some goodies to take over and Bart already left with the cart." The "cart" as Miss Mandie called it, was a hand-carved rickshaw that was a bakery case and mini-

bar on wheels. She'd had it custom-made by the Baskins, who had delivered it a month ago, red-faced, to Miss Mandie's door as Andi was heading home from work. The two long arms the person pulling it stood between and used to move the cart forward ... had been carved like a very voluptuous and shapely pair of legs, angled up in the air. The legs ended in four-inch stilettos which Miss Mandie said she needed so she'd have a place to hang her bottle openers when she was running the bar. It was a sight she'd argued should be the eighth wonder of Hope, but the board of tourism on the Island, which barely tolerated Miss Mandie, felt ... differently.

"You should see the cart," she said, leading the way into the stainless steel commercial kitchen. "Bart got this huge tree skirt and turned it into a real 'Marilyn Monroe' of a skirt for our girl, *Carlotta*. And she's got jingle bell ankle bracelets and light-up garters on her thighs."

"She's bound to be the object of a lot of tight Santa pants worn by anyone with a foot fetish tonight," Andi said. "Which I'm sure on a lot of levels will make her the bell of the ball." She paused in front of one of the long counters and gestured at the trays of cookies covering the surface. "Miss Mandie ... what ... what am I looking at here?" They were gingerbread Santa cookies, complete with meringue beards and accents on their hats, but they were stretched out on their sides, like nearly shirtless Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park*. They were ... bare-chested gingerbread under their beards, but still wearing red suspenders and red pants, slung ... very low on their hips.

“I call them, “Santa’s Sleigh Rides”. I *wanted* to call them “Santa’s Full Suspension Packages”, but Bart told me no because he’d be the one having to explain the name to the drunker and denser members of our little town. He threatened to just write, ‘It’s his dick’ on a bunch of business cards and start handing them to people when they asked. He even went so far as to price them out. Five hundred business cards with ‘It’s his dick’ printed on them, delivered in five business days. The wonders of technology. Can you believe that?” She heaved a weary sigh. “Anyway, I thought that might be a lot of hassle, so we decided to name them something more Christmas-y. Thought maybe it would go down better.”

Oh, Bart, patron saint of corralling Miss Mandie. At least, when it was possible to corral her ... and when he had the energy to do so ... and when he felt like it.

Still, it was a little sad to know that there *wouldn't* be business cards floating around town for the next year that said, “It’s his dick”. Her S.I. brain was starting to whir. She could just imagine them sticking to people’s shoes, showing up in mailboxes, being given as change in the island stores by locals, and tucked into every single greeting card at Seaside Treasures. The adult in Andi knew it was a mixed blessing though. Like Hope’s wackiness in general. A little part of her was thankful because if they existed, some of the cards would undoubtedly find their way into the business card holder on the reception desk at work. And knowing her luck, one day, she’d be talking to a tearful client about her dog’s urinary tract infection and unwittingly hand them a business card that just

said, “It’s his dick”. On the other hand, the thought of Esther Jacobs systematically opening every sympathy, birthday, and get-well card to find the heartfelt sentiment ending with “It’s his dick”, was almost enough to make Andi want to shake Bart for not just ordering the cards anyway.

“Speaking of Santa’s packages,” Miss Mandie muttered around the fresh unlit cigarette she’d stuck between her lips, through the neatly trimmed and waxed mustache of her Santa beard. “Did you know your ‘soldier of fortune’ is back in town?” There was just a *little* too much sauciness in Miss Mandie’s question.

Andi decided to ignore it. Or at least try and hope Miss Mandie didn’t pick up on the heat rushing to her face. “Yeah. He actually came by the shelter today and adopted a dog.” It was going to get out if it wasn’t already. Best to jump in the ring and try to make the whole interaction as mundane as possible for the gossipers.

“He always was a good kid,” Miss Mandie said, and Andi could hear the smile in her voice. It felt like a fresh punch in the gut. Whenever anyone in Hope talked about Max Lyons, it was always about what a good kid he was. A good son, a good man, off serving his country. As if she didn’t know all that. And it was always said to her in just a *slightly* accusatory tone. After all, *she* was the one that had broken them up.

“You two were quite a pair. High school royalty; head cheerleader and quarterback. Just about everyone in town had money riding on you two getting engaged, married, and then

settling down out here when he got out of the service,” Miss Mandie said.

Andi felt her annoyance flash white-hot into anger. “Well, we didn’t.”

Miss Mandie nodded as if she hadn’t heard the anger in Andi’s voice. “Don’t we know it. Had to change course on our betting to Nadia Whorley and that new crab fisherman she took on ... P.J. Willis. But it’s not the same. No scoreboards or backflips with the two of them and no stands for the rest of us to sit in and watch it all unfold. It looks strange when more than three of us end up standing on the dock with popcorn at the same time, just trying to catch a glimpse of the two of them making out as the trawler comes back to port. Soon, we’re all going to have to convert over and get into one of those Netflix dating shows.”

Andi wanted to be mad, but damn it. She couldn’t stay mad at Miss Mandie or even her ridiculous town. The adults on the island weren’t that different from the teenagers. This far out at sea, they had to make their own fun. In whatever shape it took.

“But, I suppose that’s the way life is,” Miss Mandie was saying. “Always taking curves at high speeds. Curves we never saw coming.”

“Don’t I know it,” Andi muttered, as they walked back into the dining room of the bakery. She paused, looking around and remembering Brandon’s face the first time she’d taken him to De-Floured and ordered him a Double D-elicious cupcake. He’d met Miss Mandie just once and when Andi had asked

him what he thought of the woman, he'd said, "*I almost proposed to her, but then I remembered you were with me.*" She'd always teased him after that any time they passed the bakery, trying to get him to go in and see Miss Mandie and better weigh his decision of asking Andi to marry him instead of her. He'd always act like he was considering the possibility, then put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his side. "*Nah, I'm pretty happy with what I've got. Besides, the devil you know ...*" She felt torn between smiling and the hard lump in her throat at the memory.

"Eh, but even if where we end up isn't where we expected or even wanted to be, and the trip getting there felt like driving through Suck Valley ... not my movie, *Suck Valley*, mind you. I'm just being metaphorical here. Anyway, I guess what I'm trying to say is that if things feel crappy right now, just hang on until the next good thing happens. Because then you'll be able to see that it wouldn't have, unless you'd gone through the bad shit to get there."

Andi felt herself smile. "Thanks, Miss Mandie ... I think."

"How are things going over there at the shelter? I heard old Doc Simmons is putting the screws to the budget. Something about getting all those pets adopted or he's gonna ship them off the island?"

Andi nodded, feeling her constant anxiety for the animals, resurfacing. But at the moment she'd take the anxiety over the sadness. "Yeah. But three of them got adopted today. So, that's something."

“How many more to go?” Miss Mandie asked.

“Pickles, Slomo, the Slurpee Twins, Clipper, Bruce, Tookie, Cinnamon’s six kittens, and ... Mr. Giggles.”

“That’s a tall order. And just a month to get them all adopted.”

“Yeah.” Andi’s knees felt weak.

“Well, it’s a good time of year for it,” Miss Mandie said with a nod. Andi just looked at her. She smiled. “The new year. Everyone’s thinking about clean slates, second chances, and being kinder, better versions of themselves.” She shrugged. “Or at least those that aren’t obsessed with a paper glitter crown and the title of ‘Motivator Monarch’.” She made a disgusted sound and shook her head. “Anyway, for everyone who is still sane, the start of a new year might be the perfect time of year to get those furballs adopted.” Andi just nodded. She couldn’t fully make out Miss Mandie’s expression, but the way she said, “hmmm ” made Andi think the woman was considering something. “Tell you what. Me and the Wild Oats club will sign up to do some pet walking. You know, show off the pets up for adoption? How about the first week after New Years?”

“That ... that would be great,” Andi said, blinking at her. “Really Miss Mandie ...”

“No big deal,” she chuckled.

They’d reached the doors to Town Hall and through the glass windows, Andi could already see drunk Santas posing

with “Cart-lotta”. They were doing things that Andi supremely wished weren’t now burned into her brain where they could haunt her at three am when she was trying to sleep.

“She’s with me,” Miss Mandie muttered to the mayor’s wife who was already striding toward them. She was frowning through her Santa beard at Andi who was sticking out like a sore thumb in her street clothes. “Keep your merkin muffler on, Velda. I only have two hands. Andi is just helping me bring these in.” She turned to look at Andi, frowning. “Wait, why *aren’t* you coming to the Ball and Crawl?”

“Work,” Andi said quickly. “Gotta be back there at six am.” Miss Mandie opened her mouth to no doubt argue with her that that was ten hours away, so Andi had to think fast to cut her off at the pass. “And I’m on call. Can’t drink or be anywhere too ... noisy. I have to be able to hear my phone if ... when it rings. Sorry.” She tried to look like she meant it. Both women looked like they knew better.

“Well, since we can’t have you stay tonight,” Miss Mandie said, leading Andi over to set their trays down on a table beside Bart and “Cart-lotta”, “I could really use your help with the Snow Ball at the end of January.”

Andi froze. *Damn it.* She’d stepped right under that box and kicked the stick propping it up all by herself. While she was rapidly flipping through excuses in her head, Miss Mandie continued. “Yeah, they’re hauling in *snow machines* for the damn thing. Personally, I think the whole thing is just going to be wall-to-wall shenanigans. But I drew the short straw this

year and so me and the Wild Oats are in charge of organizing it. And we're going to do our damndest to make sure it's not the stuffy affair everyone around here is used to skipping. So what do you say?"

This was Hope, so it wasn't a question. "Sure," Andi said automatically, feeling early-onset exhaustion for an event a month away starting to set in. With a nod, Miss Mandie socially released her back into the wild.

She savored her escape for the moment, but she knew it was going to be short-lived. All she'd been trying to do was get home after what had turned into a sixteen-hour shift. Only in Hope could walking home after a long day turn into volunteering for one of the town's biggest annual events. It was the circle of life on the island. There were no monkeys or actual lions, but if you skipped working a single event, you better leave town. If you didn't, Mrs. Bumble was going to catch you, put your name on a list, and lift you up above her head to show the rest of the town who the leader of the decorating committee was at the *next* event. And this would continue until you died. Possibly longer. It had never been proven, but there was the legend of Hildy Smith, the soft-spoken librarian who was said to still haunt certain town events because she'd been volunteered to run them for forty-five years in a row, but she'd only lived through forty-four. Andi believed it. If you were a ghost on Hope Island, you were up against the same boredom as everyone else. At least the events were something to do.

Thankfully, she was able to duck down her street to head home once she made it around the far corner of Town Hall. Her exhaustion was starting to slow her steps and for that she was thankful. She'd learned over the summer that wearing herself out to the point of not being able to keep her eyes open was the way to go. When she was too tired to even sleep, she'd just pass out into blissful darkness. No thoughts. No dreams. And after everything that had happened that day and the tangled ball of fishing line that was her feelings about it all, she would welcome a dreamless sleep.

When she reached the sidewalk in front of her parents' house, she looked over in time to see Tessa come out her front door to get her mail.

"Hey Tessa," she called. Her feet were automatically moving her across the road as soon as Tessa returned her greeting. "How are you and Sage doing?"

Tessa grinned at her and waved Andi over to her porch. "I think those mild sedatives worked." She pointed to a cat tower in the window where Sage was stretched out on the top level, on her back with her four white paws drawn to her chest. The cat looked like she was smiling in her sleep. "No pacing. She's been smiling and sleepy all evening. I know as a cat mom I probably shouldn't be saying this, but thanks for getting my cat high."

Andi chuckled and Tessa turned her attention back to the mail in her hand. Her expression changed, the easy smile

falling off her face as she read the front of one of the envelopes.

“Tess, you ok?” Andi asked. “Bad news?”

“What?” Tessa jerked her head up to look at Andi. “Oh, no.” She glanced back down at the envelope before shuffling it to the back of her mail. “No, just ... bank stuff. Everything’s fine. Just a pain in the ass I’ll have to deal with after the holiday.”

“Speaking of,” Andi said, “are you about to strap on your Santa suit and go ‘deck some halls’ at the ball?”

Tessa shook her head. “Nah. Not really feeling it. These days, I ... kind of hate this time of year.”

Andi sighed. “I think I know what you mean.”

“I think Sage and I are just going to kick back and watch some truly terrible Christmas horror flicks.”

That perked Andi up. “Christmas *horror*? Did I hear that right? If so, be still my heart.”

Tessa grinned. “Yeah. My favorites right now are *The Elf That Sleighed Christmas*, *Seasons Bleedings*, and *Treevenge*. Why? You interested?”

“Uh, yes,” Andi said quickly. As much as she’d been hoping to just pass out and sleep through Christmas Eve, a part of her knew that she’d be lying in bed, staring at the ceiling the whole night, no matter how tired her body was tonight. And watching truly terrible Christmas horror flicks with Tessa felt like it might be the exact opposite of tossing and turning,

staring at the ceiling, and probably crying. She was actually starting to get excited at the prospect now. “And I’ve got a whole box of store-bought Christmas cookies from Bumble’s I was planning on pigging out on tonight,” Andi continued, “and the recipe and supplies for some ‘high-proof knock-your-ass-off eggnog’ that Abby Locke gave me when she brought in her bearded dragon for his checkup. And I’ve been just waiting for an excuse and the right person to get snookered with.”

Tessa nodded in approval. “I’m your huckleberry.”

Max

“I know my sight isn’t what it used to be,” his mom said when Max walked in, “but that doesn’t look like paperwork.” She was grinning down at Sarge.

“No, uh ...” He paused to assemble his explanation. He needed it to sound like it wasn’t a big deal. And to sound like she’d bested him. And he needed her to be the one to tell him that he still had to go to the support group meeting. He hadn’t stopped to really think about everything that had happened at the shelter. It was a mixed bag. Kissing her had been ... but, her reaction after? Still. There was one thing he was sure of. He wanted to see her again. And the way she’d smiled before he left, like she was pleased he’d be at the meeting too ...

“Doc Simmons wasn’t there. So ... I wasn’t able to fill out the paperwork,” he said, trying to sound defeated.

She shrugged. “You tried. He’ll probably be back in the office after Christmas and you can go by again. And in the meantime, you brought home this handsome fella. Maybe he’ll be good support pup material.” She knelt down to pet Sarge who immediately started licking her cheeks and wiggling

around. His back end was stiff, but his tail was whacking her in the face with every other wag as he turned in circles, doing a happy dance. Max felt himself smile. He really was just a puppy on the inside.

“What happened to his eye?”

Max shook his head. “No one knows for sure. Andi said they think he lost it when he was a stray. Sometime before he was taken in by a retired major general on the mainland.” He held his breath hoping she’d focus on the fact that Sarge had belonged to another service member before Max and what a coincidence that was, instead of ...

“Andi?”

Max nodded, moving his gaze past her so he could avoid looking his mom in the eye. “Dinner smells great.” He stepped around her and headed for the kitchen. He was still holding the supplies he’d picked up at Bumble’s and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t in a hurry to set them down. It was just a food bowl for Sarge and a fifteen-pound bag of kibble. They were a lot lighter than his ruck, but still more weight than he’d put on his leg and prosthetic lately. This thought further soured his mood. He used to be able to carry squad members to safety. But now ...

To add to his annoyance, the supplies he’d gotten were really just the bare essentials. He’d wanted to try getting Sarge some toys too, but Mrs. Bumble had been in the pet toy and Tupperware aisle, supervising the way the stocker was

arranging the chew bones. And after the *Playboy* and support group strong-arming, he wasn't willing to risk it.

He paused in front of the stove and felt Sarge bump into him. "Well this is where we eat," he looked down at Sarge. "You ok with eating in here too?" Sarge's eye was bright and he was smiling up at Max with his mouth hanging open. Max felt some of the tension in his shoulders start to soften. When was the last time someone had looked at him without an ounce of pity on their face? Well, Andi, he guessed. But he had no history with Sarge. Nothing to "live up to", no way to disappoint him. Well, unless he didn't feed him. He carried the bag of food to the pantry and set it down, steadying himself against the shelf above him. He bent down to rip it open and he felt his knee starting to throb. Behind him, Sarge whined.

"What is it?" Max asked, turning to look back at him. Sarge was watching Max, his head cocked to the side. "Just hang on. I'm getting your food." He leaned forward again and sucked in air through his teeth as he put pressure on his prosthetic while he scooped the kibble with the bowl. Sarge whined again.

"Let me get that, Max," his mom said, coming to join them at the pantry. She looked at Max and he didn't miss the flash of worry on her face. For a moment, her expression matched Sarge's.

"Now you're both ganging up on me," Max muttered, looking from his mom to the dog.

"You're sweating, hun," his mom said softly. "Are you hurting?" He straightened up, holding Sarge's bowl with one

hand and holding onto the shelf with the other.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. Tell me where it hurts or I’m going to get a wooden spoon and just poke you with it until I find the spot.”

Sarge sat down at the same time his mom crossed her arms. He was cornered. He gave a weary sigh. If he told her, she’d let him get out of the pantry and sit down. He needed to get the prosthetic off. His physical therapist said that in addition to his knee shrinking as he lost muscle mass, it would also swell from irritation the more he used his prosthetic. *Prophet Sutters*, he thought, clenching his jaw against the pain. He could feel his knee swelling and throbbing where the prosthetic’s sleeve was rubbing against him. The muscles in his jaw twitched as he remembered Andi bringing him the stupid thing when it had fallen off at the shelter. She’d ... touched it, carried it. She’d seen it. Probably somewhere in her mind, she was thanking her lucky stars that she hadn’t married him so she wouldn’t be tied to him and the joy that came with his situation for the rest of her life.

“My knee. It’s just ... swelling. I’m fine though.” His mom looked like she didn’t entirely believe him, but she and Sarge backed up so he could get out of the pantry. He set Sarge’s bowl down and watched him eat until he felt his mom moving away toward the stove.

“So, what’s his name?” she asked. He heard the rattle of pot lids, then the smell of her pot roast and mashed potatoes reached him. He took a deep breath, trying to let go of

everything else for the moment and just breathe in her cooking fumes. There had been countless nights in his barracks and a few nights on watch in a foxhole when he ate MREs and tried to convince himself that they were a huge plate of his mom's pot roast and potatoes. It never really worked. And smelling them now told him just how poorly his imagination did them justice.

"Sarge," he said, hobbling over to help set the table.

She chuckled. "They saw you coming." She paused for a moment, and he didn't miss her small sigh. "If it was anyone else, I'd say they were pulling your leg since it's such a coincidence." She paused, eyes wide and blinking at the table, realizing what she said.

Despite his pain and anger and annoyance from the day and his balled-up feelings about Andi, Max laughed. She grinned at him sheepishly and then she laughed too.

"Sorry," she chuckled. "I meant ... if it had been anyone else, I'd say they were trying to pull the wool over your eyes, but ... Andi's not like that. At least, not the Andi we ... used to know. She's honest. Brutally so ..." It was interesting to see his mom go from hot to cold on Andi. From "good riddance" to "honest" in less than a day. But he understood why. He'd done it himself half a dozen times in his head on his way home with Sarge. Their past ... but now they had to figure out what to do with it in the present. He glanced back at Sarge's wagging tail and furry butt where he stood partially hidden by the door to the pantry, eating his food.

“Yeah,” he said, filling his mom’s glass and then his own with iced tea. “It was amazing ...”

Sarge left his dry dog food and trotted over to Max’s side. Max sat down, and Sarge sat down right beside Max’s chair, tucking his tail around him, eyes alert. He was on Max’s right side. His injured side. Like a squad member would, covering his vulnerable flank. Shoring up his weak side. A hard ball of emotion was trying to form in Max’s throat. Sarge rubbed his head against Max’s thigh and he reached out to scratch his head. He took a minute to clear his throat and make sure his voice wasn’t going to waiver. “I think he’s ... supposed to be here with us.”

He glanced up at his mom in time to see her look away and wipe her sleeve across her eyes. “Of course he is.” She cleared her throat and chuckled as she brought the tray of roast to the table for him to carve. “You know your brother is going to be mad as hell though when we call him tomorrow.”

Max glanced up at her, confused. She shook her head, still smiling. “You’ve been home for two weeks and I’ve already let you get a dog. He wanted one so bad when he was in high school, but ...”

“But you knew that if you let him get one, you’d be the one taking care of it,” Max said with a nod. Gray was a good kid, but he was immature and wild, always sneaking onto the last ferry of the night to go party in Seattle, then dragging himself off the bus and falling onto the early morning ferry to try to

sneak back into bed before their mom caught him. Which of course never worked.

“I think Sarge is going to be good ... to have around,” she said, dishing mashed potatoes onto her plate and passing him the bowl. He could hear the “good for you”, even if she hadn’t said it. “And I heard the Jacobs were donating that lot behind Bumble’s to the city as a pet park. When it’s done, it’ll be a great place to take him to run.”

So far, getting her on board with having Sarge around had gone down easy. Too easy. He had a feeling there was still some pity somewhere in the mix on that front. Still, half of his plan hadn’t worked. She wasn’t pressing him to go to the support group, which was kind of annoying. The one time he needed her to be a heavy-handed mom, shoving him into something, she was slacking off. Letting up. He pulled a little piece of roast off of his slice and looked over at Sarge. The dog met his gaze, looked at his hand, and then licked his chops.

“I guess I’m going to go to that support group meeting thing.”

He heard his mom’s fork pause on her plate. “Really?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. Can’t hurt, right?” He glanced up at her, trying to keep his expression neutral. The surprise was evident on her face, but he didn’t see the suspicion he’d expected. Good. She was buying it.

“I ... I think that’s a great idea.” He could feel her eyes on him when he returned his gaze to his plate. “You know,” she

said more quietly, “I should have gotten both you and Gray into therapy after your dad ... But especially you, Max. I’ve always felt terrible for how fast you had to grow up. I never wanted that.”

He raised his gaze to meet her sad smile. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “You probably didn’t notice so much. You were only twelve. But, when your dad died, you basically became the man of the house. You started being ... less of a kid. I appreciated all the help you gave me and your brother. And there were days that I don’t think I would have made it through if it hadn’t been for you.”

“I didn’t grow up too fast,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I distinctly remember Gray and me jumping off the garage roof, trying to be Batman and Robin when we first moved out here. And the time we tried to make our own pirate ship out of cardboard and took it to the beach to set sail ...”

She rolled her eyes. “I didn’t say you weren’t ornery and still young. But, you didn’t play as much as other kids your age. You went for groceries. You took Gray to school. You helped out around the house ...” Her voice was shaky now. “I’m just ... sorry, Max. I never meant for you to have to pick up so much slack for this family. And then you went to the service and gave so much ...”

“Hey,” he said, reaching across the table and covering her hand with his. “I wanted to. I still want to.”

She chuckled and swiped at her eyes with her other sleeve. “Well, one thing I know for sure is that you got your stubbornness from me. And once you set your mind to something, you won’t stop until you get it.” She squeezed his hand and met his gaze. “No matter what’s happened, I know you, Son. You’ll overcome any little setback life can throw your way.”

He thought about her words while they cleared the table. When they finished, he took Sarge out to show him the backyard. Sarge ran around, looking unconcerned by his own uneven gait as he inspected the garden beds and the fence. Max sat on the top porch stair, alternating between watching him and staring up at the stars overhead. He knew his mom meant well, but what she called a “little setback” wasn’t like flunking a test in school or missing a pass in the big game. It was a cruel joke from the universe, making him remember what he’d had and what he’d never have again. He was never going to be able to lift Andi over his head again when they danced to their song. Not that he’d ever have the chance. She was never going to look at him with that wild excitement they’d shared their senior year when their futures were still a wonderful mystery and the sky was the limit.

An old ache moved through him, remembering that hot, sticky summer night when they’d snuck out with a blanket and a case of beer to watch the stars from Hope Hill. The way they’d made love that night ... It hadn’t been their first time, but it was the time he thought about the most. It was towards the end of the summer. They’d both told their parents they

were staying with friends so they hadn't had to worry about getting caught. He'd already known he loved Andi, but that was the night he decided he wanted to marry her. The thought had popped into his head so smoothly, it felt like it had always been there. She was in his arms and they were just listening to each other breathe as they searched the sky above them for a shooting star. He'd started the search for her ring the next day.

She'd cried ... a lot, the last week they'd been together. It was hard. But he'd tried to reassure her. It was just basic and after that, they'd see each other when he was on leave. And they had the internet and phones and plane tickets. He remembered the downpour they'd stood in, when she'd wrapped her arms around his neck and held onto him so tightly, it was hard to breathe. "*We won't forget each other. Ever.*" She'd whispered. And he promised her he couldn't forget her, even if he wanted to. At that moment, he'd wanted to ask her to marry him. But, the ring was at home, and he'd convinced himself that asking her at Christmas when he came home from basic was a much better plan.

The next morning, he'd been heading out to catch the ferry when he saw the letter. It was wedged under the webbed foot of Bill, the metal duck statue that Andi had named the first time she'd come over to his house to visit. Every time she came over after that, she'd pat the metal duck's head and ask Bill how he was doing. Max had given him a voice like Daffy Duck and the whole exchange always ended with them both laughing as they came into the house. Occasionally Bill would have other input into their conversations or something to say

about whatever was happening, no matter where they were and when they got in trouble, Bill would be their scapegoat.

But, when he opened the letter, Bill and all of his insights were silent. She'd said that they should break up. They both had so much in front of them. *"I love you, Max. I think I always will. But we're eighteen. I'm going to college for probably the next decade. And who knows where the Army will send you. I miss you already. I don't think there will ever be a day that I won't think about you and miss having you in my life."* He'd read and reread that letter so many times. He'd kept it in the chest pocket of his fatigues. He wasn't sure why. He'd ripped up and thrown away the birthday card she'd sent when it arrived, but he kept their break-up letter. He was devastated when the ink on the crumpled paper had bled from his sweat. But, when he couldn't read it anymore, he realized he had it memorized. Her words had kept him going. They'd kept his head clear when he'd been under fire. And it was her face he'd thought of when he'd made Sergeant.

But now, being home, not under fire or in danger, and actually seeing Andi's face in person ... He thought of her ring and felt the scowl return to his face. Her face, which was probably at that moment smiling at another man, kissing another man ... he felt the muscles in his jaw and biceps jerk as he put his head in his hands.

He heard Sarge panting as he approached. Max looked up and grinned at the dog who was trying to bounce around on his stiff back feet, asking Max to play. He chuckled, looking around him. He found a stick in the grass next to the porch and

showed it to Sarge before tossing it toward the back fence. Sarge watched it go and then took off after it.

“It’s good that you still have another leg,” Jackson’s words came back to him. *“It would have been worse if you’d lost both.”* He smiled in spite of himself as he took the stick from Sarge and threw it again. *If Sarge can come back from losing someone he loved on top of losing physical pieces of himself, he thought, so can I.*

Hope was big enough for both him and Andi Morgan. And maybe, they could still be friends.

Andi

“You’re sure you won’t come with us?” Andi’s mom asked, looking down at her, sprawled on the couch. Bert raised his head from the carpet beside her and woofed at her mom.

“Nah. I’m good.” She reached out to scratch Bert behind the ears as she stifled a yawn. She’d been trying to take a nap for the last hour, not wanting to pass out later on Tessa’s couch, but her head was too full of everything that had happened that day.

Her mom grumbled as she scratched her neck under her horrible, scraggly Santa beard she wore. Andi grinned up at her. “Enjoying your last few moments of freedom?”

Her mom nearly went cross-eyed as she glared down at the beard. “Yeah. If I didn’t love your father as much as I do, I’d send him to this ridiculous circus by himself.” Andi bit down on her lip to keep from laughing. Her mom said the same thing every year. “And they force us to wear these ... let’s just call them what they are ... face merkins, all night ...”

Andi bit down harder, doing her best to hold it in and not interrupt her mom’s rant. When her mom got going, it was like

watching something inside a microwave bubble over. It was fascinating, horrifying, and always a little guilt-inducing because she'd rather watch it happening than open the door and try to get it to stop.

“And the punishment for taking the damn thing off?” her mom continued, pulling the beard away from her neck to scratch ruthlessly at the skin underneath, “Sober Santa-ing behind the bar next year. Meaning you have a whole year to look forward to wearing the same costume at the same event the next year, but not being able to drink while doing it. Torture!”

Andi chuckled. “Dad and I tried to tell you that those Jingle Jell-O Shots were a bad idea.”

She rolled her eyes, but she slowed down in her scratching when her gaze met Andi's. She saw her mom's gaze soften and Andi looked away. Here comes the pity and the mothering. “Are you sure you're going to be alright, love?”

Andi nodded. “Yeah. I'm fine. Just bushed. Amelia and I are just going to kick back and watch Hallmark movies and talk about world peace.”

Her mom rolled her eyes. “Right. Well, whatever you two are actually planning on doing, remember that all the doctors, electricians, locksmiths, and plumbers are going to be with your dad and me at the Ball. So ... plan accordingly.”

“Plumbers?” Andi asked.

Her mom shrugged. “Just covering all the bases I can think of. But I raised you two so I know that anything is possible. And now I’m actually afraid that I’m giving you ideas.”

“Ready to go?” Her dad strolled through the doorway, padded out in his soft Santa suit and huge beard. The three women in his life had often pondered, quietly, and out of earshot, whether his overly abundant Santa beard was compensation for his own stubborn, patchy facial hair. Her dad frowned at her. “Wait. Andi, where’s your suit?”

“She and Amelia are staying home for some much-needed sister time,” her mom said, hooking her arm through her dad’s and turning him toward the door. “And she’s beat. And she has to work tomorrow.”

“Oh, ok. Well, get some rest, Pumpkin. And don’t let Amelia eat all the chunks out of my rocky road ice cream,” her dad called behind him as her mom steered him through the front door.

Her mom paused long enough to poke her head back into the living room and mouth at Andi, “You owe me.”

Andi gave her a thumbs up and closed her eyes, listening to her parents argue about whether or not they were going to be late as they headed down the front walk.

It was the first year in the last eight that Andi hadn’t gone to the Santa Ball and Crawl. During college, then vet school, even though she was doubling up on classes and taking classes every summer so she could graduate sooner, she always made

it home to the island for Christmas Eve, just so she could attend.

But tonight, the thought of standing around in town hall, hearing everyone laughing and having fun around her sounded like torture. Especially because she knew she'd spend the night remembering going to the Ball last year ... with Brandon. She'd tagged along after him as they went from the Mrs. Claus' Powder Room event to dance in the main room, then to the bar, to Miss Mandie's Tipple Table and back. His eyes had been so bright. He'd been like a little kid in a toy store. She smiled at the memory, but when she opened her eyes, she remembered that was all it was.

The sound of Amelia whistling "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer" filled the living room and she heard Bert panting as he got to his feet and went to find her. When the song got louder, Andi cracked an eye open to look at her sister as she strolled over to the couch. "What the elf?"

Amelia was dressed in an elf costume complete with fake ears, dime-sized freckles drawn on her cheeks and nose, and a pointed green and red-striped hat. "Mom and Dad are gone, right?" she asked, freezing to listen.

Andi chuckled. "Yeah, they took off a couple minutes ago. The real question is what you're up to?" She opened her other eye and blinked at her sister. "Hmmm ... Santa's elves usually have names descriptive of their personality so, I'm going with ... Felony? Oh look, it already has the 'ee' sound at the end. You'll fit right in with your pals, Naughty, Caughty, and One-

Phone Call-y. And if I'm going to have to make a bail trip to the station tonight, I'll need to know the location of your allowance savings."

Amelia snorted. "You wish. And we're not going to get caught. The entire police department will be at the Ball. But, just for giggles, what did you tell Mom and Dad that you and I were doing tonight?"

"Sisterly bonding time," Andi said with a shrug. "If and when you get arrested and I come bail you out I think that'll count, so we'll technically have been telling them the truth. Just for giggles and so I'm briefed on what I'm supposed to deny knowing about later, what *are* you and the other candy-cane swinging miscreants up to tonight?"

She sighed. "We let Melody outline tonight's activities, so we're dressing as Santa's elves who are revolting because they were not invited to the party. Mostly because we're all underage, but we thought it would be fun to turn it into *Elves Gone Wild*."

"So ... streaking and mooning? Pressed Christmas hams on the windows of Town Hall?" Andi asked, groaning as she sat up on the couch. She was pretty sure she'd pulled at least one muscle while she was frantically trying to peel Mr. Giggles off her head.

Amelia rolled her eyes. "We're not idiots. No, we're going to T.P. the school and cram peanut butter in Hans' horn."

Andi nodded. "Admirable goals. Speaking from firsthand experience, make sure you use creamy peanut butter rather

than crunchy. Crunchy is too easy to clean out. Creamy is forever. Well, at least 'for-longer'. And make sure you guys buy the nice four-ply toilet paper. The rain and the high salt content in the air will make the cheap stuff deteriorate as fast as you can toss it up there."

"I feel like I should be taking notes," Amelia said, grinning at her. "It still always baffles me that my straight-laced, perfect cheerleader captain sister was the merry prankster in high school."

"I don't know what you're talking about. But as just a general piece of knowledge, it's always the ones you least expect," Andi said, getting to her feet. "And if you try to subpoena me to say any of this information under oath, I'll deny it."

"Do you wanna come along? I've got a spare elf costume upstairs. The matching shoe covers on it were too small to fit over my sneakers, but they'd probably fit your dinky feet. Turk and Jake Whorley are bringing booze ..."

Andi patted her on the shoulder. "Nah. You and the other elves enjoy your reindeer games. I've got a date."

Amelia's eyebrows disappeared into her shaggy hair. "What?! With Max?"

Andi froze. "Why would you think . . .?"

Amelia scratched the back of her neck. "I don't know. It's just ... he's back in town, you're back in town. And everyone remembers how inseparable you two were ..."

She blinked at her sister. “Brandon ...”

Amelia sighed. “I know. And it sucks. I really liked Brandon. And I know it sucks more for you ...” She looked like she wanted to say more, but instead, she straightened up and tuned her face to “Bedlam Bedelia”. It was the expression that from the age of six, had been getting Andi in trouble, right along with her. Sure, Andy was “Andarchy” to Max, but Max was also the one who over the years, had taught Andi to be covert. But, it seemed, the difference between overt and covert was taught on a day of mischief school that Amelia had skipped. When it was Andi’s idea with Max’s careful planning, they were never suspected. But when Amelia took the wheel, it always ended in phone calls to their parents, detention, and more often than not, long-term grounding. And the age difference between them always meant that Andi got in the most trouble when “Bedlam Bedelia” was on the loose. Something about being her sister’s zookeeper. “Well, if you’re not going on a date with Max, who are you seeing tonight?” Amelia was physically leaning forward in anticipation of her answer.

Andi chuckled. “Calm down there, Felony. I’m going over to Tessa’s to drink eggnog and watch bad movies.”

Amelia looked deflated. She shook her head slowly, giving Andi an expression full of false pity. “Poor Old Lady Andi. Not even thirty and already spending celebratory nights in housecoats, slippers, and hair curlers, watching bad movies and knocking back booze until you can pass out and forget memories of being young and getting into trouble.”

Andi gestured at herself. “Not wearing a housecoat, curlers, or slippers.”

“You are, mentally. Already thinking about Roth IRAs and taking up bingo?”

She shrugged. “Always good to think about IRAs and who doesn’t like bingo?”

“You are hopeless,” Amelia sighed. “Well, have fun on your ‘date’. Make sure you save your Metamucil shot to take at the end of the night. Otherwise, the excitement might kill you.”

“Make sure you get four-ply TP and creamy PB,” Andi muttered, throwing a couch cushion at her. Amelia dodged it, snapped her salute, and took off.

Five minutes later, Andi was across the street, balancing the box of Bumble’s Christmas cookies in one hand while trying to ring Tessa’s doorbell with the other while the bag of rum and eggnog ingredients hung from her wrist. She waited for a moment, listening as Tessa’s soft footsteps approached the door, and then paused. Andi waved at the peephole and a moment later she heard the tumble of at least two deadbolts before the knob turned. *I guess when you live alone, you can never be too careful*, she thought. It was probably overkill for Hope though. Nothing ever happened on the island.

“Christmas Eve delivery,” Andi said, shaking the box and bag.

Tessa blew a piece of hair out of her face and reached for the cookies. “I know this is sudden, but will you marry me?”

Thankfully, her full attention was on the colorful and intricately decorated cookies, so she missed the way the comment had knocked the air out of Andi.

She did her best to recover quickly. “You should reserve your offer until after you’ve tried the eggnog. I brought the recipe with me because I have a feeling that I may screw this up without it. It lists a cup of rum for every serving. Or at least that’s how it looks in Abby’s notes. I wanted a second opinion on her handwriting before I gave us both alcohol poisoning.”

It was the first time she’d been inside Tessa’s house. It was laid out exactly like her parents’ house, with the entryway bleeding into the living room, the kitchen through a swinging door to the left and the front set of stairs to the second level off to the right. Unlike her parents’ house, the walls were bare and the only furniture she could see was an IKEA media center with her TV, a couch, and a café-style dining table with two chairs.

She followed Tessa into the kitchen and looked around. It didn’t have any furniture in it beyond the installed island and equipment. It did have the same dated cabinets and feel, though Tessa’s wallpaper was patterned with tiny white daisies.

“No chicken wallpaper,” Andi said, grinning at her. She looked around the room. “Did you just move in?” She was joking of course, but it seemed odd that the house was so Spartan.

Tessa glanced around the kitchen quickly and then shrugged, turning her attention back to the box of cookies. “I don’t like a lot of stuff and clutter.”

Andi shook her head slowly. “Then, on behalf of your packrat neighbors across the street, let me apologize in advance for any symptoms of shock and horror you may feel when you step foot in our house.”

Tessa chuckled. “It never bothers me when other people have a lot of stuff. Just ... I’m not so big on it.”

It took them three false starts before they managed to make an eggnog that didn’t smell like pure gasoline or make them go blind, but still packed the punch they were looking for.

“Alright,” Tessa said, pausing to burp. “Let the bad Christmas horror binge begin!”

They were halfway into *The Elf that Sleigh-ed Christmas* and doing a fairly decent job of keeping up a running commentary about the lead elf’s skin-tight, yellow spandex, banana-smuggling tights, when Tessa cleared her throat. Andi looked over to see her picking at the cookie in her hand.

“So, not that I’m hooked into the rumor mill,” Tessa said slowly, “but I heard that ... your high school boyfriend moved back to town?”

Andi felt a heavy weight settling in her gut that had nothing to do with the eggnog. “Yeah.” She was hoping that Tessa would take the hint and just move on from the topic.

“There’s something special about high school boyfriends,” she said quietly. Andi blinked at her, already starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. “It’s like finding a mix CD in your car that you’ve forgotten you ever had.”

Andi chuckled. “Ok, I think I know what you mean, but I’m going to need at least the Sparknotes on that premise to follow along.”

Tessa smiled, but didn’t meet Andi’s gaze. “I just mean, when you’re around them, even after years apart ... it’s so easy to travel back to that time. To remember what you had in common, old jokes, old stories, old ... habits.” Andi studied her face, but Tessa just glanced up and grinned at the screen. “Watch this. You’ve got to see the spectacularly crappy special effects when Elford takes a blowtorch to the toy factory.”

Andi was interested in Tessa’s past, but she was suddenly very worried that that discussion would come with a price tag. Andi’s past in exchange for Tessa’s. But to her relief, there was just too much bad acting and too many low-budget special effects happening on the screen to divert their attention again. Between movies, Andi decided to try striking up a deeper conversation with Tessa, but she had a feeling her approach might be less than tactful in her inebriated state.

“So, you don’t know anyone who might be interested in adopting a shelter pet, do you?”

Tessa paused as she thumbed through movies on the TV. She gave Andi an understanding smile. “I heard about the January deadline. I’d totally adopt at least one, but Sage,” she

nodded at the cat who was curled up between them on the couch, “is kind of a brat and she wouldn’t be nice to them. I’m asking everyone I come across though.”

Andi smiled. “I really appreciate it.”

Tessa frowned in thought. “I know you’re doing fliers already, but maybe something like a calendar? Or social media ads with their pictures?”

Andi nodded. “Dirk Patterson volunteered to take ‘professional’ pictures of all of them.”

“Professional, huh?” Tessa raised an eyebrow at her. She’d been in Hope long enough to meet and understand the Dirk-ology of the island.

“As professional as Hope gets,” Andi said. “And I’m not going to look a gift-Dirk in the mouth when the deadline is so close.” Another piece of her conversation with Annabelle came swimming through the rum fog in her brain and she groaned.

“What? What is it?”

“I almost forgot. Martha Washington wants to do a pet fashion show.”

Tessa shrugged. “That sounds like fun.”

Andi gave her some serious side-eye. “Really?”

Tessa grinned. “Yeah. Why not? It’s a good time of year for it. New beginnings and all that. And people are feeling happy.”

Andi blinked at her. “Miss Mandie said almost the same thing.”

“Must be true then, right?” Tessa asked through a mouthful of cookie. “And I’ll help.”

“Really?”

Tessa nodded. “Sure. I love dressing pets up.” She looked down at Sage. “If Miss Priss here didn’t protest it so much, she’d wear a new Halloween and Christmas costume every year.”

“Thanks, Tessa. I really wasn’t looking forward to being one-on-one with Martha Washington *as well as* all the annoyed shelter pets dressed as god-knows-what. But you’re right, maybe it’ll help get them adopted.”

“Especially when they see that the pets will tolerate wearing costumes,” Tessa chuckled. “Though, it does feel a little weird. Like they’re being dressed up and trotted out, grinning and bearing it because they need a new home.”

Andi nodded. “Yeah. I would have told Martha no. But, ‘needs must’. And really, I think they’ll enjoy most of it. All the pups and most of the cats like meeting new people.” She tried not to think of what Mr. Giggles would do to everyone if he was involved in the fashion circus. Sitting with Tessa and thinking about the pictures and the fashion show and the fact that there was still almost a week left in December made Andi relaxed enough to close her eyes. “Three pets were adopted today.” She tried to limit her thoughts to just that fact.

“That’s excellent,” Tessa said. “Must be the pre-Christmas thing. See? It’s already working. Which ones?”

Andi told her, doing her best to quickly skate over Max adopting Sarge and instead ending with Hank adopting Ginger.

“That’s a huge relief. I mean, by adopting Ginger, that’s like him adopting multiple dogs. Less for you to have to find homes for before February.” Tessa sighed and ran a finger over Sage’s head. “I remember when she was a kitten. She got into everything. I wish I would have also adopted one of her littermates. I always worry that she’s lonely. And I should have socialized her better. But there was never anywhere close by to take your cat for a playdate with other cats. Maybe then she wouldn’t be such a loner.”

Andi had often wished the same thing when Brandon had gotten Bert. Having a brother or a sister with him would have probably helped with his anxiety as a puppy. He was already a rescue and it had taken weeks before Bert felt comfortable around Brandon and Andi.

She straightened up on the couch as another part of her conversation with Hank resurfaced in her brain. “Oh, did you hear about the new pet park they’re building?” Andi asked. “Hank apparently drew the short straw and has to build all the wacky equipment. He mentioned that some of the projects already proposed are a giant cat tree and a Ferris wheel for pets.”

“Oh my god,” Tessa muttered, turning to Andi. “That sounds like a nightmare. For him and whoever has to insure

the park.” They sat in silence again as the new movie, *The Stocking Strangler* started. Ten minutes in, Andi glanced over at Tessa to see her chewing her bottom lip.

“What’s up?”

Tessa turned to look at her. “You know what else you should do? And I’ll help.”

“What?”

“You should have an open house party at the shelter in January. It’ll help get the rest of the pets adopted. It’s hard to say no to a pet when you’re playing with them all night and you see their life at a shelter.” Tessa sat up quickly. “Not that you all don’t try to pamper them. I didn’t mean ...”

Andi held up her hand. “No offense taken. I know shelter life isn’t as good as home life.”

Tessa nodded and smiled down at Sage, who was on her back, paws curled to her chest, smiling and purring with her eyes closed. “It’s hard to top that feeling of belonging, with just you and your best friend, side by side on a couch, or out doing something you love. And knowing that you have that for the rest of your life.” Andi couldn’t argue with that.

They were on their third crappy Christmas horror movie when Sage rolled to her feet and leaped down from the couch to stretch.

“She seems a lot calmer,” Andi said, looking down at the cat who was quickly turning into a cat loaf on the carpet with her paws tucked under her.

Tessa nodded. “Thanks to you. I ...” Tessa paused. A vibratory buzzing filled the air. Andi reached for the remote and paused the movie. They both turned to look at her little café table where Tessa’s phone was plugged in. Andi saw Tessa frown for a moment, staring at it.

“Do you want to answer it?” Andi asked.

Tessa was still frowning when she got to her feet and went to pick it up. “Hello?” She was silent for a moment and then pulled the phone away from her face and tapped the screen. She tossed the phone back onto the table, but she didn’t turn back to look at Andi for several seconds.

“Everything ok?” Andi asked, setting down the remote.

Tessa nodded, still not turning to look at her. Andi saw her drag her hands down her face before she turned around. Her face was pale, but when she met Andi’s gaze, her expression was pure annoyance. “Damn telemarketers.”

“On Christmas Eve, no less,” Andi said, harrumphing in annoyance. “There’s a special ring in hell, just for them.”

Tessa nodded. “Yeah. A ring where an invisible speaker, playing that “I Like to Move It, Move It” song, goes off in your ear every time you’re about to fall asleep. And Paul Hollywood watches and then commentates on everything you do.”

Andi shivered. “You’ve had a lot of time to think about this.”

“Oh, I’m just getting started,” she muttered, glaring at her phone.

“Remind me to never piss you off,” Andi chuckled. She saw Tessa glance at the phone from time to time as the last movie wound down and even through her eggnog-fog, she had a feeling that Tessa was distracted. But maybe she was thinking about more than the robot phone call trying to ruin her Christmas Eve.

“Well,” Andi said when the credits mercifully started to roll. “I don’t know about you, but I think I’m going to quit while I’m ahead ... or while I still have a head ... can’t remember which it is right now. And that chainsaw-wielding snowman, putting all those severed human heads on snowman bodies didn’t help clear things up either. Regardless, I think I’m ready to call it a night.” Andi’s face felt heavy and her mouth was having a hard time forming words.

“Me too,” Tessa said, getting to her feet. “I can hardly wait to see what kind of screwy dreams my subconscious summons with all the input from tonight.” She didn’t sound as affected as Andi did by the alcohol. *Lucky girl*, Andi thought. With a parting chin scratch for Sage and a hug for Tessa, she headed for the door.

“This was fun,” Andi said, turning to look at her. “We should do this again.”

Tessa’s smile was a thousand watts. “That would be great. I don’t ... I haven’t made a lot of friends out here yet.”

“Well you’ve got one right here,” she said, pointing at herself and narrowly missing sticking her finger in her eye. “And conveniently located, just across the street.” Realization floated down around Andi and when she noticed it, she asked, “Wait, what are you doing for Christmas Day tomorrow?”

“At this rate,” Tessa muttered, looking down at the cup in her hand. “Probably puking and sleeping. Hopefully in that order.”

Andi chuckled. “Well, that’s a given. But, after that? Are you alone all day?”

She shrugged. “I’m not really big on Christmas anyway. I’ve still got a few bad movies to watch. Sage and I have the classiest frozen pizzas I could find at Bumble’s, and at this rate, Christmas Day is going to be more like ‘late Christmas afternoon and an early evening’ as penance for this nog-a-thon.”

“Well, if you get lonely, just wave to us from your window and I’ll come over with enough food to feed a small rave.”

“Really?”

“Eh, maybe a medium rave. My mom found a dozen new recipes she wants to try and at the Morgan house, screwing up and embarrassing ourselves in the kitchen is a team sport.”

She chuckled. “I meant ... I can just wave and you’ll see me?”

Andi nodded. “Yeah. And if waving doesn’t get our attention, you can always try a pressed ham on the glass ...

My mom grew up with five brothers. Mooning is like the bat signal in her family.”

Tessa chuckled. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. But thanks for the offer. And Andi, thanks for tonight.”

With a final “Merry Christmas” and goodnight, Andi was back on Tessa’s porch, trying to negotiate her way down the stairs. Behind her, she heard the multiple deadbolts and the doorknob clicking as they were locked. She waited to look back until she was on her own porch. Tessa and Sage were in the window and Andi saw Tessa wave to her before the light in her entryway was turned off.

That was nice of her, Andi thought, pushing her front door open. *She was watching to make sure I made it home ok.*

Tessa had smiled when she’d waved, but there was something about her expression that bothered Andi. *Maybe you’re not the only one who has mixed feelings about Christmas.* Maybe Tessa had something terrible in her past Christmases too. Andi made a mental note to make sure and look out their front windows as often as she could the next day, just in case Tessa needed something.

As she was stumbling up the stairs to bed, Andi caught her toe on the threadbare runner carpet and went down.

“Uh-oh, Santa. Did you have too many of Miss Mandie’s ‘Chimney Sweeps’?” For a moment, she could hear Brandon’s voice teasing her and she waited to feel his hands under her arms, helping her back to her feet. After the Ball and Crawl the year before, they’d left early to have their own private

party. She closed her eyes, trying to choke down the wave of nausea remembering the taste of the Everclear-based, black licorice-flavored drinks. This was followed by a wave of anguish, rising in her throat.

They'd made love that night. It had been slow and the whole time, she knew, even in her foggy state, that they were making a memory. She'd fallen asleep euphoric, remembering Brandon whispering, "*I love you*" into her hair as she dropped off to sleep. Then the next morning, he'd asked her to marry him. She squeezed her eyes shut as the dam inside her broke and she started choking on her sobs. There wouldn't be any hands helping her back to her feet tonight. There was no Brandon waiting for her in her room, no life back in Seattle that the two of them would get to build together. It was all a dead end.

Her dead end.

Andi

Andi was awake, but she kept her eyes closed. Hell was lurking just on the other side of consciousness and if she opened her eyes, she was sure it would throw open the gates and invite the hangover demons in. She could hear the scrape of chairs and groans downstairs and in her half-asleep state, she automatically rolled onto her left side.

“It sounds like we weren’t the sole survivors of the Ball and Crawl,” she mumbled into her pillow. She waited for a muffled response, a groan, or even just the sound of a grunting snore. Something he always did when he’d had too much to drink. But instead, there was only silence. She reached out her right hand, frowning as she felt around for him. The pillow and the blankets next to her were cold. She cracked an eye open and stared at the empty space. No Brandon. And then she realized that the Ball and Crawl she’d been mentally reliving now only existed in her dreams and memories.

With all her energy, she sat up and put her head between her knees. The only thing that *hadn’t* changed about this Christmas morning was the pounding headache and dizziness that always

accompanied her hangovers. At the moment though, she was thankful for the headache and nausea. Now, she just needed to untwist the screwed-up sense of time in her head.

She hadn't gone to the Ball and Crawl last night. Instead, she'd spent it across the street with Tessa and Sage, watching movies and drinking too much ...

Her stomach lurched. Ok. No need to say the "egg" word. Or think it ... She got to her feet and stumbled down the stairs to the kitchen, focusing on the pain in her head and her resolve to not puke on the stairs and reenact the stair scene from *Death Becomes Her*.

When she reached the kitchen, she started feeling marginally better. There was a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch on the kitchen table with a bowl and spoon at each place setting. It was the only morning out of the year when cereal was the approved breakfast menu and not just one of the family members going rogue. She tried to get her mouth working well enough to say, "good morning", but all she could muster was a grunt. Her mom, dad, and Amelia all grunted in answer. She fell into the only empty chair and looked down at her snowflake-printed placemat. Her mom always pulled out placemats for the holidays. They had ones decorated with a Rockettes-style kick line of turkeys for Thanksgiving, snowflakes for Christmas, and reversible ones for Valentine's Day that on one side were hearts and cupids and the other side were skulls and grim reapers, depending on what your mood about the holiday happened to be year to year. Her mom said they were supposed to be for Halloween *and* Valentine's, but

she'd bought another set with jack-o-lanterns for Halloween, so their Valentine's options stayed open.

She looked around the table and like her own place setting, everyone had a bowl, a spoon, a glass of water, a mug of what smelled like peppermint tea, and two 500mg gel caps of Ibuprofen.

“Aw yes, the Morgan family traditional Christmas breakfast,” Andi mumbled as she leaned on the table, supporting her head with both hands. Another grunt from the rest of the family. Her mom was still wearing her Santa hat from the night before, pulled down over her ears. Judging by her smeared lipstick and mascara, Andi was willing to bet she'd passed out rather than “gone to sleep”. The PJs she was wearing were misbuttoned, and she was only wearing one slipper under the table. Her dad, on the other hand, was wearing his bathrobe with his Santa beard around his neck, poking out of the flannel like he was part yeti from the neck down. Across from Andi, Amelia was struggling to hold her head up and was currently leaning to one side, mouth open, trying to shovel cereal inside. Andi studied Amelia's face. She was pale under her smeared, drawn-on freckles and her eyes were bloodshot. It looked like the Whorleys had been successful in scoring the booze for the elf riot the night before. Andi started with the water and Ibuprofen, progressed to the tea, and finally her cereal. By the time her bowl was empty, she was starting to feel like a person again. *A person who is not going to cry today and ruin Christmas for everyone else*, she reminded herself.

“Merry Christmas,” she finally managed to croak.

“Shhhh,” her mom said softly, putting a hand to her forehead.

“Merry Christmas, Andi,” her dad mumbled, scratching his chest where his Santa beard lay.

“I like the low-key festive look you’ve got there, Dad,” Andi said, nodding at his chest.

Her dad glanced down at himself and groaned. “I didn’t realize ... damn. I thought my chest hair was just finally growing in to be less ... patchy.” Andi, Amelia, and their mom caught each other’s eyes and then quickly returned their attention to their bowls, while their dad swore and muttered as he tried to get the elastic band of his beard over his head. The rest of breakfast passed in silence and as soon as they all seemed certain they could move from the kitchen table to the living room without their throbbing heads falling off their shoulders, they moved into Christmas morning mode.

Andi was actually smiling, until her phone dinged.

M: I miss him so much today.

A: Me too, Michelle. Want me to call?

Andi stared at her phone, waiting for a response, but when she got it, it was just;

M: Merry Christmas.

A: Merry Christmas, Michelle. If you need anything, or you want to talk, I’m right here.

Michelle didn't text back, so with a deep breath, Andi tucked her phone into the pocket of her hoodie and went back to the Morgan Christmas Day festivities.

While Amelia and her dad bickered over who would be the first to try out the new toy drone Andi had gotten him for Christmas, Andi moved over to the window overlooking the street. Everyone's Christmas lights were still on despite the pale winter sunlight and she could see a warm glow behind every house's sheer curtains all around the cul-de-sac. All except one. Across the street, Tessa's house was dark. The shades were still drawn and though Tessa's own modest string of blue-white Christmas lights were on, they didn't do a lot to convince Andi that everything was alright with the woman. First Sage's anxiety, then that phone call ... even in her partially inebriated state Andi hadn't really believed that it was just a robot call. Tessa had acted too ... on edge, for it to just be a telemarketer. But she hadn't wanted to talk about it, at least not with Andi. Instead, they'd talked about yellow spandex, pet fashion shows, and high school sweethearts. There had been something in Tessa's tone on the last topic that made Andi think maybe she wasn't the only one who knew about loss. Had something about that phone call triggered a memory for her? Maybe the same way stumbling to bed drunk the night before had reminded Andi of ... *No. U-Turn and accelerate. It's Christmas. Don't ruin this for everyone else.*

"Alright you two," Andi said, marching back into the living room. "Mom gets to try out the drone first."

Her mom's groan was muffled. She had laid down on the couch and put a throw pillow over her face as soon as Amelia and her dad started fighting. Now she moved the pillow aside to squint up at Andi. "Don't drag me into this. Let us all remember the Roomba crash of 2018." Amelia and her dad groaned. Her mom glared at them. "See? Is that what you want? No? Well then play nice." And with that, she put the pillow back over her face.

The day rolled by with a comfortable ache that Andi was able to navigate with hugs, her head on her dad's shoulder, and plenty of teasing Amelia when it was time for her to open her Christmas present from their Aunt Amelia, her namesake.

"Every year, you get something sane, like a purse," Amelia muttered, unwrapping the huge box and shooting a glare at Andi.

"What? Last year you got a coat from her. That's sane."

"It had ears, a tail, and ... chest fur."

"It was cute," their mom said, trying to hide her smile. "You looked like the animated Robin Hood."

"I was seventeen. I felt like I'd been ... upholstered."

Amelia kept up a low muttering growl as she opened the box and stared in at the contents.

"Well? What is it?" Andi asked.

Wordlessly, Amelia lifted out a ball of cream-colored fabric.

“Is ... is that a dress?” Their mom leaned forward to squint at it. Amelia shook it out and Andi felt her jaw drop.

“It’s a suit. A ... business suit,” she said, blinking at Amelia.

“For all those college first impressions and job interviews you have coming up. Smile, wear this, and remember the sassy girl you are and who you are named for,” Amelia read off the note. She dropped the note and held the fabric up to the light. Slowly, Andi saw a smile form on Amelia’s face.

“What? What is it?”

“Ok. Aunt Amelia did good. Check out the print.” She tossed the jacket to Andi and the skirt to their dad. Andi held it up to the light. In a faint, slightly lighter cream, she could just make out the intricate thread forming the outlines of pigs ... with wings.

“If there was ever any question about where Amelia gets it,” their dad chuckled, tossing the skirt back to Amelia, “that question has now been definitively answered.”

“What did she send you, Andi?” Amelia asked, pulling on the jacket.

Andi tugged the bow off the box in her lap and dug her fingers under the edges of the lid. When she finally had the lid off, she just stared in at the contents, not quite understanding what she was looking at. It was a shoe box. Inside, there was a pair of new running shoes. At least, they smelled new. But their smooth black surface had been interrupted by silver

Sharpie. “Just keep going.” “One foot in front of the other.” “Eventually you will be somewhere good again.” “When you’re going through hell, keep going.” Andi’s eyes blurred over.

“Your aunt knew how much you loved to run when you were in high school. She thought ... you might need a new pair.” Her mom’s voice was soft, hesitant. Andi squeezed her eyes shut and a moment later, she felt the couch dip on either side of her. Then she was surrounded from both sides by her parents’ arms and Amelia was sitting on the floor in front of the couch, hugging her legs.

When she could finally speak, she whispered, “They’re ... perfect.” She felt the box slip off her knees. She jerked a hand out to catch it and felt her fingers close over Amelia’s hand which had shot out to steady the box. Andi opened her eyes and met her sister’s gaze.

“What is it you runners say?” Amelia asked, placing her other hand over Andi’s. “Don’t look back unless it’s a good view?”

“That’s Tupac,” their dad said, shaking his head.

Amelia shrugged. “It’s still a good saying.” And just like that, the tense, emotional moment broke, turning into Amelia and their dad arguing about other inspirational quotes and whether Colonel Sanders or Rip Taylor were the masterminds behind them. Andi kept a watchful eye out the front windows in case she saw Tessa wave, but she never even saw the

woman pass by one of her windows. She was worried until she remembered Tessa's plans for sleeping and puking.

The rest of the day went by in the same lazy, recovering hangover fashion that most Christmases since Andi turned twenty-one had gone. They watched Christmas movies and pretended to bake cookies. In reality, they actually squeezed them from a tube and only got half on the tray before they realized the logjam in their assembly line was Andi and Amelia, who were eating the raw dough.

"You're going to get worms," their mom snapped.

"I have dewormer at work," Andi said around a mouthful of chocolate chip cookie dough.

"Oh good, we're safe then," her dad muttered, fighting Amelia for the last glob of dough.

The lazy afternoon turned into evening and after dinner, Andi gathered up her presents and carted them upstairs to her room. She set the box with the running shoes on her bed and stared down at them. In high school, she'd been a cheerleader in the fall, but a runner in the spring, right alongside Max.

She wasn't great at long distances. She was a sprinter. And she was fast, but she didn't have the endurance to go more than a couple of miles. But she'd always wanted to. She'd look at the cross-country runners just a few years behind her and wish that she had the endurance of Emma Stockton or the long legs and speed of Ella Danforth. But she didn't. That wasn't who she was. Still, there was something about going for a run that sounded good to her. And she needed to head to work

anyway. New shoes, especially new running shoes always made the day better when they were comfortable and supportive. She ran her finger over her aunt's square letters. When she shifted the shoe, she felt something roll to the heel.

Andi turned it over and the object dropped into the palm of her hand. "Breathe," she read off the band. It was a silicone bracelet, black with white letters spelling out the one-word command, "*Breathe.*" She felt herself automatically take a deep breath. Inside her, she felt the warring emotions and memories pause for a moment and the tight feeling in her chest start to loosen. *Thanks, Aunt Amelia,* she thought as she slid the bracelet on her wrist and pulled on socks. She laced up the new shoes and looked down at them when she stood up. Her jeans covered most of the top, but she could still read the toes sticking out. "You got this," was printed on the left toe, and "No Goats, No Glory" was printed on the right. Andi chuckled. Leave it to Aunt Amelia to immortalize on the toe of her brand new shoes, the most eye-rolling cheer the Hope Goats football cheerleaders had ever dreamed up.

"Why are you dressed for the outside world?" Amelia asked when Andi came back down the stairs.

"Gotta go to work, Bedelia," Andi said, grinning at her sister's glare.

"But it's Christmas."

Andi shrugged. "The Slurpee twins don't know that."

She headed out with the cookie tins full of homemade cat and dog treats under her arm and was almost instantly

barraged with “Merry Christmases!” from everyone she passed. And considering it was a holiday, there were a lot of people out and about. But that was the way of Hope. Like every other holiday, the town of just over three thousand people felt like holidays were meant to be shared. De-Floured was open and bustling and through the window, she could see the place was standing room only. Miss Mandie was behind the counter and Andi saw her pull her shades down and wink as Andi went by. She waved to and greeted the Melroses as they came out, hefting boxes of Kris Kringler Ring donuts and a growler full of Miss Mandie’s eggnog. She felt her stomach start to churn at the thought of eggnog. She’d have to thank Abby Locke for the recipe and then also tell her it should be a guarded secret because it could be weaponized if it fell into the wrong hands.

“We can’t thank you enough for Ginger!” Rita Melrose said, pulling Andi into a one-armed hug. “In the middle of the night, she figured out how to open the fridge and ate the entire breakfast casserole.”

“So she’s a true Melrose now,” Hank added.

Andi chuckled. “I should be thanking the two of you.”

“And the grandkids are so excited about having puppies. They’re all fawning over Ginger right now, arguing who’s made her the softest best out of our cushions, pillows, blankets, and towels,” Mrs. Melrose chuckled.

“We better get home before they suffocate her with love,” Hank said with a sigh. Andi waved goodbye to them and kept

walking, feeling lighter as she absorbed all the carols, Christmas cheer, and smells of wood fires, evergreen, salt air, and good food mingling in the street from open house doors and De-Floured.

When Andi walked in, Charlotte was filing her nails and singing “The Twelve Days of Christmas” to the cats who were having free play time in the Pet Plaza. She paused in the doorway just in time to see one of the Slurpee twins push the other off the second shelf of the kennels. He landed on Slomo who, if anything, just seemed to turn into more of a cat puddle.

“You’re early,” Charlotte said, craning her head back to look at the clock. “You weren’t due to be back here for another hour.”

Andi chuckled. “You’re the only person I know who’d complain about getting off early from a twenty-hour shift.”

Charlotte shrugged. “I don’t mind. I know we’re short-staffed at the moment. And we’re not open to the public today anyway. The couch is comfy, and I’ve got Netflix on my phone. Besides, if I do just two of these bad boys a week, the rest is me time.”

“Fair,” Andi said with a nod. “But ... I’m so sorry, I forgot to tell you that Cinnamon gave birth on that couch the night before last.”

Charlotte made a face. “I thought it smelled funny. I didn’t see any stains though.”

“Annabelle moved her onto a towel, but I didn’t think to warn you about it before I left. Sorry, I just forgot.”

“You were preoccupied,” Charlotte said with a grin and a wink. “After Sergeant Hottie stopped by.”

Andi decided her best course of action would be to just ignore her. She looked around. “How’s everyone doing?”

Charlotte shrugged. “Good. Cinnamon’s a good mama. Those kittens are all healthy and eating. Even the little one you were worried about. I think she’s going to be just fine. Everyone else is at their standard baseline.” There was a deep growl from the kennel on the top shelf and it started to vibrate as Andi got closer.

“Everyone’s been out to play except for Mr. Prince of Darkness up there,” Charlotte muttered, scooping up Slomo and pouring him back into his kennel. “I tried to get him to come out but he didn’t even want to stick his nose out and look around.”

“Lucky you,” Andi muttered. “If I’d tried that, either you or Annabelle would have come in to find me dead on the floor with a suicide note on my chest, written all in ‘cat paws’ and my face missing.”

“Yeah. Mr. Giggles sure likes you,” Charlotte said with a nod.

“Something like that,” she muttered. She waved goodbye to Charlotte with an exchange of “Merry Christmases” and started down the evening and night checklist, taking the dogs

out for play in the yard and checking on Pickles' stitches to see how they were healing. When the dogs came back in, she left their kennel doors open and started doling out the homemade treats. Then, she sat down in Shirley's chair to listen to the symphony of chewing. She watched as the homemade cat treat she'd poked under Mr. Giggles' door with a ruler, shot back out like a tuna-flavored missile.

She sighed. "Giggles, why are you so angry all the time?"

The phone rang, making Andi jump. She spun around in her chair to look at it. It was Christmas night. If someone was calling, it had to be an emergency. She snatched the phone off its receiver.

"Andi! I was hoping I'd get you. Your mom said you were working tonight."

Or, it would be Martha Washington.

"H-Hi Martha."

"I know you're probably busy looking after all those little furry cuddle bugs, with their whittle paws and belly scratches ..." It sounded like Martha was calling her from a bathtub filled with gin.

Before she could stop herself, Andi said. "It sounds like you've been having a very merry Christmas."

"Oh, I have ... I have. The girls just left. Charades and Lena Abbott's white Russians are good enough to almost forget that she conned us all into joining her new year's running group."

“Oh, that’s ... nice.” Andi was wracking her brain, trying to figure out why Martha would be calling on Christmas night, unless she was just randomly prank-calling people. Which, if that was the case, the woman had just risen in respect in Andi’s estimation. She and Max, well *S.I.* had been prank callers on the island’s old party line when they were in middle school.

“I’m calling about the pet fashion palooza!” Her wobbling coherency had turned almost accusatory now. “I talked with your ... Annabelle about it.”

Andi squeezed her eyes shut. Damn it. That’s why she was calling. “Oh, Martha. You don’t have to ...”

“I know I don’t. But I have the cutest ideas. Famous figures in history.”

Andi blinked at the countertop. “What?”

“Famous figures in history!” she said louder. “We dress them up as famous figures in history. They’ll be so damn adrob ... adorable, that people will have to adopt them.” Martha sniffed and Andi braced herself. “It’s just ... it’s so sad. You, losing your fiancé so young and now about to lose all the pets at the shelter if you don’t ...”

“Yeah, but hey, yesterday three of them got adopted!”

Martha cried harder. “But you still have so many ...”

“It’ll be ok,” Andi said, turning at the sound of metal banging off metal. She turned to see Tookie banging around the room, her head stuck in the small metal garbage can they

kept by the door. “We’ll ... get them all adopted.” Tookie started dragging the can across the fronts of all the kennels, eliciting hisses and annoyed mewling from the cats. Mr. Giggles started firing off dry cat food warning shots which pinged off the metal can, making Tookie howl in fright, unable to see where the enemy was firing from. Andi could only imagine how loud it was inside the can. “Took, come here,” she tried to coax the dog to meet her halfway. The phone cord was only so long. “Martha, I need to go. I’ve got a situation here.”

“Oh, well I just wanted to call to tell you I can come over tomorrow to measure all the animals for their costumes.”

“Oh,” a thought occurred to her. “Come after six,” Andi said quickly. “We’re ... cleaning kennels all day tomorrow before then ...”

“Oh! Ok. I’ll see you after six then!”

With a sigh of relief, Andi hung up. She chased Tookie around the room until she could get her cornered and calmed down enough to stop scaring herself with the loud echo of her whines from inside the trash can. Andi was smiling an evil, calculating smile by the time she got Tookie’s head out of the can. Yes. Let *Annabelle* deal with Martha tomorrow. She started this, after all. She stopped just short of doing a Bond-villain-laugh, but she did catch herself petting Tookie like she was a fluffy white evil cat. She paused and looked at Tookie. “But we already have one of those, don’t we Took,” she

muttered, dragging her gaze up to look at Mr. Giggles' kennel. It was still again and the rain of cat food had ceased.

“Blew your whole wad, didn't you?” she muttered, getting to her feet and retrieving the broom.

Ten minutes later, the floor was clean and everyone was settling down for the night. Andi looked around the office and sighed. If this had been her practice in Seattle, she would have changed the layout. But this was Doc Simmons' practice and she was just a spare vet.

Her dream practice was gone. Just like her other life. Part of losing it had been her fault. After the accident, she didn't sleep at night. She'd started drinking to numb the shock and then the pain. She'd missed appointments and lost clients. She'd always been sober when she'd gone to work, but she was strung out and no matter how hard she tried to fight to keep her head above the water, she was sinking. That's when her dad had come to get her. Instead of a lecture, her dad had packed her up and brought her home, “just for a visit” he'd said.

But she'd ended the lease on the building where her practice was. She was twenty-six years old. Young for a vet. And now, what was it all for?

She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and put her face in her hands. A year ago, her future had laid itself out like a paved road for her to follow. But then came the runaway semi of that fucking boat accident. She'd lost Brandon, and with him, lost herself. She stared down at the floor and

through the gap between her fingers, she saw the silver Sharpie on her left toe.

“You got this.”

On your feet, Sam, she heard in Aragorn’s voice.

And then Andi was on her feet, moving across the room to reorganize the wound care drawer. Some combination of Viggo’s Aragorn and her Aunt lit a fire under her. After she finished with the drawers, she was finally going to reorganize the exam rooms. Then, if she still had time, she was going to deep clean that couch.



“Seriously, the exam table again?” Annabelle’s voice scared the crap out of Andi. She jerked up to a sitting position and fell off the table for a second time.

“Do you need some extra cash?” Andi grumbled, holding her head. “Cause you could really clean up as an air siren.”

“Are *you* looking for some? Maybe doing comfort reviews of stainless steel exam tables?”

Andi sighed and blinked at her watch. “I’ve only been asleep for twenty minutes. Deep breaths, Annabelle.” She squinted at the girl. “Why are you so cranky, anyway? Didn’t you have a good Christmas?”

“Oh, it was the best,” Annabelle said. “Until I came here, saw two cookie tins on the breakroom table, and in the dark,

picked up a handful of what was inside and stuffed it into my mouth ...”

“Oh,” Andi said. “Yeah ... those are dog and cat treats I made.”

“I know that *now*,” Annabelle muttered. She paused to slosh water around in her mouth and then spit into the sink.

“Couldn’t you smell them?” Andi asked, leading the way back to the Pet Plaza.

“Power of suggestion. You put them in those blue Danish butter cookie tins. The power of my imagination overrode the ... roadkill smells. I *really* wanted them to be butter cookies.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Andi said. “I can go get you some from Bumble’s.”

“No you can’t,” Annabelle said with a grin. Andi turned to frown at her.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s six o’clock and you have your support group meeting in an hour.”

“But that’s not until ...” And then she realized. Christmas had passed. And it was the 26th. She was on the other side of the mountain. Beyond the date of the wedding that didn’t happen, the honeymoon that never was, and her first Christmas without him. That road had dead-ended. But now, when she looked around her, searching for a new path to follow, there wasn’t one. Well ... there wasn’t *much* of one.

“Remember, you’re going, so you don’t have to get Mr. Giggles to pose for pictures or clean his kennel,” Annabelle said. In response to his name, Mr. Giggles’ kennel began to vibrate and hiss.

“Even trade,” Andi said, looking at the kennel.

“I don’t know about that,” Annabelle muttered darkly. “Even as embarrassing as a support group can be, I think you got a better deal than I did.”

Andi bit her lip and checked her watch. “You may be right there. Martha’s coming over any minute now to measure all the pets for their ... costumes ... for the fashion show ... She’s thinking of doing ‘famous historical figures’.”

Annabelle narrowed her eyes. “You’re sticking me with Mr. Giggles *and* Martha?”

“Sorry?” Andi said, shrugging at her. “But you started the pet fashion show thing with her. Seems only right that you should finish it.” She glanced up at Mr. Giggles’ kennel. “Oh ... and because we might lose our insurance if the whole thing turned into a hostage situation, I’d just skip Mr. Giggles for the pet fashion show. It’ll save everyone some skin and blood loss.”

Annabelle nodded. “Good call.” She started shooing Andi toward the back door. “Now go. Before you’re late. Every minute you’re not at that meeting is another Mr. Giggles turd I’m leaving in that litter box for you to deal with.”

Andi sighed.

“But Seriously, Andi,” Annabelle’s voice was softer as she followed Andi over to put on her jacket and bag. “I think this meeting might do you some good.” Andi turned to look at her. Annabelle grinned and put a dramatic hand to her chest. “And any time you think about sneaking out of it, just think of me, trying to convince Martha not to dress Bruce up as Britney Spears while Mr. Giggles plots a nuclear attack from the shadows of his lair.”

Andi shook her head. “Tookie is a way better pop star candidate than Bruce.”

“You know what I mean,” Annabelle muttered, shooing her toward the door.

“Fine. Point taken. I’m getting off easy.”

“And after your meeting, bring me back some Danish butter cookies. I need to get the cat treat taste out of my mouth.”

“I’m on it,” Andi said with a grin.

“*After* the meeting,” Annabelle called as Andi headed out the back door.

Max

The sound of his mom coughing, almost like she was choking, had Max hobbling for the stairs only pausing to give his prosthetic a passing thought as he started down them. Three steps down, he felt it shift out from under him. He grabbed wildly for the banister thinking, *If I fall, I won't be able to help her. Balance out.* He paused long enough to get his downward momentum under control and then hurried as fast as he dared down the rest of the stairs and into the kitchen.

“Mom?”

She was standing by the sink, drinking from the faucet. She paused, coughed again, and straightened up. “I tried that garbage Gray said he drinks for breakfast on the ship. That apple cider vinegar crap. Good for Gray, but there's no way in hell I'm doing that every day. I don't care how 'good' it's supposed to be for you.”

Max smiled. They FaceTimed Gray the day before on Christmas as soon as he was on a break between watch standings. It had been hard to see Gray in uniform, looking happy and full of duty and honor and enjoying his time at sea,

despite the eighteen-hour days the crew were on. It had been even harder to see the look of pity in Gray's eyes when he focused on Max and asked how he was. But, by far the hardest part of Christmas was the toast he and his mom had made to his dad. A part of him felt like he'd let his old man down. Max hadn't died in service to his country like he had. And now he never would. But, just as these thoughts had settled over him, he'd felt a nudge against his left leg. And automatically, he'd dropped his hand to pet Sarge's head and those thoughts had drifted away. The husky had made Christmas a little bit easier. He was still such a puppy at heart that he bounced around as best he could. He "talked" to them in that yowling vocalization that only huskies use and it had been something for both him and his mom to smile and laugh about. That had definitely helped.

"It's almost seven," his mom said, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Were you still planning on going to that meeting?" He didn't miss the hopeful look in her eyes.

He nodded. "Yeah. But I shouldn't be home too late. It'll probably just be an hour. I'll take Sarge for a walk when I get back."

"No rush," his mom said, pulling the vanilla ice cream out of the freezer. "Sarge and I are going to have some ice cream to wash the taste of that apple vinegar crap out of our mouths. Isn't that right, pup?" Sarge's tongue was hanging out as he trotted over to watch her scoop the ice cream into two bowls.

"You gave that vinegar to Sarge?"

She shook her head. “No, he’s just sympathetic to my plight. So, I’m rewarding him. You should have seen how he panicked when he thought I was choking. He almost knocked me down.”

Max chuckled. “Well, I’m glad he didn’t have to figure out how to do the Heimlich on you.” He nodded at the ice cream container. “Be careful about giving him too much of that. I don’t know what it’ll do to his stomach.” He didn’t miss the wink his mom gave the husky despite the firm look on Max’s face. He rolled his eyes at the pair of them. They’d had Sarge for less than two days and his mom was already spoiling him.

“Head on out. We’ll be just fine,” she said, shooing him toward the door, her ice cream scoop still in hand.

He headed out as he zipped his bomber jacket up and paused on their front porch steps. What was he doing? He was *voluntarily* going to a support group meeting. Why? Because of Andi Morgan.



ANDI

Andi started shaking the moment she walked into the high school. She took a second to be thankful that it was still Christmas break and there wouldn’t be students staring at them on their way out of detention. She paused in the doorway to the old cafeteria to take in the scene in front of her. The same long tables they’d sat at when she was a student had been

folded away along one wall. There was a circle of chairs in the center of the room, but no one was sitting in them. There were several groups of people standing at the edges of the room, and a snack table by the door. She got a can of ginger ale and scanned the room around her. Besides the groups, there was one person standing alone.

“Tessa!” Andi said, feeling relief wash over her. Tessa looked up at the sound of her name and met Andi’s smile with one of her own.

“Oh thank god,” she sighed when Andi joined her. “I was afraid I was the only person I knew who’d been blackmailed into this.”

“Mrs. Bumble got you too?”

“Cornered me in the cat food aisle,” Tessa said, shaking her head. “If Sage only knew the things I did because I love her.”

“Well, selfishly, I’m glad you’re here,” Andi said, scanning the room and trying not to feel let down when she didn’t see Max. In the far corner, she recognized Zane Lawrence, a guy who played football and graduated the year behind her class. There was Patrick Dorsett and his fiancée Carol Springfield, Terrance Biggs, Elena Fort, and half a dozen other folks that Andi hadn’t seen since she got home.

“Do you know everyone else that’s here?” Tessa asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Yeah,” Andi said. “Curse of a small town.”

“It’s worse if you’re not from the small town you live in,” Tessa muttered. Andi turned to look at her and Tessa sighed. “Then, you can never catch up. Even if you make friends, they’ve all been friends with each other so much *longer* than they’ve been friends with you, it’s like starting a race laps behind everyone else.”

Andi nodded. “I see what you ...” She trailed off when her gaze fell on the doorway. Max was standing there, shifting his weight and gripping the doorframe, looking like he was on the brink of turning around to leave. But, before he could leave, she waved and called out to him, “Hi, Max.” The corner of his mouth twitched, but to the rest of the room, he still looked like he was scowling. Only Andi knew that that twitch of a smile was the regular equivalent of bouncing around with jazz hands when it came to Max Lyons.

She was suddenly aware of how quiet the room around them had become. Everyone was turning to look at him and his uneven gait as he crossed the room. She could see the pink tinge starting to creep up his neck as he got closer and the expression on his face was the same one he’d worn any time someone was making a fuss over him, whether it was naming him MVP at a game or presenting him with a medal in track. Though, she noted, at the moment, she could see the muscles in his jaw pulsing as he made his way over to them. *Best to just get the action over with so the rest of the gawkers go back to their regularly scheduled programming.*

“Over here, we saved a seat for you,” she said, smiling at him and quickly sitting down, pulling Tessa down to sit on the

chair to her right, while tapping the one on her left for Max.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling at her and nodding at Tessa. A little thrill ran through her with the deep rumble of his voice. It was an echo of the thrill she used to get every time she saw him when they were dating. It was like a part of her past self had been in deep hibernation, somewhere inside her, and she’d just woken up to sniff the air and see if springtime had arrived.

Andi tried to redouble her grip on reality and focus. “Hey ... uh, Max Lyons, this is Tessa Cartwright,” she said quickly, turning to her friend. “A friend and she’s my ... she lives across the street from my parents.”

“Hi,” Tessa said, reaching out a hand to shake Max’s.

“Nice to meet you,” Max said. Andi didn’t miss how gently his large, square hand shook Tessa’s.

“Max Lyons, huh? I’ve heard tales. So, are you the other half of the fabled S.I.?” Tessa asked.

Andi choked on her drink and she heard Max start to laugh. “How do you know about S.I.?”

Tessa crossed her arms and grinned from Andi to Max. “Are you kidding me? S.I. is apparently legendary in this town.”

“You’ve been talking to Amelia, haven’t you?” Andi coughed.

Max turned to look at Andi, his eyebrows raised. “You told your sister about S.I.?”

“No!” Andi hissed, dropping her voice and looking around. “S.I. is ... I’ve *never* told anyone about S.I. But Amelia said the enduring rumor at Hope High is that S.I. was you and me.”

Max shook his head. “Why do they think it was us?”

She shrugged. “Apparently, there haven’t been any epic pranks since our senior year.”

“Oh I *love* pranks,” Tessa said, pulling her chair closer to them. “And I was a bit of a prankster in my day, so let’s hear what you two call ‘epic’ and see how you measure up.”

Andi turned to Max, eyebrows raised. “Oh, really? Maybe we’re in the presence of a true prank goddess.”

“Oh, Tessa,” Max said, “Do tell. If there’s one thing Andi and I always appreciate, it’s pranks.”

“Here, here,” Andi said. “Tell us about the pranks you pulled.”

“Uh-uh, you two first,” Tessa said, sitting back and crossing her arms. “I want to hear about the infamous Hope Island S.I.”

Simultaneously Max and Andi held a finger to their lips.

“Urban legends, Tess,” Andi hissed. “We can only talk in ... hypotheticals.”

“Yeah,” Max added. “There still may be a pending warrant for S.I. with the Hope Island Sheriff’s Office.”

“Alright,” Tessa said. “So, tell me about this ... S.I. and what they *potentially* may have done or not.”

“Well,” Max said, grinning at Andi. She felt a blaze of heat run through her as his dark gaze held her own. “There’s a legend that this famed ‘S.I.’ once hired a mime from Seattle to follow Principal Bob around for a week.”

Tessa’s jaw dropped.

“Not even in the top five S.I. pranks,” Andi muttered, rolling her eyes. Tessa and Max turned to look at her, eyebrows raised. “I *heard* S.I. once glued a thousand thumb-tacks to the back of the science classroom’s door and all the desks and then filled the classroom full of balloons, half of which were full of baking soda, while the other half were full of vinegar.”

“No,” Tessa breathed.

“And sophomore year, S.I. hooked up nitrous oxide tanks to the air vents in the principal’s and the counselor’s offices,” Max said.

“And the librarian’s,” Andi added.

“Whoa,” Tessa chuckled.

“And coordinated the Alarm Clock-Out of 2014,” Andi said.

“Oh, I forgot about that one,” Max sighed, smiling.

“Ringing lockers, huh?” Tessa asked.

Andi nodded. “S.I. coordinated three hundred alarm clocks, hidden all over the school to go off a minute apart. It was a five-hour, hellish ripple effect.”

“I just remember Mr. Ritter muttering to himself about being ‘too old for this shit’,” Max said.

“He really, *really* liked the *Lethal Weapon* movies,” Andi explained. “On the last day of school every year, he’d just show the movies to all his classes.”

Andi felt Max’s knee bump hers and she caught a hint of his scent. Leather, spruce, and citrus. A scent that had woven in and out of her dreams, often accompanied by his heat after a game, or when he was moving over her ... She jerked back on the free rein she’d been giving her brain. Maybe she was still drunk on some level from Abby’s eggnog recipe.

“I still think the best S.I. prank though,” he said, “was when they carried around screwdrivers with them for four years and slowly removed screws from random things all over the school. Not load-bearing screws, but auxiliary screws that weren’t needed for safety or function. Just extra screws. And then, they just left the big bucket of screws on Principal Bob’s desk, on the last day of school with no context as to where they were from or why they’d been removed.” Andi had to duck her head at this point to turn her laugh into a cough. Principal Bob’s high-pitched voice in the hallway asking Mr. Sharpton, the janitor, that last morning, why there was a bucket of loose screws on his desk, would always be one of her favorite memories.

“So, why are these pranksters called ‘S.I.’?” Tessa asked.

Andi glanced up and met Max’s gaze. “It’s never been definitively proven,” Max said slowly, not breaking eye

contact with Andi. “But, for many years, it was believed that ‘S.I.’ stood for Stuart Irving, the president of the Hope High Library Club, captain of the Chess Team, first chair Alto Saxophone player, and Ivy league early-acceptance student.”

“And did it stand for Stuart Irving?” Tessa asked, her gaze a little too knowing.

“Hey everyone!” All three of them looked up to see a woman with a short blonde pixie cut standing in the doorway. She was wearing a flannel shirt open over a red t-shirt and tan cargo pants. Beside her, there was a brown and white pit bull mix leaning against her leg. “I’m Jordan Bumble. I remember a few of you from my time growing up here on the old island.” She moved into the room and took a seat in the chair in the circle right across from Max, Andi, and Tessa. She dropped a single-strap backpack off her shoulder to lean against one side of her chair and gestured at everyone who wasn’t already sitting. “Don’t worry, none of us bite. At least not hard enough to break the skin. Come sit down for a second.”

Andi felt Max lean back in the chair next to her. Her heart was racing and she did her best to draw a steadying breath. Sitting in this circle of chairs was a nightmare come true. If Jordan was anything like her mom, they were all in for some cold, emotional finger-poking. The next hour was going to be about as comfortable as having to watch an acquaintance’s taped water birth.

When everyone was seated, Jordan looked around at them and smiled. Not like a teacher full of excitement at meeting

her first class. More like a friend who had just flopped down on the couch next to you after a long day to ask what you wanted on your pizza.

“Like I said, I’m Jordan, and this is my emotional support dog, Buddy.” She scratched the pit bull behind his ears and he smiled up at her. “I have PTSD and Buddy helps keep me balanced.” She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, hands clasped, as she looked around at all of them. “I just want to start off by saying I really appreciate the amount of bravery in this room. To be willing to come to a support group and confront how things in your life are affecting you, is not easy. Hell, starting *over* isn’t easy. In this society, we all look at January 1st as some kind of magic pill that only brings good things with it. But, I’m willing to bet that everyone in this room knows that’s not true. Everyone knows that starting over means letting go of something that didn’t happen. Or, something that *did* happen and now can’t be changed, no matter how much we want it to. We’re a mortal race. The only direction we can move is forward. And that’s the one direction most people don’t move. Either because they don’t want to, or they can’t bring themselves to. So instead of swimming on and looking for land, they tread water, just getting more tired and more worn out as time continues to pass them.”

She paused and gave them all a soft, unassuming smile. “But, here you all are, doing your best to forge on. And that makes you brave. All you need now, is to serve yourself a cup of kindness. Just like the song says, ‘we’ll take a cup of kindness yet for the sake of auld lang syne’. A cup of kindness

for what you've been through. What you're *still* going through. Remember the past, but cut yourself some slack and keep moving forward." She shook her head. "And I don't want anyone to worry about how awkward we're going to get with prodding each other's emotional wounds. This is the 'Cup of Kindness' support group, not the 'Pick At It Until It Bleeds' support group. I believe that there are better ways to heal than mortifying each of you by forcing you to spill your guts," she nodded at Andi, Max, and several others in the room, "to people you've known since you were in diapers. Bottom line is that this is not your average support group. Mostly because this is not your average place. Hope Island is a place we all love, but we can also admit, is the geographical equivalent of the aunt who lives in a treehouse, talking to dead politicians and making liquor from foraged mushrooms. We're left of center out here when it comes to normal."

"Here, here," Andi muttered. Jordan caught her eye and winked.

"Yeah, so, how do you have a support group in Hope that lends support to its members?" She paused and gave them all a wry smile. "Raise your hand if you were coerced in some way into attending tonight?" Most of the room raised their hands including Tessa, Max, and Andi. She nodded at everyone with their hands raised. "And how many of you would like to talk about the *reason* you were coerced into being here tonight?" Every hand dropped. She nodded again.

"We're Islanders from a small island. So small in fact that it's nearly impossible for our neighbors to not stomp right

through our personal business on their way to somewhere else. So, instead of just *talking* about what's going on in our lives which none of us want to do, I thought we might take a different approach. We're heading into a new year, with new challenges, obstacles, joys waiting to be had, relationships waiting to be formed. And with all the new things coming our way, I thought it might be helpful for all us Hope-ians to do something we're already familiar with as a side dish: helping others. Volunteering has been shown to lower depression, help folks build stronger support systems, raise self-confidence, self-esteem, and increase our feelings of life purpose. And by volunteering, we need to try to extend ourselves some of the grace and the cup of kindness that Hope volunteers always extend to their neighbors at events. So, as our first chance to bond as a group and volunteer, we're going to be helping other townsfolk sign up for their chosen resolutions for the new year at the New Year's Bash. I also want each one of you to join *at least one* of the New Year's Resolution groups. And I'll be doing it too. We all need something to work towards, something to work on, and something to work for. We'll also be helping with the Resolution Redo party on the 15th, and the Snow Ball at the end of the month. After the Snow Ball, if you've managed to hang with us for the whole month, you'll get a certificate of completion for the program. Sound like fun?" Jordan didn't seem the least bit deterred by the lack of excitement from those around her.

"She's definitely her mother's daughter," Andi muttered. She heard Max chuckle beside her.

Jordan grinned at all of them. “Feel free to grumble. That’s part of the tradition too, isn’t it? Nothing like a little familiarity to help you find your footing. As we’re helping others at these events, I want you all to reflect on how you can better extend yourself the same courtesy. What if you approached yourself, needing the same help you’re giving someone else? Just keep that in mind as the month wears on and at the end or in the middle, or even here at the beginning, if you feel like talking, we’ll all be here. The only rule for this group is that the first person you need to serve that cup of kindness to, is yourselves.” Andi saw Jordan’s gaze pause on every face around the circle, but they lingered on hers and Max’s.

“Now,” she finally said, clapping her hands together, “because I’m from here. I know that there’s no way everyone is feeling up to sharing in this first meeting. It’s just too foreign a concept for us Islanders to gossip about ourselves, and in an organized setting where it’s actually encouraged. But everyone here will be very familiar and comfortably uncomfortable with sign-up lists and event planning since that is taught to us in the womb. So, let’s get started on our group’s part in the New Year’s Bash and just see where that takes us.” She picked up the bag she’d dropped beside her chair and pulled out a stack of papers. “These are sign-up lists and we’ve got some floor plans, a selection for the menu, and lists and lists of activities for the party’s agenda. Divide yourselves up based on what interests you or at least what part of the events you’re the most comfortable helping with.”

Andi was skeptical of this event planning tactic until she saw the people around her visibly relax as they started talking about miniature bonfires, resolution tables, DJs, buffets, and what they could ask Miss Mandie to have as drink specials. As if Jordan Bumble had opened a window and turned on a fan, the awkward, nervous tension in the room dissipated.

Tessa was still nervous and Andi realized this was probably new for her. She linked an arm through Tessa's and then with only a second of hesitation, linked her other arm with Max's before marching them over to join the group picking food items for the menu. She felt them both relax next to her as they became referees in a heated debate about gouda versus brie cheese. And when she felt them relax next to her, she felt her own tension start to release. She caught glimpses of Jordan and Buddy as they moved around the room, checking in with groups, and making notes or comments. Andi smiled, realizing that if anyone stuck their head in the cafeteria door, they would think it was just an event planning meeting, one of several thousand that were held every year in Hope. Not a support group for reluctant people in a small town, who were feeling broken and exposed.

Well played, Jordan Bumble, Andi thought.

Andi was surprised to see Tessa jump in with some ideas of her own on side dishes. Andi stood towards the back of the group with Max, smiling while she watched the other townsfolk turn to Tessa and listen to her suggestions.

“And just like that, she became an Islander,” Andi chuckled.

“Yeah, once someone asks you what your cheese spread recipe is, you’re in,” Max grunted beside her.

They were standing a little apart from the group and everyone else was fixated on the menu discussion happening at the front. Her head was still a mess from everything, but she’d started to realize that was the status quo with her. How the hell had she ended up back in Hope in their high school cafeteria, standing next to Max Lyons while there was a heated debate about appetizers versus hors d’oeuvres? It was like they were repeating a particularly obnoxious homecoming dance committee meeting. Complete with Max shifting his weight uncomfortably, but still showing up because everyone expected it of him and Andi.

“The universe is mocking us,” she muttered aloud.

“What do you mean?” Max asked, moving a step closer beside her.

“This is a homecoming committee meeting, isn’t it?”

Max snorted. “Sure feels like it.”

They fell into silence again and Andi tried to search her brain for something to say. She wasn’t sure why exactly, but she knew there was something buried in her head that she needed to say to Max. She knew it as clearly as she knew when she’d forgotten something. The *details* of what she’d forgotten, or in this case, what she needed to say, were the wild cards. *Just say something*. She could feel her window closing.

“I hate wild cards,” she said. *Ok, that was ... something. Don't panic, maybe he won't have heard you.*

“Because they always feel like cheating?” Max asked. She turned to look at him. “Like in poker, they make it easier to get a good hand?”

She paused. “Yeah ... but ... in those cases, it's *not* cheating, right? Because everyone knows the rules and if aces are wild, then aces are wild. If someone draws an ace, it can be anything you need it to be.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess. Still ... it always feels like they water down the game. Like a win doesn't mean as much when there's a wild card involved.” He turned his full attention on her and Andi felt her heart picking up speed. Max's dark eyes always made her feel like she was the only person in the room when they locked onto her. “So, why do *you* hate wild cards, if it's not the cheating thing?”

She wasn't sure why, but every time he said the word cheating, something about his tone stung. She'd never cheated on Max. Did ... did he think she had? *You're being paranoid. Just answer him before things get even weirder.*

“No, I ... I was just thinking about wild cards in general.” The mess in her head was trying to tangle itself into what she was saying. She tried to focus. “I meant ... I hate when you know you want to say something, but you can't figure out exactly *what* to say.”

“Oh, metaphorical ‘wild cards’,” Max said, his voice softening.

She chanced a look at him and felt an old annoyance wash over her. He looked like he always did; stoic, unaffected, basically standing at parade rest as he looked from her, to the group, arguing animatedly about whether or not jalapeno poppers could be classified as vol-au-vents.

She wanted to scream at him, "*We kissed two days ago.*" But even she knew that wasn't a good plan. She wanted to ask him *why* they'd kissed because she didn't understand it herself.

"Sometimes," the rumble of his voice made her stumble on her mental treadmill. "I think it just helps to start talking. What you want to say will eventually come out, right?"

Right, she thought sarcastically. *Easier said than done, Captain America.* Seriously, did nothing ever affect this man? Max was the only person she knew who could act so cool and collected after what had happened between them. He was still looking at her, inscrutable and patient, waiting for her to be vulnerable and broach the topic. *No. I'm not going to be the one to cry while I tell him how I feel and he awkwardly pats me on the back. Been there, done that.* It still hurt to remember the way she'd cried about him leaving for the Army. She knew she couldn't stop him and she knew it was what he really wanted, but he'd been so stoic through it all.

He was still looking at her, waiting for her answer and she felt herself chicken out.

"I ... I need to get all the pets at the shelter adopted by the end of January or Doc Simmons is going to send them to the

mainland and who knows where they'll end up from there.” She rushed on before he could figure out that this hadn't been what her original “wild cards” comment had been about. “And I know there's probably a magic combination of words out there to say, that would ... tell people how much it would mean to ... the pets ... if they were adopted into a loving home, but I just don't know what those words would be.” She stuttered to a halt, bracing herself in case he worked out what she really wanted to say.

“Well,” he said, frowning at the floor as he thought. “Maybe just start by telling them the truth. It's hard for people to turn their backs on something when they know the whole story.”

Again, easier said than done, she thought. You're batting a thousand tonight, Sergeant Lyons.

Max

“Roquefort? What are you thinking?” Glenda Kissinger snapped, flicking the paper they were all crowded around. “Pull your head out of your ass, Sam.”

“Oh, pardon me, Cheddar Mistress,” Sam Phillips muttered. “We’re not all so cheese basic. Provolone and Pepper Jack? What? Was *American* busy?”

Max bit down harder on his lip to keep from busting out and risking the wrath of Glenda or Sam. He, Andi, and Tessa had taken two big steps back when the two had squared off, just in case cheese bickering led to side dish slapping.

“Did we land on a menu?” Jordan asked, pausing next to Max.

“All but the cheese and side dishes,” Andi muttered from Max’s other side.

“Oh boy,” Jordan said with a sigh. She turned to look at Max, Andi, and Tessa. “Well, everyone else has finished with what they were working on. Since, uh,” she paused in time to see Glenda take a step closer to Sam so they were almost nose-

to-nose. “Sam and Glenda are on the cusp of cheese harmony here, I’d say you three could probably sign off if you wanted to.”

“Thanks, Jordan,” Andi said, quickly. “As entertaining as ringside seats would be for the final round, there’s a good chance one, or all of us, would end up getting dragged into this fight and I don’t have a strong slap game.”

“You just need practice,” Tessa said, patting Andi’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Jordan said, turning to Tessa with a smile. “I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting you. I’m Jordan Bumble, daughter of the extremely pushy woman who probably badgered you into coming to this meeting in the first place.” She held her hand out to Tessa.

Tessa shook it and smiled. “Tessa Cartwright. I’m obviously not from here.”

Jordan smiled. “Nice to meet you, Tessa. And you’re probably saner for it. Not being from here, that is.”

“Seconded,” Max and Andi said.

“Well, thank you for being brave enough to join this circus. And welcome to the island. Has it been a hard place to adjust to?”

She shrugged. “Not too bad. I’m used to big cities. That ... that’s where I grew up. New York.”

“Really?” Andi asked.

Tessa nodded quickly. “Yeah. But, I really like the island. I used to think small towns were boring, but ...”

Jordan chuckled. “But then you moved here.” Tessa nodded.

“I don’t know,” Andi said, glancing at Max. “Sometimes this place can get boring. When it does, you just have to make your own fun.”

Max felt his lip twitch, trying to smile. Usually, the days of S.I. felt so far away. But standing next to Andi, who still remembered all the details of the stupid pranks they’d pulled, was making time do funny things again.

“I actually don’t mind ‘a little boring’,” Tessa said. Her voice sounded wistful and Max looked up at her. A shadow had fallen across her face. “It’s kind of nice to be somewhere where you know your neighbors and you feel ... so safe.”

Max frowned. There was something in Tessa’s voice. It reminded him of when he was very young and his mom’s voice when she’d sit on the end of his or Gray’s bed in the room they shared, and do her best to reassure them that their dad was safe and he’d be coming home. It was a facade of reassurance, but peel it back, even a little and there was fear.

“Oh,” Jordan said, glancing down at the list in her hand. “I almost forgot. Tessa, would you mind working a shift on one of the resolution booths with Zane?”

“Uh, sure,” Tessa said with a shrug.

“Excellent,” Jordan said, scratching her name down. “And Andi and Max, you can work the other one together.”

Max blinked at Jordan. *Speaking of wild cards.* Even the *thought* of being crammed into one of the little booths next to Andi all night made him nervous. Not that she looked calm at the moment. Andi always wore her emotions on her sleeve. It had been helpful during their relationship, but also maddening when he could tell with a single look how much he'd hurt her when he did or said something thoughtless.

The yelling between Glenda and Sam had ratcheted up another notch and everyone around them took a huge step back. Andi was avoiding Max's gaze and he wondered if she'd try to switch places with Tessa, just so they wouldn't be alone again.

Jordan sighed. "Yeah, you three take off," she muttered to them. "It's always easier to diffuse a bomb without an audience."

"Well, we don't have to be told a third time to vamos, do we?" Andi asked under her breath, glancing from Tessa to Max. Jordan and Buddy moved forward to try refereeing Sam and Glenda's argument, leaving a clear path for their escape that Andi looked only too happy to take.

He caught a hint of apple as Andi moved past him, gesturing to the door. He followed her and Tessa out, but he was distracted by a fresh whiff of the old high school's smell. It was a combination of sea salt, old wood, permanent cafeteria lasagna vapors, gym socks, Sharpie, and, if someone was searching for it, the faint smell of fireworks, for which S.I. could be credited. It had been burned into the very fibers of the

school on the first day of their senior year during the epic pull-string firework chain reaction when every classroom had shut its door for the first time after the eight am bell. He was convinced the gunpowder smell had to have been burned into the industrial-grade thinning carpet because of how strongly the whole building smelled of fireworks for the rest of the year. Outside the cafeteria, the hallway was gently lit with trophy case after trophy case. He held his breath as they moved down the hall. The trophy case next to the office still had the game ball from the state championship, the team photo, and the photo of him and Andi ... but before they reached the case, Andi took a hard right turn down a different hallway, steering them towards a side door instead of the main exit.

He was confused until he heard her say to Tessa, “This way gets us closer to the square. I think it’s raining.”

Max was quiet, just enjoying the sound of Andi’s voice, her smell, and the familiar way she talked and moved. They’d crossed through the square before he realized how far they’d walked.

“Well, Tessa and I are this way,” Andi said, pausing next to the side street by Town Hall. Her gaze was searching Max’s face.

“Ok,” he said quickly. “I ...” He would have liked to keep walking with them, but he couldn’t think of a legitimate reason to head down the dead-end street, into the cul-de-sac where

Andi lived. “I’ll see you two for the New Year’s Bash set up on Saturday?”

“Uh, yeah,” Andi said quickly. “We’ll ... see you then.”

“It was nice to meet you, Max,” Tessa said, nodding at him. “On Saturday, I expect you both to tell me more about what it was like growing up here and more about the pranks you two ... I mean *S.I.* used to pull.”

“Maybe,” Andi said, grinning at Max. “A part of me already feels like you know too much.”

Max waved goodbye to them and headed home, his head full of Andi and the weird sensation of having come full circle, back to where they were eight years before. A twinge of pain shot through his knee and he paused to rub it, feeling the compression sock around the joint and the cold metal and hard plastic of his prosthetic. Well, not exactly full circle.



ANDI

“So, what did you think of Hope Island’s version of a support group?” Andi asked Tessa as they turned down their street.

Tessa chuckled. “It felt a lot more like an event planning meeting, but I guess that was the point. It was kind of nice to

meet people and talk but not be put on the spot and have to talk about our history in front of everyone.”

Andi paused on the precipice of asking Tessa about her past. She'd heard Tessa's voice quaver as she talked about feeling safe in Hope and her antennae had gone up. What kind of life had Tessa known before moving here? Andi thought of the phone call on Christmas Eve and the way Tessa had been obviously shaken over it.

“So, what's with you and Max?” Tessa asked, interrupting Andi's thoughts and making her forget to step over the broken cobblestone in front of the Patterson's house.

“What do you mean?” Andi knew she'd spoken too quickly. She'd sounded too anxious. She tried to mentally take a deep breath. *Be cool.*

Tessa rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. Don't play dumb with me. *He* was your high school boyfriend, right? You two *obviously* have history. And I don't want to talk or think about mine, so spill.”

“Oh, you didn't tell me that you were actually a member of the Hippopotamus genus, mostly found on a Greek island,” Andi said, feigning surprise.

Tessa frowned at her. “What?”

“A hippo from Crete,” Andi laughed. “A hypocrite. Sorry, old joke.” Old joke that Max would have gotten.

Tessa rolled her eyes. “Wow. I do have to say, you Islanders are really big on your dad jokes.”

Andi nodded. “Our whole town charter is basically a really long dad joke.”

“Quit trying to distract me and tell me about Max,” Tessa said, bumping Andi with her hip.

Andi sighed. “You’re right. We dated in high school.”

“Just dated?” she asked. Andi didn’t have to look at her. She could feel Tessa’s gaze boring into the side of her head.

“We were friends all through middle school, and then we dated all the way through high school. Proms, dances, homecomings. He played football and I was on the cheerleading team,” she tried to shrug like it wasn’t that big of a deal. “And then we broke up before we both went our separate ways.”

“That sucks,” Tessa said softly.

“Eh, it’s what usually happens, isn’t it?” Andi asked, glancing over at her. “Two eighteen-year-olds, heading in different directions? He was going into the Army and I was going to college for a very brutal pre-vet course. We weren’t going to see each other for a long time. And it would have been harder if we’d tried to figure out a relationship that would have been stretched thin over the time and distance between us.”

“So,” Tessa said, pausing to turn and look at her. “I’m guessing *you* did the ‘breaking up’?” Andi couldn’t tell by the pale light from the nearby old-fashioned lamp post if the frown on Tessa’s face was disapproval or confusion.

“Yeah,” Andi said softly. “Max ... he ... he’s a really good guy. I know he would have struggled through it and stuck it out. But ...”

“But, what?” Tessa asked. She wasn’t accusing. She honestly sounded curious. She didn’t sound like she was passing judgment on Andi for what she’d done.

“But, I just thought it would be better for both of us if we were free and didn’t have to worry about keeping a relationship together on top of everything else.”

They started walking again, both lost in thought. That was why she’d done it, right? Unfortunately, it was a lot harder to use her old standby logic now, especially when she was looking at Max Lyons again. She’d forgotten how deep his dark eyes were. They were soulful, as if when he talked to her, he was talking to her very center, buried under muscle and bone. And when he was aroused ...

She could feel the heat climbing her chest at the parade of memories her brain was now dragging through her conscience like a reluctant kite as it skipped around, trying to catch a breeze and lift it to the height of a daydream. *No breezes*, she thought stubbornly. *Do not go there with Max. He’s been through enough.*

“Why don’t you ask him out on a date?” Tessa asked.

“What?” Andi asked quickly, stubbing her toe on the curb as they crossed the street and started down the sidewalk in front of Tessa’s house.

“Max,” Tessa said, rolling her eyes. “It’s obvious the two of you still have feelings for each other.”

“Friend feelings, maybe,” Andi said.

Tessa shook her head. “Look, I’m older than the two of you and I think I can safely say that I’ve seen a lot more guys than you have? Maybe?”

Andi wasn’t sure if she should agree or be offended. “I’ve ... dated.”

“More than a dozen guys?” Tessa asked.

“No ...” Andi said, moving her gaze to her feet. What was Tessa saying?

“Well, I have,” she said with a sigh. “And I’d like to think that I’ve become a bit of a keen observer when it comes to male body language.”

“Oh, you’re fluent?” Andi asked, grinning up at her.

“Yeah, but I’ve got to be honest,” she said, turning to wink at Andi, “the language is pretty easy to pick up. It’s like the pig Latin of non-verbal languages.”

“Good to know,” Andi said, with a nod of approval.

“Anyway,” Tessa continued. “I’ve seen guys. I’ve seen guys who feel platonic about the people around them. And I’ve seen guys who feel indifferent. Hell, I’ve even seen guys who want to destroy the people around them. And on one other occasion, I’ve seen the body language of a man who never got over a girl.”

“One other?”

“Yeah,” she said, scratching the back of her neck. “But tonight was only the second time I’ve ever seen it.”

Andi raised an eyebrow at her. “If it was only the second time, how could you be sure that’s what you were seeing?”

Tessa met her gaze as they stopped in front of her house. She reached out and put a hand on each of Andi’s shoulders. “Because the first time I saw it, I asked the guy why he looked the way he did. And he told me that there was a gas crater in Turkmenistan, called the Darvaza crater. It’s said that it was purposely set on fire in the seventies by the Soviets to prevent the spread of methane gas and it’s been burning ever since, never going out, never consuming all its fuel source. It’s just burning steadily, and probably will for eternity.”

Andi blinked at her. “So, are you saying I’m a gassy crater?”

Tessa shook her head and Andi saw her fighting a smile. “No. I’m saying that tonight, I saw the same body language, the same expressions on Max’s face when he looked at you. I think you might be Max’s Darvaza crater.”

“So ... what *are* you saying?” Andi asked, following Tessa up her walkway.

“I’m saying you should ask him out on a date. See where it goes. Do you still like him?” Tessa paused on her porch to open her mailbox.

Andi frowned. *Did she still like Max?* Definitely as a friend. They'd had so much fun together in school. And then there was that kiss ... *No.* She was scared to peek over the cliff of where that thought might lead. And it was too soon anyway. Why was she even pressing Tessa for this? She felt Tessa's energy change and she glanced up to see the woman freeze as she looked at a white envelope under the glow of her porch security light.

"Tessa? Are you ok?" Andi asked.

"Yeah, I'm just ... tired." She held her mail against her chest and smiled at Andi. "I'm going to go in and hit the hay. Thanks to you, Sage is sleeping at night, which means I finally can too."

"Are you sure you're ok?" Andi asked again. "Did you get something in the mail ..."

"I'll see you on Saturday for the event setup, right?" Tessa asked.

Andi just stared at Tessa for a moment. She couldn't decide if her friend was looking paler because of the porch light or ... was it because of the letter she'd received? Either way, she got the feeling that even if pressed, Tessa wasn't going to discuss whatever had come in the mail.

"Ok," Andi finally said.

"Goodnight," Tessa said as she slipped in the front door. It clicked closed behind her and Andi heard the locks tumble into place. In the window to the left of the door, Andi saw

Sage pounce off the sill, running to meet Tessa. Andi shivered as she pulled her coat closed around her. She wasn't sure why, but she had a feeling that something wasn't right in Tessa's world. Even so, she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do about it if Tessa didn't want to talk.

Andi was used to patients who would try to play off injuries and not vocalize when they were hurting. She just had to watch, wait, and listen, but most of all, try to hear what they weren't saying. And she'd start by keeping an eye on Tessa, just so Sage wasn't the only one.

"Oh good, you're home," Amelia said when she walked in the door. Andi paused. Her hand was still on the doorknob and the mad glint in Amelia's eye made her want to keep it there.

"Ok, you have to tell me if you're a body snatcher and you've taken my family captive. It's ... um, earth rules and our galactic ..."

Amelia rolled her eyes. "You are such a dork. No. It's a good thing you're home because I'm too tall to stand in the chest freezer and we need someone who can get down to the bottom and chisel out the Ziploc bags of leftover blue cheese lasagna and that funky risotto Mom made in May."

Andi squeezed her eyes shut. "We're not taking *frozen* leftovers to the Mold fight." For the past eight years, Andi had been successful in leaving town before the New Year's Bash and the "Out with the Mold" fight that served as entertainment, filling the gap between the planned events and the countdown to midnight. It was based on an Italian tradition

for “out with the old” when at midnight people would throw plates, glasses, etc. out windows to symbolize throwing out the old. Hope decided to try it, but when Wilma Evans brought her old casserole dish to smash, she realized there was still a slice of lasagna clinging to the side. She scooped it out, chucked it over her shoulder, and when it hit Fred Welks squarely in the face, the new tradition was born. Now, it was essentially a food fight made up of crusty, moldy, and freezer-burned leftovers of dubious origin and consistency. Andi usually *hated* the “out with the mold” fight. There were no winners. It also meant that everyone in Hope ended up smelling like cat food and regret when the countdown started and came away from their midnight kisses gagging and trying to not get frozen shards of cream sauce and disintegrating spaghetti in their mouths.

“I don’t want to be a part of this,” Andi whined as Amelia steered her down the hallway to the garage door.

“It’s tradition,” Amelia said in a creepily accurate Mrs. Bumble voice. “And you’ve had a pass for the last eight years, so jump to it, and here’s a butter knife to help with the chiseling.” Andi turned to face her sister.

“If you want this to happen, *never* use that Mrs. Bumble voice again.” She snatched the butter knife from her hand and muttered darkly, bracing for the cold as she climbed into the chest freezer. Her parents came to join Amelia in the doorway.

“Oh! I made some Swedish meatballs for St. Patrick’s Day and I held back a dozen of those bad boys for the fight,” her

dad said. “I tossed them in the corner. See if you can get those out too while you’re at it.”

“Is it unsportsmanlike to cut up the frozen bag of grease we saved from cleaning out the deep fat fryer? You know, to use as extra ammo?” her mom asked.

“Yes,” Amelia and her dad said.

“Isn’t that how Sarah Walker almost lost her nose?” Andi asked, kneeling on a bag of frozen peas so she could start chipping out the bag of leftover lasagna. “That raccoon lunged at her when she was walking home and ...”

“That was an *accident*,” she heard her mom say. “And it wasn’t *my* grease that year.”

Only in Hope, would the *ownership* of frozen grease that led to raccoon-assisted plastic surgery matter in the court of public opinion.

Max

For the rest of the week, Max buried himself in home improvements, his physical therapy exercises, and teaching Sarge how to dramatically disagree with his mom whenever she tried to get him to go out and do anything social. And his mom was starting to laugh at the situation less and get more and more annoyed.

“So when’s your next meeting?” she asked on Friday night at dinner. He could tell from the way the question tumbled out of her that she’d been holding it back for days.

He did his best to hide his smile as he dragged his spoon through the chicken vegetable soup they’d made for dinner. “It’s tomorrow, actually. We’re ... the support group ... is helping out with the New Year’s Bash at Town Hall ... and I guess in the town square, since there are bonfires involved.”

“Bonfires? As in *plural*?”

He shrugged. “I heard the phrase ‘miniature bonfires’ kicked around at the last meeting. So, yes?”

“So this meeting wasn’t a support group? It was just an event planning meeting?” she sounded insulted.

“It’s Hope,” he snorted. “Jordan says, and I guess I have to agree with her, that people in Hope are never going to *voluntarily* talk about their feelings and what’s bothering them. The town’s too small and the gossip mill is too strong.”

She gave a huff of annoyance and dipped her bread in her soup. “Well, it still feels ... underhanded. Using folks who are having a hard time as free labor. So instead you’re all just working this event?”

Max frowned. “No, it’s more than that. It gets us all out together and doing something familiar for anyone who’s lived in Hope. You could just feel everyone in the room relax when she told us we were helping with an event instead of sitting in a circle and talking.” He could tell his mom wasn’t convinced. “And we’re each supposed to sign up for one of the resolution groups at the Bash so ... I guess that’s ...”

“Something?” she asked.

He grinned. “Yeah, that’s something.”

She muttered darkly about supposed mental health professionals masquerading as volunteer recruiters while they cleared the table, but Max could only smile. He wasn’t sure how much good the support group was doing or would do for everyone else, but speaking for himself, time seemed to be going a lot faster since the meeting. Maybe it was the group, maybe it was having Sarge ... maybe it was the thought of seeing Andi again.

The next morning, he took Sarge out for a walk, picked up another order of baseboard from Baskin, and had time to start the patch job in the living room. He did his best to keep his mind busy on what he was doing so it wouldn't drift to the fact that he'd be seeing Andi again in just a few hours. He'd been trying to pretend all week that seeing her on Monday night hadn't had such a huge impact on him, but he knew that if he looked too closely at those thoughts they would confirm him as a liar.

Andi was, if anything, more beautiful now than she'd been in high school. Her face had been so young when they were both eighteen. She still looked like a teenager. At twenty-six, she still had the elvish appearance in her eyes, the tilt of her nose, and her high cheekbones, but she was a woman now. A woman who had been through something. The more time he spent around her, the more he realized that he wasn't the only one struggling. He supposed that whatever it was, either Mrs. Bumble knew about it, or she'd sensed it when she pushed Andi to join the support group. Whatever it was though, it wasn't something as easy to notice as his prosthetic. That thought alone was enough to calm him back down. She still wore her engagement ring. Maybe she and the fiancé had just gone through a rough patch. If it was over, she would have taken it off.

As was the custom with all Hope Island events, it was pure chaos when he arrived in the Town Square on Saturday morning.

“No, Mabel, the metal swans have to go on top of the fire barrels! If they don’t have toppers, they’re just going to look like trash can fires, spread all over the square, like a post-apocalyptic proving ground. The swans have to be there!” Esther Jacobs was doing her infamous yell-telling as she bustled across the square, nearly running into Max who wasn’t fast enough to get out of her way.

“Whoa there, hoss!” The voice behind him raised the temperature of the surrounding air by several degrees. Andi. He’d stumbled back on his heels when Esther had bounced off him. Andi’s arms closed around his waist from behind. A shiver ran through him and he felt his muscles involuntarily flex. *She’s touching me. The way she used to.* How many football games, track meets, and just lazy summer days had she snuck up behind him and wrapped her arms around him, just like this? *God. Did it always feel this good to be so close to her?* He felt his prosthetic slip on the ground as a painful spasm shot through his knee. *Balance out.* The whole exchange only took a few moments, but while Andi’s arms were around him, time felt like it stood still.

“You alright?” Andi asked, coming around to stand in front of him. “Esther hip-checked you pretty hard there.”

“Eh, I’m sure I’ll survive. She barely clipped me.”

“Lucky, considering she already took out Glenda at the knees over the cheese selection,” Andi sighed. She was smiling at him, and for a moment, the world around them seemed to dim. She was Andi Morgan, his first love, all over

again. They were young and in love and nothing hurt. “So, ready for this madness?” she asked. The present-day Andi was standing in front of him, but instead of avoiding his gaze like she had at the meeting, she was smiling at him. For a moment, it felt like they were back in sixth grade, and partnering on their first school assignment.

“Uh, yeah ... what are we supposed to do first?” Max asked. And he immediately regretted it. It was the Hope Island equivalent of saying “Beetlejuice” three times. And it summoned someone much, much worse.

“There you are, Andi,” Mrs. Bumble’s voice was like the horn that announced the apocalypse. Which, now that he thought about it, was probably actually Hans’ horn. It would make sense to him that the site of the end times might be during a Hope Island event. He just assumed it would be during the Plummers’ Day Parade or the annual Gravy Appreciation Day Food Fight. “Now will you two stop standing around gawking? We’ve got work to do.”

“I’ve always wanted to spend a Saturday night getting my eyebrows singed off while I basically climbed into a garbage can fire to trigger the stupid pilot light mechanism that we just had to use instead of a ball of flaming newspaper that we could just lob inside from a safe distance,” Andi muttered.

“Hey,” Max said, tipping the last barrel back to an upright position as the heat started to warm the metal. “I was one hundred percent in favor of your flaming newspaper option.

And we would have gotten away with it if Esther hadn't caught us trying it on that first barrel."

"Yeah, and then followed us around, hissing like a cornered possum every time we made a comment about the stupid pilot lights being dangerous or hard to light," Andi said, looking around. "I don't know about you, but I think S.I. could do some damage around here."

"Oh yeah?" Max asked, lowering his voice and moving with her to stand at the edge of the flickering firelight coming off the twenty cans. "What are you thinking, Morgan?" He turned to look at her in time to see her smile in profile, the warm light flickering across her cheeks.

"Well, apparently these swan toppers," she said, bending down to pick up one of the horrible attempts at waterfowl, carved out of rusted metal, "are *very* important. The question is, will anyone notice if instead of beak up, they're placed over the fire ..." she turned the metal sculpture in her hands.

"Yeah, beaks down is the way to go," Max said. They spread out and roped Tessa into the plan, so in under ten minutes, all twenty swan butts were illuminated by their own resolution flames, and the three of them were gliding off to their next assignment before anyone else noticed. Tessa was scooped up by Jordan to help Zane man one of the resolution tables while Andi and Max were sent to the other.

"This won't be so bad, right?" Andi said, perching on the stool next to Max. "Apparently, we're the Resolution ... aries." She laughed, reading the paper that had been taped,

perfectly perpendicular to the edge of the table. “Awesome. Any idea what that means?”

Max picked up one of the half-sheets of paper from the stack on the front of the table and read, “Welcome, Resolutionary. Now is the time to commit to a new year. Write down any resolution you made for the last year that you didn’t achieve and release it into one of the swan flames.” He cut his eyes to Andi. “Release it to the swans, huh?”

“Bottoms up,” Andi said, doing her best to keep a straight face. Almost with perfect timing, they heard Esther let out an ear-splitting shriek.

“Swan butts!”

“New catchphrase?” Andi whispered as they both moved around their booth to look at where Esther was yelling at Jordan about the swan butts.

“Definitely,” Max said. Jordan was valiantly trying to keep a straight face while she explained to Esther that the fire had made the metal too hot to move now. And they’d just have to live with the swan butts. For a moment, Max was nervous when he saw Esther starting to stagger through the rows of bonfires, but then he saw Mr. Jacobs roll by slowly with his empty wheelbarrow and position himself right behind his wife. Esther sat down hard in the wheelbarrow and wordlessly, Mr. Jacobs pulled out a paper bag from his pocket, shook it open, and handed it over to his wife. She was aggressively breathing into it and glaring at everyone like they were all in on the conspiracy as Mr. Jacobs wheeled her past them. Max tried to

arrange his face into a look of confused concern and from the corner of his eye, he saw Andi do the same.

“S.I. for the win, again,” Andi said, turning around to look up at him. They were standing so close that when she turned, her hair brushed his cheek and he heard her draw in a breath. He was still holding his. God. How did she have this power over him? He’d been under fire, he’d been in life-and-death situations. How the hell did standing this close to Andi have his heart pounding more than running into a combat zone? He stared into her blue eyes and he was moving before he realized what he was doing.

“Hey! How does this booth work?” He and Andi jumped apart. “Max! Max Lyons! Welcome home, son.” The speaker was Hank Melrose and he bellied up to the counter before giving Andi and Max his patented glare-smile where his eyes were glaring, but his mouth was smiling. Hank was the only person Max knew that could pull the look off. “My wife dragged me to this stupid thing and then sent me over here while she went to sign up at every one of those ridiculous resolution club booths inside. Apparently getting a dog wasn’t enough newness for her.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Town Hall and gave a disgusted snort. “I love the woman, but if she manages to stick the landing with any of those resolutions for even just January, I’ll go vegan for a whole year.”

“Careful, Hank,” Max muttered, looking behind the bear of a man. “Your wife is coming in hot right behind you.”

“Awww ... well shit. And I can’t cuss now. She’s making me give it up for the new year, lint, or whatever.”

“You mean ‘Lent’?” Max asked.

Hank made a dismissive gesture. “One of them things. I just need a new way to cuss.”

“Might I suggest, ‘swan butts’?” Andi asked. She winked at Hank who just looked at her, confused. “Don’t worry. It’ll make sense to you as soon as you go around the corner to burn your old resolutions. Or ... whatever you want to write down on that piece of paper to appease your wife who is going to be within earshot in three ... two ... one.” Hank started to pale as soon as Andi started the countdown.

“Gimme that pen,” he muttered to Max. “Swan butts. I need another one of her lectures like I need a hole in the head.”

“Resolutions!” Max called like a carnival barker an hour later. Miss Mandie had been by twice with her “Irish Cocoas” and he was feeling pretty good at the moment. Andi didn’t seem to be too far behind him.

“Dump your old ones and make room for new!” Andi called. Max had to say, their booth seemed a lot more popular than the one across the way. But he had a feeling it was mostly due to Miss Mandie having easier access to him and Andi than Tessa and Zane who were almost an island in the sea of townsfolk milling by.

“Mom! Dad!” Andi said, suddenly straightening up next to him. Automatically, Max tried to square his stance. It was

automatic muscle memory for him: pretending to be judge-sober whenever parents were around, despite the fact that they'd both been of legal drinking age for the past five years. Kids probably never outgrew wanting to appear sober to their parents.

“Hey you two,” Mr. Morgan’s smile was genuine. He met Max’s gaze and Max felt himself relax. Mr. Morgan had never missed a game. He’d played catch with him at the Morgan family dinners whenever Max was invited over and his hug and words of encouragement on the day of their high school graduation had meant as much to him as his mom’s. “Max. It’s good to see you home safe, son.”

“Yessir,” Max said with a grin.

“Oh, this is a familiar sight,” Mrs. Morgan laughed, looking from Andi to Max. “I can tell because I’m both happy to see it and slightly wary that all the screws have been removed from the benches around the fire ... mysteriously.”

Andi blinked wide-eyed innocent eyes at her. “Oh, mother, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh,” Mrs. Morgan muttered, raising an eyebrow. “So, I don’t suppose you two have seen S.I. running around here, have you? I heard a rumor that those merry pranksters were back in town in time for the New Year.”

“No,” Andi said, sounding like they were discussing the weather rather than being vaguely accused of mischief. “I did hear something about ‘swan butts’.”

“So have we,” Mr. Morgan groaned. “Esther is inside alternating between screeching and breathing into a paper bag. Something about bird butts sticking out of bonfires?”

Max nodded. “Yeah. Everyone’s burning their old resolutions from this past year that didn’t work out in the swan bonfires.”

“Swan butts seem a logical place to stick bad resolutions,” Mr. Morgan said with a nod. “I think it’s right on message.”

“And you two are going to be on the anti-parade side for the Mold fight, right?” Mrs. Morgan narrowed her eyes at Andi, then Max.

“Of course,” Max said quickly. He glanced down at the red cooler his mom had sent with him, full of thawed ammo, most of which looked like a badly burned eggplant parmesan.

“I don’t know,” Andi said beside him. “I’m thinking you’d make a great Grand Marshall in the Plumber’s Day Parade, Mom.”

“Bite your tongue or at least lower your voice,” Mrs. Morgan growled. “I swear if you accidentally summon ... you-know-who with talk like that, I’m signing you up to work every event of hers for the next year.”

Andi threw her hands up in surrender. “I was just joking with you, Mom. Of course, I’m anti-parade.”

She gave them each a short nod. “Good. Then we’ll see you at our family evacuation and plotting point, over in front of Honey-Do at eleven.”

Andi snapped Mrs. Morgan a salute with her left hand.

“Other hand, soldier,” Max chuckled. Andi corrected herself and winked at him.

Mrs. Morgan rolled her eyes and muttered to Mr. Morgan. “Let’s go burn whatever this crap is so we can go stake out our spot before the Donovans try to poach it.” With a final wave at them, the Morgans hurried off to go see the swan butts. “You two better make sure you’re on time or all the Swedish St. Patrick’s Day meatballs will be gone!” Mr. Morgan called back to them as they disappeared into the crowd.

“Mold fight ammo?” Jordan asked, pausing in front of the booth and glancing after the Morgans.

Andi nodded. “Yeah. Dad’s never seen the irony in making Swedish meatballs for an Irish holiday. We’ve tried, but, anyway. They never get eaten at the Shamrock Fest. Personally, I think it’s just how he gets around the guidelines for the Mold fight since all things thrown in the fight have to be leftovers that were beyond salvaging. And ever since he tagged the mayor with one three years ago, he thinks he’s Babe Ruth with a meatball.”

Max nodded. “Everyone has to have something that gets them out of bed in the morning.”

Jordan grinned at them and crossed her arms. “So, I think I already know the answer to this, but have you two signed up for a resolution club yet?”

“Nope,” Andi said.

“We were kind of hoping that if we worked the whole shift, we could get out of it,” Max added.

“Too bad,” Jordan said, shaking her head. “Anyway, Buddy and I are here to give you a break and send you inside to the waiting arms of one of the resolution club booths.”

Max and Andi groaned.

Jordan’s grin was wicked. “You only have to sign up for one. And hey, think of it as a trade-off. At least I’m not making you all sign up for a club *and* do a weekly sharing circle.”

“Fair,” Andi sighed. “But we can do that later ...”

Jordan shook her head. “Nah. You two are due for a break.” She handed them each a pen and a resolution form and shooed them off toward the bonfires. “And now you have time to write down and ditch old resolutions, or write down all the bad crap that happened this year that you want to let go of and feed it to those magnificent swan butts.” She winked at them. “Go have some fun.”

“Well, where do you want to sit?” Max asked, looking around. Most of the benches around the small bonfires were full.

“Over there,” Andi said, pointing to the edge of the square.

“Where?” Max asked, squinting through the smoke and crowd.

“Follow me,” Andi said. But then, her hand brushed the back of his and automatically his fingers entwined with hers. It

was triggering memories like fireworks in his head as his thumb moved on its own, rubbing the back of her hand as she led him through the crowd. He didn't miss the smiles and greetings from the old faces as they passed. Even a few muttered or whispered exchanges between people, "I wondered how long until they ...", "It's good to see them together again ...", "She sure didn't waste any time ...", "Look at him. Like a puppy ...". He knew he should be pissed about some of what was being said. But at the moment, he was having a hard enough time keeping his pulse in check and his brain out of the gutter. There was something about touching Andi Morgan that ran an electric shock through his core, all the way to his soul. And the four whiskey-laden cocoas he'd been plied with by Miss Mandie weren't making his thoughts any clearer.

"Here we go," Andi sighed when they reached an empty bench by the bonfire in front of the library. It was the furthest from the rest of the event and for that, Max was thankful. The things he'd overheard other people saying about them as they passed were starting to sink in.

She'd held his hand to get through the crowd, but she let go once they reached the empty bench. And in the firelight, as she sat down and looked over the form, he could see the huge rock from her engagement ring sparkling in the flames.

"Well, I didn't really make any resolutions this last year ... at least not one of the big five," Andi said with a sigh. He could see the pink in her cheeks and knew it wasn't from the heat of the bonfire.

“The big five?” he asked.

She nodded. “Lose weight, lose crap, lose a bad habit, lose stress, or lose your free time to a hobby you’ll end up hating in a few months.”

“With a sales pitch like that, we should have been able to have them lined up around the block for our booth,” Max chuckled.

“What are you going to write?” Andi asked, pausing to glance over at his blank paper.

“I don’t know. What are you going to write?”

She sighed. “Well, Jordan told us to write down all the bad crap that happened to us this last year. I understand the symbolic nature of the act and then burning it, but,” she looked doubtfully down at the paper on her knees. “... if writing them down would have helped, I would have fired up dad’s barbecue months ago.”

“Well, it can’t hurt,” Max said, his voice soft.

She looked up at him and nodded. “Yeah, it can’t hurt.”

He started to write, trying to put in as few words as possible how much the last year had sucked. His fingers were sweating on the pen and he was writing as small as possible, just in case she glanced over and saw ...

“Ok,” she said after a few minutes. “I ... I think I’m ready.” She looked over at him. “What about you?”

He quickly balled the paper up in his fist. “Let’s shove them up some fiery swan butts.”

The papers burned quickly and he felt himself take a deep breath, feeling relieved that everything he wrote down was now gone, lost in the ashes of the barrel bonfire. Beside him, he heard Andi breathe her own sigh of relief.

“Well, what should we do now?”

She looked up at him and sighed. “I suppose we can’t postpone the inevitable for much longer, right?”

He froze, what was she ...

“Signing up for a resolution club,” she said.

He exhaled and nodded. “Yeah. Might as well get it over with.” Andi led the way inside Town Hall, Max staying right on her heels. Tables were set up in rows snaking around the length of the large open room. It looked like the exact opposite of the Hope Island summer fair. Instead of hosting displays, most of the booths were bare except for a single poster announcing the name of the club and asking people to join.

“Hmmm,” Max said as they walked down the row. “Well, I don’t have a clutter situation and I’m not going to try to subsist on ... eggs for a whole year.” He squinted at Mrs. Bumble’s sign as they walked by.

“And I tried meditation once,” Andi said, nodding at a booth as they went by. “I fall asleep five minutes in, every time.” She grinned up at Max. “Did wonders for my insomnia though.”

They rounded the corner and paused in front of Mrs. Abbott's booth. Her sign had, "The Jog and Bond Club" printed across it in neat block letters.

"Huh," Andi said, pausing to consider it.

"I like to jog," Max said. That was only partially true. What he liked to do was run, but right now he was having a hard enough time walking. Jogging would be something to work towards, and if Andi ...

"Me too," she said with a nod. "I'm sold."

"Oh good," Mrs. Abbott said when they asked if they could sign up. "We've got a big crew but not a lot of young ones. But now with you two here, I'm sure more of them will follow. What size of jogging suit should I order for you?"

"Uh ..." Max said after a moment of confused silence.

"I'm getting them for everyone so we'll all match. They're just standard sizes, you know, small, medium, large ..."

"Uh, I guess medium for me?" Andi asked. Mrs. Abbott nodded and looked at Max.

"Extra ... large?"

She wrote down their sizes and beamed from him to Andi. "I must say, it sure is nice to see the two of you together again. After everything that's happened ..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Melrose," Andi said quickly, stepping away from Mrs. Abbott's table. "I didn't mean to clog up the line."

“We’ll see you two on Wednesday morning! Bright and early at six am sharp. We’ll all meet at my house to get into our jogging suits before we hit the trail!” Andi and Max waved so she’d understand that they heard her and then they moved on. They were quiet as they walked on. He’d been irritated when he’d heard the whispers and gossip about them as they moved around the bonfires outside, but something about how Andi had cut off Mrs. Abbott, like she didn’t want to even hear what the woman was saying and grin and bear it, the old Hope traditional way, irked him. He was trying to work out the best way to ask her about it when she came to a stop beside him.

“Damn it,” she muttered.

“What? What is it?” Max asked, looking around. The booth in front of them was Esther Jacob’s. The sign said, “Flush Sugar for the New Year! Join our Breaking Sugar-Free Club!”

“I was really hoping her club was about eating more donuts or baking more donuts, or hell I would have taken *dressing* like more donuts, but ...”

“Instead, it’s apparently about ‘flushing’ the donuts?” Max asked.

“And why use *that* verb? Couldn’t it be ‘dropping sugar for the new year’? Or even *jettisoning* sugar for the new year?”

“Yeah, seems like a poor choice of words. Probably why no one’s in line to sign up.”

Andi gave a disgusted sigh beside him. “Well, wish me luck.”

“What? Why are you ...” but it was too late, she was already within yelling distance of Esther. She’d crossed over into no man’s land and he wasn’t brave enough to follow her. He watched from afar as she got in two words for every three minutes of Esther’s talking. He let his gaze wander, still baffled as to why she was signing up for a second club when their assignment from Jordan was only one.

“Hey, Max.” Max turned on the spot to see Zane Lawrence, smiling at him. He’d seen Zane in the support group meeting but they hadn’t gotten a chance to speak. “I saw you and Andi out working the resolution booth. Jordan gave me a pass so I could come run my club booth.”

Max dropped his gaze to the sign taped to Zane’s table. “Zane’s Mobile Gym?”

“Yeah,” Zane said, nodding quickly. “Hope doesn’t have a gym, but I’d like to start one, one day. Until then, I’ve outfitted my old four-wheeler with weight racks and a cart I can pull behind it that has press machines and leg curl machines ... all kinds of stuff. And I’m looking for people to join my club to try it out. It’s like a free membership for the month of January to lift weights all over town.” He grinned at Max, his eyes wide and hopeful. “I was thinking it would be like the ice cream truck. I even have this noise machine thing I can play from it.” He turned and pressed a button on the speaker beside him. What sounded like an air raid filled the air. “Whoops!” he shouted. He punched the button again and the air was filled with the tinny ice cream truck muzak. “See? And anytime my club members hear it, they know it’s ‘Sweat

and Wild' time." Max must have looked confused because Zane quickly pointed at his sign again. "That's the name of the club, The Sweat and Wild Mobile Gym Club. I know it's kind of long, but it's kind of a working title." Zane kept his hopeful gaze on Max. There really was only one way for Max to get out of this situation.

"Sure, sign me up." From Zane's reaction, an outsider might have thought Max had agreed to give him his kidney.

"Awesome! Well, we're not starting tomorrow, because everyone is going to be hungover. But on Tuesday, we'll be meeting for our first mobile session at the gazebo at eight am."

Max looked up in time to see Andi hurrying back. "I'll be there." He shook Zane's hand and turned to meet her.

She glanced from Max to Zane and raised an eyebrow as she approached. "What? Did you decide to sign up for a second club too?"

"In my defense," Max said, "I was left unsupervised." He looked behind her, back at Esther's table which was once again deserted, though Esther was waving at him and trying to get him to come over. "Tell me again *why* you decided to join Esther's club?"

"I didn't tell you the first time," she said. "Wanna head back outside, it's really hot in here?" It didn't seem too warm to him, but he nodded and followed her back out anyway. Why wouldn't she just tell him why she'd joined Esther's club?

“Seriously, does Esther have some kind of blackmail on you?” Max asked.

“Everyone, the time is two minutes to eleven. If you’re participating in the ‘Out with the Mold’ fight, please remember these three simple rules: Nothing frozen, nothing rotten, and nothing thrown at those who are not participating. Let’s not start the new year with a visit from our EMTs, as amazing as they are,” the mayor’s voice boomed from the loudspeaker on the steps of the gazebo.

“Max! Andi! Over here!” It was Mr. Morgan, waving them over to where Mrs. Morgan and Amelia were standing with a huddle of three coolers, lined up in front of the closed hardware store.

“I’ll be over there in a minute,” Max said. “I need to go back for my cooler. I left it in the booth.”

“God, I’ve missed this place,” Jordan chuckled when Max approached. She nodded at the crowd, surveying the contents of coolers all across the square. “Looks like some kind of middle-of-the-night picnic, though I’m pretty sure what’s about to happen is about the exact opposite.” Max chuckled as he pulled the red cooler out from under the table.

“So are you going to join in or just watch the fun from here?” he asked.

She grinned. “I think Buddy and I will just enjoy our premium seats this year. Maybe we’ll get in on the action next year.”

“Well if you change your mind, between me and the Morgans, we have four coolers full of leftovers and we’d be happy to share.”

Jordan nodded at him. “I saw you and Andi are back together again.”

“Uh, no ... we’re just ... old friends.”

“Oh. Right,” Jordan said. She sounded like she believed him, but something in her eyes told him she didn’t. Not really.

“Really, we’re not ...” he trailed off as the mayor cleared his throat into the microphone again.

“Better hustle so the first food fight blood to be drawn won’t be yours,” she chuckled, waving him on.

He wanted to stay and argue with her, but the blast of a handheld air horn filled the air, followed by the mayor’s traditional yell of, “Play meatball!”

Andi

Andi was fidgeting, tossing one of her dad's dried-out meatballs from one hand to the other as she scanned the crowd looking for Max. He wasn't back yet and the fight was about to start. And what if someone hit him and knocked him down? She remembered the cart crash at Bumble's and the cat fiasco at the hospital when he'd lost his prosthetic.

"There he is," Amelia said beside her. She was standing on one of the coolers which added at least a foot to her height making it easy for her to crane over everyone else. But, before Andi could spot him, the horn blew, the mayor yelled, "Play meatball!" And the fight started.

"Max!" she yelled, grabbing Amelia's arm and pulling herself up to look around. She finally spotted him, skirting a spaghetti versus linguini fight happening between the Melrose clan and the Peabody herd. He got hit on the side of the head with a handful of what looked like alfredo or clam sauce and she saw him duck and try to hurry on.

"I'm going in after him," Andi muttered.

Amelia grabbed her arm. "You can't. It's suicide."

Andi turned to look at Amelia and the two of them could barely keep it together. “Then I’ll see you in lunch lady hell!”

Amelia shivered. “Lunch lady hell sounds really bad.”

“Cover me,” Andi said, handing Amelia her meatball and bracing her as a bag of wilted salad exploded against them as Miss Mandie jogged by, smacking people in the gut or on the butt with it like a leaky salad-filled pillow at a pillow fight.

And then Andi took off, making as straight a beeline as she could for Max, doing her best to side-step a herd of teachers led by Abby Locke and Aaron Burns and out for vengeance, pelting high school students with discs of burned mac and cheese.

“Max!” He’d taken cover behind one of the bonfire benches, a Ziploc bag of lasagna open in front of him. He was mashing the slices into balls and hurling them at Reverend Anderson who was armed with a spoon and a bottle of what smelled like strawberry jam that had turned. Rev had taken refuge behind one of the mini bonfires, leaning out to try to flick spoonfuls of the jam at them.

“Oh good, reinforcements,” Max chuckled when Andi dropped down beside him. “I hope you know how to make a lasagna bomb, soldier.”

Andi raised an eyebrow at him. *Oh, he wanted to play, did he?* “Soldier,” she growled, “I was making lasagna bombs when you were still trying to figure out stuffing grenades.” She dug a hand into the bag and pulled out the clammy noodles and mixture. They had to work fast. She could see

Turk and Jake Whorley heading their way with a bag of gray goo that they were flinging at people like snot.

“Ew, what do you think they’re flinging?” Andi asked.

“With any luck, we won’t have to find out.” As one, they reeled back and let fly two perfect lasagna balls, the size of baseballs, right at Turk and Jake who’d just turned to face them. Max’s ball hit Turk right between the eyes, knocking him back. Andi’s hit Jake in the chest and he stumbled, dropping the bag of gray goo. It spilled across the cobblestones and made other fighters move away, trying to keep their feet out of whatever the weird substance was.

“Yes!” Andi yelled, jumping up and down. “Direct hit!”

Max was excited too. He let out a whoop and grabbed Andi around the waist, swinging her in a full circle while she laughed. Then he felt it. The toe of his prosthetic caught between two cobblestones and he was unbalanced. He quickly set Andi down and turned to his leg.

“What is it?” Andi asked quickly. “Oh, I’ve got you.” He felt her arm around him, trying to steady him. He yanked his prosthetic out of the crack and tried to secure it on his knee again. Andi turned to face his chest.

“Andi ... what are you ...”

“Brace for impact she muttered, eyes squeezed shut.” And then he felt it. Granted, Andi took the brunt of it, shielding him from the bulk but when Bart let fly with that melted, freezer-burned canister of cold vanilla used-to-be ice cream, Max

caught it in the face and shoulders. Automatically, he squeezed Andi against him, trying to shield her from the worst of it with his arms, but she was still soaked. They both were.

“Bart’s an asshole,” She shivered through gritted teeth. They’d ducked down a side street far enough to have cover so they could wring out their shirts. The night was cold and the fight always went until the countdown, at least thirty minutes away.

“Yeah,” Max agreed, feeling his stomach twist itself into knots as Andi turned her back to him and reached for the hem of her shirt. He forced himself to turn his back on her. “I foresee an ice cream-related punishment in his future for every month of the year.”

“And pictures taken of his anguish each month so we can make a calendar and sell them to everyone who got ice creamed tonight,” Andi muttered.

“Agreed.” Max knew his voice was muffled as he pulled his shirt over his head and started wringing it out. Silence fell between them and he had to keep his focus on the task at hand so he wouldn’t remember that he was standing in the shadows behind Dirk Patterson’s detached garage, half-naked with Andi Morgan. “I’m thinking we should superglue two waffle cones to his chest like Madonna for January. Thoughts?” Andi didn’t answer right away, so he turned to look back at her, just in time to see her hair swish as she looked away. Had ... had she been checking him out? He couldn’t stop the haughty smile crossing his lips as he took his time wringing out his shirt. He

glanced back at her again and saw she had her shirt off too. Her pale skin looked like a reflection of the moon above. There was something on her upper left shoulder. He couldn't make it out in the dark. A tattoo? But if he asked her about it, she'd know he was looking. She finished wringing her shirt out and tugged it over her head and he reluctantly did the same.

“Ok,” Andi said. “Super Glue waffle-cone bra for January. I'm thinking we should rig up the same industrial-sized canister of ice cream over his bed to slowly drip on him in his sleep for the month of February. But we'll have to figure out how to strap him to his bed. Maybe duck tape? You lure him up there and I'll be hiding under it, ready to tape him down?”

“Sounds like a plan.” But they didn't have time to discuss the other months. The fight was still raging and Max noticed more than once when townsfolk seemed to be working out some inner frustration with each other via crunchy veal piccata, burned fruitcake, and disintegrating spaghetti. One favorite target seemed to be Dirk Patterson. But, Max had to admit, he *did* kind of bring it on himself. Dirk was dressed in camouflage with a hand-stitched badge across the back that read, “The Leftover King”. And he had a messenger bag full of burned waffles and pancakes already soaked in maple syrup. Every time he paused to “reload” anyone in the vicinity would stop throwing things at each other and combine their forces against Dirk.

“In everyone else's defense,” Andi said, scraping out another handful of lasagna and chucking it at the mayor as he

ran by, “maple syrup is a bit too far.”

“Really?” Max asked. “Maple syrup is too far? I just saw Mrs. Thompson jog by, pushing her grocery cart, outfitted with what looked like a cold chili trebuchet.”

Andi rolled her eyes. “It was just a ladle hooked up to a pulley system.”

“You say that like it’s a normal thing,” Max laughed, dodging a freezer-burned burrito.

The battle raged on as people ran out of ammo and started scooping up whatever was on the ground around them to hurl at the remaining fighters.

“Good,” Max muttered. “The more people wear home, the less we’ll have to clean up when this is over.”

“Alright, folks!” The mayor called, pausing to blow loose spaghetti out of his eyes and then wipe it off the microphone. “A truce has been called! Everyone, join me for the countdown. Ten, nine, eight ...”

Andi turned to look at Max, her heart racing. People kissed at midnight on New Year’s. Was she supposed to ... did Max expect ... he turned to look at her and she met his gaze. The sound of everyone counting around them grew dim in her ears. Max had ice cream drying in his hair and eyebrows, making him look like a muppet in the wild. He was smiling that half smile that made the dimple in his left cheek stand out. God help her, in that moment, she wanted to kiss him so badly. But

she knew she couldn't. She knew it even before she heard the annoying ding of her phone in her back pocket.

"Two, one ... Happy New Year's," the mayor yelled.

"Happy New Year's," everyone answered.

"Should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be forgot and the days of auld lang syne," the people around them were singing.

Old acquaintances be forgot. No, she wasn't going to forget Brandon. And she was difficult to deal with at the moment, but she wasn't going to forget Michelle either.

"Sorry, I have to get this," she said to Max, reaching for her phone.

M: When we were kids, Brandon and Dad, and I would stay up until midnight on New Year's and watch the ball drop in New York together on TV. God, Andi, I miss him so much right now.

Andi sighed and tried to choke down the lump in her throat.

A: Me too.

"Everything ok?" Max asked.

"Uh, yeah. Just a ... a friend, wishing me a happy new year."

Max was quiet as they started shaking out garbage bags and scooping up leftovers off the cobblestones.

"Happy New Year, you two," Agnes Redding called to Max and Andi as they passed.

“It sure is nice to see you two together again,” Sue Whitehorse slurred. “Too bad it came too late for my big payout in the marriage betting pool when you two were graduating.”

“We’re not together,” Andi said, trying to take some mental deep breaths so she wouldn’t snap. The women frowned but continued on. Seriously. Her fiance had just died. How could people be so callous? And to just keep reminding Max when he probably wanted to move on too. It was just ... frickin’ rude.

“You two are a mean combo,” Reverend Anderson chuckled as he passed them. “Heaven help when you two get married and there’s a whole pack of Lyons ...”

“Jesus, we’re *not* together!” Andi barked, only realizing after who she was talking to. “Sorry, Reverend. But Max and I aren’t in a relationship.”

Reverend Anderson gave her a quick nod and then hurried off towards the church and his parish on the other side of the square.

“Sorry,” Andi muttered to Max as they cleaned. Max didn’t reply. He was cleaning faster now, keeping his back to her as he shoveled, moving further away from her. *Of course he is*, she thought. *Then people wouldn’t keep assuming they were together.*

They’d finished with the trash and had started on the folding chairs and tables inside with the rest of the support group

when she finally got a look at Max's face. His expression was stony and his gaze was focused on the task at hand.

“What's wrong?” Andi finally asked, voluntarily hefting a bag of trash to the dumpster so she could follow him. She knew at some point tonight she needed to apologize for the rest of the town putting the two of them together in their gossip again.

“Nothing,” Max muttered. His tone was pleasant but his expression didn't match.

“Max, I know you. What's wrong?”

He tossed the bag of garbage into the dumpster and turned to look at her. “If you know me so well, do you have to ask?”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?”

He chuckled, but there was no mirth in it. “Every guy dreams of hearing his high school girlfriend loudly and emphatically yelling at every towns person that they're not together anymore.”

“But we *aren't* together anymore,” she said.

He sighed. “I know that. Believe me, I know that. And the whole town should know that.” He ran a hand through his hair and turned, glaring at the deserted square around them. She saw the muscles flex in his jaw when his dark eyes found hers again. “Hell, you're wearing another man's ring on your finger. With the way the gossip mill is around here, you'd think they'd have at least figured out how to put one and one together.” Andi tried to say something, but he wasn't finished.

“And I know we’ll never be together again. Man, at this rate, all of Selton Island probably knows from the way you’ve been yelling about it. The town is just ... it’s Hope, you know? I can’t believe you’re surprised. They see you and me and they remember ...” The emotion was leaving his face now. His anger was gone, replaced by the steady, stoic Max she’d always known. “It’s probably better if we don’t hang around each other and just ... try to stay out of each other’s way while we’re both on the island.”

“Max ...” Andi breathed, almost choking on the hard knot forming in her throat. She saw the muscles in his jaw and neck flex. He wasn’t meeting her gaze. His eyes were fixed on the ground between them.

“Because, even just being around you,” he continued, “goofing off and talking, it’s too easy to think that that door is still open, even a little, and ... I don’t want to live like that.”

“So what, you just want to throw away our friendship?” Andi asked.

Max shook his head. “Andi, you dumped me on the day I was leaving for basic training. We never got to talk about it or have a fight or ... *anything*. You left me a *letter*. Like that was supposed to make everything ok? You broke my fucking heart. People don’t do that to someone they love. *Friends* don’t do that to someone they love.” He moved around her and headed back inside.

Andi felt like she’d just had all the air knocked out of her. She glanced back at Town Hall, still lit up and teeming with

the other support group members and a few stragglers. She followed Max's outline as he trudged back to the building, barely recognizing him in the shadows. His walk was slower than it had been, stiffer.

And then she turned her back on him and walked home. After all, what would be the point in running after him, shaking him, and telling him how she'd pined for him for three years at college before she even went on her first date? How it took another year before she met Brandon and her life had felt whole again. What would be the point in telling him how much it had hurt when he'd never written to her? Because friends would write.

But, apparently, she and Max Lyons were not even friends.

Max

A part of Max knew he'd been too hard on Andi. He tried not to be surprised when she didn't come back inside to help with the last of the cleanup. *Why would she?* he thought. He'd just yelled at her and told her they weren't friends. *Nice going on that, by the way.* He hadn't meant to be so harsh. But every time she'd loudly and quickly corrected a well-meaning townspeople who thought they were back together, it felt like a kick in the ribs. Yeah, ok, they weren't together, but ... did she have to sound so *adamant*, so ... *horrified* by the idea? The one that had hurt the most from all sides was Reverend Anderson, talking about a pack of Lyons ... and then her reaction. God, that had sucked.

“Good work tonight, everyone,” Jordan called as the last of the plastic trash barrels were wiped out and stacked and the lights were turned out. Everyone still standing looked like they'd cleaned the floor with their bodies since they were all covered in leftover stains, including Jordan. She caught Max's eye and grinned, motioning down at herself. “Even spectators weren't safe from the fray.” She turned to look down at Buddy,

trotting at her heels. “Though, Buddy thought he’d died and gone to dog heaven.”

Max chuckled, but his heart wasn’t in it. Jordan focused on him, giving him that assessing look, like Jackson ... like Andi. *Crap*. Was he just that easy to read or was there something so off about him that everyone just felt *compelled* to . . . ?

“You free for coffee tomorrow? I’ve got something I want to run by you,” Jordan asked.

“Well, I ...”

“Say, nine o’clock at De-Floured?” Jordan was a lot more personable than her mother, but she wasn’t standing behind the door when the pushiness gene was handed out.

“Uh ... sure,” he said.

With a final nod, she clapped him on the back and said good night to the rest of the group as they split off to head home in different directions. Max made the trek home, his head full of how badly he’d wanted to kiss Andi at midnight, their fight, and whatever the hell Jordan wanted to talk about the next morning.

“Wha? Happy New Year!” his mom yelled when he came in the front door and startled her awake in her chair. Sarge staggered to his feet, whining in surprise. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one he’d startled awake.

“Happy New Year, Mom,” he said, trying to force a smile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Oh, I wasn’t sleeping,” she muttered. He mouthed along with her as she said, “I was just resting my eyes.” She caught him mocking her and reached out to pinch his side. “It’s after one. Getting home kind of late, aren’t you?”

He shrugged and took the red cooler into the kitchen to rinse it out. “We all had to stay late to clean up after the food fight.”

“How did that go?” she asked. He could tell this was what she’d wanted to hear about the most, but decorum dictated that she pretend to be interested in his whereabouts and night’s activities *besides* the fight.

“It went well. The lasagna balls were a big hit. Meaning they hit whatever I threw at them.”

She crossed her arms proudly. “I knew it. Going heavy on the ricotta makes them easier to mold into balls. What did you think of the sauce-to-noodle ratio? More sauce next time?”

Max rolled his eyes. “Isn’t there a rule against making something just so you can have the leftovers for the Mold fight?”

She shrugged. “If there is, nobody follows it. Well?” She waved a hand at him. “Give me some highlights.” He sat down on the couch and when she joined him, he started with his jam versus lasagna standoff with Reverend Anderson and then progressed to Bart and his run-by creaming.

“And then we nailed Turk and Jake Whorley and made them drop this bag of gray crap they were flinging at people. It turned out to be gravy.”

“We?” she asked.

Damn it. He’d done it again. “Me and ... Andi.”

“Max,” she said softly.

“I’m beat,” he said, focusing on the coffee table, hoping she’d think he just hadn’t heard her. *Balance out*, he thought to himself as he got to his feet. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He paused. “Do you want anything from De-Floured for breakfast? I’m meeting Jordan there at nine. She says she has something she wants to talk to me about.”

He watched her mentally set aside whatever it was she’d wanted to say and instead smiled up at him. “Surprise me.”

It was a long night for there only being five hours of darkness left by the time Max’s head hit the pillow. Every time he closed his eyes, he either saw Andi’s hurt expression as he’d told her they weren’t friends or the outline of her curves and that creamy white skin with the dark tattoo on her upper left shoulder. Probably the name of some asshole she’d dated. Or the one she was going to marry.

He knew he wasn’t being fair. He just ... it sucked. The whole thing sucked. He’d understood when they were moving in different directions after high school. It had sucked then too, but it had made sense for them to not be together. But now, by some cruel twist of fate, the timing had lined up and they were both home, but they still couldn’t be ...

Max gave up on sleeping at ten after six. His head and his leg were throbbing and he couldn’t get his mind to put down

the aluminum bat it was beating him with. The house was cold and quiet like every morning. He started coffee without thinking and had the fire going before he remembered he was meeting Jordan at nine. He drank the coffee anyway, remembering a faint Hope Island detail about Miss Mandie's January coffee having a low to non-existent caffeine count. And the last thing he needed this morning on top of his sleep deprivation, pounding head, and throbbing leg was caffeine withdrawal. Sarge had trailed him on the way down the stairs and was snuffling by the front door with his leash in his mouth. He turned and looked at Max and whined. Max got to his feet and sighed. "Back yard not good enough for your morning business anymore?" Sarge whined again.

Max had to admit that the cold morning air felt good on his aching head. The whole town was quiet as they moved down streets to the joggers' path. Sarge wasn't pulling and he didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, content to pause anytime Max needed to adjust his prosthetic or take a patch of cobblestones slowly so he didn't have a repeat of getting his leg stuck. Falling down and being stuck until someone could come and help him up would be somewhere near the top of the list of the most embarrassing things he could think to do. He tried to breathe and think as they walked. It took about a mile of thinking through everything before he could admit, at least inside his head, that he wasn't actually mad at Andi. He was mad at the town for treating them now and, if he was being honest, back when they were in high school, like they were some kind of entertainment to watch and make predictions

about. To *bet on*, for pete's sake. Ok, he was a little mad at Andi for how insistent she'd been that they weren't together. As if it was the worst idea she could think of.

He took Sarge home at eight and decided to head to De-Floured early. He needed sugar and he needed a quiet place to think. Of all the busybodies in Hope, Miss Mandie was the only one that would leave a person alone when that's what they needed. He pushed through the door and immediately ducked as a muffin sailed over his head, hit the door frame above him and fell, bouncing off his shoulder.

"I'm not doing it, Bart. These muffins suck."

"Fine! Then just plan on business being light this month. You can't fight Town Hall, Miss Mandie!" Bart and Miss Mandie were both hands on hips, breathing like a pair of winded bulls, preparing to lock horns again any minute. Max looked around the bakery and was surprised to find it completely empty. He picked up the muffin from the floor and headed to the counter.

"Morning," he muttered.

"Oh, blow it out your southern exposure," Miss Mandie growled. She turned on her heel and hit the swinging kitchen door so hard Max held his breath, half expecting it to snap off its hinges.

Bart let out a weary sigh and shook his head. "Miss Mandie *hates* this time of year."

Max frowned. "Why?"

“Why!?” Miss Mandie’s bat-like hearing was legendary. She smacked the door open and leaned against it with one arm, glaring out at him. “Because everyone in this town exploits New Years’ Resolutions for their own gain. They convince everyone that they need to lose weight, ditch the sweets, and switch over to eating nothing but squash or something. It’s downright sadistic, and not the good kind where the people they’re doing it to actually enjoy it. I mean, I’ve liked being the one in leather cuffs from time to time, but ...”

“What she means,” Bart said loudly, giving her some serious side-eye, “is that she’s pissed because a dozen of our morning regulars didn’t show up this morning and when she called to check on them, told her they’d all joined the weight loss and diet resolution clubs last night.” Bart’s hands were on his hips again as he turned back to face her. “I *tried* to tell her we needed to expand the menu to have more healthy options, but ...”

“But these muffins you came up with *suck*.”

Max looked down at the muffin in his hand. It was still warm. He lifted it to his nose and smelled it. “Smells good.”

Bart looked vindicated. “See?” he spat at Miss Mandie. “I told you ...”

“He doesn’t eat with his nose,” she growled. She turned her fierce glare on Max. “Go ahead, try it.”

Max broke the muffin in half and paused. “Uh, there’s a whole sliver of ... carrot in here. And ... two almonds?”

“Oh! You got the Bob Ridgely version,” Bart said.

“The what?” Max asked.

Bart grinned. “So I call them ‘Flash-Your-Muffins’. Each of them either has the carrot and nuts in the center for Bob Ridgely, the flasher in *High Anxiety*, or cherry pie filling which is the Warrant version.”

Max choked on the bite of muffin he’d been chewing.

“See?” Miss Mandie said, waving a hand at him. “They suck.”

“No,” he coughed. “They’re good. They just ...” But his response was drowned out by the argument flaring up again between her and Bart. And it was just as well. He wasn’t quite sure how to articulate that the reason he was coughing was because he hadn’t realized what the carrot and almonds were supposed to be until *after* he was chewing them up.

“I’m going back to the mixer,” Miss Mandie muttered, sticking a spatula in Bart’s face. “And I’m going to top your flashers.”

“Top away, I’ve made something *topless*. It cannot be topped!” Neither of them could keep a straight face, but with a disgruntled “harrumph”, they spun away from each other, noses in the air. Miss Mandie disappeared into the kitchen and Bart focused on Max. “What can I get you?”

“Uh, coffee ... I guess. Though, it’s now officially January.”

Bart put a finger to his lips and glanced back at the kitchen. He leaned across the counter and lowered his voice to a

whisper. “Miss Mandie was so distracted with choking on hatred for hard-boiled eggs and joggers this morning that she forgot to make her Winter Ween coffee. And there was still some Christmas Chaos blend left so I made a pot in the decaf pot so she’d never know. So, if Miss Mandie asks, I’ll need you to pretend you’re dragging ass and whine a little about how much you need some caffeine.”

“For you, Bart,” he gripped Bart’s shoulder. “I can do this.”

He sat at the table under the window with his coffee and watched the sunrise over the square, listening to Miss Mandie force-feed Bart two different versions of what she was calling “Morning Wood Muffins”.

“Because they have a ton of cinnamon and a hint of spruce in them,” Miss Mandie argued. “Cinnamon is a bark, and spruce is a tree. Therefore, Morning Wood Muffins!”

A few other early risers had stopped in for their morning coffee and pastries but no one seemed to have much energy or be in anything resembling a good mood. Though, Max reasoned, it probably had something to do with the new pot of coffee Miss Mandie had brewed.

Not that he was “Miss Mary Sunshine” even with a cup of high-octane caffeine in his hand. The throbbing in his head had stopped, but it had been replaced by a skipping and repeating replay of his fight with Andi the night before.

“Hey Max,” Jordan’s voice jerked him out of the loop and he looked up to meet her tired gaze. Buddy was on her heels,

snuffling the ground as she made her way over to him. “Mind if I sit?”

“Please,” Max said, motioning to the chair across from him. A part of him hoped Jordan would make their meeting a short one. The bakery was starting to fill up with the grumbles of every towns person who took a meatball to the face and too many of Miss Mandie’s drinks to the stomach the night before. All he needed at this point was for someone like Mrs. Thompson to wander over to him and make a comment about either him and Andi. Or, because he was sitting with her, him and Jordan. “So, what did you want to run by me?”

She sipped her coffee and fixed him with that x-raying look that was every degree as strong as the one her mother had given him right before conning him into going to the support group meeting. “I was thinking,” she finally said. “You know, there’s not a lot of support for us vets all the way out here on the island.”

Max nodded. “No. But, are there that many of us out here?”

She chuckled. “You’d be surprised. Reverend Anderson, Fred Welks, Lawrence Elton ... didn’t you play football in high school?”

He frowned at her. “Well, yeah.”

“Well, Coach Hendricks is a Coast Guard veteran.”

He just blinked at her. “He is? He ... he never said.”

She shrugged. “He had some pretty dicey recovery missions. He doesn’t like to talk about it much.”

“How do you know so much about it?”

She shrugged. “I just listen.” They were quiet for a moment, both of them staring into their coffee. “You know, after I got back from Afghanistan, the night terrors were pretty bad. Every time I closed my eyes, I was back on my chopper, choking on the black smoke from my engine as we nosedived into that sandbox. Woke up screaming and crying ... I could still smell ... Anyway, when the Army discharged me, I thought my life was over. I mean, I’m thirty-six. What the hell else am I going to do with the rest of my life? I thought I’d serve until I was fifty, maybe longer, and then retire if I was unlucky enough to come home.”

He frowned at her again. “Unlucky?”

She gave him a knowing smile. “You know what I mean. When you’re in it every day, that’s your life. It’s what you think about when you get up in the morning, it’s what you do all day, and at night you hope that you’re so damn dead on your feet that you can just pass out and *not think* about it. There’s no work-life balance, no home life and work life separation in deployment. You eat the sand, drink the sand, sleep in the sand. But you never think you’re the one that’s going to get it. It’ll be someone else. Someone down the line. Not me. That’s why the thought of it all ending one day is so terrifying. Then, when it does, and you’re still alive, you have to come back home. You have to be a civilian again. And you have to try to figure out how to be ‘normal’. Trying to remember that morbid jokes about missions going sideways and the smell of barracks’ shitters aren’t good table

conversation. Remembering how to grocery shop and how to relax when you're walking through a crowd ...” She shook her head. “Shit, I think it's worse than basic.”

Max chuckled and turned his mug in his hand. “I actually really liked basic.”

“There were definitely parts of it that I liked,” she said with a nod. “I miss the life. I miss the women and men in my unit. They really were my brothers and sisters.” She shrugged. “Being an only child, it was ... perfect. Being one of them.” She sighed. “But all good things ... and bad things too, eventually come to an end.” She slapped the top of the table, breaking the nostalgic spell that had been settling over them. “Anyway, seeing as how you're around for a bit, I was wondering if you'd be interested in helping me get all the island vets together just to hang out, swap stories, try to recreate some of that basic training magic.”

He nodded and smiled up at her. “Yeah. I'd like that.”

She nodded and drained her coffee. “Thanks. Never hurts to be reminded that no matter what we went through, life goes on. We're just in charge of our own marching orders now. No brass breathing down your neck, and unfortunately, no drill sergeant making you feel at home.”

Max scratched the back of his neck and grinned up at her when she stood. “I don't know, Bumble, if you miss it that much, I think I can do a pretty good impression of *my* old drill.”

“Sir, yessir,” she muttered, nodding at him and raising her empty cup. “And it’s Chief Bumble, Sergeant. See you at the meeting on Wednesday night. I didn’t see Andi at the end of the cleanup last night. Hope she’s ok. Remind her about Wednesday when you see her?”

“Yeah,” he said, trailing off, not knowing what else to say. She waved at him and left. *When he saw her.* At this point, he didn’t know when that would be.

Andi

Andi didn't know why she even bothered getting into bed. She hadn't slept. She'd just glared up at Aragorn in the dark, thinking what a lucky fictional jerk he was with his clear purpose and the bad guy clearly defined and everything so damn black and white. Her head was a mess of Brandon, Max, and a hard, greasy ball of guilt that was sitting on her chest, trying to suffocate her.

At six, she finally rolled out of bed and got dressed for the day. She stumbled down the stairs and when she heard her mom bustling in the kitchen, she pulled on her coat and decided to get coffee at De-Floured on her way to work. She wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone and De-Floured would be busy with the morning regulars. She could slip in with a greeting and slip out with her coffee and a pastry. As she walked through the quiet dark streets, she tried to untangle the mess inside her head. When she finally found the end of the thread, she pulled, and came up with Max's face, angrily telling her that he didn't like her correcting everyone, telling them that they weren't together. *But they weren't*. Why did he care so much? They hadn't seen each other in eight years and

apparently, they weren't even friends. *Because you drew attention to him by saying it.* And then it dawned on her. He was embarrassed. She'd embarrassed him. He'd been laying low since coming back to the island. He probably wouldn't have even come to the Bash if it hadn't been for the support group. She knew she wouldn't have. There was a figure hurrying toward her ahead, bundled up, head down against the wind, clutching a bag of groceries to their chest.

"Tessa?" Andi croaked.

The figure paused a few feet in front of her. "Oh, Andi. Good morning."

Andi frowned. "What are you doing out so early?"

"Oh, ran out of cat food. And human food. Had to make a quick run to Bumble's."

"At five in the morning? Bumble's was open?"

"Yeah, something about a resolution club she started," Tessa said. "There was a whole group there, buying eggs. And the whole store smelled like hard-boiled eggs."

Andi sighed. "Don't know. Don't wanna know." She focused on Tessa again. "I didn't see you at the end of the night. I meant to walk home with you ..."

"I had to head home early. Sage doesn't like to be alone for too long. She's ... she's gotten spoiled with me working from home."

Andi nodded. "I'll bet." Tessa was fidgeting, shifting her weight from foot to foot and looking around them. "Is

everything ok?"

"What?" Tessa asked, freezing and looking back at her.
"Oh, yeah. Just gotta pee and need to get back to Sage."

"I won't keep you. But maybe wanna hang out later? I get off at six."

"Sorry, busy tonight. I have a late meeting. See ya later."

"On New Year's Day?" But Tessa was already hurrying away toward her dark house. Andi frowned after her. Something was going on with Tessa. But whatever it was, she apparently didn't feel like sharing. Andi's phone dinged in her pocket and she let out a frustrated sigh as she dug it out and swiped at the screen. It was Michelle.

M: Hey, can you call me? I want to talk about Brandon.

Andi sighed, feeling the greasy ball of guilt roll back into place, right in the middle of her chest.

A: Sure. Give me a few minutes. I'll call you when I get to work.

She put her phone away and stomped up the stairs to De-Floured. She paused at the door and stared in at the empty tables. There was a pretty big contingency of early morning caffeinators in Hope that haunted Miss Mandie's before the sun came up each morning. With her weird long shifts, she'd often see them on her way to or from work. So where were they? She checked her watch. It was five-thirty. They should have already been inside, drinking, eating, and making merry with Miss Mandie. She could see Miss Mandie standing

behind the counter, phone to her ear and an unlit cigarette between her teeth. Andi tugged the door open and paused just inside, breathing in the heady baking fumes.

“You joined too, huh? Nothing but hard-boiled eggs? For how long? The whole year. You mean to tell me that for the next three hundred and sixty-five days, you’re eating nothing but hard-boiled eggs? You and Jim, huh? Your house is going to be so fragrant this year. What about your Lady Swiss meetings? You always serve my scones and cupcakes ... *deviled eggs*? Gloria, I say this with every ounce of love I can muster, but half your club smokes and if you serve deviled eggs, someone’s going to ignite the methane leaking out of everyone’s southern exposures, and blow up your house.” The conversation seemed to deteriorate from there and with a final huff, Miss Mandie hung up. She was scowling when she turned to Andi.

“What’s great about it?” Miss Mandie muttered. Andi just blinked at her. “Oh, I thought you were going to say ‘good morning’. I was just getting my pissy response out of the way up front.”

“More efficient that way,” Andi said with a nod. “But no, at most I was going to just say ‘morning’, because I agree with you. It’s not a good one.”

Miss Mandie sighed and nodded. “I hate this time of year.”

“Because it’s new?” Andi asked before she could help herself.

“Smartass,” Miss Mandie snorted. She shook her head. “No. I specifically hate the first two weeks of January here. People start poking themselves and each other, deciding suddenly that something is wrong with their bodies, so they start starving themselves or like the geniuses joining Lisa’s club, eating nothing but hard-boiled eggs.”

Andi felt her lip curl. “Ew. And that can’t be safe. Cholesterol and what about all the other nutrients they need?”

Miss Mandie shook her head. “Besides that, life is short. Yeah, maybe eating a Double D-licious a day won’t keep the high blood sugar at bay, but I can make them something healthy to eat that won’t turn them into a natural fuel resource. And that’s the problem with this town. Who told them they needed to change? Social pressure. That’s who. And I’ll bet Lisa and Esther were behind it all, poking, prodding and commenting all the way. Why can’t people just leave other people alone and let them be happy with what makes them happy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Andi said faintly, feeling herself trail off. Miss Mandie wasn’t done.

“Well, I’m sick of it.” Miss Mandie took out her unlit cigarette and slid it behind her ear. Andi felt herself take a step back. Once a cigarette was in Miss Mandie’s lips, she smoked it. She’d *never* seen or even heard of one going behind Miss Mandie’s ear. That would mean that something was important enough to make her skip her smoke break. “Bart! Cover the front.”

Bart stuck his head out of the swinging kitchen door and raised an eyebrow at her.

“If it’s *actually* about their health, hell, I can make them something healthy. I’ll make them something so healthy and irresistible that Lisa and Esther will be getting in line for them.” And then she was off, marching back into the kitchen. Bart stepped out of her way and watched her go. He looked over at Andi and shook his head.

“T-minus ten minutes before she yells at me to come in there and help her dream up something. But I’ve got an idea. I’ve just been waiting for the right time to use it.” He looked around the empty bakery and then leaned over the counter, motioning for Andi to come closer. She leaned in. “Muffins that have two different centers, like they’re flashers and when you break them open, you see different fillings.”

“Ok ... and how are these *healthy*?”

He grinned. “One of the fillings will be a long piece of carrot and two whole almonds, you know ...”

She knew she was going to regret asking but here they were. “And what’s the other one going to be?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. Maybe ...”

“Cherries?” Andi asked. “Like cherry pie?”

His eyes went wide. “That’s it! Yes.” He turned to head to the back but paused and swung back to her. “Don’t tell anyone, ok? It’s our secret.” He started to head for the kitchen again.

“On one condition,” he froze and turned on the spot, eyes still wide. “I need coffee. The good stuff, not the January decaf. And I need a Well Endowed.”

Bart’s face relaxed. “Oh, I thought you were going to say you wanted a share in the profits.” He looked at the coffee machine and then back at the door to the kitchen. “Since she’s distracted, I’ll slip you the Christmas Chaos, so if we get caught, you have to tell her you tortured me.”

“Deal,” Andi said, pulling out her wallet. “Light it up.” By the time the coffee was finished brewing, she’d finished her éclair.

“Remember, it’s our secret,” Bart said, snapping a lid on her to-go cup.

“Mum’s the word,” she muttered, raising her cup to him on her way outside. She was heading up the street, wiping the maple glaze from her Well Endowed off the corner of her mouth when she heard someone gasp behind her.

“Andi! Did you just come out of *De-Floured*?! Don’t tell me you’ve fallen off the wagon already? We’ve just barely gotten the horses hitched to this new year.”

Andi squeezed her eyes shut. Esther. She turned on the spot, trying to remember what a smile looked like before she was face to face with the woman. “Good morning, Esther. I was jus ...” She trailed off when she saw the eye-watering hazard yellow sweatshirt Esther was wearing. It was marked with a big red circle with a line through it on top of the word “sugar”. *Damn it.* She’d forgotten that only a few hours ago, she’d

signed up for Esther's ridiculous club. And signed away her right to eat sugar. If she didn't need anything from Esther, she'd have just shrugged her shoulders, said "whoops", and gone back into De-Floured for a Double D-elicious cupcake. But, as cruel fate would have it, she *did* need something. And if she was going to get it, she needed to be on Esther's good side. If ... the woman had one.

"Oh! No. I just went in for coffee," Andi said, holding up her cup and hoping she was successfully pulling off the innocent expression she and Amelia had perfected in the mirror ever since childhood. It didn't work on their parents, but *maybe* it would work ...

"Is there *sugar* in that coffee?" Esther snapped, stomping over and reaching out for the cup.

"No!" Andi jerked the cup back, suddenly panicked that Esther might take it away. She needed caffeine today if she was going to survive. "No sugar! Or cream ... I always just drink it by itself. You know ... just beans and water. That's gotta be good for you, right?" She held her breath.

"Well, good for you. And good for you getting an early start on the day. I was telling Mr. Jacobs this morning that starting the day early is the key to really living the day. Think about it, those people who sleep until noon and are up only eight or ten hours? Are they actually living? No. They're ..."

Andi felt her eyes starting to glaze over. *Ok, universe, I get it. I lied about the donut and now my punishment is death by a thousand sentences courtesy of Esther Jacobs. I got it. Andi*

smiled and nodded and did her best to look like she was hanging on every word Esther was saying while she tried to form a plan of attack for getting her toe in the door with her and securing enough favor to get Brandon's bench approved.

"You know, it's not like we need sugar to survive as a society. Sugar makes us tired, shortens our lifespans, and ruins our potential for all the things we could be doing. Why, think of it, animals don't need sugar ..."

And there it was. "Yes, and speaking of animals," she said, plowing on even though Esther was still talking like a wordy undertow that would pull her down if she faltered or lost her nerve. "I think it's amazing what you and Mr. Jacobs are doing for the town by helping build that pet park." Esther paused either to draw breath or to actually listen and Andi plowed ahead at full force. "You see, I would like to ... apply, to have a bench installed in the pet park?" She heard it coming out more as a question than a statement and she tried to course-correct. "As a memorial, for ..."

"A bench? Why do pets need benches? Is this one of those crazy pet-only specialty benches like the cat tree thing that Eudora Thompson is going on and on about?"

"Uh, no. This is ... a people bench. For ... people butts." She gave her head a shake. "For people with pets to sit on while their pets play in the park. Or for people who don't have pets to just come and enjoy watching them play."

Esther was quiet and Andi planted her feet, expecting the earth to crack open and the end times to begin. Was it a good

thing that she was quiet? A bad thing?

“I’ll think about it. You know, there are so many people in town wanting to add this or that to that pet park, you’d think it was meant to be some kind of pet carnival. Now, I was telling Mr. Jacobs, did you know that someone wants to put in a *pet Ferris wheel*? Can you believe it? Just imagine the insurance that would go with something like that! My lands! And how would it be operated? Would we have to have an employee there from sun up to sun down to ...”

Andi’s phone started ringing, and she did her best to contain her squeal of excitement behind an apologetic smile as she pulled it out to answer. “Oh, it’s the hospital, I better take this.” It was actually Annabelle, but hey, close enough.

“You on your way?” Annabelle yawned into the phone. “Dirk just called to ask if he could come over today to do the photos.” Annabelle was crunching on what sounded like potato chips in Andi’s ear.

“Yes! Tell him to come right in! I’m on my way.” Andi said, putting on the performance of a lifetime, trying to sound like she was panicked, but still covering it with professional decorum.

Annabelle stopped chewing. “Really?”

“Yes! Time is of the essence. I’ll be right there.” She hung up before Annabelle could question her more and held up the phone. “Gotta go. Emergency. Thanks for ... talking,” she said to Esther.

Esther nodded. “And I’ll see you on Wednesday night for our first ‘Sugar Detox’ meeting. Bring a sugar-free snack to share. I’m bringing raw vegetables, so if you were planning on bringing the same thing, you’ll have to think of something else.”

Esther was still talking as Andi waved and took off in a jog for the hospital. She was wearing the good running shoes her aunt had given her, but in her defense, she was weighed down with a well-endowed, half the coffee she’d had time to drink while Esther was talking and now a third layer of guilt because she’d lied to Esther and was already plotting how she was going to survive the next two weeks without sugar. Though, when she stopped to think about it. She’d give up sugar for the rest of her life if it would bring Brandon back. She’d give up sugar for the rest of her life if it meant Max Lyons would still be her friend.

“Really?” Annabelle asked her again when she blew in through the back door of the hospital.

“Good morning to you too,” Andi said, passing by her to poke her head into the pet plaza and check on everyone. “How are Pickles’ stitches?”

“Healing. Now, *why* were you so frantic to have Dirk come in for the photo session this morning?”

Andi sighed. “I wasn’t. Esther had me cornered.”

“Oh!” Annabelle said. “The safeword when that happens is Albuquerque.”

Andi just looked at her. “Albuquerque?”

Annabelle nodded. “Yeah. A bunch of us worked out a system for when we’re stuck in a long conversation with Esther and we have to pee or move before we decompose on the spot. If we spot each other with her, we call the victim, and if they want an excuse to get out of the conversation, they say ‘Albuquerque’ and suddenly I’m their great-uncle Lester, going in for a biopsy, or on my way to the ER with a broken leg on the mainland. Once, I was Pippa Donovan’s uncle *and* grandma in the same phone call.”

“And she figured out how to say ‘Albuquerque’ to you?”

Annabelle shrugged. “After a while. She originally forgot and kept saying Phoenix like someone trying to help a friend out with the name of the fifth *Harry Potter* book. Eventually, she remembered and started shouting Albuquerque. Of course, then we had to work it into the conversation.”

“And how did that go?”

“Grandma wanted to go to Albuquerque and her uncle was trying to stop her.” Annabelle finished with a flourish, pulling the last Danish butter cookie out of the tin Andi had brought her.

“And Esther bought it?” Andi asked.

“Are you kidding? Esther didn’t even *notice*. Not until Pippa yelled that she had to go.”

“Albuquerque, huh?” Andi said. “Well, I’ll probably be using that a lot in the coming weeks.”

“Why, pray tell,” Annabelle asked, plopping down on the old ripped wingback.

Andi leaned against the break room doorway. “Because I need a favor from Esther.”

“Hellhounds on your trail? Need someone capable of talking their ears off?”

“No. The memorial bench ... for Brandon.”

Annabelle sat up and looked at her. “Oh, Andi. I’m so sorry.” Andi gave her a dismissive wave.

“Don’t worry about it. You told me about Albuquerque. We’re square.”

“Still square since you’re having to deal with Dirk coming in today?” Annabelle asked.

Andi sighed. “I thought you were going to handle Dirk as part of our deal in exchange for me going to the support group meeting.”

Annabelle shrugged. “Hey, he’s not coming during my shift. I still cleaned up Mr. Giggles *and* scrubbed his kennel out. His majesty is still muttering about it. But at least now all you have to do is help Dirk get a picture of him. Maybe you can pull a Slomo and climb up on top of the kennels and then just open his kennel. Dirk can get a real action shot as Giggs springs out onto his head.”

“Great idea. Wait, what’s that lawsuit?” She turned her head to look at the empty space next to her. “You say you can’t wait

to meet us? *And* have the hospital turned into Dirk's photography studio?"

"Fine," Annabelle muttered. "What do *you* plan to do about Mr. Giggles' photographic debut?"

Andi shrugged. "I'll wing it."

Annabelle blinked at her. "That's it? No hysterics, no worries, no ... anything? Just 'I'll wing it'?" Andi moved past her and picked up the shift clipboard from the hook by the reception desk. "Andi? What's up?"

A part of her wished she could explain it to Annabelle. Another part of her was asking her to explain it to herself. But she was just ... numb. She wasn't worried about Mr. Giggles scratching or scalping her or biting her until she bled. None of it seemed to matter this morning. Her gaze had fallen on Sarge's empty kennel and it was amazing how the void felt like a mirror at the moment.

"Is this ... does this have something to do with ... Max?" Annabelle asked.

Andi did her best to reset her expression to nonchalance when she turned back to look at her. "Why would you think that?"

Annabelle sighed. "Because I'm still living at home and my mom heard you two arguing by the dumpster beside Town Hall after the New Year's Bash."

Live in a small town. Never have any private business. It'll be fun, Andi thought.

Andi sagged where she stood. Annabelle swung Shirley's chair around and motioned to it while she took the rolling doctor's stool. Andi sat and leaned forward, elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

"He ... he told me we weren't friends anymore," Andi said. She squeezed her eyes shut remembering the rest of the conversation and sending a silent plea to the universe that Mrs. Leeds hadn't given Annabelle a blow-by-blow of the conversation.

"Why would he say that?" Annabelle whispered.

"I ... I don't know," Andi said, hoping Annabelle would drop it.

"Yeah you do," Annabelle said, shattering that hope. "What happened?"

There was nothing for it. Andi recounted the night before, step by step. As she did, just hearing what happened out loud made things a little easier. They'd had fun at the Mold fight. They'd had fun around the bonfires. They'd had fun during the setup for the event. They'd even had fun signing up for the resolution clubs. It wasn't until ...

"But, the whole town just kept making all these comments about us being together again, like Brandon didn't even exist. And it just ... it pissed me off. And the more people said things, the angrier I got and ..."

"And Max probably thought that you were disgusted by the idea of being with him again," Annabelle finished.

Andi jerked her head up and stared at her. “That’s not why I ...”

Annabelle sighed. “No, but that’s how it would have sounded to him. Does ... does Max even know ... that Brandon ...”

Andi frowned. “He has to know. The *whole town* knows.”

Annabelle shrugged. “He was gone when it all happened. And it has been almost a year. And ... you know this town, Andi. It’s Hope. We only like wallowing in misery when the pro-parade people win the yearly contest and we’re looking down the barrel of at least three parades a month for the next year.” Andi shivered and Annabelle nodded. “Exactly.” She sighed and when she spoke, her voice was softer. “Andi,” she leaned forward and took Andi’s hand. “We’ve been aching for you since it happened. And then you were home and the whole town tried to give you space, waited, and wanted to grieve with you ...”

Tears were forming in Andi’s eyes as she met Annabelle’s gaze. “But the town didn’t even know Brandon. Not really.”

“No,” Annabelle said with a sad smile. “But we know you. And you know in Hope, no one is ever allowed to do *anything* on their own. I swear, if Doc Holland hadn’t shouted them down, we might have had one of those communal public toilets over by the footpath from the ferry. Like the Greek ones where everyone is just ... sitting on the can, in one big room, facing each other ...” Andi felt her lip curl. Annabelle nodded. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the town hasn’t changed

much in the last eight years. We're still up to our necks in each other's business. And ... do you want to know what I think happened last night?" Andi nodded and Annabelle squeezed her hand. "The town saw someone they loved, who'd been hurting for the last year, smiling and laughing and having a food fight. And it was nostalgic because it was a familiar sight. The person she was laughing and having fun with was the same person she'd done those things with eight years before. Before everything else happened."

"But ..." Andi started to argue.

Annabelle held up a hand. "I know. It's not fair for them to assume. But just ... cut them some slack. Cut yourself some slack. And think of it this way. Would you rather have them bursting into tears and bringing up Brandon and endlessly asking you if you're alright? Or would you rather have them making gentle cracks about you and Max and *smiling*? And you can tell them you're not together. Maybe just ... get Max on board with it and not make it sound like being with him again would be the equivalent of the elevator scene in *Holidate*." Andi rolled her eyes. "Just ... think about it, ok?" Annabelle asked.

So, after Annabelle left, Andi thought about it. But, she waited until she'd taken as much time as she possibly could playing with the animals, feeding and exercising them, and running checkups and baseline tests on each one between appointments. The conclusion she finally came to was, as much as she hated to admit it, maybe Annabelle had a point. It

still didn't change the fact that Max was adamant. He *didn't* want them to be friends.

“Hi, Andi!” She stifled a groan when Dirk Patterson stuck his head in through the front door. “Is it ok if I prop this open to bring in all my equipment?”

Other photographers traveled light. A camera and maybe one of those shield thingies to help with light, maybe a portable light source. Not Dirk. Dirk had a setup like those kitschy photographers at wild west fun parks. He had ... *furniture* including an old ottoman and a gold painting frame, without the painting which he'd strapped to the cart behind his bike. He had lights, fabric ...

“Are these ... costumes?” Andi asked, picking up a tiny tailcoat.

Dirk nodded. “I just brought them along, in case the mood strikes and the art calls for them.”

Andi decided that “quiet but helpful” was the best route to take. She held and petted and stood with the pets while Dirk frowned and circled the little photo area he'd put together in the back of the pet plaza. She held her tongue while he had her try different poses with the pets, different props from the two grocery bags he brought with him which included a French horn that Toookie immediately tried to stick her head in, a vase of dried flowers the Slurpee twins couldn't leave alone, and a stuffed trout which creeped ... everyone out. Including Andi.”

“Dirk ... what's with its eyes?”

He heaved a weary sigh. "I kind of ... got in a fight with Fred over at Bait and Swish. He was taxiderming it for me and ... well, I didn't like what he did with the eyes to start with. Then, after our fight, he just stuck googly eyes in and epoxied over them. But don't worry, from a distance, people won't even be able to see the eyes."

No, because they'll be too distracted, trying to figure out why the cat is in a tailcoat and sitting under a stuffed fish to begin with.

They were finally down to just two remaining pets. Pickles and Mr. Giggles.

"Picks, come here," Andi cooed, chasing the cat around as he wound between Dirk's legs and batted at his dangling camera strap. Dirk smiled down at the cat and bent down to scratch her chin.

"What's her name?" he asked.

"Pickles. She ... came to us with it, so none of us are quite sure why." Andi paused, not wanting to move and break the spell as she watched Dirk's expression soften as he squatted down to pet her while she wove in and out of his legs, purring.

"She's got stitches," he said. "What happened?"

"The Anacortes shelter she came from said she took on a big dog in a fight and he ... snagged her. She's healing really well though. The last of the stitches should be able to come out in a week or so."

“You’ve got spunk, don’t you, little one,” Dirk said softly, running a finger under her chin. “You’re not about to let someone tell you how small you are. You’re a little travel-sized lion, aren’t you?” He cleared his throat. “With those spots, she looks like she has some Ocicat in her. Maybe that’s where the Pickles name comes from. They kind of look like bumps on a pickle.”

“Yeah,” Andi said. “I hadn’t thought of that.” Her voice felt faint and far away. She was transfixed, watching Dirk drag the camera strap on the floor until Pickles pounced on it. To see blustering, defiant Dirk the Pill melting down to his core as he played with the cat was the last thing she’d expected to see today.

“I had an Ocicat when I was a kid. Oscar. He was ... he was kind of my best friend all through grade school. You know, when the other kids were being ... childish. But I’d go home, and Oscar would be there. And everything was ... ok.” After a minute, Dirk cleared his throat and straightened up. “Does Pickles ... I mean, I assume if you wanted me to take her portrait ...”

“She’s available for adoption,” Andi said carefully, trying to curb her enthusiasm as Dirk thought it over. Pickles sat at his feet, looking up at him with her big green eyes and Andi saw the moment when Dirk’s expression changed and he made his decision.

“Well, I’d still like to get her portrait. She’s very photogenic. But, I would ... like to adopt her.”

Andi was so elated that she didn't mind dressing Pickles in five different outfits, until Dirk finally settled on the shark onesie. And she didn't mind standing with a treat and a cat toy at different angles and bent over at different heights until he was happy with Pickles' expression, location, and angle. Andi rubbed her back while Dirk filled out the paperwork. She was having a hard time containing her excitement over Pickles being adopted. Well, until she heard the low hiss and growl of the upper kennel when she walked by.

"Oh, did we forget someone?" Dirk asked. "We haven't had a chance to put anyone in the hamburger costume. It's made for a cat, but it would fit a small dog too," he said, holding it up.

Andi sighed. "I'm going to be honest with you, Dirk. If we try to put Mr. Giggles in that hamburger costume, we will be essentially signing our own death warrants."

"Not very friendly?"

"That's putting it mildly."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Dirk said, though she saw his gaze drift to the vibrating, spitting, and hissing kennel, and his statement ended up sounding a lot more like a question.

"Maybe just a couple of candid shots in his kennel will be enough ..."

Andi made sure she was out of Mr. Giggles' visual range when she opened the kennel door. The cat seemed to calm

down with only Dirk in his line of sight. At least, he didn't leap out and try to rip his head off.

"Does he always ... growl like that?" Dirk asked, his camera shaking as he advanced on the kennel.

"He alternates between growling and hissing usually. Occasionally he'll meow, but it sounds like a prayer meant to raise Cthulhu." Dirk snapped some quick shots and Mr. Giggles' growl grew louder with each flash of his camera light.

"Oh ... ok. I think I've got enough to ... work with. Maybe I can photoshop ..."

Andi got Mr. Giggles' kennel door shut and internally debated telling Annabelle a story about how harrowing Mr. Giggles' pictures had been, just to buy some sympathy points from her.

"Thank you so much, Dirk," Andi said, folding up the pet costumes and tucking them back into one of the grocery bags. "For such ... professional photos. I hope it'll help them all get adopted."

Dirk was holding Pickles and Andi looked up in time to see her reach out to put a paw on his cheek. "Is it ok if I come back for my bike and my equipment later?" he asked, glancing up at Andi. "I don't want to scare her by putting her in a kennel on my bike right now."

"Sure," Andi said. He nodded and started to head for the door. "Oh, just bring her back in on Thursday so we can check

her stitches. The last few should be ready to come out.”

“I’ll bring you the photos at the same time. I think Pickles’ portrait may be the best photo I’ve ever taken.”

Shark Ocicat in repose, Andi thought.

She waved to Dirk and sat down on Shirley’s chair. Her next appointment wasn’t for a half hour, she’d survived Dirk, *and* Pickles had gotten adopted. The day was shaping up to be pretty good even though her coffee was wearing off and without something immediately in front of her as a distraction, thoughts of Max were creeping in. There had been a moment the night before when she’d stumbled and he’d braced her. His warm hand had skimmed across her hip and the strip of skin where her sweater and jacket had ridden up. A hot tingle raced down her spine, remembering the sensation. Did skin have its own memories? Did it remember the last time those hands had touched her?

Her phone dinged. Michelle again. She’d spent half an hour before her first appointment and after Annabelle left, on the phone with her, crying and talking about Brandon. And here she was, thinking about Max’s hands. She pulled out her phone and looked at the screen. It was Michelle.

M: Some days it just hurts so much to know we’ll never see him again. That we’ll have to go the rest of our lives, without him in them. That could be another sixty or seventy years. I’ve known him all my life, Andi. He’s been a part of everything I am. And now he’s gone.

A raw pain, like ripping off a scab, filled her. She was trying to put together words to reply to Michelle when the front door jingled.

“Knock knock,” Jordan Bumble’s voice called out. Andi swiveled in her chair, swiping at her eyes. “Oh, Andi. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ...”

Andi paused and looked at her. For a moment they just stared at each other. Buddy sat down beside Jordan’s feet and cocked his head from side to side looking at Andi and then up at Jordan. The whole scene was so ridiculous, Andi chuckled.

“You didn’t mean to come into an animal hospital, greet me, and interrupt my breakdown?” Andi asked.

Jordan gave her a half smile. “Yeah. But, I realized how ridiculous it would sound, so I just kind of trailed off, hoping you wouldn’t draw attention to it. But I guess that ship has sailed. Are you ... would you like company for your ... breakdown? I mean, I’m no triple-A, but I’ve changed a mental flat tire or two in my day.”

“I’m ... I’m fine,” Andi said, sniffing and sliding her phone back into her lab coat pocket. “Uh, what brings you here today?”

Jordan didn’t look like she believed Andi, but she said, “I heard from Martha Washington that she was planning a ‘pet-palooza’, her word not mine, fashion show for the Resolution Redo party on the fifteenth.”

Andi nodded and cleared her throat. “Yeah. She wanted to do it for the New Year’s Bash but there was already so much going on and we didn’t have that much time to plan ...”

Jordan nodded. “Right. So since there is time to plan now, I was wondering if you thought helping out with the fashion show would be something the Cup of Kindness crew could do?”

Andi blinked at her. “Yeah. That would be ... that would be great. We’re kind of a small staff here and ...”

Jordan looked around at the kennels in the plaza. “And you’d be outnumbered by ... fashion models?”

“By about three to one,” Andi said. “If you count Cinnamon’s kittens.”

“Well, excellent. I was hoping at the meeting this week, we could talk about plans for the Resolution Redo party since it’s only two weeks away. I just wanted to check with you before I invited Martha to the meeting to talk about what she’s calling her ‘vision’ for the fashion show.”

Andi gave her a weary smile. “Thank you.”

Jordan nodded and silence fell between them. Andi braced for Jordan’s probing questions to come. She started mentally lining up what she was going to say to deter Jordan from pressing her on the subject. She liked Jordan, but she wasn’t ready to talk to her about Brandon.

“Hey, you got a certification in training assistive animals?” Jordan asked, moving across the waiting room to study the

framed certificates and degrees on the wall.

“Uh, yeah,” Andi said, surprised, but thankful for the topic change. “I took a class in college and just became really interested in the process. I had an opportunity to do a summer internship with veterans experiencing PTSD and how assistive pets can help ...” She paused, trying to focus on the academic reasons she’d taken the class and the internship and not the face she’d seen in every vet she’d worked with. A part of her at the time, even while she was dating Brandon, had thought about Max and how even if she couldn’t do anything for him, she could try to do something for his brothers and sisters-in-arms.

“You know, there are a lot of vets here on the island. A lot of the ones I’ve talked to still have trouble sometimes, you know? They’ve seen the depth of what humans can do to each other. That’s not something you forget.” Jordan returned to the counter and gave Andi a sad smile as she tapped the counter next to the sign Andi had framed inviting visitors to ask about their assistive pet training program.

“No takers yet,” Andi said, nodding down at the sign. It was disappointing. She knew it might take some time to get going, but she was still discouraged. She’d had to fight Doc Simmons so hard to have permission to do it. And he made a point of asking her about it every time they were in the office together. She suspected so he could gloat.

“I’ve got a feeling that’ll change,” Jordan said with a nod. “It’s a new year. See you Wednesday.”

Max

“Alright, you two,” Max’s mom called, marching into the living room, “Union enforced, fifteen-minute break.”

Jackson groaned. “Do we have to? Max was about to show me how to use the nail gun.”

Max avoided his mom’s gaze as he set the tools down. “Fifteen-minute break for a snack then I’ll be upstairs with a pillow over my head trying to not imagine worst-case scenarios involving you two, bloody fingers, and trips to the hospital.”

“Fine,” Jackson grumbled, reaching for a cookie and a mug of cocoa from the tray she’d brought in.

“Thanks, Mom,” Max said with a grin. “And don’t worry. Our first lesson was safety. We’ll be fine.”

“You’re pretty popular today,” his mom said. “I know you probably couldn’t hear it over the racket you two have been making this morning, but I’m apparently your new answering machine.” She pulled a piece of paper out of the pocket of her robe and cleared her throat. “Lena Abbott called to tell you

‘your suit is in and the whole club is meeting at her house tomorrow morning at six to get outfitted and go for your first jog’.” She glanced up at him. “You joined a jogging club?”

Max sighed. For the past two days, he’d been marginally successful in keeping his mind busy with Sarge, Jackson, his mom, and home repairs, but tomorrow was Wednesday. And that meant the jogging club *with Andi*, and the support group meeting, *also with Andi*.

“Lena Abbott can be pretty persuasive,” his mom muttered. “Miss Mandie sicced her on me two years ago, trying to get me to join their Wild Oats Club. I was doing the dishes one night and about had a heart attack because Lena was staring at me from the other side of the window over the sink, grinning from ear to ear and pointing to her sweatshirt that said, ‘Sow it, Sister!’”

She went back to the paper in her hand. “I’m glad you’re getting out and doing things. I’ll bet there are a lot of folks in that club if Lena’s in charge of it. All probably beaten into submission, but hey, misery loves company.” She paused and read further down the page. “Then Zane called,” she looked up at him and smiled, “I heard he was back on the island. Eudora Thompson told me his company out in Virginia didn’t do so well. Now he’s back home with his folks for a bit until he’s back on his feet. He was always such a nice kid. I remember you two playing football together. Anyway, he said the mobile gym club is meeting at the gazebo tomorrow afternoon at one. And then Jordan left a message on the phone tree for all the

Cup of Kindness support group members reminding you that you have a meeting at the high school at seven tomorrow.”

She folded the paper and tucked it back into her apron before pretending to wipe a tear from her eye. “My little social butterfly.” Jackson started laughing until he caught Max’s side-eye and quickly turned it into a cough. “Alright, you two, Union break is over. Back to work.”

“I’m going to be on the track team when I get to high school,” Jackson said, picking up the nail gun. “I like running.”

“You wanna go join the jogging club instead of me?” Max muttered as he ripped open a box of 15-gauge nails.

“Is it early in the morning?” Jackson asked.

Max grinned at him. “Six.”

Jackson shook his head. “That’s too early. When I grow up, I’m going to have one of those night jobs, like an assassin, so I can sleep in all day.”

Max chuckled. “An assassin, huh?”

“Yeah, or like an Army Ranger with night vision goggles so I can do my job even in the dark.”

Max took the nail gun from Jackson to load it. “You know, if you’re an Army Ranger, you have to start with basic training and at basic you have to get up at *four* in the morning because PT starts at five.”

Jackson frowned and two-handed the nail gun when Max passed it back to him. “Maybe when I’m grown up it won’t be so hard to get up in the morning.”

Max shrugged and lined up the piece of baseboard. “It’s not hard to get up when you’re doing what you love.”

“Do you love being in the Army?” Jackson asked. Over the past two days with the kid, Max had started getting used to his constant questions.

“Yeah. I do,” Max said. He was glad his back was to Jackson as he squared up the baseboard.

“My friend Paul and I want to join the Army Rangers together. He doesn’t like getting up in the morning either. And he says his mom says assassins don’t have good health insurance anyway.”

Max cleared his throat. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jackson sounded sad. “We *were* going to join together.”

“What happened?” Max asked, wiping his face on his sleeve before turning to look at him.

Jackson’s face was stony and he was staring down at the nail gun in his hand, his fingers carefully away from the trigger, just like they’d practiced. “We had a fight at recess right before Christmas.”

“That’s too bad,” Max said, frowning up at him. “What did you two fight about?”

Jackson heaved a dramatic sigh. “Something really stupid.”

“What was it?”

“We were playing tag at recess and I said it was freeze tag, but Paul and the rest of our friends wanted to play regular tag. I kept saying freeze tag, but I didn’t mean to. And Paul, he just ... he kept yelling ‘It’s regular tag!’ and I ... got mad. I told him he wasn’t my friend anymore.”

“Because he kept correcting you?” Max asked.

“I guess,” Jackson muttered. “But it was ... like he was saying I was stupid for calling it freeze tag. It just ... we were playing and I just said it wrong. He didn’t need to make such a big deal about it.” He dropped his gaze to his shoes. “I guess it doesn’t matter now. We’re not friends anymore.”

“Sure you are,” Max said. “We had arguments over stupid stuff all the time in my fire team.” He grinned. “We had a running competition over who was the most tired. And we argued about who was stinking up the barrack with their dirty socks.” Jackson raised his gaze to meet Max’s. “Hey, it was just a silly fight. Just go talk to him when starts up again. Say you’re sorry for getting mad. Then, if he’s your friend, he’ll apologize for making you feel bad and you two will be future Army Rangers again together in no time.”

“But he was the one being mean, why do I have to apologize?”

“Well, it sounds like you didn’t handle it very well either. And you were the one who said you weren’t friends anymore.”

“I guess,” Jackson muttered. “I hate having to apologize. What if I do it and Paul says he still doesn’t want to be friends anymore?”

Max shrugged. “Then at least you know you did what you could. The rest is up to him. And if he still doesn’t want to be your friend after you’ve apologized, then maybe you weren’t really friends to begin with.”

It wasn’t until he was in bed that night, staring up at the ceiling in his room and the crack in the plaster that Andi had always said looked like a smiley face, that realization hit him. “I’m such an idiot,” he muttered. A questioning whine came from the foot of his bed and in the dark, he saw Sarge’s head pop up over the end of his bed. He patted the covers next to him and Sarge crawled up to lay beside him. He scratched the husky behind the ears while he cocked his head to study Max in the dark.

“I screwed up, Sarge. And tomorrow, I’ve gotta try to make it right ... if I can.” The “if I can” part haunted him for the rest of the night. He tossed and turned, and when his alarm sounded at five, Sarge was back on his bed on the floor, probably sick of being jostled by Max all night long. He sat up and scooped his phone off his nightstand. It took a minute before he realized it wasn’t the only thing he’d picked up. His fingers squeezed the broken friendship bracelet, separating it from his phone to study it in the dark. *She was my friend before she was ... anything else with me.* Maybe, if he apologized, they could go back to what they were before they started dating. *“I don’t even think we should be friends*

anymore.” His words came back in a rush, haunting him.
“God, if she’ll even *let* me apologize.”

He was the first person to arrive at Mrs. Abbott’s house. He decided to wait on the sidewalk for other people to arrive, rather than go knock on her door and have to make awkward small talk until everyone else showed up. He didn’t have to wait long. He heard Bill Benson huffing up the street behind him before he could see him clearly.

“Morning Bill,” Max called, raising his hand in greeting.
“You joining Mrs. Abbott’s jogging club too?”

“Oh, hell, it’s just you, Max,” Bill said, pausing to catch his breath, his hand grasping a stitch in his side. “I probably should have joined one of these resolution clubs. Helen has been after me to be more healthy.”

“So if you’re not here for the club, what are you ...”

Bill sighed. “We got a call from Iris Carpenter,” he jerked his head at the house across the street, “saying that there was a suspicious-looking person standing on the sidewalk across from her house trying to look in her windows.”

Max just looked at Bill. “What?”

Bill shook his head. “She always thinks someone is trying to look in her windows. Lena here had a big scarecrow in her yard for Halloween last year and Iris must have called in half a dozen times, saying there was a ‘pre-intruder’ across the street, *thinking* about looking in her windows and breaking in.”

“Gotcha,” Max said. He turned and waved at the dark house across the street. In the dim light from the old lamp posts, he saw a curtain twitch in an upstairs window.

“You’re out here because of some club?” Bill asked.

“Yeah. I’m a part of Jordan Bumble’s support group and we all had to sign up for one of the resolution clubs and so I signed up for Mrs. Abbott’s jogging club.”

Bill snorted. “Better you than me.”

A few minutes after Bill left, other townsfolk started to arrive including Rob Winters from the library, Mrs. Thompson, Reverend Anderson, Clarence Ford, the retired editor from the newspaper, and half a dozen others. They greeted him and stood around in the quiet pre-dawn for a moment.

“Well to hell with this,” Mrs. Thompson muttered. “I need to use Lena’s facilities. I’m ringing her doorbell.” Several relieved voices agreed and followed her up the walk, leaving Max alone.

Despite the cold, he was starting to sweat. *Where’s Andi? Did she forget? Or was she ...* After what he’d said to her, he guessed he would understand if she didn’t come, or if she just dropped the club altogether. And what about the support group? A wave of panic crashed over him. What if she dropped both and he wouldn’t see her anywhere? He’d have to go to the animal hospital to get a chance to apologize. That thought made his stomach start twisting itself into knots. God, the thought of trying to apologize to her during one of Sarge’s

check-ups, while she was being coldly polite and professional ... he shivered. *Please, universe. Just give me a chance to make this right.*

The sky was turning purple with pink streaks of light in the distance when he saw a lone figure turn the corner, heading in his direction. She was bundled against the cold, but her long, wavy dark hair was loose around her shoulders. His mouth had gone dry and he was trying to remember what he was going to say to tell her ... to ask her ...

She paused fifteen feet in front of him, keeping her gaze on his chest. Then she looked at the ground and started to walk around him.

“Andi,” he croaked. He cleared his throat. *Come on, Lyons. Don't screw this up.* She paused. *Now or never.* “I was a jerk on Saturday night.” *Keep going. Faster. So she won't have time to cut you off before you finish.* “I'm so sorry. I ... totally understand if you don't want to ...” *Don't assume she'll still want to be friends.* “If you never want to talk to me again. But I ... I just wanted to tell you, I'm sorry for how I acted.” He held his breath, waiting. She was quiet for a moment and then he saw her head drop. She reached up a hand to swipe at her face and then she cleared her throat.

“I was engaged.”

Was? He tried to stomp down the immature blaze of excitement that shot through him.

“It's ... it's been a really, really ... *shitty* year.”

She was trying not to cry. He could tell because her voice always pitched low. He remembered that. Their whole final summer together ...

“I hear that,” he said, thankful for once his mouth understood the assignment and wasn’t too loud or forceful.

Andi nodded. “I know. That’s why I guess ... Saturday was so nice. It was like revisiting happier times... it was a nice way to end a truly terrible year. But then ...”

“But then I screwed it up,” he muttered.

She sighed. “To be fair, the town kind of screwed it up. I just ... everyone was ...”

“Putting us back together out of habit?”

She nodded. “And it ... hurt. And I lashed out. I didn’t think about how my reaction hurt you.”

He shook his head. “No. I overreacted. I was just ... being a jerk.” He cleared his throat and realized he’d been keeping all his weight on his left leg, his strong leg. *Balance out*, he reminded himself. He shifted his weight onto his prosthetic and looked at her. “Can we ... would it be ok if we started over? I mean . . .,” he grinned, “It’s a new year, after all. Can we pretend like we’re back in the sixth grade and I’ve just walked into school for the first time ...”

“And Mrs. Jewell is yelling at Derek Myers and Les Berger for drawing penises on the window with their fingers.”

Max laughed. “Yeah. And I’m scared shitless because it’s a small school and I don’t know anyone, and then you look up

from the *Little House on the Prairie* book you were reading ...”

Andi scoffed and gave his shoulder a shove. “It was *Sherlock Holmes*.”

He grinned. “And you smiled and waved me over to the seat next to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “And ten minutes into our first conversation about football, I started to regret it.”

“Yeah right. You love football.”

“I didn’t in the sixth grade. I knew ‘touchdown’ and ‘field goal’ and everything that happened in between just looked like a very uncoordinated game of ‘Red Rover, Red Rover’.”

“Alright joggers!” Mrs. Abbott’s voice boomed from her porch, startling several birds out of the tree in her front yard.

“Good to have a noise ordinance violation under our belts before seven am,” Max muttered.

“I mean, would it be a Hope meeting at all without one?” Andi muttered as they headed over to join the back of the crowd around Mrs. Abbott’s porch.

“This year, for our jogging club, The Square Pegs in the Run Hole, I decided to get us all matching uniforms that are made to help you sweat, have zero wind resistance, stay warm, and be safe every time we run.” She opened a cardboard box at her feet and started passing out drawstring bags, calling out names as she did and looking around until each one found its

owner. When Max and Andi got theirs, they stared down at the somewhat heavy bags in their hands.

“How much do you want to bet it’s spandex biker shorts in hazard orange and yellow?”

Andi sighed. “No bet. Though, it feels kind of heavy if that’s all it is.”

“Open them on the count of three?” Max asked.

Andi nodded. “One, two ...”

“Three.”

They pulled the drawstrings and stared in at the contents.

“I see leather straps with metal spikes,” Andi said after a moment of silence. “Max? Am I having a stroke or something?”

“No. Unless we’re having a communal stroke because I see them too...” Max said, pulling out what looked like a black leather studded harness. “What the ...”

Andi dropped her harness on the ground and dug out a black bodysuit. “Um ... we got the spandex part right.”

There was an odd mix of grumbling and delight around them as he and Andi watched the rest of the club members shimmed, hopped, squeezed, and fought their way into the body suits, including the hoods that covered their faces and zipped up the back. Max felt his jaw drop and a quick glance out of the corner of his eye told him that Andi was having a similar reaction.

“They’re called Zentai suits,” the faceless figure of Mrs. Abbott called out, like a bossy shadow in her own suit. “I think it’s because these suits are also popular for people practicing Zen and Tai Chi.”

The rest of the club “ohh-ed” and “ahh-ed” at that explanation and then without missing a beat, picked up their leather harnesses and began trying to figure out how to put them on. Max could hear Andi choking next to him and he turned to see her biting hard on her lower lip to keep from laughing. He joined her seconds later as they watched Mrs. Thompson stepping through the armholes of hers and trying to tighten it around her butt.

“These protective harnesses will keep you from getting attacked while out jogging. So you can be comfortable and have complete peace of mind, focusing only on the task at hand, jogging at your best!” Now Max and Andi were snorting in laughter still trying to suppress as much of their noise as possible. People around them were turning to look, but whatever their expressions were, they couldn’t see them. “Andi and Max! You better get yours on too. We’re not going to wait on you.”

“We better do what she says,” Andi muttered to him out of the side of her mouth.

Max had a brief memory of his mom’s story about Mrs. Abbott standing outside their kitchen window, staring in at her when she was trying to get her to join the Wild Oats Club.

“Yeah,” Max said, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I wouldn’t want this whole crew to show up in these outfits outside my kitchen window and stare at me while I was trying to do the dishes.”

It took a long time for Max to get the suit on over his prosthetic, but without saying a word, Andi moved closer to him and put his hand on her shoulder so he could balance. Mrs. Abbott barked encouragingly at them until they also had their harnesses on and looked like everyone else in the club.

“Alright! And we’re off! We’ll start with a power walk and then break into our jogging pace when we reach the joggers’ path. Feel free to spread out and find a partner who is jogging at the same speed you are.”

And then all fifteen of them were out on the sidewalk and heading down the street, black faceless shadows in a variety of colored running shoes, the light of the morning sun glinting off everyone’s metal spikes.

“Eventually, they’re going to figure it out, right?” Andi asked beside him as they brought up the rear of the group.

“That they’re all wearing dominatrix sex gear?” Max asked. “Us included?”

“You’re right,” Andi said, nodding. “They’ll go to their graves, arguing that this was just the newest breakthrough in jogging equipment. And hey, at least no one who sees us will be able to tell who we are.”

“I like how much I’m already sweating,” Reverend Anderson said somewhere ahead of them. “I’ll bet this is going to do wonders for my double chin.”

“Probably kinder not to tell them,” Max said.

“Yeah,” Andi agreed. “And it probably was an honest mistake. If I was a betting woman, I’d guess that somewhere in the searching or the ordering, Mrs. Abbott mentioned the club’s name, and the combination ‘peg’ and ‘hole’ led us to where we are.”

The happy chatter around them from the other joggers was bizarre to see, but it was comforting at the same time. This was Hope at its core. You could dress its citizens up in Christmas tree costumes, ugly sweaters, as the founding fathers, plumbers, or apparently dominatrix joggers, and they would still be there for the sense of community and the chance to dish gossip. Andi seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

“Neither snow nor rain nor sex dungeon costumes can deter the citizens of Hope from the chance to catch up with their neighbors, huh?”

Max smiled under his own black spandex hood. “Something you can always set your watch to out here.”

He heard Andi sigh beside him and tried to keep his gaze on her hooded head and not let his eyes drop down to where the spandex, even over her running shorts and top, was hugging every one of her curves.

“What is it?” he asked. They were back to being tentatively friendly. The last thing he’d want is to say or do something to derail them again. And he was somewhat impeded now without being able to read her facial expressions.

“It’s nothing. I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“How this town never really changes. I mean, we have new events every year, and technology changes, but, the people, they always stay the same.”

Max nodded. “The good and the bad.”

“When we get to the path, let’s just keep walking,” Andi said, “let everyone else get ahead of us?”

“Sure,” Max said, feeling his heart rate start jogging even if his feet weren’t.

When everyone turned onto the jogging path Andi and Max hung back, watching the rest of the club outstrip them.

“Ok, I don’t care if it risks Mrs. Abbott’s wrath,” Andi said, reaching for the zipper on the back of her suit. “I’m taking this hood off. My hair is halfway wrapped around my neck and I feel like I’m choking.”

He joined her and once their hoods were down, he saw her close her eyes and take a deep breath of the salty sea air tinged with evergreen, stirring the loose waves of her hair across her face. She was turned, facing the sunrise and the pink and orange light on her skin made her look like a goddess. They’d paused by one of the benches along the path that looked over

the cliffs below and the seemingly endless strait that passed between their island and the mainland. She turned to look at Max, and he saw her swallow hard.

“I never thought I’d be standing here with you again.” Her voice was soft and he was confused for a moment until he remembered their last day together before he’d shipped out. They’d snuck out at four in the morning to watch the sunrise so they could spend the whole day together. Their last day together.

“Well, I definitely never thought I’d be standing here with you again while wearing black leather and metal studs,” Max said, grinning at her.

She looked down the path and squinted into the distance. “I think we could just sit for a minute and then loop back around, and end up back at Mrs. Abbott’s house by the time they get back and just tell her we were slow.”

Max nodded. “They’ll believe it, since I’m with you.” He jerked his chin down at his prosthetic.

“You ... maybe wanna sit and talk for a while?” Andi asked.

“Yes,” he said, the second she finished her question. He could barely maintain his cool with how well the morning already seemed to be going. In his *best-case* scenario, she would have accepted his apology and agreed to small talk while they jogged near each other. Correction, while she jogged and he limped as fast as he could to stay up with her. Jogging and running were still awkward concepts for him and some days, they felt like nigh impossible feats. As if the

thought had triggered it, a phantom pain shot up his leg as they made their way off the path.

They sat down on the old wooden bench, the paint and wood chipping away from the constant exposure to the sea air and rain. He tried to rub his knee as discreetly as he could and he glanced over at Andi to make sure she wasn't watching him. She was staring grimly out at the horizon.

“Another day,” she murmured.

“Another day,” he repeated.

“I know it's a new year and everything is supposed to feel all bright and hopeful,” she said, shaking her head, “but I don't feel it.”

Max felt his cheek twitch up in a smile. “I thought I was the only one.” Andi turned to look at him and her smile seemed to dull the pain in his leg and gave him the courage to ask, “Well, you know my big news,” he said, motioning down at his prosthetic. “Heck, you carried it.” *Now or never*. “You said you *were* engaged. Is ... is that what made Mrs. Bumble think you needed a support group?”

Andi nodded. She didn't look at him and her voice was soft, almost soft enough to lose over the sound of the waves crashing on the rocks a hundred feet below them. “He died. In an accident in February.” There were tears on her cheeks now, almost gold in the light from the rising sun. Her face was tense and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her body was tense and it jerked as she tried to suppress her sobs. Even after losing his leg and being bedridden and then not being able to walk

without crutches, or carry anything for himself, even during all of that, he'd never felt as helpless as he did at that moment. Her fist was balled on her thigh as she tried to hold back. Without giving himself a chance to overthink, he reached out and took her hand, holding it between both of his.

“It’s ok,” he whispered. “You don’t have to fight it. Let it out.” Andi slumped forward, hanging her head and his heart ached for her as she sobbed. He squeezed her hand and she shifted on the bench, but didn’t pull away. If anything, she’d shifted closer. He stroked her thumb with his, not feeling sure about what to do next and all the while, trying to beat back a persistent thought in the back of his mind. *If you’d stayed together, and gotten engaged, and if the IED had blown under the front end of the Humvee instead of the back ... You would be the reason Andi was crying now.* It was the first time Max felt ... thankful ... for how things had worked out.

Not because Andi was now sitting beside him, crying for a man she’d loved and lost, but because he was alive and able to be here, sitting next to her, holding her hand and supporting his friend while she did it. And that’s what she was, first and foremost, his friend. She was Andi Morgan, the girl who had smiled at him on his first day in a new place and waved him over to sit next to her. And right now, she was hurting. Andi leaned toward him, her sobs turning to muscle jerks and sniffles. He scooted closer to her and put one arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his side and helping block some of the cold wind whipping up the cliffs.

“You know,” he said softly, his nose full of the apples and summertime smell of Andi. “My grandma always said that grieving for someone you love is the last gift you can give them. You’re grieving for them so they didn’t have to grieve for you.”

She sniffed and swiped at her face. The spandex didn’t do much for absorbing the tears but Andi didn’t move to find anything else. “Thank you,” she said when she found her voice again. “I meant to tell you before, but ...”

“How do you slide that into a conversation?” Max asked. “It doesn’t really fit between ‘hi how are you?’ and ‘Roquefort or Swiss?’ which have been the bulk of our conversations since we’ve seen each other.”

She chuckled softly. “Yeah. I guess.” She turned to look at him, and her swollen eyes searched his face. “Here I am crying over what’s happened to me, and you’re just sitting here, comforting me. I . . .,” she dropped her gaze to her lap. “My dad told me what happened to you in Iraq.”

Max frowned. “He did? So you knew about me, even though I’ve only been back a few weeks, but somehow you’ve been back for six months and *no one* managed to tell me you’d lost ...”

She shrugged as she swiped at her eyes again. “I suppose I’m old news.”

He shook his head. “This town.”

“Well, now you know,” Andi said. “And it just ... it’s only been eleven months. And everyone at the Bash was just ...”

“Putting two old faces together and acting like your fiancé ...” he began.

She nodded. “Acting like he’d never existed. That’s why I got so upset but ...” Her eyes were filled with tears when she turned to look at him. “I never meant to break your heart, Max. When you said that ...” She squeezed her eyes shut and he saw tears starting to leak out of the corners.

“Hey, no more of that,” he said, swiping at her cheek with his thumb before he could stop himself. Her skin was so soft. “At least not for me. We’re fine, Andi. You apologized, I apologized, we strapped ourselves into these bizarre discount-sex shop jogging ... outfits, and now everything is going to be ok. Friends, right?”

Andi just looked at him for a moment and then her face broke into a smile and she nodded, holding a hand out to him to shake. “Friends.”

Max shook her hand and then turned to squint down the path the other joggers had followed. “Do you think it’s time for us to head back to meet up at Mrs. Abbott’s?”

Andi was on her feet. “Yes.” She was still holding his hand and still smiling, she started to tug on it, trying to get him to stand. Feeling her warm, small hand interwoven with his was both a new sensation and one so familiar, that he felt his fingers curling around hers on their own. *Balance out*, he thought to himself as he got to his feet. *Balance out*, he

thought again as he looked down into Andi's eyes. She'd let go of his hand, but her eyes were still on him as she pulled up her hood and tucked her hair back inside. He caught himself staring at her and quickly moved to pull up his own hood.

"Ok, so we're sneaking back to Mrs. Abbott's but we need to look like we're coming from the same direction they are," Max said.

"I say we loop down Oceanview and then come down the alley by your house and then wait until we see them run by, pop out behind them, and pretend to be winded when we reach her house."

"A solid plan," Max said, trying to make his gait as smooth as possible as he followed her off the jogging path and back the way they'd come.

"I'm so sorry about falling apart on you," Andi muttered as they waited behind a hedge on Oceanview, waiting for the rest of the joggers to run by.

"I'm sorry for *literally* falling apart on you the other day at the hospital." Andi turned to look at him. Again, he couldn't see her expression, but he could imagine it. "You know when my leg came off."

She was still for a moment, and then she snorted with laughter and shook her head. "God, that's morbid."

He grinned, but then he remembered she couldn't see his face. "Just wanted to make you feel better."

"I apprecia-

A scream behind them made them both jump. Max spun too fast and almost fell, his prosthetic shifting sideways under him. In a second, Andi's arm was around him and she was leaning against him.

"You ok?"

There was a second scream before he could answer her. It took a third scream before he was able to tell where they were coming from. Mrs. Rothenberg was leaning out of her second-floor bedroom.

"Ninjas! There are ninjas in my yard! Help! Someone help!"

"Well crap," Andi muttered.

"Come on," Max hissed. "We'll take our chances waiting at Mrs. Abbott's."

Unfortunately, Mrs. Rothenberg could still see them, standing on Mrs. Abbott's porch.

"There are ninjas on Lena's porch! Ninjas! Lena! Get out of the house!"

"Mrs. Rothenberg, it's Andi Morgan," Andi yelled. She reached up and tried to unzip her hood, but paused and swore under her breath.

"Oh my god, one of the ninjas has Andi!"

Max sighed, reaching up for his own hood. "Mrs. Rothenberg, it's Max Lyons." He froze, looking over at Andi. "Is your zipper stuck?"

“Yeah, I think I zipped some of my hair up in it,” Andi said, pausing in her struggle to turn to look at him. “Why?”

“Because I think I did the same thing,” Max muttered. Mrs. Rothenberg was still screaming about ninjas and up and down the street, they could hear doors and windows being thrown open.

Andi sighed. “I’ve got an idea. Come on.” She grabbed his hand and they headed down the porch steps and back onto the street. “Uh, tell me if we’re going too fast.”

Max was glad she couldn’t see the annoyance on his face. “I’m fine.”

She nodded and they hurried on, rushing past townsfolk in bathrobes standing open-mouthed in doorways and leaning out of windows.

“Miss Mandie!” Andi yelled as she pulled Max in through the bakery’s front door. Andi froze and Max was right behind her. “I didn’t think this through,” Andi muttered to him. The bakery was full of people with the Flash-Your-Muffins and Morning Wood muffins halfway to their mouths, now staring at her and Max.

“Oh good,” Miss Mandie called as she hustled around the counter. “My models for The Sex Pit’s Grand Opening cake are here!” It was like she’d cast a spell of normalcy over the whole bakery. As one, the room seemed to shrug and then they went back to their breakfasts. “This way, you two,” Miss Mandie chuckled, pausing to wink at Max. Maybe Miss Mandie was a witch if she was able to make eye contact with

him through the opaque hood. Andi was still holding his hand as they followed Miss Mandie back into the kitchen. “Well, should I ask? Or just assume you two were having a little early morning fun and became the victim of cheap zippers?”

“Not so much early morning *fun*. At least ...” Andi was floundering and he couldn’t see her face, but he could tell by her voice that she was blushing.

“Mrs. Abbott bought all the jogging club members Zentai suits with studded harnesses because she thought they were jogging suits with built-in security,” Max said.

Miss Mandie let out a belly laugh so intense she had to grip the edge of the countertop to keep from falling. “God, I love Lena. She’s a hell of a woman, but she’s still pretty innocent about some things.” When she’d regained control of herself she sighed, still smiling as she turned to Max and Andi. “You two are in luck. Most of my movies had budgets so small that all our costumes had cheap zippers. There are some tricks ...” Max motioned for her to work on Andi’s zipper first. After five minutes, Andi emerged, red-faced and with her hair standing four inches taller than before from the static electricity. Miss Mandie side-stepped her and pushed Max toward a chair so she could get at the zipper on top of his head. “No offense, Doc, but if you touch me right now with as much static electricity as you’re storing, we’ll end up blowing this whole place sky-high. I was testing out a new bloody mary recipe this morning and I got a little carried away,” she glanced down at her wet apron, “and I tripled my hairspray because of how damp it was today.” Andi took a huge step

away from her and went back to work, unhooking the harness and peeling the spandex off. Max tried to keep his gaze on the floor while Miss Mandie worked the zippers free. “Alright, now you can shed like a seal in summer,” she said, finally taking a step back from him.

“Such a nice visual,” Max chuckled and he worked to get his own harness off. Miss Mandie leaned back against her double sinks and watched them with her arms crossed.

“You know, you two don’t look too bad in kink. You ever consider it? Kink providers make pretty good money.”

“Probably not in Hope,” Andi sighed, kicking off her running shoes and bending over to peel off the suit. Max forced his gaze to the floor again as he peeled his own suit off his chest.

“You’d be surprised,” Miss Mandie said.

“Miss Mandie!” Bart called through the door. “We’re getting gang banged out here.”

She sighed. “We really need to come up with a more covert phrase for when we’re getting slammed.” She disappeared through the kitchen’s swinging door and Max started trying to quickly push the suit under his hips so he could keep using the chair for balance.

“Here, I’ll help,” Andi said, dropping to her knees in front of him and starting to untie his running shoe. He’d forced the weird cap thing from the bottom of his prosthetic over the bottom of the Zentai suit so it wouldn’t drag on the concrete

and he almost knocked heads with Andi trying to get to it before Andi. “Ok, I love the hustle but I doubt that knocking ourselves unconscious will get us out of my one o’clock with Esther’s sugar-free club and the support group meeting tonight.”

He sighed. “Yeah, and I have a one o’clock meeting with Zane’s mobile gym club.”

“A mobile gym?” Andi asked. “That’s kind of cool. You know, I want to see his setup.”

Max raised an eyebrow at her. “Why? You thinking of creating some competition with him? Did you get into lifting weights beyond just stealing them?”

She rolled her eyes. “First of all, *you* were the one who stole them. I was just your ... toady. Your accomplice. Accessory to weight thievery.” Max chuckled and she shook her head. “Nah. This town needs a mobile vet service. I’ve been campaigning on it to Doc Simmons for the last month or two, but he’s reluctant. I thought maybe if I could show him how it would work, he’d feel more open to the idea.”

“Good plan,” Max said, trying to concentrate on their conversation and not on how her hands felt on his leg as she tugged the suit down and off his foot.

“Where are you all meeting?” Andi asked, moving to help with his other leg.

“I’ve got this one,” he said quickly, bending over and boxing her out as he fought to pull the suit off over the

prosthetic. It had been a hell of a lot easier going on over it than coming off. The stretchy fabric kept snagging on the bolts or edges of the hard plastic. “Uh, we’re going to be at the gazebo.”

“The town square seems to be a popular place to meet up,” Andi said. “Esther’s Down with Sugar club is meeting in City Park next to Town Hall at one.”

“I’m sorry,” Max said, shaking his head. “I’ll put two donuts on a breadstick and do some curls in your honor.”

“Excellent,” she muttered. “That’s so kind of you.”

“Why’d you join her sugar-free club anyway?” Max chuckled. “Does she have blackmail on you or something?”

Andi dropped her gaze and went back to playing with the metal spikes on her harness. “I need a favor from her. I thought it would be easier if I was on her good side.”

“A favor?”

She blew out a sigh. “She and Mr. Jacobs are donating that land for the new pet park.” Max nodded, but Andi didn’t look at him. “I was ... hoping to get a bench installed in the park, as a memorial for Brandon.”

Brandon. Her fiance. Andi and Brandon. He wondered what Brandon’s last name had been. Andi’s phone dinged and she pulled it out of her pocket. He watched her face as she read the screen. Her expression fell.

“Bad news?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. It’s ... it’s Brandon’s sister. She’s having a hard time.”

“So are you,” he said gently.

Andi met his gaze. “Yeah, but ... she’s alone right now. And she and Brandon were really close.”

He shrugged. “Well, if you’re willing to even keep up the appearance that you’re not eating sugar and you’re willing to humor Esther enough to *voluntarily* let her talk at you about sugar, I’d say you’re a shoo-in for that bench. Why don’t you invite his sister out to see it when it’s built?”

She looked up, considering it. “Max, that’s a great idea. Hank said there was going to be a dedication ceremony when they break ground. That’ll be before it’s built, but still ... she could see where it would be. And it would be sooner. I ... I think that would help.” Her phone dinged again and she barely managed to stifle a sigh.

“Do you need to call her?”

After a moment, Andi nodded. “Yeah.” She looked up and met Max’s gaze. He felt himself smiling and after a hesitant moment, she returned it. “It’s ... it’s really good to be friends again with you, Lyons,” she said. “This morning was ... fun.”

He grinned. “No one I’d rather dress up with and freak out an entire neighborhood with.”

“Right back at you,” Andi said, her smile turning to her old mischievous grin. “See you at the meeting tonight?”

“Or at one when we make awkward eye contact across the square while we’re joining in on our obligatory meetings,” Max said with a sigh.

“You curl some donuts and I’ll bench someone in sugar withdrawal and before you know it, it’ll be over,” Andi said, squeezing his shoulder. He was still sitting so she was able to reach it. He followed her gaze to the wad of Zentai suits with the two leather harnesses sitting on top.

“What should we do about ...” Max asked.

“I say we leave them here,” Andi met his gaze and he grinned. “If anyone can find a good home for them, it’s Miss Mandie.”

“What about the jogging club?”

Max shrugged. “We say we have a scheduling conflict. You work too much and I’ll say my physical therapy isn’t allowing me to jog regularly yet.”

Andi narrowed her eyes on him. “*Is* your physical therapy not allowing you to jog?”

Max grinned. “Yeah. But I wasn’t about to let that stop me.”

Andi shook her head. “You’re killing me, Lyons.”

An automatic nerve impulse shot down his arms but he forced himself not to act on it. How many times had he been sitting on the bench in the locker room, or on the field when Andi would come over to check on him, her hands on his shoulders, and his hands around her waist, pulling her into him to stand between his legs. Always gently chastising him for

doing something he was kind of supposed to avoid. Every time, it would end with her kissing him, running her hands through his hair, and telling him, “*I love you, but you drive me crazy.*”

He got to his feet and they strolled out of the kitchen as if it was something they did every day. They paused outside the bakery and he saw Andi take a deep breath before turning to look at him.

“Thank you,” she said.

Max blinked at her. “For what?”

She grinned and reached out to squeeze his hand. “For still wanting to be friends.”

“Same,” he said.

Five minutes later, she’d taken off after her phone dinged a third time and he was on his way home, his nose still full of her scent, his hand still twitching at the memory of her touch. *You’re glad you’re friends too*, he thought. *Just friends.*

Andi

Despite the fact that she had at least a twenty-minute phone call with Michelle to look forward to which always felt like a sharp-toed high-heel boot kick to the chest, Andi was smiling when she left Max in the square. To say it had been a weird morning would be an understatement. Though “weird” for Hope Island was definitely not the national standard. On the Hope Island scale, her day so far would have just been “eventful”. And even that was a sliding scale since they’d just come out of the holiday season. “Eventful” during Christmas in Hope was a *Survivor* show waiting to happen. Michelle texted again and Andi barely managed to hold in her sigh.

M: ???

She was going to have to call her. She turned down her street while she waited for Michelle to pick up. She didn’t have to wait long.

“You didn’t text me back,” Michelle sniffed. Andi had gotten so accustomed to Michelle’s crying sounds that she could tell in one sentence how long that morning Michelle had been crying. Her stomach started to churn, unearthing a giant

brick of guilt at the bottom. Why wasn't she always crying for Brandon? She'd been his fiancée. What was wrong with her?

"I'm so sorry, Michelle, I ..."
Ok, brain. How are you going to explain this one? Telling her that she'd been hiding in bushes in BDSM gear with her ex from high school was probably the wrong thing to say, so the truth wasn't going to work. "I was jogging. I didn't see you'd texted." It was *kind of* true. Sure they'd never reached jogging speed, but when running it's the thought that counts, isn't it?

"I wish *I* could just go for a jog and forget about everything," Michelle sobbed.

Churn, brick, churn.

"I'm so sorry, Michelle," Andi said. "I just ..."

"I still can't believe he's gone, Andi," her sobs made Andi's legs feel weak. She'd made it to her parents' house and she collapsed on the porch steps, leaning against the nearest pillar for support.

"I know," she whispered. The wind was picking up and she could hear the honk of geese overhead. Either geese who'd slept through their alarms and were trying to catch up or eager beaver geese back from their southern adventures. While Michelle cried and Andi said anything she could think of to try to comfort her, she watched for the geese overhead, remembering something Brandon had told her.

"I used to think birds were the smartest animals in existence," he said, running a hand through his messy hair

and grinning up at the sky. They were lying in the grass by the conservatory at Volunteer Park in Seattle. It was fall and they'd decided to spend the afternoon pretending they were fallen leaves.

“Never heard the phrase ‘bird-brained’ before?” Andi asked. He reached down and poked her in the side.

“No, it’s just ... I didn’t understand how they knew where to go. Like, are there bird roads? Bird maps?”

“Bird Maps? From the bird Triple-A? American Avian Association?” Andi teased.

He huffed, “You know what I mean.”

She nodded, turning her head where it rested on him enough to kiss his chest. “Yeah. So when was the magic gone for you?”

“You mean, besides when I met you and all your animals’ knowledge dispelled their wonder?”

She rolled her eyes. “Are you still mad because owls poop?”

“We’re not having that discussion again.”

“You know snakes poop too,” Andi chuckled, turning her head to look at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Here I was trying to say something profound and all you did was ...”

“Poo all over it?” Andi asked. It was the wrong thing to say. Besides Amelia, Brandon was the best tickler she’d ever

met. She shuddered to think what would happen if they teamed up to tickle the world. Lots of hiccups, accidental farts, and probably several suffocations from laughing too hard. “Ok, ok, truce,” she wheezed. “Tell me something profound.”

He sighed, resting back in the grass with one hand behind his head, one resting on her belly while she cozied up to him. “I was jealous of the birds. They were free, but they knew where they were going. Always. And it was innate. They didn’t have to question if they were going the right direction or ...”

“I’ll bet there are geese somewhere who end up in Minnesota in the winter with their Hawaiian shirts and flip-flops and realize too late that they made a wrong turn somewhere.”

“Would you just ... please?” he hissed, poking her.

“Ok, ok. I’m sorry,” Andi laughed, squirming away from him.

“And besides, how would geese wear flip-flops with webbed toes?”

Andi was smiling and she chuckled at the memory.

“Are ... are you *laughing*?” Michelle sniffed.

“I’m so sorry,” Andi said quickly. “A funny memory just came into my ...”

“How are you carrying on like everything is ok? Brandon is gone.”

“I know,” Andi said, as the familiar numbness in her face and chest settled over her.

“I wa-was listening to all my voicemails from him today,” Michelle cried. “The first one was on our mom’s birthday. I was at work and I couldn’t answer when he called. She ... she’d been gone for five years ...”

Half an hour into the phone call, her dad came out to the porch and looked down at her. She motioned at the phone in her hand and he disappeared, only to return ten minutes later with a soft, thick blanket which he draped over her shoulders and a mug of hot cocoa. She mouthed, “Thank you,” to him. He nodded, kissed the top of her head, and went back inside. She burrowed deeper into the blanket, using the mug to keep her hands warm as she watched the wind rattling the naked trees in their front yard. She was lucky she had someone like her dad. Michelle was alone in Seattle.

“Oh, Michelle,” Andi said quickly when she paused to draw breath. “How about you come out to the island for the groundbreaking ceremony for the pet park? I ...” She realized too late that she might have jumped before she looked. “I should know about when it’ll be this afternoon and,” *Please, Universe, don’t turn me into a liar.* “I should know about his memorial bench this week.”

“Really?” Michelle asked. Andi held her breath. “So, a ... bench.” Michelle sounded like she was considering it. “Ok.” Andi started to breathe again. “It’s a good place to start, anyway.”

Andi decided that she'd take it. Michelle had been their third musketeer in Seattle. But after Brandon's funeral, they'd drifted apart. It hurt at first, but as her mom said, it was probably just self-preservation. Michelle had the same curly, messy hair, and toothy grin that Brandon had. Andi could admit that seeing her was hard. "*And,*" her mom argued, "*Seeing you without Brandon is just as hard for her.*" It was fair, but it had still been hard. "*What you need is familiarity from a previous life. Life's knocked you down at the moment. You just need to get your legs back under you again.*"

The front door opened and Amelia stuck her head out.

"Andi, did you lose a bet or something?"

Andi turned to blink at her. "What?"

"Esther Jacobs is on the phone. She says you're supposed to come to a meeting of her sugar club at one?" In the momentary silence that fell between them, all she could hear was the soft creaking of tree branches in the wind and the sound of Mrs. Jacobs trying to talk Amelia's shirt off where she had the cordless phone pressed to her chest.

Andi sighed. "Tell her I'll be there." She held her own phone away from her face and checked the time. She needed a nap and a shower if she was going to have to smile through a sugar-free meeting with Mrs. Jacobs and *still* be sane enough to ask for Brandon's bench. "I have to go, Michelle. Text me if you need anything. I'll text you as soon as I have the details about the groundbreaking ceremony.

“Ok,” Michelle sniffed. “Have a good rest of your day, I guess.”

“Michelle,” Andi said softly. But Michelle had already hung up.

“So,” Amelia said, coming over to plop down next to her. “How many times did Michelle guilt trip you today?”

Andi looked at her. “Am, she lost her brother.”

Amelia dropped her gaze. “And you lost your fiance. She shouldn’t put so much on you, Andi. You ... you’re grieving too.”

Andi leaned her head against Amelia’s shoulder. “Yeah, but Michelle is all alone. And after their dad died, she and Brandon got closer. I have you, and Mom, and Dad. But,” she looked up. “I did invite her out here for the groundbreaking ceremony at the pet park.”

Amelia groaned.

“Hey,” Andi said.

Amelia sighed. “Is she going to yell at me if I smile? If I wear a bright shirt? At the funeral, she told me my green hair wasn’t ‘appropriate’.”

Andi shook her head. “She’s just upset. It wasn’t so long ago that I was in the same seat. When you’re hurting, regular manners sometimes go out the window. You can’t think about anything or feel anything except for the pain. You go to sleep with it and you wake up with it. And ...” Amelia’s arms were around her shoulders. “Am, I can’t breathe,” she wheezed.

Amelia finally released her. “So, when does the pet park break ground? I want to schedule strategically.”

“I’m sure you do.” Andi shrugged. “I don’t know yet. There’s only one way to find out and honestly, right now, I’d rather be boobs-deep in Mordor, hiding from the Eye of Sauron and going for a leisurely hike up Mt. Doom.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “You’re such a nerd. So *that’s* why you joined Esther’s sugar-free club. I was afraid you’d taken a massive blow to the head. Or she ran a floating craps game and you couldn’t cover the juice.”

Andi blinked at her. “The juice?”

“Sorry, I was watching *Lucky Number Slevin* earlier. So, this is your plan to get on Esther’s good side? Join her club and forgo all sugar for a year?”

Andi shivered. “No. My goal is to get on her good side long enough for her to approve Brandon’s bench and then fall off the sugar-free wagon after it’s built.”

“Sneaky. S.I. would approve.”

“No, they wouldn’t. They’d be figuring out how to pass off Kool-Aid as a new energy drink for people in sugar withdrawal and pass off Oreos as a new superfood,” Andi muttered, tugging the blanket tighter around her.

“Ah-ha! I knew it! You said *they*. It’s not Stuart Irving,” Amelia crowed, her finger an inch from Andi’s nose.

“Get your finger out of my face,” she muttered.

“It’s not in your face, it’s attached to my hand.”

“Get what’s attached to your hand, out of my face before I bite it off.”

“I won’t tell everyone that you were a part of S.I. if you help me come up with our senior prank,” Amelia said.

“No,” Andi sighed, getting to her feet. “Pranks are personal. You have to *feel it*.” She put a hand on Amelia’s shoulder. “You’ll know when it’s right. And now,” she turned and headed into the house, “I’m going to take a nap.”

“You’re going to need it,” Amelia called after her. “Esther said today’s topic for the meeting is an overview of glucose and sucralose.”

“Wonderful,” Andi muttered on her way up the stairs.

“With a blind root veggie tasting,” Amelia added, following her.

“Can’t wait,” Andi said when she reached her room.

“And an answer session after.”

Andi paused and turned to look at her. “You mean a question and answer session?”

Amelia shrugged. “Well, yeah, but it’s Esther. Do you think anyone will get a chance to *ask* questions? Maybe one. Then the rest will just be Esther’s answer until the dead rise, the meteor hit,s and the big wolf chows down on Odin.”

“Hence the nap,” Andi muttered. “Goodnight.” And she shut the door in Amelia’s face with a snap.



As it turned out, Esther's sugar-free meeting wasn't as bad as Andi expected it to be. At least, by the end.

"Now, I find that even using fruit to replace your sugar cravings can have an adverse effect," Esther droned on. Andi was letting her voice wash over her where she sat on the grass wedged between Mr. Elton from the dance academy and Martha Washington, the owner of the Excavation lingerie store. The two of them seemed to be at least *moderately* interested in what Esther was saying.

Behind Andi, she could hear Mrs. Redding from the Red and White Floral shop muttering under her breath, "This is horseshit," every few minutes. Andi had her arms wrapped around her knees and was surreptitiously checking her watch while she waited for the meeting to wind down. She checked again and inwardly groaned that it had only been four minutes since the last time she'd checked. She glanced around her and saw that everyone else at the meeting was either drifting in and out of consciousness, (probably missing the sugar that usually pepped them up), or twitching where they sat, either playing on their phones, shredding the wet brown grass that Esther insisted they all sit in for the duration of the meeting. Some had tried standing, but it hadn't lasted. Once Esther hit her stride, it was best to sit.

Andi let her gaze drift around the square in front of them. The park was at a downward slope with the town square in

front of them and a low point of the joggers' path behind them where it hugged the cliffs. There'd been some excitement when Zane had strained his way down a side-street, slow-pedaling his heavy load of a mobile gym, mounted on the cart he pulled behind him. It had also been pretty exciting when Dirk Patterson had shown up and started doing squats in what had to be his red and orange Hope High Goats wrestling singlet circa 1980. And then Max had shown up and ...

Max had always been heart-stopping handsome in high school. His deep brown eyes and dark hair, the five o'clock shadow on his jaw. That little half-smile he wore when he was embarrassed ... but he was also a gym rat. He'd gotten into lifting with the football team in middle school and Andi had often wondered at how easy self-discipline seemed to come to him. He'd gotten her to join him in the lifting club one summer. She'd tried it, hated the early mornings and waking up every day feeling like she'd been hit by a truck, but she'd gone just so they'd have one more thing they did together. Things were always more fun with Max.

While Esther droned on, she tried to strain her memory and imagine middle and high school *without* Max as her best friend and boyfriend. She couldn't do it. So many memories included him that if she took those out, the whole experience felt like it could be boiled down to a single sentence; *School happened*. But her tenure with the weightlifting club had ended with the prank they decided to play on Coach Hendricks the last week of summer when they swapped all the weights out for plastic replicas. She snorted into her knee remembering

the way Rudy “Red” Callahan, now the Fire Chief had smirked at her and Max, yanked a pair of “fifty-pound” dumbbells out of the rack and hit himself in the face.

“Is there a question?” Esther paused in her monologue to ask. It was a question, but everyone present knew it actually wasn’t. Andi quickly shook her head and Esther returned to her lecture. Andi checked her watch. Three more minutes down. Next to the gazebo, she caught a glimpse of Max moving around Zane’s cart, laughing with him while he picked a set of dumbbells. There was a portable weight bench that Zane had unfolded set up on the side of the cart closest to the park, though thankfully facing away from park, so the sugar-free club wasn’t subjected to the possibility of up short or singlet “buffalo shots” from those doing the lifting. She watched as Dirk strutted around the bench, adding heavier and heavier weights to the weight bar before straddling the bench, which in his singlet, made for a visual she wished she could unsee. The damp from the grass was seeping through her yoga pants and she was supremely thankful she was wearing black to hopefully hide the big wet spot when this was over. Others around her ... weren’t so lucky.

“Watch out!” Max’s voice. Andi looked up in time to see the weight bar slip out of Dirk’s hands where he had it fully extended. Time seemed to slow down for a moment as Dirk’s arms went over his head and the whole island shook as the heavy bar and metal weights hit the cobblestones. The whole island seemed to tremble, birds squawked and shot out of the trees overhead and the whole sugar-free club seemed to

levitate off the grass as one. Then, physics came out to play. The weight bar, kept off the ground on either side by two fifty-pound, round weights, started to roll ... downhill.

“Shit! It’s coming right for us!” Mrs. Whitehorse yelled behind Andi. And then the world was chaos. The weight bar was gathering speed as it rolled downhill. Everyone was on their feet, running to get out of the way. Everyone, except Esther. She just stood in its path, silent for once, mouth hanging open and eyes wide. There wasn’t time to think through what she was doing. She dove for Esther just as the weight bar rocketed over the low edging of concrete around the park. She and Esther hit the ground to one side and Andi looked up in time to see the weight bar blow through the center of the park.

“Look out!” she yelled, hoping no one was on the jogging path, about to collide with it. It skipped across the paved path and launched itself off the edge and over the cliff. The whole island seemed to go still for a moment as they listened for the sound of the weight bar crashing into the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. After a moment, there was a crash and the frightened screeching of seagulls. Then, as one, everyone in the park slowly turned to look back at the gazebo where Dirk was standing, his face as red as his singlet.

“I didn’t ...” he turned on his heel and glared at Zane, hands-on-hips. “In my defense, you forgot to bring your chalk bags. How are we supposed to pump serious iron *without* chalk?! No wonder ... that ... happened.”

“Yeah, chalk is the reason my weight bar and two hundred pounds of expensive weights are currently crushing everything in their path as they sink to the bottom of the Pacific,” Zane snapped, loud enough for the whole club to hear. She could see Max behind Zane, trying to cover his laugh with a cough and she had to look away. She was having a hard enough time keeping her laughter silent, though she thought she might have felt something pop out of place in her ribs from the effort. Esther was still next to her on the grass and she’d already worked too hard to get in her good graces to blow it now.

“This grass is wet,” Esther hissed, getting to her feet and brushing at her clothes.

“We know,” Mr. Elton muttered, frowning down at the seat of his own pants. In typical Hope fashion, once life-threatening situations were resolved, if they were unsurprising, the next order of business was to discuss minor inconveniences such as wet butts. And any kind of catastrophe involving Dirk Patterson was unsurprising in Hope. While Zane and Dirk argued and Max tried to mediate, Andi turned her attention back to Esther. This might be her best shot. Unfortunately, she’d never been that good at aiming.

“I know! Wouldn’t it be nice if this park had a couple of benches?” Andi held her breath, trying to sell it with as much innocence as she could muster when Esther swung around to look at her. For a moment, the rest of the world seemed to fall away and it was just her and Esther, staring each other down.

“I’ve always said this park would be so much more *useful* with some benches. I remember telling Stanley just that very thing last year during the summer bathtub races. ‘Everyone has to bring their own chair,’ I said to him. I mean what is the point of a park where no one can sit?”

“I completely agree,” Andi said quickly, hoping that Esther would focus on the “agreeing with her part” and not the part where Andi cut her off. “But you’ll be able to make such a difference with *your* park,” she said quickly, kicking her own volume up, hoping it would be enough to dissuade her from cutting her off. “You’ll be able to install all kinds of benches for people to be able to sit in while they watch their pets play and ... uh, enjoy the nice day, and I’ll bet you’ll even have enough so next year, this sugar club ...” Esther’s eyes bulged. “Sugar-Free ... the Down with Sugar club would be able to meet *there*, comfortably ... and with dry ... butts.” Andi paused and held her breath, watching Esther’s face. *Please. Please give me an in.*

“I’ve always said we had to have benches in that park. I mean, without them, where would people sit while they’re waiting for their pets to tire themselves out? I think dark wood will complement the trees, though the cost will probably be outrageous ...”

Universe, I owe you. “Oh! I’ll bet.” Andi cut across her again. “What if some of us would like to pay for the benches and have them as memorials for ... our loved ones?”

Esther's business face calculated the savings and then her human face emerged, blinking at Andi. "I think that's a ... *could be* a good idea. Just to keep things orderly, I would need a proposal along with a quote on the benches and the funds to pay for them before I could say yes, just like everyone else. And of course, all of this would need to be finalized before we break ground."

Andi wished she'd brought something to take notes. "Oh. Ok. And when do you plan to break ground?"

"January 17th. We'll be meeting on the lot at one in the afternoon. So all applications would need to be turned in and approved no later than the day before. I'll be making my decision and letting applicants know the night of the 16th. So, just a little over a week from now. I hope you have enough time. My goodness, you should have brought this to me sooner ... you wanting to sponsor one of the benches *I'd already planned* on installing ..."

History revisionists had nothing on Esther Jacobs.

"You're absolutely right," Andi said quickly, "I better go get all that paperwork put together. I mean ... if the meeting is over?" She looked around the park and judging by the frustrated sigh from Esther, she was doing the same. Almost everyone else had been successful in fleeing the park while Esther was preoccupied with Andi. Andi started to sweat. If she was the last person standing with Esther, she'd be stuck there until Esther went hoarse, talking at her. But then she saw

him, her savior, Dirk Patterson. He was stomping away from Zane.

“Fine! Your mobile gym idea sucks anyway,” Dirk yelled over his shoulder. “I’m going to join a *different* club.” And those were the magic words for Esther. Involuntary attempted manslaughter be damned. The chance to add another name to her club and eek that much closer to being crowned Queen Motivator was enough to make her forget her near-death miss.

“Dirk! As a person interested in fitness, are you aware of the difference between glucose and sucralose?” Esther called, bustling over to intercept him. Andi allowed herself a brief sigh of relief as she power walked out of the park.

“Hey, are you ok?” Max called, hustling over to her. His expression was worried as he hurried over to her. He only had an a-shirt on and he was ... glistening ... even in the cool January air. Andi felt her inner cartoon wolf start to pant before she could smack it on the nose with her mental newspaper.

“I-I’m fine,” Andi said, gazing around the square, suddenly trying to look anywhere *but* at the wood and citrus-scented Max Lyons standing shirtless next to her. “So, good meeting?”

“Yeah. The first twenty minutes of it, anyway,” Max chuckled. “Then it was a *great* meeting, well, except for the whole worrying about a weight bar running you over and dragging you off the cliff.”

“Yeah, except that.” She turned to look at Zane who was starting to repack his bike cart. “And poor Zane.”

“Let me give you a hand with that,” Max called to Zane, hurrying over to help fold up the weight bench. She tore her eyes away from the sight of Max muscling the bench onto the cart with Zane and moved around the cart to reload the dumbbells.

“So, how’d the climb up Esther’s good side go,” he asked as they waved goodbye to Zane who was already red-faced but hellbent on pedaling his mobile gym home on his own.

“Oh, Everest has nothing on me now,” Andi said with a sigh as they headed around the square. “But I think I broke through. I just have a bunch of paperwork to do and I’ve got to get the money together ...”

“Do ... do you need money?” he asked quietly.

She turned to look at him. “No, I’m good. Th ... thanks though.”

He nodded quickly and cleared his throat. “Well, um ... do you feel like getting a cup of coffee?”

“No,” Andi said. She could feel Max deflate slightly beside her. She grinned, chewing on her bottom lip. “But I’d kill for an éclair.”

Max chuckled and looked around the square. “You’re in the clear. Esther is probably off chasing Dirk down the jogging path, trying to get him to join her club.”

Andi shook her head. “That stupid Monarch Motivators contest was one of the mayor’s most ridiculous ideas.”

Max held the door to De-Floured open for her and followed her in, stopping short, right behind her because of the long line snaking all the way to the door. Andi felt his hips press into her from behind for a moment and she couldn't breathe. He was wearing athletic shorts and ... *it's just been a long time.*

"Busy today," Max said softly. Was he ... out of breath?

"Yeah," she breathed. The line ahead of them shifted forward and she took a huge step away from Max and right onto the back of Mr. Welks' shoe, flat-tiring him. "Oh my gosh, Mr. Welks, I'm so sorry," Andi said, staring down in horror at Mr. Welks' heel.

"It's my fault," he muttered, glaring back at her. "Should have known when I stepped out of the house this morning that it was a bad idea." He growled darkly the whole time she and Max helped him balance so he could fix the back of his shoe and she was careful to stay a step behind him the rest of the way to the counter. Max wasn't pressed into her back anymore, but his contours were stubbornly pressed into her mind.

"Sorry, for ..." Max started while Mr. Welks muttered his order to Miss Mandie. "The line was just so ..." His face was red and Andi felt heat rising in her own cheeks. So he *had* noticed.

"Next," Miss Mandie barked, saving Andi from whatever embarrassing reply she was on the precipice of making. Instead, she turned her attention on Miss Mandie, frowning.

"What's up, Miss Mandie?" Andi asked.

“Oh, I’ve just had it up to my titty tassels with these damn resolution clubs,” she muttered darkly, looking over their heads out the front door. Andi caught a glimpse of Max behind her, head down and scratching the back of his neck. A classic Max Lyons tell that he was having a hard time keeping it together when something was making him laugh.

“I’m with you,” Andi said, grinning as she saw Dirk jog by the bakery door, with Esther on his heels. “I get the feeling it’s not even about the resolutions anymore. It’s just about the competition between the people heading up the clubs. They *really* want to be Queen or King Motivator.” Miss Mandie went still behind the counter and Andi turned to look at her. “What?”

Miss Mandie was smiling. And it was a smile that would have gotten her at least an interview to be the third S.I. member if it still existed. “Well, maybe the neighborly thing to do would be to take the crown myself. You know, to limit the in-fighting between the rest of them.”

“What kind of club are you running?” Max asked.

“Hmmm, well, I was planning on celebrating National Bagel Day, Cheese Lover’s Day, and Chocolate Cake Day. Maybe my club will be for people who want to celebrate the lesser holidays of the year?”

Andi grinned. “I’ll join that.”

“Me too,” Max said.

“In Hope, the island that hosts the bathtub races on the half-birthday of their inventor? And the Plummer’s Day parade? A club like that would be Hope Island... catnip.”

Miss Mandie grinned and ran her receipt tape out. She ripped off the long piece and set it down in front of Andi with a pen. “Well, if you two sign as my first two members, I’ll get this show on the road.” She wouldn’t let them pay for their coffee and donuts. “And I’ll give a twenty-five percent discount to all members of the ... Hope Hardly-Known Holidays Club.”

“I like it,” Andi said.

“I’m feeling motivated,” Max added.

“Well, if you two will spread the word, I’ll get a poster up on the door and we’ll get this show on the road. Anyone who wants to join, send them my way.”

They waved goodbye and headed outside. “I’m not sure how it’s a resolution,” Andi said. “But she’s got my vote.”

Max grinned. “I’m sure she’ll come up with something.” Andi was about to comment when Max swept in front of her, pulling her to him. *Oh my god, is he going to kiss me?* Her heart was pounding in her chest. He didn’t kiss her, but he paused, his dark eyes pouring into hers. A moment later, he looked over his shoulder before taking a step back. “Sorry. Esther was cutting through the square.” He glanced down at the éclair in Andi’s hand. “I didn’t want her to spot you and ... use that as an excuse to deny your ... application.”

“Th-thanks,” she said, trying to shut down the voice in her head, screaming a plea for him to touch her again.

“Well, I ... I guess I’ll see you at the meeting tonight,” he said.

She gave her head a quick shake and nodded up at him. “I ... I can hardly wait ... to see what all the ... new volunteer opportunities ... are.” If he noticed her flushed face or the way she had her Well-Endowed in a death grip, he was kind enough not to torture her with it. He waved goodbye and headed in the direction of his street. She watched him go, his new gait wasn’t anything like the one he’d had in all the years she’d known him, but it fit him ... now. It fit the Max he was now. He’d grown up. As she waved her eclair in greeting to townsfolk walking past her on her way home, she wondered if she had a different gait now. Did Max think she’d grown up too?

Max

“Alright!” Jordan called over the arguments erupting between support group members all over the cafeteria. “Clearly it was a bad idea to have everyone break into smaller groups to discuss what their favorite holiday movie is. That one’s on me. It was just meant to be an ice breaker, not the start of a town-wide cold war.” Jordan’s gaze flicked to Max before returning to the group at large. “Now, we’ve got a couple items of housekeeping, and then we’re going to move the rest of this meeting over to the animal hospital and shelter because our next project is helping out with the pet fashion show which will be at the Resolution Redo party next Sunday, the fifteenth.” She paused for a fairly equal number of groans and gasps of excitement. “Before that though, it’s come to my attention . . . well, it came to *someone’s* attention . . .” Max saw Jordan barely contain her eye roll, “that our support group name is too long and we need a shorter version of it since we’re now doing so much in town. Apparently, the person complaining tells me, it’s too long to put on programs and signs. So, we need a shorter version for official use.”

“What about an acronym?” Glenda called from the far side of the cafeteria.

“Cup of Kindness, COK?” Zane asked.

“Cokers,” Sam Phillips said.

“Or CocKers,” Andi muttered beside him, “Kind of sounds bad no matter how you pronounce it,” she added to Tessa, sitting on her other side.

“What about Cuppers?” Max asked as the room started to devolve around them into another round of arguments.

Jordan nodded at him, looking relieved. “Cuppers?” she asked the room at large, raising her voice to climb over the verbal fistfight happening between Glenda and Sam.

“Cuppers,” Tessa said. “Can we call the pet fashion show, Cuppers with Puppies?”

“But what about all the cats?” Carol Springfield asked.

“Kitties with Biddies?” Mrs. Thompson added.

Jordan seemed to realize that getting a unanimous consensus was a pipe dream and that unilateral action was the best course forward. “Cuppers it is. Let’s head over to the animal hospital.”

Max smiled as he, Andi, and Tessa followed everyone else out, bringing up the rear.

“You’re smiling,” Andi said, her arm brushing against his as they walked.

“Uh, yeah. Just ... this town, you know. Being away you forget.” *Nice save.* He wasn’t ready to admit to himself, let alone Andi that the smile was because of her. He’d just spent the last hour with his left knee an inch from her, smelling her apple shampoo every time her long hair fell over her shoulder when she turned to talk to Tessa and remembering the way his pillow had smelled like her for a week after their first time in his room. He knew these weren’t helpful thoughts. But lately, he’d had a hard time stopping them.

“Hello, hello, hello!” Martha Washington trilled when they filed in through the hospital’s front door. She was standing in front of the reception desk, surrounded by a pile of bags from her store, Excavation. “My! How many of you! Well, we don’t have a minute to waste! Let’s get you all paired up with a furry baby so we can make some history!”

“Annabelle,” he heard Andi mutter to the blonde vet tech who was grinning behind the desk. “How much ‘big dog tranquilizer’ do we have?”

Annabelle shook her head at her. “Sorry, Boss. Not enough to take her down for more than a half hour or so.”

“Damn,” Andi muttered.

Max was supremely thankful that they ran out of pets and costumes by the time they got to him. Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“How did you manage to weasel out of the runway?” Andi asked, narrowing her eyes at him as they all mercifully dispersed at the end of the night.

“Yeah,” Tessa said, piling on. “We were in line *right next to you* and we have to dress up but you don’t.”

He shrugged. “Just ... not enough pets to fashion ... model. But I didn’t get out of it. Jordan put me in charge of stage maintenance.”

“Wanna trade?” both women asked, turning to glare at him as they passed an old-fashioned street lamp.

He held up his hands in surrender. “You’re right. I don’t have a leg to stand on.” Tessa’s eyes went wide but Andi snorted and Max grinned.

“Well, maybe one,” Andi chuckled. And then Max was laughing.

“You two are freaking morbid,” Tessa said, shaking her head.

“And proud of it,” Max said.

“I’ve missed morbid,” Andi said, still laughing as she met his gaze when they passed another lamppost. There was an intense look in her gaze that made his heart stutter in his chest. *You’re reading too much into this.* He cleared his throat and looked down. They’d reached their street, but he wasn’t ready to leave them.

“I’ll walk this way with you,” Max said. He could feel Andi’s eyes on him in the dark. “It’s a dangerous time. Either Esther or Mrs. Bumble might leap out and force you to join their club.”

“So ... what?” Tessa asked. “If you walk with us, and they are, you’ll just get signed up along with us.”

He sighed. “Chivalry is dead.”

“No it’s not,” Andi said, nudging his shoulder. “If you want to be *really* chivalrous, you could take my spot in Esther’s club.”

“King Arthur and all his knights wouldn’t do that, even if Esther had the Holy Grail tucked down the front of her shirt,” Max muttered.

They rounded the corner to the cul-de-sac where Andi’s parents and Tessa lived and Tessa paused beside them.

“Tess? You ok?” Andi asked. Tessa was squinting into the dark toward her house.

After a moment, she nodded. “Yeah. Sorry. Just ... long day. I thought ... but I’m just tired.”

Max frowned. “Are you sure?” He squinted into the dark, but he couldn’t see anything. “Did you see something?”

She grinned. “Just you, dressed as Queen Elizabeth, leading Bruce the bulldog as Winston Churchill so I don’t have to.”

“Sorry, I can’t stand for that.” He grinned at Andi. “Even on one leg.” Tessa rolled her eyes.

“Goodnight, you two weirdos. I’m outnumbered and I’m going inside to warm up. See you on Saturday.”

They said goodnight and Max stood with Andi on the sidewalk as Tessa crossed the street and disappeared inside her

house. He turned to Andi, but she was still staring after Tessa, the ghost of her last smile fading from her lips.

“What is it?” he asked.

Andi shook her head. “I don’t know. There’s just ... I have a feeling something is going on in Tessa’s world. It just ... it seems strange.”

“What do you *think* it is?” Max asked, his hand brushing against the back of hers as he shifted on his prosthetic.

She sighed. “Probably just my paranoia. It’s a lot of little things.”

He shrugged. “Do you ... feel like getting a cup of coffee and ... talking about it?” The excuse sounded pathetic when he said it out loud. He was prepared for her to laugh again, or brush him off, or for her to give him a pitying smile and tell him she needed to go to bed.

“Sure,” she said. She looped an arm through his and let him lead as they turned and headed back toward the square. “It’ll give us a chance to see how Miss Mandie’s club recruitment went today. See if she’s in the running for the crown.” Max had a knot in his stomach. Andi was letting him lead the way, taking smaller steps. She was on his right side. Like Sarge. And his mom when they walked together. Like they were shoring him up.

On the way to De-Floured, Andi filled him in on her suspicions about Tessa.

“And she keeps trying to ... play it off, like it’s ...”

“Like it’s nothing?” Max asked.

Andi sighed. “Yeah.”

“Maybe it is. Or maybe it’s just something ... personal she doesn’t want to talk about. Maybe the phone call and the letter reminded her of something painful. Something she’s ... missing.”

Andi nodded, but her expression was far away, lost in thought. “Yeah.” She shook her head. “Maybe you’re right.”

“There they are!” Miss Mandie boomed when a wall of warm air and chocolate cake fumes hit them on their way in the door. “The kids of the hour. My henchmen, toadies, and personal flying monkeys.”

“Ok, I don’t know where this is going,” Andi muttered, “but three quick blinks is the signal for ‘Run’.”

“Wait, are these double-eye blinks, or are we talking left, right, left blink?” he asked as Miss Mandie strolled around the counter and behind them, wrapping an arm around each of their shoulders.

“Today was a good start,” Miss Mandie said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial stage whisper. “Over two hundred sign-ups.”

“Whoa,” Andi said. “That’s a lot more than everyone else. Congratulations!”

Miss Mandie was already shaking her head. “Nah. We’re not done. I want to *crush* those other clubs.”

Andi caught Max's eye and he saw his own startled expression reflected there.

"Crush them?" Andi asked, her voice small.

Miss Mandie squeezed their shoulders and released them. "Yeah. I want to make a statement about these ridiculous clubs. Namely, as much as you want it to be, lube is never gonna be the real thing." She looked at Andi and Max expectantly.

"Uh," Max finally said out of pure confusion.

Miss Mandie rolled her eyes. "It'll get the job done, but no one's heart is in it." She paused and looked at them both again. He glanced at Andi who looked like she was starting to catch on.

"They're performative. People are doing it because they think they're supposed to do it. Phoning it in," Andi said.

"Exactly," Miss Mandie said with a nod. She moved back behind the counter and reached for the coffee pot. "Free coffee for you two if you'll help me spread the word for the rest of the week and crush those numbers."

Max grinned. It was for a good cause. And if Andi ...

"I'm in," Andi said with a nod.

"Me too," Max said with a grin. "And I've got some ideas."

Andi cut her eyes to him. "S.I. ideas?" she asked quietly while Miss Mandie's back was to them.

He gave her a slight nod and the mischief in her face was back. In an instant, they were seventeen again and planning out how to get a dozen goats into the high school. And the feeling didn't go away as they drank their coffee and plotted at a window table while Miss Mandie sang along to Marvin Gaye, and brought them a dozen samples of chocolate cakes to rate. For the first time in six months, life was good. Really good.

Andi

“Is it just me,” Max asked as they left the library with Miss Mandie’s list ten names longer, “or do you feel like we’re out selling Girl Scout cookies?”

It was the third day of their “flying monkey” work for Miss Mandie and the third day that Annabelle or Charlotte had *mysteriously* needed more hours and taken the overnight and early morning shifts Andi had scheduled herself for. She was still waiting for that shoe to drop, but at the moment, she was ... kind of having fun, going around with Max.

Andi grinned. “Nah, I think we’re more like door-to-door missionaries than Girl Scouts. ‘Excuse me ma’am, but do you have a minute to talk about Miss Mandie trolling all the other resolution club organizers?’ The only difference is most people are replying ‘hell yes’ to that question.”

Max nodded, looking around the square in front of them. “And word is starting to get around.”

Andi followed his gaze and felt herself swallow hard at the sight of Mrs. Bumble and Esther glaring daggers at everyone,

and carrying two boxes from Bumble's, across the square to Seaside Treasures.

"Please don't notice us," Andi muttered. "Please don't notice us."

"Should we duck down a side street?" Max asked out of the corner of his mouth.

"They'll see us. They're like T-Rexes. Their visual acuity is based on movement."

Max sighed as the two of them swung around to look right at them, eyes narrowed. "I guess it doesn't matter now."

"We forgot that they hear like bats," Andi muttered.

"So, it's you two, is it?" Mrs. Bumble snapped as they approached. "Mandie has you doing her dirty work?"

Andi was sweating now. She'd just gotten on Esther's good side. Hank had called and told her Brandon's bench had been approved, but ... she wouldn't put it past Esther to change that.

"Oh, we're just trying to lend a hand," Max said. Andi glanced at him to see he'd plastered on an innocent-looking smile. "You know, as part of Jordan's support group. Just ... trying to find some levity in these difficult times when things are so hard ... it's nice to have something fun to look forward to. Even if it's just ..." he glanced down at the flier Miss Mandie had sent with them. "National Pie Day." He gave a sad, dramatic sigh, and Andi bit down on her lip as she smiled sadly at the two women. "You know my brother Gray and I

used to make pies with my mom, but Dad was always the best pie maker. And then he ...” he shook his head and dropped his gaze. “And now Gray is deployed, and I’m ... a lot slower moving around the kitchen these days ...”

The two women were shifting their weight uncomfortably and Andi saw a rare break in their confident, indignant expressions. Andi saw her opening and decided to dog pile.

“And as you know, January 24th is National Make a Difference in the Life of a Pet Day ...” she paused, letting her eyes well up with tears. “And I’m trying so hard to get them all adopted.” More awkward shifting from the women.

Finally, Mrs. Bumble cleared her throat. “Well, I guess there’s a saying about not shooting the messenger for a reason.” She narrowed her eyes on them. “But since you’re messengers, carry a message to her for us. This. Means. War.”

Esther was nodding, doing the verbal equivalent of Double Dutch, trying to time when to jump in. “Yes. She wants to celebrate all these obscure holidays and try to overtake our carefully selected club members?” A vision of Esther chasing Dirk down the street floated across Andi’s memory. “Then, we’re going to give her members more obscure holidays than they can stand.” With a flourish, Esther and Mrs. Bumble dropped the cardboard boxes in front of them with a clatter and folded back the flaps. Mrs. Bumble’s was full to the brim with handbells, the kind a choir would use when singing carols and attempting to drill them into the audience’s memory with

the application of migraines between metallic clangs. Esther's box was filled to the top with ...

"Are ... Are those kazoos?" Max asked, leaning forward with Andi to look.

"Yes," Mrs. Bumble spat. "You know what other obscure holidays are in January? The official Ring-A-Bell Day ..."

"And National Kazoo Day," Esther jumped in. "With a special discount at my store for every person who goes into that bakery armed with one of each and takes a picture of Mandie with their phones whenever they play them."

"Tell Mandie it's her move. If she wants us to call the noise assault off before it starts, she has to disband her 'club'. If not, let the games begin." And with a huff, the two of them picked up their boxes and stormed off.

"Do ... do you feel like we just pulled a *Matrix*-style backbend to dodge the bullets they were firing at us?" Andi asked, watching them go.

"Yeah," Max breathed. "I've never felt so ... alive."

She grinned at him. "I've missed your sarcasm." She felt her face start to burn when he turned his gaze on her.

They made it back to De-Floured just after the lunch rush. Miss Mandie didn't have much of a reaction when they relayed Mrs. Bumble and Esther's message. She shook a cigarette out of her pack and tucked it behind her ear with a sigh.

“Well, if Lisa and Esther want a war, I’ll give it to them.” She grinned from Andi to Max. “They must not know that I have the old S.I. crew in my employ.”

Andi and Max started to protest, but Miss Mandie held up a hand. “Save it. Now, let’s get to plotting.”



The time between waking and putting her feet on the floor in the morning was quickly becoming her favorite time of day. She was still asleep enough that her brain wouldn’t punish her for where her thoughts strayed. She could blame it on that dream twilight time when no one could be held responsible for the humming, happy thoughts she was having before reality came charging back. This morning in the form of an early text message from Michelle. She’d texted Michelle the details about the groundbreaking ceremony an hour after she had them, but as the days went by, Michelle’s initial excitement about coming had started to dwindle.

M: I don’t know if I should come. Everything just feels so stressful right now.

Andi laid her phone on her chest and stared up at the ceiling. Today guilt and reality weren’t waiting for her to put her feet on the floor. There would be no early morning happy thoughts, reliving the evening before when she and Max had been finishing up their “flying monkey” duties for Miss Mandie. Canvassing town with Max and getting the signatures for Miss Mandie’s club to five hundred had crystallized

several realities for her. The first was that people in Hope were a lot less suspicious of lurking adults than they were of lurking teens. They'd been able to sneak half a dozen white beach balls with Sharpie pupils into Mrs. Rothberg's neighbors' bushes *and* ring the doorbell across the street before anyone had seen them. Then, they were able to innocently stand with everyone else while Mrs. Rothberg called the police from her bedroom window to tell them that she was being eyed by a "lewd bush next door". Andi had almost hyperventilated, by the time Max dragged her around the corner. She shifted on the bed, shivering as she remembered what had almost happened next.

Max was supporting her and she was laughing so hard, tears were blurring her eyes.

"Why did she pick 'lewd' to describe the bush?" she hissed on an inhale before she shook with silent laughter.

Max was laughing too. "I could hear the silence on the other end of the line from Bill Benson."

Andi's legs had folded under her and she'd gone down laughing, bracing herself on Max, and her hands slid lower with her as she came to rest on her knees, head down, still laughing. Max had been trying to reach for her, balancing his weight on one leg. She'd sobered up when her hands had slid over his hips. She'd looked up at him, so close, and the memory of one of their steamier nights, the summer before they broke up came back to her.

The tide of burning guilt in her gut wasn't waiting for her day to start either. Her phone dinged again and she read the screen.

M: How are people supposed to carry on when they lose someone, Andi?

Andi's feet hit the floor and she leaned over, putting her elbows on her knees and letting her head hang down. She took a deep breath and texted her back.

A: I guess just one day at a time.

Her phone screen hadn't even gone dark before Michelle's return text arrived.

M: I hope I make it to 'one day at a time'. Right now, it's an hour at a time for me. There's no one who will ever be as good as Brandon. Never. He was the best person. Faithful, loyal, honest, always there for you and me.

Andi felt sick. Her phone tumbled out of her hand and hit the floor and she put her head between her knees. Her phone dinged and she slid off the edge of the bed to the floor. She stared at the phone, face down, trying to decide if reading another text like that might actually cause the guilt to strangle her and end it all.

Bert nosed the door open and padded inside, making a beeline for Andi. He was smiling and snuffling and she felt her eyes starting to tear up. She always had a theory that if you looked closely enough, you can see the similarities between people and their pets. It was some kind of usually

subconscious bond that formed when people connected on a deep level with an animal, seeing something of themselves in their personality. Bert and Brandon were no different. Both were smiley, easygoing, goofballs, always getting into something, and forever hungry. Bert seemed to sense Andi needed some comfort because he put his head down and bulldozed his way onto her lap, pinning her to the floor. She laughed through her tears, leaning down to kiss his big shaggy head while he panted and smiled up at her, his butt wiggling on her lap where his tail would have been. *The best part of waking up, is crying on your pup.* She was hugging him to her, making him squirm as he twisted to lick her face, when her phone started to ring. She held him tighter, hoping with all her might that it wasn't Michelle and then fighting the nausea in her throat for thinking it. She picked up the phone, steeling herself for an emotional Titanic sinking, but paused when she read the screen. Annabelle.

She cleared her throat as she swiped her finger across the screen and held the phone to her ear. "H-hello?"

"Hey Andi, I know you're not due at work for another hour or two, but we've got a ... situation."

The situation turned out to be a loose Mr. Giggles who'd proceeded to Nick Nolte all over the exam rooms.

"Quick! He's heading for the break room!" Annabelle yelled as Andi sprinted down the hallway, trying to get to the door before the hissing, whirling ball of fur could. But she was too late. She and Annabelle stood at the door and watched as

Mr. Giggles tore ass around the room, knocking everything off of every hard surface in the room. They both cringed as one of Shirley's lamps became collateral damage and Andi sighed as her coffee from De-Floured became a lukewarm casualty. They ended up having to corner him with couch cushions and several treats in a portable carrier before they could get him inside to take him back to his kennel. Andi's wrist was bleeding from a deep cut and she kept it elevated while she hunted for clean gauze in the disaster area that was once an organized exam room.

"We should get one of those sticks the snake feeders use in those anti-venom labs," she grumbled, trying to tear open the gauze packet with one hand. "Just for Mr. Giggles. Then I could just hook him gently from underneath and lift him back into his ..." she trailed off when she caught Annabelle's raised eyebrow and "get real" look."

With the excitement over, Andi plopped down on the edge of the reception desk since Annabelle had already claimed Shirley's chair.

"So, are you and *Max* going to the Resolution Redo party tonight?" Annabelle asked, leaning back in her chair and putting her hands behind her head as she surveyed Andi.

"Well, we had to help with set up last night, and then there's the fashion show," Andi said, looking around at the kennels. The Pet Plaza was a mess now too. "But before that, time to push the broom behind Mr. Giggles' droppings," she groaned, getting to her feet.

Annabelle followed her, bending to pick up a bag of kitty litter that had been knocked over. “You know what I mean. You’ve been spending a lot of time with Max lately.”

Andi frowned as she righted a box of glucose strips that had been knocked over on the counter. “Not really. Just support group stuff and Miss Mandie stuff.”

“And the jogging club?”

“We gave that up. Turned in our Zentais and leather harnesses,” Andi said, as she got the broom to sweep up spilled dog kibble.

“*We* gave that up, huh?”

Andi sighed. “I’m going to start cleaning up the exam rooms.” She glanced at her watch and groaned. “The rest of the support group should be here in a few minutes to get ready for the fashion show, so please run ‘Mr. Giggles interference’ for them. He’s gotten very ‘handsy’ and his paw-reach from the front of his kennel is ridiculous. We don’t want to have another hair-ripping incident.” Annabelle opened her mouth to comment but Andi was already pushing through the hallway door.

Annabelle just didn’t understand what she and Max had. They were friends. Really good friends. Something she never expected would happen with them again. In the eight years they’d been apart, she’d resigned herself to the fact that she might never see him again, or if she did, he wouldn’t want to see her. Breaking up with him had almost killed her, even though she knew it was the right thing to do. And she knew he

was mad and hurt by it and she was too. She never expected him to forgive her for it, let alone want to be friends again. Yet, here they were.

She sighed when she opened the exam room door and stared around at the once-sterile carnage. Hoping this wasn't a sign of how the rest of the night was going to go, she dropped to her knees and started a game of five-thousand-q-tip-pick-up. She'd been cleaning for forty minutes when the exam room door opened behind her.

"Hey, did the support group get here?" Andi asked without looking up. She expected Annabelle to answer, but the sound of a deep throat-clear made her pause.

"Yeah. And there's currently a fight going on about wigs and shoes," Max chuckled.

Andi felt the strange tingling sensation that had been getting stronger all week wash over her as she sat up on her knees and turned to look at him. "Wigs and shoes for the dogs and cats or ..."

"Both," Max said. "I thought I'd come give you a hand with ..."

"Rebuilding efforts after Mr. Giggles tore through here?" she asked, looking around at the still half-destroyed room.

"*One* cat did all of this?"

"Oh, just wait until you see the break room."

Max shook his head. "Why are you so angry, Mr. Giggles?"

They finished with the exam room and poked their heads in to see how things were progressing in fashion show preparations.

“Oh, everything is fine, fine, fine!” Martha trilled, though the half-dressed helpers and cats and dogs trying to fight their way out of their costumes begged to differ. “We’re about to head over. Andi, Gus here volunteered to be our Buffalo Bill when I reassured him it was the gunslinger, not that seamstress from that cannibal movie.” Andi opened her mouth to respond but found she was speechless so she closed it again when Martha continued. “So, you can just be our backstage helper.”

Andi blinked. The universe was being uncommonly good to her this week. “Sure. Awesome,” she said. “We’re just going to tidy up the break room and then head that way.”

Martha nodded and clapped her hands. “And I saw the stage, Max! It looks *wonderful*. We’re going to go do a run-through with everyone before the party starts and then take everyone out for a potty break so we won’t have any messes, will we?” She bent down to ask Clipper the last question where he sat on her foot, tongue hanging out, a pirate hat topped with a parrot on his head, and a fake beard down around his neck.

“Blackbeard,” Andi muttered to Max as they smiled and withdrew back into the hall.

“And his handler is ...?”

“Glenda, dressed as the Queen Anne’s Revenge,” Andi muttered. I saw her in the corner, arms crossed across her ...

bow. I'm willing to bet that she heard Queen Ann and thought ...”

“Actual queen,” Max sighed. “Come to think of it, she was in on the wig and shoe fight.”

The breakroom took them a while to put back together. “Which do you think is more disturbing,” Andi asked, as they crawled around on the floor under the table, picking up papers and trash, “the sight of a Weimaraner dressed as Brittney Spears or Martha Washington’s take on *Silence of the Lamb*?” She reached for a paper at the same time as Max and his fingers brushed her wrist.

“What’s this?” Max asked, gently gripping her wrist and turning it over to look at the bandage. “Andi?” She was unnerved by the look in his eyes, the serious set to his mouth. “Did you ...” And then she realized what he was asking.

“Oh! No, Mr. Giggles got me. Back claw attack.” They were so close, under the table. He was still holding her wrist in his warm, rough hand and the tingling sensation in her stomach was getting stronger, the longer she stared into those deep, dark eyes. She dragged her gaze to his lips, trying to remember exactly how they had felt against hers all those years ago.

“Andi,” he whispered. He was leaning toward her. Her nose was filled with his woody citrus smell. She didn’t move and as his lips touched hers, her brain flatlined. His lips moved against hers and the tingling turned into a burning need just like the last time. But, this time felt ... different. This wasn’t

just *remembering*. Fire chased from her lips to her nipples and then headed south. He groaned.

His knee. She forced herself to pull back and look at him.

“Your knee ... I’m so sorry, I,” she panted. “I can finish this. I’m so sorry, I ...”

He looked dazed for the moment, but he was coming back to himself quickly. “That’s not ... I’m fine.” They were quiet as they crawled out from under the table and she was torn. She wanted to help him up, but he wasn’t looking at her. He got his left leg under himself and pushed off the ground, his hands steady on the table. His prosthetic slid a little as he tried to stand and she heard him mutter something that sounded like, “Balance out.”

“What?” she asked.

He looked up at her. “Uh, nothing.” His cheeks were red and he wasn’t meeting her gaze. She could still feel the heat rolling off her face.

“Max, I’m so sorry ...” she whispered.

He shook his head. “It was ... my fault, I shouldn’t have ...”

“It was ... nice,” Andi breathed, horrified when she realized she’d said it out loud. Thankfully, Max didn’t react. *Maybe he didn’t hear.* Instead, he glanced up at the clock on the wall.

“We better get going,” Max said. “It’s almost party time.”

The cold air on her face and the darkness definitely helped as they headed for Town Hall. *We kissed. We just kissed.* Her brain was stuck in a loop. Max Lyons had just kissed her. What did it mean? Did it mean *anything*? Was it just ... force of habit? Remembering something that used to come so naturally?

“Uh, so ...” Max started. Andi’s heart was in her throat. “Were you paying attention when they were talking about the order of events tonight?”

Her heart sank a little, even though she knew he was right. At least he’d remembered that they were supposed to just be friends. “Yeah. First is the ball drop and food. Then the ‘burn and turn’ stuff ...”

“The what?”

“You really *weren’t* paying attention, were you?. I swear, it’s Mr. Hubble’s chemistry class all over again.”

He turned to her, a scandalized look on his face. “I had a concussion.”

She rolled her eyes. “The *whole* quarter?”

He dropped his gaze. “Well, maybe not the *whole* quarter.” He raised his eyes to meet hers and he grinned. “But by then, he already knew your handwriting. It would have looked suspicious if I started turning in my own homework.” They’d stopped walking just outside of Town Hall and she could feel the pressure building in her chest. She had to say something

about the kiss. From the look on Max's face, he looked like he was gearing up to say something too.

"There you two are," Miss Mandie called as she banged open the front door of Town Hall, making them both jump. "If you don't hurry, you're going to miss the payoff from what I believe is one of S.I.'s best revenge pranks." Andi didn't look at Max as they headed up the ramp to the door. "But, then again, I guess I might be biased," Miss Mandie chuckled, as she held the door open for them.

The party was definitely in full swing with a rowdier crowd than the *actual* New Year's Bash just two weeks earlier. She recognized half a dozen people from Esther's Down with Sugar club standing at one end of the buffet filling their plates with cookies and Miss Mandie's Double D-elicious cupcakes. Through the windows on the far side of the room, Andi could see a haze of smoke rising above smokers chain-smoking like their lives depended on it. And in the middle of the dance floor, there were people swinging their Land's End jackets over their heads, chanting something that sounded like, "Kegs, not eggs!"

"Lisa's egg diet club kind of ... cracked," Miss Mandie said with a grin. "Well, we've still got about half an hour until the mayor re-drops the ball at the late, late hour of eight pm. Why don't you youngins go eat, dance, and take a couple of these bad boys for your trouble." Andi had been watching the room while she listened to Miss Mandie, trying to ignore the tingling feeling she was still getting, just standing beside Max. Now

that they'd kissed, that was all she could think about. It was like she was fourteen again.

“Andi?” Miss Mandie asked. She turned to see Miss Mandie balancing an Irish coffee on the bare thigh of Cart-lotta which was still strung up in chasing LED lights. The cart's overall decor had traded out the Christmas tree skirt for a sparkling skirt made of silver strands of tinsel and tinsel “sparklers” stuck out of the toes of her carved “shoes”.

“Uh, thanks,” Andi said quickly, taking the drink. Max was beside her, cradling his coffee and keeping his gaze on the dance floor.

“Now don't go too far,” Miss Mandie reminded them. “After champagne, comes vengeance.” She shooed them away and Max glanced behind them as they made their way around the dance floor.

“Is it vengeance if you're proactive before the thing to be avenged occurs?”

Andi shrugged. “It is in Hope.” She spotted Amelia and a bunch of her friends doing a shuffle dance move on the floor. Amelia must have felt Andi's eyes on her because after a minute, she looked up and met her sister's gaze. Amelia grinned and stuck her tongue out at Andi who returned the love.

“It's good to see you smile,” Max murmured. She turned to look at him. “I mean, really smile. Not just at something funny that's going on but ... like you're ... happy.”

Andi didn't know what to say to that. She tried to get the grin to stay on her face, but it was getting harder. *Like you're happy.* But she couldn't be happy. Not really. *You can't be happy and in mourning at the same time.*

“What are they doing?” Max asked, nodding at Amelia and her friends who were now swaying with their legs together and their arms down by their sides.

She shook her head. “The Swag Bouncee.” He blinked at her and she grinned. “It’s a TikTok dance.”



MAX

He was watching her face as she explained the dance. He could barely hear her over the music, but also the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. *Andi Morgan is standing with me, on the edge of a dance floor. Again. This isn't a dream.* The music changed and she trailed off. After a moment, her eyes lit up. “Hey, is that the Eels?!” She paused and they both listened to the first few chords of “In My Dream”.

“Yeah,” Max breathed. There were too many memories backlit by an Eels song in his past with Andi. They weren't exactly a mainstream band so whenever they'd dedicated a song to each other at school dances, they'd always chosen Eels songs, so no matter who the other one was talking to at the moment, they'd know it was their song.

“Would ... would you dance with me?” Andi whispered.
“Just ... you know, because it’s The Eels?”

He hesitated. He hadn’t tried dancing since ...

“Please? Just for old times’ sake? And it’s a slow one,”
Andi said, biting her lip and holding a hand out to him.
“Which is good. Because I haven’t danced in a few years.”

“That’s a shame,” he murmured. *Balance out*, he thought to himself as he took her hand and moved on shaky legs to the floor. Walking was one thing. He finally had a pretty good handle on that rhythm. But dancing? And it would be dancing with *Andi*. But, as his dad would say, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Andi’s arms were around his neck. He was concentrating on his balance and he said a silent thanks to the universe when he didn’t stumble as his hands slid along the sides of Andi’s silk shirt under her jacket. *God, had holding her always felt so good?* He had not fully appreciated how good he had it in high school.

The dance floor was packed and everyone around them seemed too involved with their own conversations to notice him and Andi joining them. *Good. Maybe we can skip the commentary this time.* He still hadn’t forgotten the comments of the people at the New Year’s Bash bonfires. They weren’t dating. They were just ... old friends, dancing for old times’ sake. That was it. But, like holding hands, holding Andi to him to dance felt like sitting down in an old comfy chair. Her curves fit into his hands like they were meant to be.

“I forgot how much I loved to dance,” Andi said softly. “Do you remember ... our song? And that ... goofy dance we came up with to go along with it?”

He chuckled. “Yeah ... it took us two months to learn it.”

“Three,” Andi’s voice was soft. “I kept screwing up the timing. But you ... you were always on time.”

She was so close to him that he wasn’t sure who had been the first one to lean in. But, it was so smooth, it felt like it was a part of the dance. It wasn’t until he felt her soft lips under his that his brain shifted into gear and he realized. *Holy crap. You’re kissing Andi Morgan. Again.*

Andi

Her brain was screaming at her, but her body wasn't listening. *What are you doing?! You're kissing Max again!* But she was having a hard time with reality at the moment. The week was catching up with her and it had felt like a reunion episode of "A & M Rides Again", just one of the many nicknames they'd given each other while they were in high school. And it felt like prom all over again. They were a little tipsy on the dance floor, swaying to The Eels, their favorite band. Well, one of them. But it was the one they always requested songs from. It was part of their secret code, the two-person language they spoke to each other. And now, her lips were pressed to his and nothing existed for the moment beyond her closed eyes. For the past eight years, she'd assumed she was overselling herself on how good Max's kisses had been. But now, the taste of him, the heat and pressure of him as the shock wore off and they fell into an old rhythm that had been paused for the better part of a decade, she felt herself breathing in short, sharp bursts. His tongue flicked her bottom lip and she moaned softly. This was a mistake, because the deep rumbling growl that came out of Max shot straight through her to her center like lightning.

Whoa. Had ... had kissing him always felt like this? She was eighteen again in her mind and they were at prom. They'd snuck a bottle of champagne out of the house, strapped to her leg under the bell skirt of her prom dress. Her thigh had been so cold. She shivered remembering what Max had done to warm her up. She moaned and Max gently bit down on her lip. After what felt like reliving four years of time in a single moment, they broke apart, breathing heavily.

“Wow,” she whispered. Max was pink in the cheeks. He had a lot more stubble than he had in high school, and there were more lines at the corners of his eyes, but he was still her Max. He was smiling down at her, his hands on her waist, and she remembered this was their stance every time “Beginner’s Luck” by The Eels would play at a dance. They were high school royalty. They were a fairy tale. Dark reality was lurking on the edge of her mind, but for the moment, she just wanted to live in the magic part of their story.

“‘Wow’ doesn’t really seem to cover it,” Max breathed. The song ended and she could feel the couples around them moving toward the edge of the floor which meant they were moving toward them. She gritted her teeth, remembering the snide comments she’d heard as she’d led Max to the abandoned bonfire in the square. She just didn’t want to lose him in the crowd, or worse, not be able to help balance him if someone ran into his leg ...

She took a step back from Max and smiled up at him. “I could use a drink. How about you? A ... non-alcoholic drink.”

“Champagne!” Miss Mandie called, moving through the crowd, wearing a harnessed tray like a peanut salesman at a baseball game. “Get your champagne! We’re less than a minute away from the countdown! Clink a glass with a cutie and wash down all the bad crap of the last year.”

“No one sells booze like Miss Mandie,” Max chuckled, pausing to take two flutes of champagne from her. He moved back toward her, his smile melting her annoyance at the other, whispering townsfolk for the moment and restoring the fairy tale view. When she looked at Max, it was like looking at a wide open doorway leading to a winding road through a summer valley. The possibilities looked endless. That’s how she’d felt in high school. And it was a mental high she’d craved for years.

Max led the way back to their table this time. It took them a little longer to arrive with all the people milling around. They’d just sat down when they heard the mayor on the microphone. “Ten, nine, eight ...”

They didn’t wait for “one”. At least, Andi didn’t wait. She leaned toward Max, craving that feeling again. Wanting it more than her next breath. Max didn’t seem to mind. She was losing more of her sense as the sensation overtook her. His hand was warm on the small of her back and she wanted to feel his chest under her fingertips. With a little growl of her own, she inched toward him. Apparently, the inch wasn’t enough for Max either. With a low groan that sent tiny electrical vibrations down between her legs, Max scooped her up and pulled her onto his lap. She could feel the familiar

groves of his muscular thigh under her. His arms were around her, pulling her to his chest and she threaded her hands under his jacket to rest them against his black t-shirt that pulled tight across his pecs. She could feel his warmth and under her right palm, the thump of his heartbeat. It was beating fast, like hers. Was all of this actually happening? There was noise around her. Noisemakers, cheers, the first notes of Auld Lang Syne, and the mayor clearing his throat on the microphone.

“Just thirty minutes left folks to sign up for the resolutions you’re planning to stick to for the rest of the year after your trial period,” the mayor quickly announced. “After . . .,” the microphone was jerked out of his hand by Mrs. Thompson who cleared her throat and started warbling the lead melody.

“Should old acquaintance be forgot? And sometimes from behind? Should old acquaintance be on top? And lays of auld lang syne.”

Everyone in their vicinity simultaneously choked on their champagne, including Max and Andi.

“You sing it, Eudora!” Miss Mandie hollered.

There was the sound of muttering and a struggle and then the mayor got the microphone away from a very tipsy Mrs. Thompson.

“Please, everyone,” he said, his face turning a beet red, “get those last sign-ups finished so the tourism board of Hope can tally the names and we can crown our Motivator Monarch.”

Max and Andi fell into line, laughing along with the rest of the crowd. “Please,” Andi chuckled. “I think Mrs. Thompson’s should be the new official lyrics.”

“Oh yeah,” Max chuckled, knocking back the last of his champagne. “We just witnessed Hope history in the making. In a hundred years when people are singing the new lyrics and wondering where they came from, history will point them all back to Mrs. Thompson, Miss Mandie’s Irish coffees, and cheap champagne,” Max said, laughing. She caught his eye and her heart was in freefall, just like the first day she’d seen him walk into their class in middle school. Before she could talk herself out of looking like an idiot, she’d waved to him and motioned to the empty desk next to her. She’d held her breath at that moment, wondering if he’d ignore her and go sit with the more popular kids in the back. Then everyone would laugh at her. But he hadn’t. He’d sat down next to her and the best friendship of her life had begun. Neither of them had been that popular in middle school until she’d started cheerleading and he’d started playing football. It had created a tidal wave that they’d ridden through the next six years. She’d always been a good student. She had to be if she wanted to be a vet. And Max was so driven and he was respectful, neat ... military. To the teachers, they’d been model students and athletes, which was part of the reason no one had ever figured out that the two of them were S.I. It was their secret. Forever.

They moved through the crowd over to Miss Mandie’s table and ... the cake.

Andi was thankful for something to take her mind away from how good it had felt to have Max's hands on her, to kiss him, the way he'd groaned ... She cleared her throat and tried to ignore the painful way her hard nipples were pushing against her bra. "Uh, when are you going to 'unveil' the cake?" she asked Miss Mandie. She could feel Max's eyes on her, but she did her best to focus.

Miss Mandie grinned. "As soon as I'm crowned. I need you two to go do some reconnaissance. Check and make sure we're comfortably in the lead on names, will you?"

Andi shook her head. "You're in the lead. But we'll go double-check, just to be sure." She turned to look at Max, "A final flight of the winged monkeys?"

There really was no competition. Miss Mandie's list was in the hundreds. And she could tell by the sour looks on the pruney faces of all the members of the tourism board that they knew it too. One of the oldest wars in Hope was between Miss Mandie and the board of tourism. They were the only people who had a problem with Miss Mandie and her bakery. They all huddled up on the small stage, the mayor joining them. There was a lot of gesturing, some muttered swearing that got picked up on the hot microphone and met with chuckles from the audience, and then the huddle broke up.

"It seems," the mayor said into the microphone before glancing back at the tourism board who were standing, arms crossed, looking like they were seconds from having a communal conniption fit. "That we have a very clear winner.

Uh,” he glanced down at the paper in his hand. “First, third place goes to ... Esther Jacobs and her Down with Sugar Club.” There was a smattering of applause as Esther elbowed her way through the crowd. Andi clapped enthusiastically as Esther went by them.

“Suck up,” Max muttered at her from the side of his mouth.

“Gotta get those brownie points wherever I can,” she hissed.

“Brown is right,” he chuckled. She poked him in the side and he caught her hand. Her heart stilled when he didn’t immediately let go.

“Second place is Lisa Bumble for her Eggstraordinary Diet Club.”

“And the reason that everyone is holding it in until they get home tonight,” Andi muttered. Max glanced over at her. “If one of the smokers tries to light up on his way past the bathrooms, they’ll blow the place up.”

“And our winner, but a four hundred and sixteen name margin,” the mayor said, “Is Miss Mandie Cane with her Hope’s Hardly-Known Holidays Club. With a total of five hundred and six names.” Andi and Max whistled and clapped along with the rest of the room. “Miss Mandie, if you’ll come up here, we’d like to honor you as our Queen Motivator for the year!”

Miss Mandie swept up the stairs, taking her time, her perfectly painted lips in a pleasant smile, but her eyes were on Mrs. Bumble and Esther who’d assumed the same facial

expressions and stance as the tourism board behind them. If looks could kill, the entire stage would have been littered with dead bodies. The mayor of course didn't notice any of this. He had his back to them while he dug the crown out of its Tupperware box. There was an awkward moment when he went to put it on Miss Mandie. Neither of them were that tall, but Miss Mandie had epic cleavage and the mayor was nose-deep in it when he finally managed to set the crown on her head. His face was red either from embarrassment or lack of oxygen when he stumbled back, starting a fresh round of clapping that the room eventually joined in on.

“Geez,” Andi said. “He should at least treat her to breakfast after that.”

“It's still early,” Max chuckled. “Now the big event,” he whispered. Andi met his gaze and winked. It wasn't the most elaborate S.I. prank. And to be honest, the theft had been S.I.'s only real role in the plot.

“Thank you all so much,” Miss Mandie crowed into the microphone. “I'm so honored to be Queen Motivator this year. Let me just say, resolutions are B.S. Here's the only resolution you'll ever need; live. Just live. Eat the cake, take the nap, blow off work to see a friend. Take a chance and sleep with the person you have a thing for ...” the board of tourism surged forward as one, heading for the microphone. Miss Mandie turned her back on them, blocking them out with both hands on the microphone, elbows out and ready to scrap. “Because life is short. And resolutions end in one of two ways. You successfully do it and you get a single shot of endorphins

when the year ends and you can blister paint with your farts in the case of Lisa's egg club. But then, it's over. And you have to make *another* one. But more often, you stumble, you fail, and you feel even worse about yourself. So just live, children. Just live and laugh and dance and bang. Or not, if you're not into that. Just knit. Or ... run marathons if that's your sex." Now she was fighting off Esther, Mrs. Bumble, and the eight-person tourism board.

Max was shifting next to her. "Should we ... help her?"

She chuckled. "You know Miss Mandie can handle herself."

"That's all. Now," Miss Mandie said, holding up a hand and managing to give Mrs. Bumble a little slap across the nose with it. She took the microphone off the stand and stepped off the stage, still having to fight off the women trying to get it away from her. "I've baked a cake for us all to share that encompasses my philosophy. If everyone will just gather around the buffet table ... but I'd like my second and third-place contenders to be the first ones served. Lisa and Esther, it's been a pleasure competing with you."

"Oh blow it out your rear end," Esther snapped.

"Hold that thought," Miss Mandie said with a cold smile. She moved to the table and with a flourish, lifted off the white sheet, covering the cake. The whole room gasped, well, except for Andi and Max who gasped late.

"Crap, do you think anyone noticed we didn't look surprised?" Max whispered.

“Just try to look scandalized,” Andi hissed. “Clutch your invisible pearls.” So they tried. It wasn’t hard to imitate the faces of the people around them. The cake was a beautiful woman on her hands and knees wearing Twizzlers and fondant nipple tassels and a g-string, crawling toward a finish line marked out in black sprinkles. In Bart’s careful frosting calligraphy, the words, “Screw Resolutions” were spelled out on the far side of the line. The woman’s tan skin even had a tan line where her bra would have been.

“It’s such a work of art,” Andi whispered. “It’s almost a shame for her to cut it.”

Miss Mandie picked up a cake knife and gestured for Esther and Mrs. Bumble to step forward. They did, but Andi wasn’t sure if it was out of obligation or because they were afraid of Miss Mandie’s maniacal smile combined with the huge knife. She kept her gaze on Esther and Mrs. Bumble as she raised the knife and in one clean chop, she sliced right through the cake woman’s ass. The room was silent as the piece of cake fell. Well, almost silent. The muted tinkling of a bell’s clapper sounded as the piece hit the plate Miss Mandie held under it.

“A cheek for you, Esther,” she said, handing over the piece of cake. She raised the knife again and sliced off the other butt cheek. “And a cheek for you,” she said, handing the second plate to Mrs. Bumble. Even from where Andi was standing, she could see a metal kazoo sticking out of the chocolate. Andi and Max were close enough to the table to hear Miss Mandie lean over and say. “Bet you were wondering where your bells and kazoos went. Next time, they won’t be in a *cake’s* ass.”

She drew back and grinned at the crowd. “Devil’s food with orange liqueur sponge and a white mocha frosting. Let’s form an orderly line to come and get her.”

When they were in line, Max leaned forward, keeping his lips close to her ear when he asked. “Do you think they suspect us of kazoo and bell theft?”

Andi shivered, but forced herself to turn and look at Mrs. Bumble and Esther where they were standing on one side of the room, still holding their butt cheek cake and looking ready to spit nails. “They aren’t *currently* glaring in our direction, but the night is young.”

“Ah, but what about a clean slate,” Max asked and she felt his chest bump her back as they were jostled in the line. His lips brushed her ear and an electric shock shot through her as if there was an electric wire from her ear south. She shifted her weight forcing herself to not rub her thighs together, seeking relief. He was bumped from behind and his hands were on her hips as he steadied himself. “Sorry. Apparently, everyone’s impatient to ‘come get her’.” He moved to step back from her and before she could think about it and stop herself, she put her hands over his, keeping him where he was. As one, they both took a shaky breath. “Andi ...”

“Shhh,” she breathed. She didn’t want to think. Not now. His hands were warm and solid and she felt so safe with him holding her. She leaned back against him and breathed in his clean cedar and the leather smell of his bomber jacket. She was aware that half her brain wasn’t currently functioning, but

she seemed to be doing fine without it. Her senses were overloading it at the moment.

“Andi!” Martha Washington’s voice shattered the moment. Andi and Max sprang apart and turned just as Martha pushed through the crowd and skidded to a stop next to them. “We’re short a queen!”

Andi blinked at her. “What?”

“A queen! A queen! And who will Churchill walk with now?”

Andi frowned. “Where’s Tessa?”

Martha threw her hands up. “I don’t know. The queen would be *extremely displeased* if she ever found out that someone impersonating her didn’t show up ...”

“She’d probably be more pissed that the Queen wasn’t actually the queen when Winston Churchill was alive,” Max muttered behind her.

Andi bit down on her lip and tried to focus on Martha. “So ... should we just not have Bruce ...”

“Don’t be silly. Winston’s outfit is superb. He *must* make his debut.” Her hand snaked out and she snatched Andi’s wrist before she could get away. “You can do it.”

Andi didn’t get a chance to argue. Martha was a lot stronger than she looked and Andi wasn’t sure her feet touched the ground as they plowed through the crowd toward the stage. She glanced back and barely caught a glimpse of Max before he was swallowed by the crowd moving between them.

She was still trying to find the words to object when Martha finally came to a stop backstage. If she could pick a word to describe the support group members and pets backstage, it would be; harassed. Gus was in one corner whimpering while Glenda fought her sails and tried to dab his hand with an alcohol swab.

“What happened?” Andi asked.

“Kitten got him,” Glenda muttered.

“He’ll live,” Martha snapped. Andi turned to look at the woman and felt herself take a huge step back. There was a madness in Martha’s eyes as she glanced up at the clock. “Oh my god, it’s five minutes till! Everyone line up! I need to address the audience!” She glanced at Andi. “Get dressed, Your Majesty!”

Martha disappeared and Zane glanced over at her. “Was she being sarcastic?”

“Nope,” Andi muttered, picking up the last garment bag on the rack.

Max

“And an extra big slice for you,” Miss Mandie said with a wink, putting one Twizzler-tasseled boob on a plate for him. “Where’s your girl Friday? I was going to give you two the matched set.” She nodded down at his plate.

“She was drafted into the pet fashion show. Someone didn’t show up.”

She nodded. “I need to schedule a walk with her and our Wild Oats Club. She’s doing so much to try to get those pets adopted. Least this town can do is lend a hand. I’ve never seen someone so determined to make things ok for others. Pets or people.”

Max nodded. “Yeah.” But that was his Andi. *The Andi he knew*, he corrected himself. He moved along in the line and stood at the edge of the dance floor, trying to determine a way through the crowd between him and the stage. He was nervous to get too packed in with them. If someone stumbled sideways into his leg ...

“Hey.”

He turned at the sound of the familiar voice and smiled at Jordan. “Hey.”

“You ready to see the things Hope legends are made of?”

“Always,” Max said with a nod. Jordan looked around.

“Where’s Andi?”

He nodded toward the backstage area. “Back there.”

Jordan nodded. “So Martha already found her?”

“Yep. Like a perfumed bird of prey.”

Jordan opened her mouth to reply but was cut short by Martha Washington on the microphone, now reclaimed from Miss Mandie’s table. “Good evening Hope-ians!” There was a smattering of applause. “Welcome to the first annual Hope Island Petpalooza Fashion Show!” A few more people joined in with the applause and whistling. Martha seemed placated. “Tonight, we’re going to start ... well *restart* our year with some historical figures from history, rendered in cuddly fur! All of the pets in tonight’s fashion show are also up for adoption at the Hope Animal Hospital and Shelter, so if you’re looking for a fur-ever friend, look no further! Our first historical figure tonight is that rough and tough kitten of the west, Annie Oakley!”

“I thought they all had cutesy names,” Jordan muttered.

“I wouldn’t bring that up when you talk to Martha later,” Max said. It was the last thing he was able to say to Jordan before the only mildly interested crowd turned into a single voice of “ahhhs” and “ohhhs” as what Max had to admit was a

parade of cute, waltzed across the stage. Each time Martha cleared her throat to announce the next pet, he held his breath, waiting for Andi.

“There she is,” Jordan said, patting him on the back when Andi and Bruce appeared on the stage. The biggest “ahhh” of the night was for Bruce whose bulldog jowls were peeking out of a tailored tailcoat, complete with an ascot. He wore a bowler hat and was happily chewing on a squeaky toy shaped like a cigar. He was cute, but Max only had eyes for the figure holding the end of his leash. Andi was wearing a pink gown, studded with rhinestones and a tiara on her long dark hair. She looked just like she had at homecoming, eight years ago. And in a moment, he was back in time, sneaking out the school’s back door with her in his arms, laughing as her shoes fell off in the dark as he carried her to the football field for their own dance. He could tell she was nervous, smiling at the crowd as they walked down the runway. When she turned, she caught Max’s eye and he felt his heart pick up speed. He saw her shoulders straighten and she winked before adopting her best Queen impression and giving the audience a perfect imitation of the royal wave.

“Come along, Winston,” he heard her say to the bulldog. He was looking up at her, his little bowler hat starting to slide back on his head, but he was still chewing on his cigar toy. It squeaked and she feigned shock. “Such language should be kept for the war room, Mr. Prime Minister. What would they say at Downing Street?” And then she was leading him back

up the runway to whistles and applause while a short rendition of “God Save the Queen” played over the speakers.

He was the first one to greet her once she was changed and out of the backstage area. She was carrying Bruce and talking to him in a soft voice between kisses when he approached. “I know you’re not one for dressing up, but Bruce, you looked so stately in that suit and that bowler hat ...” The bulldog gave an indignant woof. “Well, I’m just saying, Dapper Dan has nothing on you.” Max chuckled and she looked up at him, color rising in her cheeks. “Hey!” She glanced down at Bruce and sighed. “How many angry letters do you think we’ll be getting from the royal family for my performance?”

He shrugged. “With you as the queen, they should be flattered.” Andi’s cheeks went from pink to red. “I mean,” he cleared his throat. “With Martha, there was always a possibility that Bruce could have ended up as the queen.”

Andi nodded and sighed. “I just don’t have the jowls to pull off Winston. But a girl can dream.”

“There you are,” Miss Mandie called. They turned in time to see her carefully picking her way through the crowd to them, three drinks perched on a waitress’ tray, and high heels stepping on feet that weren’t quick enough to get out of her way. “I made us a little celebratory drink to commem ... to commend ... no that’s not the word. To commemorate, there it is, our very successful partnership in taking down the Motivator Monarchy.”

“Did we take them down? Or just install our own monarch?” Max asked with a grin as he took one of the glasses. The contents looked like a mimosa, but he caught a whiff of something tropical besides the citrus.

“Little of column A, little of column B,” Miss Mandie muttered with a shrug. She handed a second glass to Andi, took the third for herself, and lifted it to the two of them. “In honor of you two, I call this drink a ‘flying monkey’. It’s a mimosa on steroids.”

On instinct, Max reached out, offering to take Bruce so Andi could drink, but Andi expertly shifted the bulldog to her hip and the crook of one arm and took a sip. After a second, she coughed and blinked at the glass. “Whoa. That’s ...”

Max took a sip and the alcohol roundhoused him in the face. “Miss Mandie,” he wheezed. “What the hell is in this?”

She grinned. “Imagine a mimosa having a one-night stand with a Long Island iced tea.”

“That about covers it,” Andi coughed again, bending down to let a squirming Bruce loose. She held onto his leash as the bulldog sniffed around on the floor.

“He’s a cutie,” Miss Mandie said. Max automatically looked around them, expecting to see a young guy in tight jeans wander by. But when he looked back at the woman, he saw she was focusing on Bruce. He’d paused to sniff at her shoes and he was smiling when he looked up at her. “We still owe you some dog walking,” she said, pointing a finger at Andi. “The Wild Oats.”

“Uh, yeah,” Andi said.

“How about this week? I’ll talk to the girls and give you a call. These little ... fur butts ... fur balls deserve homes.”

“I ... I agree,” Andi chuckled. “That would be great.”

Miss Mandie wagged a finger at her. “I’ll call you.” She turned to Max, grinning, and then reached out and pinched his cheek. “And if *she* doesn’t call *you*, I just might.” She looked back at Andi and winked. “You two have some fun tonight. Don’t forget to live.” And then she was off, heading back to Bart who was being overrun with customers at their cart.

Max cleared his throat in the awkward silence that fell between them. “Nothing uncomfortable about ... that.”

“There he is,” Annabelle’s voice made them both turn back toward the stage. She grinned at Andi. “I’ll take Bruce back with the rest of us.” Andi handed her Bruce’s leash and Annabelle looked for a moment like she wanted to say more. “You two have fun tonight.”

Andi’s face was red when she turned away from Annabelle. “She’s getting diarrhea duty next week.” He watched her, but he could tell she was trying to avoid his gaze. She glanced back at the stage and he saw a flash of worry cross her face.

“What? What is it?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Where’s Tessa? It’s not like her to ...”

“To blow a pet fashion show off?” Max asked.

Andi sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe it is. I don’t know her that well. Not that I haven’t tried. She just ... I guess she’s just a really private person. She doesn’t want to let anyone in.”

“It’s not easy,” Max said softly, “letting someone in.” Andi met his gaze, and for a horrible second, he was afraid he’d said too much.

“No,” she whispered. “It’s not.”

The moment between them felt heavy with unsaid things.

“Do ... do you want to go check on her?” Max asked. He saw Andi’s face relax.

“Yeah. That would be great.” She looked around. “The party is still going. Do you think we could sneak out to go check on her and be back before we’re missed?”

Max scanned the room. The usual Hope busybodies were either occupied in other conversations or nowhere to be seen. “No one’s looking at us. I say this is our moment.”

As soon as he said it, Jordan Bumble emerged from the crowd and smiled at them, waving.

“Damn,” they both whispered.

“Hey you two,” Jordan dropped her voice as she got closer. “So, I’ve got the high school’s detention detail coming in to do the cleaning and I feel like you’ve both already done enough for the group with building that stage and saving the fashion show. Why don’t you two slip out of here and go enjoy some peace for the rest of the evening? I’ll cover for you.”

Max hesitated. He wanted to shout “yes” in Jordan’s face, but he wasn’t sure if Andi would want to ...

“Yes!” Andi said. She was nodding enthusiastically. “Thanks, Jordan.” She nodded, winked at them, and took off, back into the crowd.

They slipped out the side door and Andi shivered when the cold air hit her. Without pausing to think of the implications, he put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her to his side.

“Th-thanks,” she said. He just nodded. The feel of her next to him was making it hard for him to form sentences.

“So, what do you think is going on with her?” he asked as they turned down her street.

Andi shook her head. “I don’t know, but ... I think she’s afraid of something. She just ... I know when *I’m* afraid, I’m the last one to admit to it. I make excuses, I try to pretend ... I say things to try to tell everyone else I’m not ...”

Max traced his thumb over the top of her shoulder as she talked.

“Do you think I’m off base?” she asked, looking up at him. “Maybe Tessa really *did* just blow off the fashion show. Not that I’d blame her.”

“What’s your gut telling you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It’s saying something’s wrong.” They were quiet as they crossed the street to stand on the sidewalk in front of Tessa’s house. The windows were dark, the only

light came from her Christmas lights that were still strung across her porch.

“Maybe she wasn’t feeling well and just went to bed early,” Max said. Though, in his gut, he was starting to worry about the woman too. He didn’t know her that well, but he could feel the anxiety rolling off of Andi in waves. And she was usually right about things like this.

“Should ... should I ring the doorbell? I’ve tried texting her. She’s not texting back.”

“Maybe she had to go to the mainland last minute,” he said. “Didn’t she say she was from New York? Maybe something happened with her family.”

Andi didn’t look like she believed it as she studied the house. “Yeah. Maybe.” She turned to look at him and she could see the hesitancy in her expression.

“Andi, what is it? What do you want?” He asked, keeping his voice soft. He saw her visibly shiver and he felt a flood of very different emotions crowding that moment.

“Do ... do you mind if we just watch her house for a little bit? Maybe from inside our house? My parents’ house? They’re still at the party with Amelia ... I just ... in case we see something.” There was something in the look on Andi’s face that made him swallow hard.

“Are you sure? I mean, that you want me ...”

“I’m positive,” she said before he finished. He saw her take a deep breath and then reach for his hand, threading her

fingers through his.

Andi led the way back across the street and up the porch steps to her front door.

Even through his Irish coffee, flying monkey, and champagne haze, he knew that there was something happening between them. He also knew that if he stopped to really look at it, he'd start to overthink and try to slow it down. He'd been jealous of Andi's ability to throw caution to the wind and leap in for as long as he'd known her. Tonight, whatever she wanted to do, he wanted to leap in, right beside her. *Just live*, Miss Mandie had said.

But, what if she's expecting something? His tactical brain kicked in. He hadn't ... been *intimate* with anyone since his leg ... *Stop assuming things. She wants to watch Tessa's house. Don't assume things she hasn't said.* But something about the way she'd said, "*I'm positive*", gave him hope.

"So, did Tessa ever mention *anything* about her past?" he asked, pausing in the entryway of the Morgan's house to let the memories wash over him along with the smell of baked bread and a thousand family dinners and the superglue fumes that still lingered faintly. Once, during their senior year, Amelia was being a brat and tore up the Ben Harper concert tickets Andi had gotten for their anniversary, so in retaliation, he and Andi had glued her GameBoy to the ceiling above the stairs. He glanced up and grinned, noticing the grooves in the plaster from the GameBoy being removed were still there.

“Not really,” Andi said, shaking her head, “She mentioned something about ... high school boyfriends.” He followed her into the kitchen and out of an eight-year-old habit, automatically went to the cabinet to pull down a couple of glasses. Andi noticed and grinned at him. “Just like riding a bike, huh?”

Max froze. “Sorry ... just ... habit.”

She smiled. “Don’t be sorry. You grab the glasses. I forgot about this six-pack of cider Mom brought me back from Orcas Island.”

“Sounds good,” he said, pulling out two glasses and taking them to the table. She joined him a moment later with two bottles and the skeleton hand bottle opener hanging off her thumb. He smiled, remembering how he’d won it for her at one of the carnival games, senior year at the Hallows Festival. She sat down next to him and slid a bottle and the opener across the table to him. “So, high school boyfriends, huh?” he asked, opening her cider before his.

She sighed. “Thanks.” She poured her bottle into her glass, keeping her gaze on the amber liquid rather than his face. But he could see the color in her cheeks. “Yeah. We were talking about ... you. And how it’s hard ... to forget your first.”

Max nodded and took a sip of his cider. “I can agree with that.”

Andi looked up and met his gaze and something passed through her eyes. Something ... hopeful?

“What ... what else did she say?” he asked, hoping there might be more so he could gauge what kind of outcomes might be ahead for them.

She shook her head. “Nothing. It was when we were hanging out on Christmas Eve. Then she got that phone call. She told me it was a robot, but she froze when she answered it. And ... Sage has never had anxiety until recently. I checked her file. And Tessa has gotten several things in the mail that made me think ... I don’t know.”

“Did you see what was written on them?”

Andi shook her head. “No. But whatever it was, it looked like it was *really* bothering her.”

“Hmmm,” Max said, setting his empty bottle on the table and studying Andi. “You think someone is bothering her?”



ANDI

“I don’t know. Someone or ... something. Maybe it’s just something from her life before coming to the island.” She paused and looked at Max. *He* wasn’t overreacting to the situation. Not that she expected him to. He *was* Sergeant Stoic after all. He was right. Right now, Tessa was most likely safe across the street behind her locked door with Sage. Probably in bed asleep or watching a movie. And if Tessa didn’t want to tell her what was going on, she wasn’t going to push. *God*

knows I've been there, she thought. And so had Max. The staring, the probing questions, the pity. So, as far as Tessa's situation went, there wasn't anything more she could do besides keep an eye out and be ready to listen when Tessa was ready to talk.

"Feel like watching a movie, while we keep an eye on her house, just in case? I mean, since we don't have anywhere to hurry back to, praise be to Jordan."

"Sure," he said with a nod.

"What do you feel like watching?" she asked.

He shifted his weight and concentrated on his cider, running his thumb across the sweating glass. She felt her nipples contract, watching him rub in lazy circles. "Maybe the one that we watched every year on New Year's while we were in high school?"

She grinned. "You mean *Live and Let Die*?"

He nodded and she straightened in her chair, pretending to draw a card from an invisible deck and set it on the table. "He comes again," she said in her best Solitaire voice. "There will be violence. He approaches now."

"I haven't watched that movie ... since the last time we watched it together," Max said, the tips of his ears turning red. Andi swallowed hard. She was remembering that night herself at the moment.

"Me either." She hadn't meant for her voice to come out so breathy, but she was having a hard enough time controlling her

body temperature and the speed of her heart which was currently pounding against her ribs. She took a deep breath and straightened up. She crooked a finger at him to follow her into the living room.

Ten minutes later, she was starting to breathe again as the James Bond theme song filtered out of the soundbar. The subwoofer under the couch made the dark suede buzz under the palm of her hand on the seat between them. She and Max sat on either end of the three-seater couch. And it felt ... weird.

“How did this become our New Year’s movie, anyway,” Max asked. “I can’t remember. It’s been too long.”

Andi rolled her eyes. “You remember. You’re just *trying* not to because you lost the bet.”

“What?” He turned and blinked at her.

“You don’t remember the argument we had in study hall freshman year? It was the first and *only* time we got detention. You said that it was Sean Connery in *Live and Let Die*. I was offended and told you it was my favorite Bond movie and that it was Roger Moore. But, you stuck to your guns, we started arguing and ...”

“And we ended up getting a lecture about being considerate and then detention with Mr. Simmons,” Max chuckled.

Andi nodded. “And if Mr. Simmons wouldn’t have forced us to put our phones in that stupid lockbox thing on his desk at the beginning of every class, we would have been able to look

the damn thing up, we wouldn't have argued, and that detention would never have happened. So, really, he shot *himself* in the foot on that one because then *he* technically had detention too since he had to stay and babysit us. Anyway we got out, we looked it up, and you apologized," she paused to smile at him. "Because that's the kind of man you have always been. Fair and quick to admit when you're wrong. And *annoyingly* stoic about the whole thing."

"Well, apologizing to you has always been easy," he said, grinning down at his lap. She didn't miss the color rising up his neck. "Usually. And besides making us watch the movie every year, you never tortured me when I was wrong."

Andi sighed and melted back into the couch cushions. "It's so much easier that way. It's exhausting to keep a running total of who's right and who's wrong and hasn't conceded. Easier to just admit it and move on."

"I've always liked that about you, Andi Morgan," he murmured. She turned to look at him and she immediately started wondering why sirens were always women in fairy tales. Max was spread out on her couch, his bomber jacket was off and lying over the back of the couch. His black t-shirt looked painted onto his broad shoulders, the definitions of his pecs, his abs. His dark jeans were faded in all the right spots, highlighting his thighs and the rise between them. But the thing drawing her in at the moment, body and soul, was the dark, hungry look in his eyes. It shot straight through her, making liquid heat pool between her legs and turning her

nipples to hard ball bearings, rubbing against the silk of her bra with every breath she took.

“Andi,” he whispered. It was her sleeper word. When he spoke her name like that, there was only one person she saw. Only one thing she needed. She was across the couch in a single breath and he was pulling her onto his lap. “God, Andi. You feel so good.” His hands were sliding up her sides and the sensation was so intense, it felt like being seventeen again, the intense heat of their first time. “I’ve missed holding you. Kissing you ...” She covered his mouth with hers, running her tongue over his lower lip. He moaned into her mouth and she felt his tongue meet hers, battling for dominance. She thought she had the upper hand or ... tongue until she felt herself moving. Max had hooked his hands under her thighs and lifted her, pulling her across him to straddle his hips.

“Wait,” she panted, pulling back from him. She didn’t miss the look of confusion and the apology poised on Max’s tongue. One thing she’d always loved about Max was that he was a gentleman, but once she enthusiastically gave him permission, he was an animal, wild and passionate and always in control which in the bedroom was what drove *her* wild. “Come with me.” Her voice was little more than breath and pounding heart. She hadn’t known definitively what she’d wanted in a long time. But she knew that right now, she wanted Max Lyons. She crawled off him and stood, holding her hand out to him. She saw him hesitate as he got shakily to his feet. For a second, she was worried he’d tell her no. *Was the thought of them ... again, too painful for him?* She knew she didn’t

deserve a second chance for something intimate with him. Not after she'd broken up with him in a letter. She'd wanted to tell him face to face, but she knew that if she was staring into that hungry, loving gaze of his, she wouldn't have been able to say it. But at the moment, that felt like something that had happened in a different life. All that mattered right now was this moment. If he agreed to share it with her. Finally, he took her hand and they made their way up the stairs. They started kissing again in the hallway.

“Andi Morgan,” he growled, “you drive me crazy.” She moaned when he pinned her against her bedroom door, hard, his lips moving down her chin and neck, his teeth grazing her throat, followed by his tongue.

“God, I want you so bad, Max. Please.” She had one hand in his hair and with her free hand, she found the doorknob and turned it, making them tumble into her room. She recovered her balance quickly and braced herself to steady him so they wouldn't fall.

“Is ... is this ok?” she asked, pulling back for a moment, praying he wouldn't tell her no.

“Andi ...” His hand traced her jaw and she saw him squeeze his eyes shut as if he was trying to remember the lines of her face with his fingers instead of his eyes. “I've wanted you for so long. But I ...” He opened his eyes and looked down at his legs. “Andi ... I ...”

And then she realized. His leg.

“Oh, does it ... is it hurting?” Andi wanted Max, but the thought of him being in pain while they ...

He almost smiled as he shook his head, but the too-serious, almost mournful look that quickly replaced it broke her heart. “No, Andi, I just ... I don’t want you to be ... disappointed.”

Andi blinked at him. “Max,” she whispered. “If the only parts of you that had come back were your beautiful smile, and your laugh, I’d still be soaked right now with how much I want you.”

His kiss was possessive and hard and Andi moaned with the intensity. She let out a keen of pleasure when he cupped her and growled. “Soaked?”

She could only nod as he traced his fingers over her, creating a shock-wave thunderstorm for her little man in a boat to sail through with just the pad of his thumb. Even with the heat of his kisses and the stroke of his hand, she’d known Max Lyons long enough to know that he was nervous. She could tell in the nanosecond pauses between his tongue flicking her ear and burying his face in the curve of her neck while she moaned his name. She needed to show him that she meant every word she said. She slid her hand across the marquee tent in his pants and felt the hard outline of him. Long, thick, and she smiled, remembering his slight curve to the right. “*Max, you always do the right thing,*” she’d whispered to him in her most serious voice one night during senior year when she’d climbed through his window to be with him. She’d had her hand wrapped around his length at the moment and she could

still remember how hard he'd laughed. Well, until his mom had come to the bedroom door to ask if he was ok. Now, the wild animal in Max was surfacing as she held him, stroking him through his jeans.

“Max,” she breathed. “There’s something I’ve always wanted to try with you.” She pulled him toward the bed. Or at least she tried. She wasn’t entirely sure he’d heard her. With a deep growl, he lifted her to sit on her bedside table. She heard the crash of all the books and junk she’d had sitting on it as they scattered across the floor. He paused and pulled away from her, to look down at the mess. She saw the tidy military sergeant in him trying to surface through his hunger and desire. He wanted to clean that mess up. *But*, she thought, feeling herself getting even more turned on by the thought, *I’m not going to let him*. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him to her.

“Andi,” he growled. “Your things ...”

“Leave them,” she breathed. She locked eyes with him and reached out to toss the throw pillows from her bed onto the floor. She saw a muscle in his jaw jump. “Uh-oh,” she whispered. “I made such a mess. Am I in trouble?” She gave him an evil grin that turned into a moan when he bucked his hips against her. *Too many clothes. There were too many things between them. Need to throw more stuff on the floor.* She was seeing red. *God, have I ever been this turned on before? Or has it just been so long that I can’t remember it now?* But a little naughty part of her wasn’t ready to let him

have complete control. Not when she had the chance in front of her to fulfill a fantasy she'd kept buried for almost a decade.

She fought against the pleasure humming through her as his lips traveled from hers back to her jaw and down the side of her neck. She tried to focus enough to pull his shirt off which wasn't easy. She could feel the graze of his teeth on her skin and she shivered. He paused long enough to help her tug the shirt off over his head and then he froze. She could see something in his eyes. Shame? Fear? Then he just stared at the floor, his face stoic again. He'd stopped moving but he wasn't trying to pull away from the hold Andi still had around his waist. His chest was scattered with silvery scars. Most were short and wide. *Shrapnel*. She gently moved her hands up his sides and she felt him shudder and try to step away from her. She tightened her grip around his waist with her legs, carefully watching his eyes. She'd known Max Lyons long enough to know the subtle tells in his expression. She knew the difference between when he didn't want something and when he wanted something but was afraid to ask for it. She smiled and leaned forward. She took her time, gently kissing around each of the scars. He was breathing hard. She kept her gaze on his face when she finally kissed one of the scars, right over his heart. He shivered, but stared down at her, eyes wide and questioning.

"You gave so much, Max," she whispered. "Please, can I give something to you?" He didn't say anything, but he didn't try to stop her either. She gently kissed the next scar, then the next, and she felt him relax against her. When she finished, she

couldn't resist flicking his nipple with her tongue. The animal in Max was awake again.

"Andi," he growled into the curve of her neck as he reached for the hem of her shirt.

"Please, Max," she whispered, raising her arms to make it easier for him. He had her out of her clothes in a matter of seconds and she almost couldn't bear the intensity of the look he was giving her. She turned toward the bed and she felt Max freeze behind her. She turned her head to look back at him over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"Your tattoo," he whispered. She felt a rush of heat in her face. Brandon hadn't been pleased when she'd explained it, but she'd gotten the tattoo two weeks into college and he'd accepted it. "Teacht ar ais chugam," he read. "Come back to me?"

Andi bit her lip, but she forced herself to hold his gaze as she nodded. How was she supposed to explain about the Irish Gaelic from his grandmother's tattoo, the memories of tracing the letters on his arm, and how much she had ached for him when he'd left? "Max ... I ... " But he'd closed the distance between them again. They were skin to skin and she couldn't think. When he finally broke the kiss, she couldn't meet his gaze. She was afraid the intensity in his eyes might set her on fire.

She stood by the pile of clothes on the floor and felt her power surge back to her when she saw his gaze momentarily shift to the mess. "Oops, *another* mess." She saw a flicker of

annoyance cross his face as he refocused on her. “I think I know how to make you forget about it though,” she whispered. Her hands found his belt and she heard him draw in a sharp breath as she unbuttoned his jeans and dragged the zipper down. *God, was he always this big?* She pulled his jeans down, not pausing when she got to his prosthetic. She wanted him to know that she didn’t think any differently about him because of it. She felt him go still again as her fingers skimmed the elastic top, but she just continued, pulling his jeans and boxers down to his ankles.

“Andi, we don’t ...”

She paused and looked up at him again, watching his eyes. Embarrassed, but not pulling away. She’d just have to make him forget the first part.

“I know I ... my leg ...” he was trying to make it ok for her to stop. She had to show him that she didn’t want to. She kept her eyes locked with his as she kissed his left knee, then all the way up his left thigh. He went rigid the closer she got to his hips, but then she skipped what she knew he was waiting for and started kissing her way down his right thigh, all the way to his prosthetic. She stroked his thigh, letting her finger skim under the elastic sleeve as nuzzled her nose against him and smiled.

“You’re perfect, Max,” she whispered. She met his gaze again and she felt her heart swell with the intense look of awe he was giving her. She raised an eyebrow at him playfully, as if to say, *“What? I haven’t even gotten started.”*

Then, to prove her point, she slipped as much of him into her mouth as she could.

“Andi,” he growled. “You don’t have to ...” But his hips thrust and she relaxed her throat around him, groaning simultaneously with him as he filled her. She ran her tongue along the length of him, keeping her gaze locked with his as they moved, coming together and pulling apart in a steady rhythm. Finally, he pulled back on shaky legs. “Gods, Andi,” he breathed. “That’s about all a man can take if he wants to last long enough to make his best girl scream his name.”

“Yes, please,” she panted, feeling the evidence of her own arousal coating the backs of her calves where she was kneeling in front of him. She could see him trying to work out how to pull her to her feet without losing his balance and she quickly got to her feet and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself against him. She almost cried out when they were skin to skin, feeling his hard length pressed into her belly. *This has to be a dream*, she thought.

He turned her in his arms to gently lay her back on the bed, but she planted her feet and met his gaze. She wanted him more than she wanted her next breath, but she had to focus on her plan.

“Now, I know this will be new for you, *Sergeant Lyons*,” Andi said, doing her best to keep her voice very serious as she squared her bare shoulders at him. Max was smiling at her, his gaze dropping to her chest every few seconds, reminding her of the eighteen-year-old version of themselves so many years

before. “But, you were always so *bossy* in the bedroom. Not that I didn’t love it. But, there’s something I’ve always wanted to try.”

“I’m at your command,” he growled. She bit her lip and pushed him gently onto his back on the bed before slowly crawling up his body.

“Now, I don’t have a horse,” she grinned wickedly, remembering the *Playboy*, “But is this an ok recreation?” She mussed her hair and raised her hands to her breasts, trying to recreate the erotic expression on the woman’s face from the cover.

“Better,” he growled. “So much better.”

His hands were at her hips and she could see he was holding back the animal inside him. Cool, collected, but she could see the strain. She wanted him to let go of the leash. She steadied herself over him and looked down at the face that she’d seen in countless odd dreams in the last eight years. Dreams that had left her feeling guilty, frustrated, but mostly, homesick for this man.

The sensation of him sliding inside her, stretching and filling her was like a homecoming. They both moaned and Andi felt her eyes burning with tears. “Andi,” Max panted as he bucked up into her, making her gasp. “My. Andi,” he breathed, accentuating each word with a thrust. Her heart was so full.

She raised herself up and dropped back down on his hips, wanting to feel that sensation again. They both groaned and he

rocked into her, his movement almost desperate. Andi smiled down at him as she squeezed around him. The predator was in his eyes when he met her gaze. And the feel of his warm, rough hands on her hips, was making her whole body hum. She came apart when his low voice growled, "That's my girl." The speed and feel of him moving under her sent her tumbling over the edge, but she was far from letting him go.

They moved together in a rhythm that was entirely their own and for the moment, for the first time in a long time, everything felt perfect, the way it once had.

Andi

Andi was dreaming. She had to be. Everything around her felt too comfortable, too warm, too ... perfect. A warm, broad hand smoothed down over her belly, the slightly rough skin tickling her. And she knew who it was before she heard his low whisper.

“I’ve missed you so much, Andi.” She smiled in time to meet his lips.

“I’ve missed you too, Max,” she whispered. He was kissing his way down her again, his stubble tickling her neck and her breast. When he took a nipple in between his lips and sucked before lightly biting it and flicking it with his tongue she became fully awake. He was moving further down her body, one hand still playing with her other nipple, his kisses passing her belly, when she heard a phone buzzing on the floor next to the bed. He paused and glanced up at her. “Yours?”

She shook her head, still trying to see straight and remember how to breathe *without* panting. “Mine dings.”

He groaned and sat up. In the pale morning light creeping in through her window, she looked down at the amazing

specimen of a man that was Max Lyons. When she reached his legs, she realized his prosthetic was gone. She could see the skin was puckered over the joint and she wanted to kiss it. She wanted him to know, without a doubt ...

He groaned. Not a happy groan as the phone started buzzing in his hand. "It's my mom. She's already tried to call three times. I better go." He paused and she felt herself smile at the pleased look on his face when she sat up to kiss him.

"Am I the only one who feels like I'm eighteen again?" Andi asked, reaching out a hand to smooth a mussed strand of hair that was falling across his forehead.

"No," he said with a grin. "I'm half-dreading a lecture I expect to come if she catches me. Something about wrecking my future and possibly yours before we have a chance to have one ..." His smile started to fade and Andi leaned forward to kiss him again. Her body was still firmly in control, her brain having been relegated to the time-out table in her head and she was planning on extending its sentence for as long as possible. She was happy. For the first time in a long time. And she wanted to make it last. She tried her best to put her happiness into the kiss. She wanted Max to feel it too, this portal back to where they'd been when things were so simple.

When they were both dressed, Andi crept down the hallway first to check that the coast was clear. The house was quiet and Amelia's bedroom door was closed. She held her breath until she got to her parents' door, only allowing herself a small sigh of relief when she saw it was also mercifully closed. She

waved back at Max that it was safe and she saw him moving as quietly as he could down the hallway after her. It hadn't been often that she'd had to sneak Max out of her house in the early hours of the morning, but it had happened once or twice. They'd been lucky, never getting openly caught. Though she did vividly remember one Sunday morning, after homecoming their senior year when she'd thought her dad might have known about Max staying over based on the hints he was dropping.

At the door, she kissed him one last time and when he pulled away, he kept her face in his hands. "Andi, I ... I never thought, in a thousand years, that we'd be here again."

"Well, you being back in Hope was probably a lot of that disbelief. And you sneaking out of my parents' house was probably the rest," Andi said softly. She put her hand to his cheek. "But I've been here with you in dreams so often it feels like I'm living in one right now."

With a final kiss and a promise to call her later, Andi stood on the front steps, watching him leave until she couldn't hear the soft rhythm of his footsteps anymore. Her whole body was still humming as she climbed the stairs back to her room and passed out on her bed, still smiling.



"Hmmm, I smell something in here," Amelia's voice was a trumpet of the end times. Andi raised a reluctant eyelid and did her best to breathe fire or at least give off dragon vibes

through her single open, bleary and, she was sure, blood-shot eye.

“Go away, Bedelia,” Andi muttered, turning her head to bury her face in her pillow.

“Just as soon as you tell me why your room smells like a monkey cage in the forest,” Amelia said, her voice ratcheting up the way it always did, right before she ...

Andi was bounced into the air as Amelia touched down on the mattress beside her. She held onto her pillow and tried to burrow further under her blankets when she landed again, but it was becoming difficult as Amelia climbed under her blankets and stuck her cold feet on Andi’s.

“You are the human equivalent of Hoth,” Andi hissed, trying and failing to get away from her sister. “Cold, annoying, and inhabited by those yeti things.”

“Ok, I’m going to chalk that response up to you being half-awake, but let’s circle back as to why your room smells. There’s definitely a ... man scent lingering by your pillows.” Amelia started an over-exaggerated sniffing exercise that would have given a dog a migraine. She was sniffing so hard, it sounded like there was a vacuum hose attached to her pillowcase.

“Get off,” Andi muttered, rolling over to push Amelia away. “And get some less disturbing hobbies. Why are you sniffing my pillows?” And then, slowly, like rising sun rays coming in through a window, she remembered. Shit. Max. She sat up in bed so quickly, Amelia jumped and fell off the edge.

“Jesus, Andi,” she panted from the floor, looking up at her sister, wide-eyed. “You’re like a Chihuahua or something. Who the hell goes from dead asleep to psycho that fast?”

“Apparently I do, so just ... get out before I pull out the Hitchcock music and stab you with my curling iron.” She was on her feet now, shooing Amelia towards the door. Unfortunately, Andi’s timing this morning didn’t seem nearly as perfect as the night before because she and Amelia immediately bumped into her dad in the hallway. Literally.

“I don’t know if our insurance covers an indoor traffic accident that we cause ourselves,” he muttered, blinking his eyes as if he was trying to be sure that he was in fact looking at his two daughters and not two raccoons that had slipped in through the backdoor and started a slap fight.

“Sorry, Dad,” Andi muttered, echoed by Amelia who was still grinning at her maliciously. They parted so their dad could pass and Amelia crossed her arms, studying Andi.

“You look ... different this morning. You’ve got more color in your cheeks.”

“Uh, just a ... good night’s sleep,” Andi said, turning her back on her sister and retreating into her room for her bathrobe.

“Yeah right,” Amelia taunted, following her back in. “Tell me who he is. Or should I just guess loudly at the breakfast table?”

Andi narrowed her eyes at her sister, “You do, you’re dead.”

Amelia shook her head. “Yeah, that threat might have worked when I was in middle school and you were taller than me and you’d come home, all college-kid-tough, but not anymore, Short Fry. Just tell me. I won’t say anything.”

“Short Fry? Not Short *stack*? Or Junior Burger, at least?” Andi asked.

“It’s early. I’ll get back to you on that. Now, spill that tea.”

Andi let out a huff of annoyance, but she couldn’t stop the giddy rush in her chest. “It’s Max, ok?” She’d dropped her voice to a whisper and Amelia was leaning in to hear her. Even though they had a pretty significant age difference between them, Andi and Amelia were close. She’d teased, tormented, and shared secrets with her sister in equal measures and Amelia had returned the favor. She’d torment Andi to get an answer out of her, but she’d never been judgmental about the answer once she had it.

She blinked at Andi. “Max? You two are ...”

“Shhh,” Andi said. “And if you’re wearing a wire, going undercover for Mom, I will end you.”

Amelia shook her head. “Where’s the trust, woman? Why do you think I’d tell Mom anything? So ... did you and Max?” Amelia was blushing and it was almost enough to make Andi want to go into details that would further embarrass her sister. But her own face was getting warm now.

“Yeah ... last night.”

“Wow, a little bang down memory lane,” Amelia said, shaking her head.

“Something like that,” Andi said. She was smiling again, and no matter how hard she tried to scrape it off her face, it wouldn’t leave.

Amelia studied her, and then she was smiling too. It was softer, more thoughtful, but with a nod, she said. “It’s nice to see you smile like that, sis. It’s ... it’s been a while.”

“Girls!” Their dad called up the stairs. “The lioness of the house has returned from the store with half a dead gazelle’s worth of pancakes, a water buffalo’s weight in bacon, and a ... hippo’s bladder of ... orange juice!”

“Cut him off of Animal Planet,” Andi muttered, looking at Amelia.

“You think I have that power?” she asked.

Andi shrugged. “Either you or Ru Paul.”

“I think I’m going to take some Ru Paul advice right now and ...” she moved past Andi. “Sashay away.”

They headed down the stairs, but Amelia was first and when she paused, Andi bumped into her. She sighed, staring at her sister’s back. “You make a better door than a window, Bedelia. What’s up?”

“Mom’s lost it,” Amelia whispered. “She’s gone around the bend. She’s taken out a personal ad in the National Inquirer. She’s singing campfire songs with Trotsky and a cow with the head of David Lynch.”

“You sound like *you*’ve lost it,” Andi muttered, sticking her head under Amelia’s arm to see what she was looking at. Andi felt her jaw drop. Their entire living room and dining room had been ransacked. Drawers were pulled out of the china hutch, and the coat closet door was open and empty with all its contents in a mountain of obnoxiously red and orange Hope Goats gear, only interrupted by U Dub purple and gold. In the living room, the dusty DVD collection was out of the cabinet and stacked like a miniature cityscape of identical skyscrapers of different heights.

“What the hell happened?” Andi asked, looking around. “It wasn’t like this last night ...” Amelia turned to grin down at her and Andi changed course. “And Dad didn’t scream when he came down the stairs ...” The question became moot when the kitchen door banged open and their mom emerged, wearing her paint-splattered overalls and her hair pulled back under a handkerchief. This was the look that always heralded the return of “Project Mom’s Way” as she and Amelia had once dubbed it.

“Oh no,” Andi muttered.

“Oh yes,” their mom crowed, walking around to each pile on the floor and dropping a new trash bag on top. “We’ve got too much junk. Myrna Stevens and Barry Simmons helped me see the light last night. This year, we’re getting rid of all our extra crap.”

“Awesome,” Andi and Amelia said with identical sighs. In hindsight, Andi shouldn’t have been surprised. This was her

mother after all. The woman looked at the Resolution Redo party as if it was the yearly Holy Grail being worked towards. January 1st was just a test run for the 16th. And it always went the same way. Two weeks of excitement and vowing about how this year would be different. This would inevitably end on February 1st with their mom on the couch, her feet propped on a pile of whatever her resolution had become, a cold rag over her face, and a glass of wine in her hand.

“This is the year that the Morgans slim down their hoard of crap,” she sang.

“Too long for a battle cry,” Andi muttered.

“I like ‘hoard’ though,” Amelia said. “It makes us sound like dragons. Definitely better than saying we have *piles* of crap.”

With a fierce smile that was slightly terrifying for early-morning-Andi, especially when a Resolution Redo hangover was trying to flirt with her. Their mom grabbed them both by the hand and dragged them into the kitchen.

“So, eat up girls, because as soon as you’re done, this cleaning machine,” she thumbed herself in the chest hard enough to make Amelia and Andi wince in empathetic pain, “is coming for those dirty, filthy caves you call your rooms!” She finished this commitment by rubbing her sore boob and walking over to the fridge.

Their dad approached and waited until her back was to them before whispering, “You two distract her and I’ll tackle her to the ground.”

Andi shrugged. “She’s just having fun. It’s a Mom tradition on the day after Reso-Redo.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. I’m worried she’s minutes away from a heart attack. She drank all the coffee in the house before six a.m. and had to go to Bumble’s for more.” All three of them gulped in unison when they turned to see their mom pouring herself a tureen of coffee, topped off with a splash of milk she pulled from the fridge.

Breakfast had a definite air of “bomb-deactivation” energy about it. They all spoke softly and in soothing words to their mom, holding their collective breaths every time they passed the waffles hoping that the soft thump of the plate touching the table wouldn’t be enough to cause her to blow up and spew Starbucks dark roast over all of them. She practically knocked Amelia and Andi out of the way after breakfast on their way back upstairs.

“Bedelia, your room is first at-bat,” she sang, marching into Amelia’s Jackson Pollock reject of a room.

Amelia stood in the hallway getting covered by flying clothing while Andi slipped by her to her room. She was more thankful than she could express at the moment that Amelia’s room was closer to the stairs. The last thing she needed was her mom ferreting something up in her room that would reveal that Max had been there only a few hours before. She closed her door and started with the bed. She stripped it. It was a new week, she could probably argue that she wanted clean sheets today, even though she’d just washed them two days ago. She

searched under the bed and breathed a huge sigh of relief when there wasn't anything incriminating lying in wait to be found by her mom.

She got to her nightstand and stared down at the mess they'd knocked off the night before in the heat of ... the moment. She picked up the Veterinarian's Desk Reference, the Lucy Score book she was currently reading, and a handful of hair ties and jewelry she'd tossed at the nightstand rather than on it. The only thing still on the floor was the silver picture frame, lying face down. She picked it up and turned it to make sure the glass wasn't broken. And she deflated. All the blood in her body rushed to her feet. She was light-headed and she missed the edge of the bed as she tried to sit down hard.

The picture was of Brandon. He was holding her and smiling at the camera. His eyes stared at her, his smile never wavering. His loyalty ... she couldn't breathe. What had she done?

Max

With every step he took on the way home, he expected to wake up. This had to have been a dream, right? He hadn't just made love to Andi Morgan after eight years of not even seeing her. Any moment, he was going to wake up and be back in his barracks in Iraq or in the hospital in New York. How many times had he dreamed of feeling her bare hips in his hands, imagined her smile and her dark hair cascading down her bare shoulders?

He backtracked to his house and slipped up the stairs as quickly as he could. His mom wasn't in the kitchen or the living room. He held his breath and headed up the stairs. *Maybe she went back to sleep.* He still wasn't as silent as he had been in high school. He had a hard time controlling how much pressure he put down on his prosthetic foot and he held his breath until he got to his room, hoping that the alternating "clunk" hadn't woken his mom if she had gone back to sleep. The light was out under her door and it was closed. He started to breathe again as he pushed open the door to his room. Sarge was on his bed, waiting for him. He raised his head and his tail thumped against the blankets while Max changed and sat

down on the edge of the bed. He removed his prosthetic and gripped his elbow crutch to get back to the wall to turn his light off. As he lay down, he absentmindedly rubbed his knee. He was still amazed. Andi had still wanted to touch him. She'd still wanted to ... he hadn't taken the prosthetic off, but she had kissed him *there* ... he felt himself stirring at the memory.

A wet dog's nose found his ear and the moment passed. "Lay down, Sarge," he murmured. "We'll go for a 'w' when the sun is up." And for the first time in six months, Sergeant Max Lyons, a retired serviceman, fell asleep with a smile on his face.

But, unfortunately, he wasn't able to sleep for long. Sarge took his promise of a "w" literally, and mere minutes after the sun was up, he was yanking the blankets off of Max, yowling and vocalizing to remind Max about what they should be doing at that moment. Max was still in such a good mood that he got dressed with minimal griping at the dog and they slipped back down the hall. His mom's door was still closed and he breathed a sigh of relief. For once, it looked like she was sleeping in. He'd seen her with Helen Benson and the other Wild Oats hanging around Miss Mandie's booth the night before, and he hadn't missed the smile and wink she'd given him when she'd seen him with Andi. She'd be excited for him, but he was still glad he didn't have to have *that* conversation with her at the moment. Sarge was on a mission as soon as they hit the street and Max had to jog to keep up with him. He was starting to sweat by the time they hit the jogger's path that circled half the island. Any other day, he'd

have felt annoyed at himself for already sweating after doing what wouldn't have even constituted a warm-up in his old life, but this morning, with the cold sea air blowing through his hair, Sarge alternating between screeching to a halt to sniff plants and lamp posts and running for all he was worth, despite his bad hip, and the rays of the rising sun, Max felt like he was just waking up on the first day of his life.

They were on their way home when his phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID but he didn't recognize the number.

“Hello?”

“Max!” He knew that voice the same way he knew the order to pack a ruck and that you wanted to be the first one to use the head on Stroganoff MRE night.

“Jax!” Max said. “Why the hell are you calling at the ass crack of dawn, soldier?”

Jax laughed. “Don't pull that crap on me, Sarge. I know you're a civilian now, you lucky bastard. Honorable discharge, bronze ...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Max said, cutting him off. “Is that why you called me at ...” he pulled his phone away from his ear to check the time. “Oh, seven-fifteen in the morning on a Sunday? To rub it in that I'm out of the service?”

“Oh of course not. I'm just with some of the boys from our fire team and we're on leave in Seattle. We were hoping we could come out and see this island you never shut up about. We've got something for you.”

Max froze. Sarge hit the end of his leash and put his head down, trying to yank Max forward with him. “You wanna come ... *here?*”

“Yeah. If that’s ok. Are you busy today?”

“Uhhh ...”

“We found the light rail station that would get us to the buses that would get us to Anna Cortez ...”

“Anacortes,” he corrected.

“Right. That would get us to Anna’s, and then we’re supposed to take a ferry to get to you. I don’t know. Wang is navigating. I’m just in charge of letting our Sarge know that we’re coming for him.”

“Phrasing,” Max muttered, automatically.

Jax laughed. “Well, that’s a good sign. Your sense of humor is still intact. So, do we have your permission to ... come aboard this island of yours?”

He blinked and looked down at Sarge. How often was he going to have a chance to see them? The fact that they were willing to go to all the trouble of coming out to the island already said a lot. “Uh, sure. Text me when you get your ferry tickets and I’ll come and meet you when you get off the ferry.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Jax said, only sounding ninety-five percent like a smart ass.

“Dismissed,” Max muttered. “I’ll see you miscreants in a few hours.”

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and coaxed Sarge back toward the town square. His team members were coming to the island. This was awesome, wasn't it? His nerves were starting to creep up on him the closer they got to home. But then the universe, probably out of some misguided attempt at kindness, decided to throw him a distraction. It was a horribly familiar sight, though he had to say the view was different from a spectator's point of view. For the first time in years, Max was thankful that Hope was a pedestrian town because the sight in front of him would have caused a car crash. It was Mrs. Abbott's jogging group. The Resolution Redo party must have been good for her because her numbers had increased. There were now at least two dozen joggers in the black Zentai suits, spiked harnesses and many had now added ... codpieces? He and Sarge moved off the sidewalk to give the group a wide berth.

"Heel to toe, folks, move heel to toe!" The voice was coming from the figure in the front. Mrs. Abbott. "We're here to sweat, people. Suck in those guts, pinch those lower cheeks together, and march. One more mile and we'll start our slow jog." She noticed Max as they drew closer. "Oh! It's Max Lyons everyone, *Sargent* Max Lyons."

"Hi, Max."

"Sergeant."

"Hey, son."

Before he could stop himself, he was returning the wave from the group, ignoring the bizarre image of the man with the

studded codpiece saluting him. Mrs. Abbott paused, letting the rest of the group file past them. “Such a pity that you and Andi had to drop out. I understand completely of course. Give her my love will you?” And she was off before Max could reply.

“Ok,” he muttered to himself, blinking at the sidewalk when the group had moved past them and turned down the jogging path. “Let’s just be thankful their jog was this *morning* instead of this afternoon.”

“What happened to you?” his mom asked when he and Sarge strolled in. “You look like you did after that football practice where you got snapped in the eye by Jimmy Burgess’ jock strap.”

He felt his upper lip curl back. “I’d just forgotten about that. Thanks, Mom. No, I just ... I was just passed by Mrs. Abbott’s ... jogging group.”

“Oh damn. I meant to sign up for that. She’s ordering fancy jogging suits for it and everything.”

“No,” Max said, shaking his head. “Please, Mom. If you love me, join a different club.”

She shrugged and then looked down at Sarge. “Well, your breakfast is ready for you, good boy. Go get it.” Max steadied his hip on the wall and bent down to unclip Sarge’s leash. The second he was free, he ran between her legs and took off for the kitchen. Automatically, Max reached out to steady her.

“So, did Sarge get you up early to take you for a walk?” she asked, leaning down to rub her knee.

“It certainly feels that way. I’m definitely not walking *him*.” He hesitated for a minute, but then decided to just dive in. “So, Jax, from my team called me this morning.”

“Oh? At seven in the morning on a Sunday?” she paused, blinking up at him.

Max nodded. “I already chewed him out about it. His ass is pâté. But, apparently, he and a few of the guys are on leave in Seattle ...”

His mom’s face lit up. “Tell them to get their butts out here. And they’re staying with us. And I’m cooking. Monte Cristo sandwiches, fresh salads, and chocolate pie. And there’s a bottle of good scotch in the cabinet.”

“Whoa, Mom, you don’t need to ...”

She rounded on him and glared. “I’m sorry, *Sergeant*, but it sounded like you were about to tell your mother what she could and couldn’t do. Did I hear that right?” Max sighed. “And they’re staying here,” she added. “So, you just go get those boys when they arrive. I need to make a trip to the store. And there was a voicemail left for you on the machine from last night. It came after you’d already left to help out with the event. Your next support group meeting is tonight, but I suppose you’ll be missing it with your friends in town.”

“Yeah ...” he said softly, his thoughts turning to Andi. He had to text her at least to let her know. Man, of all the days for them to pick to come to town. Then another thought hit him. He dug out his phone while his mom yelled about what she’d

need to get while she wrote herself a grocery list on the back of a piece of junk mail on the table.

Max: Hey, he texted Andi, Some guys from my old fire team are coming to the island today. Total surprise trip. They're on leave in Seattle, and ... I guess I used to talk about the island a lot.

He didn't add that he used to talk to them about *Andi* a lot too. He felt a stab of guilt remembering the way he'd talked about Andi, as if they were still dating. He'd even told Jax once when they were off duty and having a beer near Fallujah that he was going to marry Andi. He'd meant to say it in the past tense, but Jax had heard it as a promise and he'd slapped Max on the back and said, "You'll do it. I know you will." Another cold weight landed in his stomach. Even if he and Andi *were* ... now. What *were* they? Were they dating again? He glanced back down at his screen. He needed to focus.

Max: Anyway. I'm going to miss the Cup of Kindness meeting today since they're in town, but I'd like to introduce them to you at the Alphorn after the meeting? If you want?

Before he could second guess himself, he sent the message and looked around the living room. He'd need places for them to sleep, an itinerary for their visit, and supplies. He had work to do.

It was just after noon when Jax texted Max that they were all taking the 2:40 ferry. His nerves wouldn't let him risk being late. He'd been working, organizing, cleaning, and helping his mom cook while trying to keep his mind off the fact that Andi

still hadn't texted him back. *It's Sunday*. He paused and felt just a little too haughty, remembering the night before. *Maybe she's just sleeping in* . . . He left the house with Sarge at two to head for the ferry launch. He again sent up multiple thanks to the universe that the jogging club was a morning thing and his buddies would be passed out the next time they haunted the streets of Hope with their leather and black spandex.

He was ready to give oxygen to the idea that the rest of the island would be charming and chill when the guys arrived, that is, until he got to the square. Everyone in town, it seemed, was taking at least the first day of their re-resolutions seriously. There was a whole group of barefoot people in pajamas with stuffed animals standing on the lawn of City Park next to Town Hall. As he and Sarge approached, he heard Greta Simpson, the counselor from the high school coaching them.

“Now, everyone, I want you to hug your soft, stuffed friend to your chest and whisper in their ear, the habit you're going to quit this year. That you're *really* going to quit this time. No one else needs to know besides you and your stuffed animal. And their lips are stitched.” She gave a tinkling laugh at her own joke and Max scanned the group. They were pretty divided between the embarrassed, the bored, the annoyed, and the ones that were twitching, looking like they either needed a cup of coffee or a cigarette.

Max gently tugged on Sarge to get him to start walking again. He was staring at the stuffed animal in Dirk Patterson's arms and Dirk was glaring at both of them as if he could tell what Sarge was thinking about doing with it the second Dirk

dropped the little gorilla. Max tried to smile and wave, but Dirk's dark look made Max decide they should just move it along.

In the center of the square, Barry Simmons was holding court, using the old gazebo as his home base. There was a line of people carrying boxes of junk and patiently waiting for their turn. Barry was sitting in a folding chair next to the horn, balancing a lawn gnome on one knee and a duck decoy on the other. As Max went by he heard Barry say, "Yes, John. But do they make you *happy*?"

By the time he reached the footpath to the ferry, he was starting to accept the fact that this would probably be the *only* trip his buddies would make to the island. To someone like him, who'd grown up around the nuttiness, it didn't seem so out there. But to Jax and the others, who were from medium-sized Midwest or east coast towns, he could only imagine what their response would be. He and Sarge waited on the dock, watching the dot on the horizon getting closer.

"Sarge!" Jax yelled from the upper dock. Beside Max, Sarge got to his feet, panting and straining against the leash to get to the bouncing ball of blue jeans and leather jacket that was Jax. He was young and it looked like for all intents and purposes, he'd been able to shake off his injuries. *Lucky bastard*. Behind Jax, Max could see Wang, Curtis, and Jacobs waving from the railing. The four men were the last ones off the ferry, holding back in traditional service style to let the other passengers disembark before him. A wave of pride rolled over Max,

seeing his team members remember one of his many lectures about being gentlemen soldiers.

“Sarge,” Jax said, a second before plowing into him and knocking him back on his heels. “You look great!” The other men on the team waited their turn to hug Max, the rest of them had always been more reserved than Jax. Not that that was a high bar. He and Max had been in the hospital in Germany together before Max had gotten shipped home and since Max had dragged Jax’s ass out of that truck, Jax had gotten a lot less formal around him.

“This place looks great,” Wang said, looking around.

“And who’s this big guy?” Jax asked, bending down to pet Sarge.

“His name’s Sarge.”

“A little vain of you, isn’t it?” Jax asked, grinning up at Max.

Max rolled his eyes. “It was the name he came with. A major general on the mainland had him before he came to the shelter here.”

“Well, is it alright if he comes with us to get some grub,” Curtis asked. “Because I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry enough to eat a Sasquatch, or whatever large animals you Pacific Northwest people farm out here.”

Max chuckled. “Yeah, Sasquatch farming. That’s all we do out here. Can’t throw a rock without hitting someone’s field of

Bigfoot.” Curtis’ eyes widened and Max slapped him on the shoulder.

“It’s nice to see you haven’t changed.” He nodded at the rest of them. “Well, you’re in luck, boys. My mom is cooking. Best grub you a-holes have probably ever had. Come on.”

They all hefted day packs onto their backs and followed Max up the pathway, asking him about what had happened after he left Germany. He did his best to keep his explanation light and short, smoothing over his physical therapy the best he could. Even so, when he glanced back at his buddies, he’d always catch at least one of them looking down at his leg.

“De-Floured? Hell yeah. You didn’t tell me this town had a strip club,” Jax said with a grin. “Not for me, of course. I’m engaged.”

“Congrats,” Max said, slapping him on the back. “But, bad news for the rest of you. That’s our bakery. Not a strip club.”

“Do they not realize how that name sounds?” Jacobs asked.

“Oh no, it’s intentional,” Max said, as they drew even with the open bakery doors.

“Because I said so, Bart! Don’t fight me on this. Just finish making those nipples.”

Max realized that he was the only one still walking forward and he turned to see his buddies staring, mouths open and eyes wide at the display cases inside De-Floured. He grinned.

“Anyone need some coffee and a pastry? My treat?” They didn’t reply, but when Max chuckled and headed inside with

Sarge, they followed. The bakery was almost empty, but it *was* the middle of the afternoon and probably not unusual for what was mostly a breakfast and brunch place. “Hey, Miss Mandie.”

“Max,” she said. She was scowling and after a nod of acknowledgment at him, she turned her attention back to the windows behind him.

“These are some of the guys from my team,” he said, motioning to his friends. “They’re out for a visit.”

That was enough to pull her attention away from the windows and give each one of the guys a once-over. “How ... nice. It’s good to have more testosterone out here on the island. Careful where you set it down though or you’ll give us all the vapors.” There was a racket outside and they all turned to see Zane go by, this time in a golf cart, laden down with racks of weights with a weight bench strapped to the back. He was blaring “Safety Dance” and the dozen people trying to keep up with him looked at first glance like they had bombs strapped to their chests.

“Pick up your pace, folks. Those weight vests won’t do *anything* for you if you’re not working up a sweat!”

“Huh, Zane got an upgrade,” Max said, nodding at the golf cart. “He was using a cart behind his bike.”

Miss Mandie nodded. “He pulled a groin muscle with that overloaded cart. And we can’t have that. So I invested a little with him so he could upgrade. He’s going to promote my ‘Morning Wood’ and ‘Flash-Your-Muffins’ and I told him I’d put some of those wheatgrass and regret shakes on my menu

for the serious ones.” She shrugged. “It’s a compromise, I suppose. I mostly felt bad for his groin.”

“This town,” Max said, chuckling. “Inventing new ways to do something bat-crapping insane since 1808.”

Miss Mandie shook her head. “Don’t I know it. Still, I really do hate this time of year.”

He glanced behind him to see the other guys standing in the bakery’s doorway watching Zane’s group which had now stopped jogging and started doing squats during the chorus of the song.

“Even after being crowned *Queen Motivator*?” Max asked, fighting to keep his expression tuned to surprise.

She sighed. “You know why I did that. Beating Lisa and Esther at their own game is like crack for me. No, I just wish everyone could feel comfortable in their own skin and be happy with their habits and the way they like living. Instead of trying to fit some stupid social media mold. Just imagine how different this world would be if that was the case. Just *live*, people. It’s not some big puzzle to figure out.” She slapped a towel over her shoulder and folded her arms under her ample cleavage. Out of the corner of his eye, Max saw Curtis blush. “Well, we’re still going to fight fire with fire. Here in a half hour, the Wild Oats will be gathering here and we’re going to hammer out our January schedule. We have Male Watcher’s Day coming up. Eudora is in charge of that one.”

Max grimaced, remembering his senior year when Mrs. Thompson had asked him to help her with her mistletoe and

then spent the next hour cooing over him. It was the longest hour of his life. “I imagine that would be one of her ... passions.”

Miss Mandie nodded. “And I’m running point on some strategic holidays here at De-Floured. Namely, Bagel Day, National Cheeselover’s Day, and National Chocolate Cake Day. So, we’ve got a game plan. I’ve got a fridge full of cheese, enough raw ingredients to put a bagel around every three-dimensional object on the island, and Bart’s making more nipples than you’d find in a nudist avalanche.”

He grinned at her. “Sounds like January in Hope.”

She gave him an approving nod, stuck the unlit cigarette behind her ear, and turned to look at the men with him. “Now. What can I dish up for you ... dishes?”

While Max waited on their orders, the other guys hurried over to the windows to watch a group of annoyed-looking dieters each holding a carton of eighteen eggs and pretending to be interested in Mrs. Bumble’s speech about the all-egg diet they were all embarking on.

“You know,” Miss Mandie said, handing over the coffee carrier to Max. “This is the happiest I’ve ever seen you. If I didn’t know better, I’d say that’s a ‘got some’ smile you’re wearing.”

Max felt the heat slash and burn across his cheeks. What was he supposed to say? Miss Mandie just chuckled, shook her head, and winked at him. “It’s a good look on you, Max. Whatever’s causing it, you make sure and keep it around.”

He would. If it was up to him. He'd keep her around for as long as she'd let him. He felt his pocket vibrate and he quickly set down the drinks to dig out his phone. It was a text back from Andi.

A: Ok. What time?



The Alhorn was a pub, mostly for tourists, but it had started having a late afternoon happy hour to try to lure in the townies before they headed to Fast Eddie's to play pool and get cheaper drinks. They'd just arrived when Jax saw the wall of dart boards on the back wall and declared that it was finally their chance to show up their old Sergeant.

Max groaned, but agreed and followed them through the sea of tourists and townsfolk eating mozzarella sticks, and wings, and guzzling whatever was on tap. He was thankful that Sarge had stayed home with his mom, content to lick the floor clean after the Monte Cristos and fries she'd made. The little speckles of grease coating the floor in front of the stove had been a dog version of Chuck E. Cheese to Sarge. The Alhorn would have been Six Flags at the moment. And controlling Sarge would have been nothing short of a miracle on the order of loaves and fishes.

He teased and picked on his buddies in turn over their occasional jokes about him standing on his own two feet again, calling him the bionic man, and making comments about how long his hair was getting. He tried to distract

himself with their good-natured ribbing and not let his mind keep reverting back to thinking about Andi. She was on her way here. His unit members were going to meet her. Finally. After all the years of him telling them about her ... Talk about social pressure.

“So Sarge,” Jax said, finally taking a seat at the table again when their beers arrived. “We haven’t been entirely honest with you about why we all came out there.”

Max frowned. “Private, is this conversation going to end with me putting my prosthetic foot on your backs while you crank out push-ups?”

Jax grinned. “God, I hope not.” He looked down. “This floor’s kind of dirty.”

“Says the guy who called his fox hole ‘cozy’,” Jacobs muttered.

Jax ignored him and glanced at Wang and Curtis before clearing his throat and returning his attention back to Max. “No, we got word out of Georgia ... Wang, you tell him.”

Wang straightened in his chair and looked at Max. “Well, you know my old man is the Brigadier General at Fort Benning ... and he’s always ... been a fan of yours, sir. Ever since that day in Iraq. You ... you saved our lives, Sarge.” Wang glanced at Curtis and Jacobs. “We were scared shitless. We couldn’t think. But, you trained us to listen and do. And when you screamed at us to get over that dune, that was all we thought about.” The other two nodded quickly.

“And on top of that, you saved this handsome devil,” Jax said, thumbing his own chest. “By the way, Gloria sends her thanks.”

“*Anyway*,” Wang continued, cutting his eyes to Jax. “Well, I know you’re ... active duty isn’t ...”

Max nodded. “It’s ok, soldier. I’m not eligible for active duty anymore. No need to dance around the obvious.”

“But,” Jax said, jumping in again before Wang could finish. “Wang’s dad fixed it so ...”

“He didn’t ‘fix it’,” Wang growled. “Do we need to rumble, Jax?” Jax piped down and Wang turned his attention back on Max. “They’re looking for a new drill sergeant for basic training at Fort Benning. And ...” Wang reached into his day pack and pulled out a dark tan envelope. He passed it across the table to Max. “They want you.”

There was a buzzing in Max’s ears. *Holy shit. I would be back in the Army.* And being a drill sergeant wouldn’t be so different than being with his team. He’d have a chance to help prepare new recruits for what they’re going to be up against.

“Wow, Wang,” he breathed, looking down at the official seal on the envelope.

Wang shrugged. “The wow part was convincing them to let us deliver it to you.”

“Yeah, that was the part where having Wang’s dad at the base *really* came in useful.”

Georgia. Fort Benning. It was one of the biggest Army bases in the country. He'd wear fatigues again and ... have a career. "I'll ... I'll have to think about it."

Wang nodded. "I figured you'd need to talk to your mom and your girl about it. The posting starts at the beginning of February, so you have some time."

"Hey, speaking of which," Jax said, elbowing Max in the ribs. "If I'm remembering correctly from the picture you kept in the barracks, I think your girl's here."

Max turned in time to see Andi come through the heavy pub door. She paused and looked around, her gaze landing on Max. She smiled, but it was a nervous smile and her face was paler than usual. Max felt himself frown. Something was wrong. Her smile was genuine ... but there was something sad in her eyes.

There was a couple sitting at the bar doing shots and the girl waved Andi over. Max stood and watched while Andi and the woman talked. He saw Andi laugh when the woman mimed hanging herself while her companion imitated trying to slit his own throat. Andi gave them each a pat on the back and said something to the bartender before making her way over.

"Alright, you a-holes. You better have your sarcasm A-game and if you don't, you better behave. There's a woman heading your way and if you don't she will ruthlessly mock you," Max muttered.

"I can't believe we're about to meet the Sarge's girl," Curtis muttered.

“Hey,” Andi said, approaching. “I heard a rumor that there were a bunch of Army guys here. Have any of you seen them? Because I’m not seeing *anyone* around here that looks like a soldier.”

“Sassy,” Jax said, with a grin. They all took turns introducing themselves to her and doing their best to charm her. Max felt himself smiling with pride as she took whatever they dished out and returned the serve. But he knew he shouldn’t be surprised. She was his Andi.

“So, what’s going on with the folks at the bar?” Max asked, nodding over at the couple who were doing another round of shots.

Andi chuckled. “Librarian troubles. That’s Dana from the school library and Rob from the town library. They ended up having to run a book club for the people who made the resolutions to read more. And apparently, today’s first meeting ended in a fistfight over whether or not *Moby Dick* was ‘obscene’ or a ‘classic’. So, the two of them are getting hammered to try and forget about it.”

“Wow,” Jax said. Max and Andi turned to look at him. He was shaking his head. “No offense, but I’m starting to think that this whole town should be committed.”

“No argument here,” Max and Andi said together. She was smiling when he looked over at her, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

“Well,” Andi said, checking her watch, “unfortunately I have to get to work.” She smiled at the men at the table. “It’s

been really nice meeting all of you.”

Max got to his feet. “I’ll walk you out.”

He felt his ears burn as the men catcalled and whistled as they headed for the door.

“Are you ok?” he asked softly when they emerged out into the cold rain.

Andi’s head was down, her gaze on her feet. She shook her head. “No. I ...”

“What is it?” He stepped closer to her, his hand out.

When she looked up at him, her eyes were full of tears. “I’m so sorry, Max. I just ... I can’t ... Brandon just ...”

“Brandon?” he asked through gritted teeth. “Was that who you were thinking of the whole time we were ...”

She was crying and a part of him had the fleeting thought, *too far*: Before the anger and pain crashed over him. And then she was gone, running through the rain with her head down. He almost ran after her. He wanted to, but what would it change? *Brandon*. Her fiancé. The name was a fresh stab to his gut. As he stood alone under The Alhorn’s covered entryway, staring at the place where Andi had been moments before, he thought he would have rather taken a second round with the shrapnel.

Andi

“So, did you already bury all the dead bodies in your room? Do you have extra space for me to stash some ...” Andi heard Amelia pause in her doorway. “Andi? What’s wrong?”

Andi was still sitting on the floor, holding the framed photo. She couldn’t form words. She’d just slept with Max, *feet away* from Brandon’s photo. *In the same bed* that she’d slept with Brandon almost exactly a year before. And she hadn’t even thought of him through it all. He hadn’t even crossed her mind. How ... what was wrong with her? She heard her bedroom door close and felt Amelia’s steps. She opened her eyes in time to see her sister’s screaming skunk slippers come into her field of vision. Then Amelia dropped down to sit cross-legged, facing her with their knees touching.

“Andi?” Amelia leaned in and looked up at her. “Oh my god, what happened?”

In halting sobs, Andi tried to explain to Amelia why she was cradling Brandon’s photo and crying. Amelia was silent while Andi talked and cried and when she finished, Andi held

her breath, trying to stifle her sobs while she waited for Amelia to tell her what a horrible person she was.

“I’m still glad it happened,” Amelia said softly. Andi jerked her head up to meet Amelia’s gaze.

“What?”

“I’m still glad,” Amelia repeated. She gripped Andi’s knees and smiled sadly. “I know you probably haven’t noticed, because you’re not exactly Narcissistic Nancy, but Andi ... you look like you’ve been wasting away.”

“I have not ...” Andi started, frowning.

“You have. I’m your sister. I would know. And ... you’ve been *so depressed*. And with Michelle texting you constantly, it’s like every day you just scoop up a big old handful of salt and start rubbing it right in your open wounds. And no offense, but it hasn’t been a picnic for the rest of us either, you know. Mostly because we’ve felt helpless. We don’t know how to reach you or help you. Man, if we knew all you needed was Max Lyons and some alcoholic assistance from Miss Mandie, I would have gone over to his house the day he came home and told him to get his Army ass over here.”

Andi started crying harder. “But Brandon just ...”

“Almost a year ago, Andi,” Amelia said softly. “How long are you going to torture yourself?”

“I’m not torturing ... It hasn’t even been a year, Amelia ... and I ... I promised to marry him,” Andi sniffed, burying her face in her hands.

“And he promised to marry you,” Amelia said, pulling Andi into a hug. “But fate is an asshole and sharp rocks can step right off, and I’m going to flip off every boat I see for the rest of my life just so they’ll tell their friends that they can go fore-and-aft themselves too. Andi, you didn’t break your promise to Brandon by sleeping with Max.”

Andi opened her mouth to argue, but there was a knock on the door. Both women froze, holding their breaths.

“Andi? Amelia? If you’re in there, Amelia, I want to have a talk with you about what I found under your bed.”

Andi met Amelia’s gaze. She shook her head, unconcerned. “It’s my ubertooth. Looks a little like a vape pen. She probably thinks I’m smoking the devil’s Bluetooth.” She hugged Andi again. “Please, just ... try to cut yourself some slack, will you? For me?” She glanced back at the door and sighed. “In my hour of having to explain hacker technology to Mom.” Andi managed a watery smile. Amelia got to her feet and took a deep breath before she looked back at Andi. “If I don’t make it back alive, remember that I did this for you.” Andi almost laughed as Amelia tossed her head back and slowly walked to the door. She slipped into the hall, pulling Andi’s door closed behind her. “Here I am, Mother. Let the inquisition begin.”

There was silence in the hallway. “What ... Where’s Andi?”

“She’s not feeling well. And her room is already clean. Have I ever told you what a VPN is? It’s a fascinating invention that allows me to ...” Their voices faded away down the hallway and Andi took a deep breath. She looked down at

the photo in her hand and felt the same gut-punching pain as she had every time she looked at his toothy grin and mussed hair. But she must have been cried-out because the exhausting sobs didn't come.

"I'm so sorry, Brandon," she whispered to the frame. Then, the sobs came. She lay down on the floor and closed her eyes. Her phone started to ring. She answered it without taking her eyes away from Brandon's smiling face.

"So, I decided I will come out to this island for the park groundbreaking," Michelle sniffed. "I'll be out on the seven o'clock ferry tonight. I ... I think it means I'll arrive at 7:45 ... if I'm reading this ticket correctly. Is ... can I stay with you?"

"Wh ... of course," Andi said, sitting up and instantly feeling sick. "And ... And I'll meet you when the ferry docks."

"Thanks, Andi. I'm ... I'm really glad I'll get to see you. We can talk about Brandon. It'll be really nice to be around someone who loved him as much as I do."

Andi hung up and stared at the ceiling. She was cried-out and numb. Her phone dinged and she lifted it to look at the screen. It was a text from Max.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Dammit*. She hadn't just hurt Brandon's memory, she'd hurt Max too. *Why did I do it? I didn't even think. I just ... pounced on Max. What is wrong with me?* But she didn't have an answer. So she just curled up on her bed and wept.



“I can’t stay,” she said to Jordan when she stopped by the support group meeting. The smile Jordan had worn when she greeted her fell away. She didn’t even bother scanning the room for Max. He wasn’t there. He was with his team members. The smallest of silver linings was that she didn’t have to face him again.

“No problem, Andi. But, is everything ok?” Jordan’s face was concerned, but her voice was calm and caring and it made the wobbling dam inside of Andi rumble.

“To be honest, I don’t know anymore,” Andi whispered, her vision starting to blur.

“Do you have a minute to sit and talk? Miss Mandie and the Wild Oats brought in coffee and donuts from De-Floured. You look like you could use a pick-me-up.”

The rest of the group was mingling and arguing about Snow Ball preparations, this time being refereed by Miss Mandie and Mrs. Abbott while Mrs. Thompson ran surveillance on the young guys in the group.

“Glenda, besides tits on a mule, that’s about the worst idea I’ve ever heard. Calm your cupids. February is coming. We’re *not* going to have Valentine’s Day as the theme for the Snow Ball. Who else has a *non*-Valentine’s Day idea? And Sam before you start, we’re not doing charcuterie. This is Hope. One cross word between Esther and Dolly Ledbetter and there’ll be a food fight. Let’s not give them crackers to whip

like ninja stars or cheese ammunition hard enough to take out an eye. Now, who else has a theme idea?”

“Kind of glad to be missing out on that,” Andi chuckled, swiping her face with her sleeve. She followed Jordan out to sit on one of the couches in the hallway, facing a large trophy case by the front office.

“Yeah. Though I have to say, I’m seriously considering bringing in the Wild Oats at every meeting. That usual tension at the beginning dissolved the second Miss Mandie walked in. Everyone either started smiling or ... well ... was Glenda.” Andi smiled, but she didn’t know what to say so she just sipped her coffee and tried to get the sweeping wave of tremors to stop in her chest. They hadn’t happened often and her doc had told her that they were from stress. “How are you feeling?” Jordan asked, reaching down with a hand to stroke Buddy’s head where he’d laid down between them. Andi didn’t know how to answer. “Just physically first. How are you feeling?”

“Well, today I’m having these tremors in my chest . . . ,” Andi started. She paused, expecting Jordan to panic or start throwing out “helpful” advice to stop them. Jordan just looked at her, listening. “And ... I’m tired.”

“Or, exhausted?” Jordan asked gently.

And with that, the dam fell. Everything that she’d been holding in, everything she’d been holding onto came out in a torrent of sobs. Andi put her elbows on her knees and she felt Jordan gently take her coffee cup and place it on the narrow

end table. Andi felt Jordan's hand on her back as she made slow strokes. She heard Buddy moving and a moment later, his warm weight was resting against her leg, just like Bert.

"You've been stretching yourself pretty thin, Andi," Jordan said softly. "And part of that is my fault." Andi jerked her head up to look at Jordan, confused. "This group," Jordan said, jerking her head toward the lunch room. "It's meant to help get people involved and to come out of their shells, but in practice that translates to volunteering and extra meetings, resolution clubs ... And you're already trying to get pets adopted, you're basically running the animal hospital and shelter ... And this is *on top* of the load you're already carrying."

"So what do I do?" Andi sniffed.

"You stop carrying rocks," Jordan said. Her smile was soft and Andi felt the knots in her stomach start to loosen. "Set down anything that won't help you get up the hill. And the further you go, the more distance you put between yourself and the rocks, the easier it'll get. You don't have to forget the person who gave you the rock, just don't take the burden with the memory."

Andi's phone dinged and she felt her muscles tense again.

Jordan leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees beside Andi. "Rock?"

"No, it's ... I have to go." Andi got to her feet and Jordan followed. "Thanks, Jordan. Thanks for talking."

“Just do one thing for me. Please, Andi?” Andi turned to look at her. “Give yourself some kindness. The same kindness you’re giving to the person texting you?” She nodded at Andi’s phone. “And if you need anything, give me a call.” Jordan’s friendly smile was back. “We hope to see you, Max, and Tessa at next week’s meeting. You three definitely make the meetings saner.”

Something about what Jordan had said, irked Andi. A detail. But her phone dinged again. Michelle was on the ferry. And she was bored.

Andi left the school and let her feet carry her down the familiar path to the town square and then the walking path to the ferry. How many times had she walked this way with her family, her friends, alone, with Brandon ... with Max?

“Andi,” Michelle’s voice was a tremulous cry as she shoved past other passengers on the ship to be the first one to the ramp.

“Hi, Michelle,” Andi said. “How was the trip?”

“Oh, what does it matter,” she sniffed. “I’m here.” Her lip quivered. “But Brandon isn’t.” She started to cry and Andi put her arm around her, guiding her up the walking path, dragging Michelle’s roly bag in her free hand. “How are you not crying?” Michelle whimpered. “Do you know what today is?”

Andi blinked. “January 16th?”

“It’s the day Brandon got his cast off five years ago after he fell out of that tree, trying to get that stray cat down.

Remember? In Volunteer Park? You two went there all the time together.”

Andi nodded. “He told me about it. I didn’t know him when he broke his arm. That was before ...”

“I forgot,” Michelle cried harder. “I’m the last person living who knew him his whole life.” Andi tightened her arm around Michelle as they emerged into the town square. “This,” she sniffed again. “This is where you live?”

“It’s where I grew up ... My parents and my sister still live here.”

“Lucky you,” Michelle said, her voice wavering. “Can we stop somewhere so that I can go to the restroom and splash some cold water on my face? I don’t want to meet your family like this.”

“Of course,” Andi said with a nod. “I know just the place.” She steered Andi into De-Floured. Miss Mandie looked up from behind the front counter and raised a perfectly penciled eyebrow at Michelle as she went by on her way to the restroom. Once the door to the women’s restroom was closed, Miss Mandie motioned Andi over.

“Who’s the Debbie Downer?”

“Michelle, Brandon’s sister,” Andi said.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Andi.” Miss Mandie said. “I’ve got something for you girls. On the house.” Before Andi could protest, Miss Mandie had two cups of coffee and a pastry bag sitting on the counter. “Oh, and there are three of us coming

over tomorrow afternoon to do some street walking with those pups. Well ... the tame kind at least. I thought we might take them to the pet park dedication. Do you mind if we promote National Green Juice and National Chocolate Cake Day specials over here, while we're at it, do you?" Andi opened her mouth to ask, but Miss Mandie was already shaking her head. "No, they're not on the same day, thankfully. And before you say it, I know, National Green Juice Day sounds disgusting." She shrugged. "But, one thing I did kind of realize with this whole resolution war and after talking to so many people who just need something to look forward to. Everyone just wants a clean start with no past mistakes or pain of the last year haunting them. So, I figure the best way to give them a hand is to compromise. So, I'm doing National Green Juice Day, partnering with Zane and Esther ... Lisa's still pissed, but I think it's because no one wants to drink the green juice that comes out of chickens. Anyway, I guess the point is moderation. I think that's my resolution for this year. Well, until it's tequila sunrise time, anyway, when I predict I'll dump the whole premise. Some green juice and some chocolate cake."

Andi smiled. "Good tenets to live by."

"Yeah," Miss Mandie nodded, her smile a little too knowing. "I think it works for most things. Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow."

Michelle reemerged from the bathroom, wiping her puffy eyes and Andi handed her a coffee. "Oh. You didn't have to ..."

“I didn’t,” Andi said with a smile and a nod at Miss Mandie who was back to taking orders from new customers coming in for one last jolt before the end of the day. “It was on the house.”

Michelle sniffed. “Did she know Brandon?” Andi thought about Brandon’s eyes bugging out of his head when he’d seen Miss Mandie’s Santa suit with the nipple tassels and him drunkenly wondering aloud to Andi what would happen if he could catch one in his mouth when she was spinning them.

“Uh, they met,” Andi said, trying not to smile. Then she saw Michelle’s hurt look and the hint of a smile on her lips fell away.

Michelle wasn’t interested in looking around town or meeting anyone. She was carrying her coffee in one hand and wiping her face with the other while Andi dragged her rolly suitcase and tried to balance her own coffee and the pastry bag. By the time they mercifully turned down her parents’ cul-de-sac, Andi couldn’t feel her fingers. The rest of her wasn’t far behind as she tried not to scream or puke from the sadness and guilt free-flowing through her as Michelle rambled about Brandon between bursts of sobs. *Was this what I was like? Is this how I am to my family?*

“And ... I was going through one of our photo albums from when we were kids, and I found this picture of the two of us on a pony at the state fair ...” Michelle sniffed.

Movement ahead of them caught Andi’s eye and she paused. There was someone on Tessa’s porch. It was a man in

a uniform. Gas company? Electric? Andi saw him peek in the front windows of Tessa's house. They either heard Michelle or the rumble of her roly bag on the cobblestones as they approached, because in an instant, they jogged back down Tessa's porch steps, down her walkway, and out her gate. Andi held her breath, expecting them to come back down the sidewalk toward the town square. *At least*, she thought, *I'll be able to get a look at them*. But instead, they disappeared between Tessa's house and the Lancasters next door. Andi didn't realize she'd stopped walking until Michelle paused and turned to look at her.

“What? What is it?”

“N-nothing,” Andi said, staring at where the man had disappeared. She needed to talk to Tessa before she just assumed something was wrong, but she had a bad feeling that something wasn't right. Or, she was being paranoid and he was there to fix something. She tried to shake off the bad feeling.

“Michelle,” Andi's mom must have seen them coming. She threw open the door to their house. “Welcome.”

Michelle sniffed. “Hi. Thanks for letting me stay with you all.” Her mom's worried look found Andi over Michelle's shoulder as she pulled her in for a hug. Andi just nodded.

“Well come on inside. I see you've already been to De-Floured.”

“Been to where?” Michelle asked. Andi followed them inside but paused in the entryway to park Michelle's roly bag.

As the kitchen door swung closed behind Michelle, Andi heard Michelle starting to sob again and the sound was another quick jab to her gut with a dull knife.

“I see the birthday party clown has arrived,” Amelia muttered from the stairs. Andi looked up at her sister to see Amelia frowning at the kitchen door.

“He was her brother, Bedelia. She’s hurting.”

Amelia focused her gaze on Andi. “So are you. I’m just sad she didn’t plan her visit during the Out with the Mold fight. She would have been a great distraction. While everyone in Hope tries to get her not to cry, we could have carpet-bombed them all with Dad’s meatballs.”

Andi sighed. “Maybe a strategy for next year.”

“She’ll still be crying all the time next year?” Amelia asked softly.

Andi wanted to say no, but she honestly didn’t know.

It didn’t take the rest of the Morgans long to get sick of Michelle. *It’s not her fault*, Andi thought. *She’s hurting*. The guest room was one door down from Andi and shared a wall with her headboard and Michelle’s only separated by thin sheetrock and studs. She lay awake all night, listening to Michelle cry herself to sleep. Every sob was a new prod, a new stab reminding her that she wasn’t currently crying over Brandon. Reminding her that the night before, she’d slept with another man. And worse than that, she’d felt happy. *When was the last time Michelle had felt happy?*

“Hey, I have to go to work at the shelter today before the dedication,” she told Michelle in the morning. “Do you feel like coming with me?” Andi tried to keep her focus on Michelle and not the fervently nodding heads of her mom, dad, and Amelia behind her.

“I don’t know,” Michelle sniffed. The rest of the Morgans went pale.

“It might be a nice distraction,” Andi said, trying to smile. “We have new kittens and ... some of the sweetest dogs ... and ...” Andi trailed off at Michelle’s frown.

“How can you just go to work every day like your life isn’t over?” Michelle asked. “Brandon’s gone.”

“I know,” Andi said softly. “But ... come with me. It’ll be ... fun.” This was apparently the wrong thing to say.

Michelle started crying and pushed past Andi, disappearing through the kitchen door. Before it swung closed, Andi heard her on the stairs. The kitchen was silent.

“Well, I thought that went well,” Amelia finally said. “Apparently, ‘fun’ is the word that makes her cry.”

“And soap,” her dad said, shaking his head. “I just told her that if she needed more soap, it was under the sink. And that I hoped she didn’t mind the brand we used. She said ‘Brand’ was her nickname for Brandon. And she started crying.”

“And ‘guest room’,” her mom added.

“TV,” Amelia said.

“Flowers,” her dad listed off.

“Alright,” Andi said with a huff, turning to look at all of them with her hands on her hips. She was sleep deprived, queasy, and still worried about Tessa across the street and she knew everyone had already had their fill of Michelle. “I’m taking Michelle with me. You three do whatever you have to do today to be able to handle her being ... a little weepy when we get back.”

“So, Jell-O shots and *Monty Python*,” her mom said, nodding.

“No. Snorting Pixie Sticks while watching *Wheel of Fortune* and Amelia’s montage of bizarre TikTok dances,” her dad said.

“No! Fireworks and ...”

Andi held up a hand. “Whatever it is, please do it and be able to handle Michelle when we get back tonight, ok?”

After coaxing Michelle back out of her room and down the stairs, Andi was already late for work. Michelle was quiet when they arrived, only giving Annabelle a perfunctory nod before going to sit in the reception area.

“So ... that’s Michelle,” Annabelle said quietly in the break room.

Andi nodded. “Yep. That’s her.”

Annabelle put a hand on Andi’s shoulder. “Never thought I’d say this, but you’re doing pretty good.”

If she only knew, Andi thought. Yeah, I'm doing so good, I slept with my ex the day before my dead fiance's sister came for a visit. I'm doing awesome.

The morning quickly turned into afternoon and they all jumped when the front door of the hospital was thrown open and four women in sunglasses and bright rainbow sweaters walked in.

“All that’s missing is “Damn It Feels Good To Be a Gangsta” playing in the background,” Andi said to Annabelle. She was grinning until she saw Michelle’s bloodshot eyes lock onto her.

“Alright,” Miss Mandie said, putting her sunglasses on top of her head before flicking a crumb off her boob. “We’re here to walk some pups. Or ... cats, if you can in fact ... walk a cat.”

Annabelle grinned. “Yeah, but I wouldn’t in this weather. They don’t like the rain slickers and I foresee blood loss and lawsuits if we attempt it.”

“Fair enough,” Miss Mandie said with a nod.

“Cheer up, honey,” Mrs. Thompson said. Panic hit Andi when she realized Mrs. Thompson was talking to Michelle in the waiting room. “I’m sure they went to puppy heaven. Unless they pooped in your shoes, chewed electrical cords, and tried to sit on your face when you were sleeping. Then they went to puppy hell.”

“Jesus,” Andi breathed, covering her face. Annabelle was about to bust a rib beside her from holding it in. “Uh, if you gals will come this way ...” She quickly herded the women into the pet plaza and paired them up.

“I saw this little man with his cigar,” Miss Mandie said approvingly, nodding down at Bruce the bulldog. “I like the cut of his jib.”

“I think I need a saddle for this one,” Mrs. Thompson chuckled, petting Clipper’s big German Shepherd head.

“He’s really gentle,” Andi said quickly. “He shouldn’t be hard to walk. He doesn’t pull when he’s on a leash.” Mrs. Thompson nodded and moved away while Andi snapped on Clipper’s harness.

When she was finished, she turned to see Mrs. Thompson searching the other kennels. Andi saw her smile when she found Cinnamon. “There’s my girl. Now, don’t worry. I’m just going to help your big ... *very* big brother find his own home. I won’t get any ideas. It’s just going to be you and me.”

Mrs. Abbott was poking a finger into the Slurpee Twins’ kennel. She’d set a shopping bag down on the floor next to her and was frowning up at the two cats. “Why are these two in the same kennel?”

Andi sighed. “They’re brothers. We try to separate them, but I swear we should have named them Hooks and Loops because they are like Velcro. And they like to cram themselves into the same kennel, even if it means they’re butt-to-face with each other.”

Miss Mandie chuckled. “Sounds like the on-set dressing rooms from one of my movies.”

There was a confused whine and everyone turned to see Tookie swinging her head around, her ears caught in the handles of Mrs. Abbott’s shopping bag.

“Took, stop,” Andi hissed. But Tookie either couldn’t hear her or could and was trying to get to Andi because the next thing they knew, she was running through everyone’s legs, stirring up the other two dogs who were now running around, wrapping their leashes around Mrs. Thompson and Miss Mandie. Annabelle and Andi and Mrs. Abbott were finally able to corral Tookie and get the bag off her head.

“There, girl,” Mrs. Abbott said softly, stroking the neurotic Weimaraner. “Did that bag get you? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left it on the ground. But sometimes we just have to go for it, don’t we? You’re a little explorer, aren’t you? Brave enough to try anything, huh?” Andi caught Annabelle’s gaze, and they both stared back at Mrs. Abbott, mouths slightly open.

They waved the three pups and the three women out the front door and watched them as they turned toward the town square.

“You know, they kind of match those dogs ...” Annabelle said. “Well, except for Mrs. Thompson. She’s a total cat lady. Like superhero-level cat lady energy.”

Andi nodded. “Yeah. But, you’re right. If I was going to guess what kind of dog Miss Mandie would have, I’d

definitely say ‘bulldog’.”

“And Mrs. Abbott with Took?”

The phrase *Took and Cook* floated through Andi’s mind, thinking of the Zentai and leather harness jogging suits. “Yeah. I think we matched the pups and walkers fairly well. Hopefully, they’ll catch someone’s eye at the groundbreaking.”

“Oh, speaking of which,” Annabelle said, glancing at the hound dog clock above the door. “It’s a wagging tail to one. You better go.”

Michelle’s constant sniffles had become background noise to Andi by the time they were standing at the edge of the empty lot, listening to Esther’s long speech about her generosity in donating the lot. Her husband, Stanley and Mrs. Abbott were standing behind and to the side of Esther, sneaking bits of jerky to Tookie and entertaining the audience.

“Finally,” Esther said, and Andi heard the entire audience breathe a sigh of relief as one. “I have a list of the park features I would like to read. First, courtesy of Red and White Floral, there will be a large all-weather cat tree.” Andi’s gaze fell on Sue Whitehorse and Agnes Redding who were on one edge of the crowd, beaming. “There will be a ... ferret frolic ... area, sponsored by ... Dirk Patterson.” Someone tapped Andi’s shoulder and she looked around and then down at Dirk who was grinning at her.

“I figure ferrets are like raccoons. Just in case they ... you know. Karma. A good deed to make up for ...” Andi nodded

quickly, hoping Dirk wouldn't elaborate. Esther was already glaring at them.

Please don't let Dirk Patterson be the reason Brandon's bench is canceled, Andi thought to the universe.

Esther continued down the list and with each item not being his bench, she started to sweat. It only got worse when her gaze fell on Max. He was standing at the far edge of the crowd. Sarge was sitting at his feet on his right side, staring from Esther at the microphone to Tookie licking Mrs. Abbott's face and Stanley's fingers.

“And a bench, dedicated to the memory of Brandon Little.” Andi felt a torrent of relief pass through her as she tore her gaze away from Max and her eyes filled. Michelle was openly sobbing next to her and she pulled her into a hug.

It's happening. Brandon's bench was actually going to happen. Andi was trying to breathe and stay on her feet as she held Michelle. Her gaze found Max and she saw a soft, sad smile on his lips. He nodded at her, turned, and then he and Sarge disappeared into the crowd.

Amelia and their parents were standing at the back of the crowd and Michelle opted to go home with them rather than back to the animal hospital. This gave Andi a chance to smile as she walked back to work. *I know it's nothing compared to the life we might have had together,* she told Brandon in her head. *Through the joy and the pain and the boredom of everyday life of growing together and growing old together. But it will be a little piece of your spirit with a perfect view of*

that pure pet energy forever. She was smiling through her tears as she headed back through the town square.

“Andi,” the voice stopped her in her tracks. She turned to see Max and Sarge behind her. “I ... Congratulations on getting ... his bench approved.”

Andi nodded. “Thanks. I guess, kissing up to Esther worked.”

Max smiled. “I’m sorry for ...”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. A part of me ... but anyway.” She knew she would be asking for too much, but at the same time, less than she wanted. She blew out a heavy breath. “Max,” he looked at her. “I know I’ve asked this before and already screwed it up. But ... we were friends for so long. Could we ... could we still be friends? I ... I’ll do my damndest to make sure I don’t screw it up again.”

Max looked at her, his gaze longing and she felt her resolve start to slip. *No. If you want him in your life, you have to stop jerking him around.* And friendship is all she had to give right now.

“I don’t know, Andi,” he said quietly. “We can try. It hasn’t worked out so well lately, but ...”

“We can try?” she asked, hearing the hopeful note in her voice.

He nodded and with a twitch of the muscle in his jaw, he and Sarge turned and headed home. Andi was trying to hold onto the elation she’d had at the groundbreaking and the light

feeling of Michelle not crying next to her, but after her encounter with Max, she just felt ... deflated.

“Holy crap, Andi!” Annabelle yelled from the back when Andi came in the front doors. Andi paused.

“How did you know it was me?” Andi yelled back. “It could have been a client that you just yelled ‘holy crap’ at.”

“But it wasn’t,” Annabelle said, poking her head into the pet plaza and peering out into the reception area. “And holy crap doesn’t really cover it anyway. But I don’t want to corrupt innocent floppy ears back here. Cinnamon already hissed at me when I skipped past her and the kittens.”

“I’m about to hiss at you,” Andi sighed. “What is it?”

“Well, Jordan Bumble stopped by. She was looking for you but I told her you were at the dedication so she and I got to talking and a couple of things ... uh,” she pulled a sticky note from her pocket and read. “There’s a support group meeting tonight to finish prep for the Snow Ball and just offhand, I asked her if the group might consider helping organize an open house this weekend for the shelter. I was thinking Friday night, before the Snow Ball on Saturday.” Andi saw Annabelle swallow hard. “I mean, next week is the end of the month.”

Andi shivered. *One little victory and then back into the fire.* Andi nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. But we need to advertise, and get fliers up, and ...” She could feel herself hyperventilating. It was Monday.

“Well, I called the *Hornblower*. Ella over there said she’d get the notice in the next five days’ worth of issues ...”

Annabelle held up a hand before Andi could ask. “Free of charge. It’s a good thing you’re trying to do. She said she and Cal were going to stop by too.”

Andi started to breathe again. “Ok. Just snacks and pets and play time in the side yard. Fliers, ads. Ok. And support group members to help out.”

“Yep,” Annabelle grinned. “And I already called Charlotte, Doc Simmons, and Shirley and they’re all coming in to lend a hand.”

“Wow,” Andi said. “Even Doc Simmons?”

Annabelle nodded. “Of course, he doesn’t see the irony in us having to do the damn thing because of his budget cuts.”

“And he probably never will,” Andi muttered. “Ok. That is good news.” She moved into the pet plaza and paused next to the blonde. “Annabelle, I don’t know if I’ve told you this before, but ... thank you.”

Annabelle blinked at her. “For what?”

Andi shook her head. “For being my anchor in this place. For carrying everything when it was too heavy for me to carry it on my own.”

Annabelle hugged her and asked, “Even when I coerced you into going to that support group meeting?”

Andi smiled, thinking of all the things that wouldn’t have happened in the last three weeks if she hadn’t gone to that first

meeting. Even everything with Max. Which she knew she should regret, but even though it made her feel guilty and raw, she couldn't make herself wish it hadn't happened. "Yeah," Andi whispered. "Especially for that."

"We're back!" Miss Mandie boomed, yanking the front door open. Annabelle and Andi looked up to see Miss Mandie put her sunglasses on her head and Bruce wearing a matching pair of cat-eye sunglasses and smiling up at her. "But just for a visit, isn't that right, Brutusly Spanked." She glanced up at Andi and Annabelle. "My favorite co-star. May he rest in peace."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss Mandie," Andi automatically said. "When did he ..."

She shrugged. "1989. He was drunk and bet a guy a hundred dollars that his dick was bigger than a light socket. Unfortunately, the light socket was live and with his Jacob's Ladder piercing ..." She shook her head. "Lost on both fronts." Andi and Annabelle were speechless. "Anywho, is there some paperwork I need to do to take Brutusly home with me?"

Annabelle was running around getting the papers together while Andi just smiled at Miss Mandie. "We were just thinking earlier today how if we had to guess what kind of dog you'd get, it would be a bulldog."

Miss Mandie chuckled. "I do have a type. And I think he'll like being our official greeter at the bakery. I thought about building a pet deck where the old parking lot used to be so

folks could bring their pets to the bakery with them and sit out in the sunshine in the summer.”

“It’ll be a hit,” Andi said with a smile. “Especially with the new pet park nearby.”

Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Abbott blew in just as Miss Mandie was finishing up the paperwork for Bruce ... Brutusly.

“He’s such a good boy,” Mrs. Thompson said, scratching Clipper behind his ears. “I sure hope someone comes for him soon. He’s just about the sweetest big dog I’ve ever seen.” She stopped to say goodbye to Cinnamon and then with a final wave, and a thanks from Andi and Annabelle, Mrs. Thompson left. Tookie was prancing around the pet plaza while Mrs. Abbott watched her and smiled.

“What’s going to happen to her?” Mrs. Abbott asked quietly. “If no one takes her?”

Andi felt a hard lump form in her throat. “She’ll be sent to the mainland to another shelter that can support her. We’re ...”
No. This isn’t my decision ...

Jordan’s voice came back to her. “*Stop carrying rocks.*”

Andi cleared her throat and tried again, “Doc Simmons’ budget won’t support the shelter anymore. So we have to get all the pets adopted or they’ll be sent to whatever shelter will take them on the mainland.

“But ... what if it’s a ... kill shelter?” Mrs. Abbott asked, turning to look at Andi, horrified. Andi felt the tears stinging the corners of her eyes when she looked back at goofy Tookie

who was trotting in circles, tongue out, and smiling at Mrs. Abbott. She was tripping over her own feet, and running into the kennels, Andi, and Annabelle, but never slowing down.

“I’ll take her,” Mrs. Abbott said. “She’s so sweet. But ... I don’t think anyone else will understand her.”

“You definitely seem to be more in tune with her ... personality ... than anyone else I’ve seen her with,” Andi said gently, her heart pounding in her chest. *Two* adopted in one day? And it wasn’t even the holidays!

“That just leaves Slomo, Cinnamon’s six kittens, Clipper, the Slurpee twins, and ... Mr. Giggles,” Annabelle said. She’d sounded confident at the beginning of her sentence, but she trailed off by the end.

“Hey, but thanks to you, we’re having an open house this weekend,” Andi said, trying to smile. *We can do this. Or, at least we can try.*

Andi got home with fifteen minutes to spare before the support group meeting and not a minute too soon for the rest of her family.

“You have to take her,” Amelia said, meeting Andi on the porch and closing the front door behind her. Andi looked at her sister, eyebrow raised. “I was elected by the council of Morgans Who Want to Keep Their Sanity and Michelle needs to go away for the evening. Even for just a few hours so we can watch something funny on TV.”

“Why couldn’t you before?” Andi asked.

“Because anytime someone around Michelle *isn't* crying, she ...” Amelia sighed. “I’m an ass for saying this, but she makes us feel like we’re ... well, *asses*. I honestly don’t remember what a joke *is* at this point.”

“A bit overdramatic, aren’t you?”

Amelia shook her head. “See? I can’t tell if that was a joke or not.”

Andi sighed. “Where is she? I’ve got a support group meeting tonight. I’ll take her with me.”

“She’s in the living room. Talking to a captive audience of Mom and Dad.”

“How did you escape?” Andi asked.

“Told her I smoked.” She held up a deck of cards.

“You can smoke those?”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “It was the only thing I had handy that looked like a pack of cigarettes. And I had to blink in morse code to Mom and Dad to play it cool so I could intercept you. How long is she staying?” Amelia asked.

Andi paused. “I ... I don’t know.”

“Try to find that out for us, if you could,” Amelia said. “I need to know if I should be planning to graduate early and immediately leave for college to get away.”

Andi shook her head and pushed past Amelia into the house.

“And here he is when he won the watermelon seed spitting contest at summer camp. It was the summer after fourth grade

for him ... wait ... fifth. It was the summer after fourth grade for me.” Michelle had a photo album on her lap where she was wedged on the couch between Andi’s mom and dad.

“Help us,” her dad mouthed at her when Michelle bent her head to turn the page. Even Bert, who was lying at Michelle’s feet, looked bored. Though, it was always hard to tell with him since his hair covered his eyes. But he was snoring, so Andi stood by her first observation.

“Hey everyone,” Andi said. “Michelle, do you want to come with me? There’s a support group I’ve been going to meetings for.”

Michelle jerked her head up and Andi saw the first signs of life pass through her eyes. “Sure, I’d love to go.” Andi felt like she’d been knocked back a step.

Wow. Hadn’t expected it to be that easy.

The cafeteria was buzzing by the time they arrived. The Wild Oats were there again, Miss Mandie had Bruce in tow and Mrs. Abbott had turned Tookie loose and the goofy dog was running around the room trying to stick her head between everyone’s legs. Andi scanned the room but she didn’t see Tessa. She frowned, the bad feeling about the man in the uniform resurfacing. She hadn’t seen Tessa for more than a week at this point. She’d tried knocking on her door, texting and calling her. But nothing.

“Hi,” Jordan’s voice shook Andi out of her thoughts. But Jordan was addressing Michelle. “I’m Jordan Bumble.”

“Michelle Little,” Michelle said.

“Well welcome. This is the Cup of Kindness support group and we’re really glad to have you here.” Michelle nodded and Andi saw her gaze move around the room again. Zane was nearby drinking a Coke and talking to ... Max. Somehow, between the relief of Brandon’s bench being confirmed, Bruce and Tookie being adopted, and Michelle’s mood lightening at the thought of the support group meeting, she’d forgotten that she’d be seeing Max tonight.

“Zane,” Jordan called. “Can you introduce Michelle around? Make sure she gets a soda or some of Miss Mandie’s ‘love bite’ lemonade and short stuff cookies?” Jordan did an admirable job of holding it together as she named off what Miss Mandie had brought.

“Uh, sure,” Zane said, smiling at Michelle. “Hi, Zane Lawrence.”

“Michelle Little,” there was an airiness in Michelle’s voice that Andi hadn’t heard since before Brandon had died. She studied the woman’s face and almost smiled, seeing Michelle’s puffy eyes take in Zane’s build, his smile, and his dark eyes. When they left, Jordan motioned Max over to join them. Then she turned back to Andi.

“I saw her notice Zane when you two came in. Thought he might be a nice little distraction for her for a few minutes.”

Max paused next to them, but not as close to Andi as he usually stood. She tried to pretend it didn’t sting as she focused on Jordan.

“We’ll all be over on Friday at five to help with the open house at the shelter,” she said, nodding at Andi. “Luckily there’s no setup involved. And snacks ...”

“Oh, I’m getting those. Probably from De-Floured,” Andi said quickly. She was thankful there wouldn’t have to be bloodshed over sliced cheese on her behalf.

“Excellent,” Jordan said. “So, for the Snow Ball, since you both missed the last meeting, I just need you two to monitor the food and drink tables and make sure someone doesn’t spike the non-alcoholic punch.” Before Andi could ask, Jordan nodded. “The Wild Oats are hosting, so there’s a whole bar *and* ‘Party Punch’. But, we wanted a non-alcoholic version for people who don’t drink and since old habits die hard for some of the more ... mischievous townspeople, we need some monitors to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Andi nodded. “We can do that.”

Jordan clapped them each on a shoulder. “Knew I could count on you two.” And then she was gone, leaving Andi alone with Max.

Andi turned and tried to smile at him. “What do you think? Divine karmic intervention since you and I used to be the ones dumping booze in the punch bowl at the town Thanksgiving meal?”

Max shrugged, but she could see a smile playing at the corner of his lips. “Well, to be fair, the town should thank us for that. Made the whole dinner a lot more pleasant.”

Andi chuckled. “Until the food fight broke out.”

He sighed and shook his head. “Whoever put Esther and Stanley next to the Ledbetters should have had their heads examined.”

“And who’s this?” Michelle asked, making Andi jump. She and Zane were back and she was glaring from Andi to Max.

“Oh, this is my ... friend, Max,” Andi said. “We went to high school together.”

“Oh ... *this* is Max.” Michelle’s glare wasn’t fire. It was ice.

“Uh, nice to meet you ...” Max started to say.

Michelle just glared.

“This is Michelle, Brandon’s sister,” Andi said quickly.

Max nodded. “Nice to meet you, Michelle.” Michelle was still glaring. Andi was starting to sweat again, feeling how rude Michelle was being. “Uh, Zane, I had a question for you ...” Max said. Zane joined him and they ambled away.

“Michelle,” Andi started. But that was all she got out. Michelle whipped around to face her, her eyes full of tears despite the fact that she was still glaring.

“What the hell are you doing? My brother isn’t even gone a *year* and you’re just chatting up your old boyfriend? Did you even *care* about Brandon? Did you love him? Or was he just a place filler for ...” she jerked her head in Max’s direction. “Him?!” Michelle had been gradually getting louder and Andi knew they should leave the room, but she was frozen where

she stood, caught in competing torrents of anger, guilt, and shock. She wasn't sure which one of the three finally made her feet move. She headed for the door, Michelle right on her heels, her voice getting louder every step of the way.

“My god, I came out here, thinking that at least I wasn't the only person mourning him, but then I find you out here joking and laughing like nothing ever happened. I always knew Brandon loved you more than you loved him.”

“That is not true,” Andi's voice cracked when she finally whirled to face Michelle. They were standing in front of the couch where she and Jordan had sat and talked just the day before. “I loved your brother. I loved him so much ...”

“But now that he's gone, you can pick right back up where you left off with your high school boyfriend.”

“Max is my friend.” At least, she hoped he'd still be. “Just because I'm not bawling all the time, doesn't mean I didn't love your brother, that I don't miss him. That I wouldn't give anything to have him back. But ...” she remembered Amelia's words. “Sometimes fate is an asshole.”

And Michelle crumpled. She was crying but it wasn't the same kind of crying she'd been doing since reaching the island. This was full-body sobs. A desperate, drowning sob that made the anger inside Andi disappear. She pulled Michelle into a hug and then guided her over to sit down on the couch.

“Y-you don't know what this year has been like,” Michelle choked through her sobs.

“I know it’s sucked,” she said gently, keeping her arm around Michelle.

Michelle shook her head. “Brandon was the only family I had left.” Andi looked down in time to see Michelle squeeze her eyes shut. “I was so excited about you two getting married. I ... I thought then, I’d have you as a sister. Your family as my family ... I’d have people in my life again. I ... I don’t have a lot of friends in Seattle and ... most of them disappeared after Brandon died. And ...” She sniffed harder. “Sometimes, when I think about him and everything he won’t have ... *I* won’t have now, I start crying and I can’t stop. I ... The law firm I worked for ... let me go. The day before yesterday. I ... I didn’t know what to do. And you’d asked me to come out for the groundbreaking. I thought at least then ... I’d get to be around someone who would ... understand.”

Andi squeezed Michelle’s shoulder and rested her head against Michelle’s. “You can stay out here with us as long as you want,” Andi said softly. She’d explain it to her parents and Amelia. Hopefully, they’d understand. “But Michelle,” she had to make sure she understood. She turned to look at her. “You have to stop carrying rocks.”

Max

He loved his team buddies, but after the third round of farting competitions and endless talk of the first things they planned to do when they were deployed again, he was grateful to take Sarge out for a walk.

“Sorry, it’s what you do when you have a dog,” he’d called as he and Sarge headed for the front door. It was Thursday night and his mom was working late. He had a sneaking suspicion it had something to do with her house smelling like a barracks tent. Thankfully, the guys would be leaving in the morning. He loved being around them, but he couldn’t pretend that the constant talk about deployment and what they were looking forward to doing once they were back in the sandbox made him constantly aware that he wouldn’t be one of them ever again. Of course, he’d known that was the case for the last six months. Hell, he’d known it logically when he’d woken up in Germany and realized in his drugged and blurry state that one leg was shorter than the other even though he could still feel his toes ... somewhere. But, he’d been able to fool himself out on the island, that he was getting stronger, that he was healing, getting back to who he was. Now, seeing

Wang and Jax arguing over who could duck walk faster and Curtis and Jacobs race down the road, the full realization of it all was finally dawning on him. *Though*, he snorted as he turned the corner, *the look on Curtis and Jacobs' faces when they ran into Mrs. Abbott's jogging group was priceless.*

He'd been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed the person on the other side of the street walking a shaggy Old English sheepdog until he caught a hint of apple on the breeze and looked up.

"Andi?" He hadn't seen her since the support group meeting when Brandon's sister had started yelling at her. He tightened his grip on Sarge's leash. Ok, she was Brandon's sister and he would never, under any circumstance, raise his hand to a woman, but he'd been seconds away from storming across the room and telling her where to get off.

"Hey," Andi said. She was smiling, but it was a nervous smile as if she expected him to run or turn away from her.

He glanced down at the dog. "Who's this?"

"Oh, this is Bert." She paused. "Oh, he was out with Amelia when you were over. She's never had a pet and ..."

He could see something in Andi's eyes. Pain or ... grief? He crossed the street to meet her and Sarge and Bert did the sniffing and getting-to-know-each-other thing.

Andi sighed, but when he looked at her, she was just watching the dogs. "Do you ever wish that friendships were that easy?"

“What, sniffing each other’s butts and play-wrestling?” he asked, watching Sarge and Bert starting to knock into each other.

“Exactly,” Andi said. “It would make U.N. Security Council meetings a lot more interesting on CSPAN.”

“And those televised royal weddings,” Max added.

“Court TV ...”

“Well, do you two mind if Sarge and I walk with you?” Max asked.

She shook her head. “No. We were just ... hiding.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “Michelle is staying with us, and ...”

He shook his head, tightening his hold on Sarge’s leash again. “She had no right ...”

“No,” Andi interrupted gently, “but she’s hurting. And she was scared.”

“That’s not an excuse ...”

“What *is* an excuse?” Andi asked him. “People do stupid stuff when they’re hurting, vulnerable, desperate ...”

“Is that what we were?” he asked, without thinking.

Andi ducked her head. “I didn’t think so at the time ... but, maybe we were.”

“Desperate to have something that doesn’t exist anymore?” His voice was soft and he was thankful that she didn’t flinch

away from him.

She nodded. “Maybe. But ...”

He blew out a heavy breath. “The fact is, we’re never going to have what we did back then. I’m never going to be the quarterback again.”

She chuckled. “And I’m never going to be a cheerleader again. Though there will probably be a day in a nursing home where I can’t remember my own name, but I’ll still shout ‘No Goats, No Glory’ over and over until Irma,” she glanced over at him. “In my mind, her name is Irma, though considering our age group, it will probably be Sarah, based on how popular that name was when we were kids. Anyway, Irma or Sarah will then start beating me over the head with her cane thinking I’m a broken TV since I’m yelling the same thing over and over. And that will be how my obituary will read.”

Max paused and blinked at her. “You’ve had time to think about this.”

“I *really* hated that cheer.”

“But it was a crowd favorite. It was right up there with the one where you all got in the pyramid at the end on hands and knees and baaa-ed like goats to the fight song.”

She sighed. “*Thankfully*, I’ll never be a cheerleader again.” She glanced over at him. “And what about the football team’s obsession with snapping people with jockstrap slingshots? You came over one night with a red welt on your cheek the size of a silver dollar and it took two days for you to tell me that the

bruise was from a walnut Red Callaghan had whipped at you out of his jock strap.”

“I was embarrassed.”

“I *kissed* your cheek. I basically *kissed* Red’s nasty jockstrap along with a walnut he found in the *parking lot*.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, there’s a lot of stuff about being on the football team I’m glad I don’t have to do anymore. Still ...”

“Still ...” Andi said softly. “It was nice when things were ...”

“Easy?” Max asked.

“Simple,” she said. “And there was a lot less crying. Well ... until the end.” Andi shook her head. “You know, that always bothered me.”

“What did?” Max asked, glancing over at her. They’d rounded the town square and paused to let a group of tourists pass around them, heading back toward the ferry.

“You just let me cry,” Andi said. “When you told me the date you were leaving for basic training. And I started crying. You just let me cry.”

Max frowned. “Well, what was I supposed to do? I mean ... I remember telling you we’d still see each other and we’d talk on the phone and email, letters.”

Andi shook her head as they started walking again. “I know. But ... you just ... you weren’t affected by it.”

“What?” Max pulled Sarge to a stop as they headed down Andi’s side street. “You think, what? That I didn’t *care*?”

Andi just shrugged. “You didn’t cry with me, you didn’t even think about staying. I wouldn’t have let you stay. I knew the Army was what you wanted. But ...” She squeezed her eyes shut. “A part of me wondered if you were ... if you were already moving on. So ...”

“So *that’s* why you broke up with me?” Max felt a swell of anger in his chest. “Just because I didn’t break down crying, you think I didn’t love you?”

“No, that’s not ...” Andi started to say.

“You think I didn’t want to stay with you? You thought I’d just move on and forget you. Andi, I ...” but he trailed off. He’d been on the brink of telling her about the ring. *But what good would that do?* He felt the heat rising in his face at just the thought of telling her how dopey and lovesick he’d been for her. He took a deep breath. “Whatever it was, it’s in the past.” He shook his head. “And we can’t go back. No matter how much this place makes it feel like we can.”

Andi nodded. “I know, I’m just ... Max, I ...” She shook her head and sighed. “It doesn’t matter now though, does it?” She looked around them with a sad smile. “This place is still the same, but ...” She met his gaze. “People change. It’s like a river. You can cross it at the same place every time, but you can never step in the same river twice.”

His heart was still pounding with frustration and anger for how she’d felt, and if he’d known ... but the fight had gone

out of him. She was right. They weren't the same people they'd been before. There were dark circles under her eyes. He'd seen them under his own. They were both ... less hopeful. Life had ... well, they weren't beginners anymore, the way they had been. And they never would be again. Her phone started to ring.

Probably Brandon's sister, ready to chew her out because she saw out the front window with a pair of binoculars that Andi is walking with a man.

"I'll leave before you get in trouble with Brandon's sister," he muttered, but a part of him wanted to stay and hear what she'd been planning to say.

"No, it's Tessa," Andi's voice was strained. Tessa hadn't shown up to the Resolution Redo party, but he'd just assumed she was hiding out from the insanity. But she also hadn't been at the last few support group meetings, and he remembered how worried Andi had been about her just two nights before. Andi slid her finger across the phone screen and put Tessa on speaker.

"Hey, you!" Andi said, her voice instantly brighter. "Where have you been hiding? I mean ... I know where, but we've missed you. How are ..."

"I need help," Tessa's voice sounded panicked. "Please. Someone broke into my house."

Andi

Sarge and Bert seemed to understand the urgency of the moment because they weren't listening to Andi and Max's pleas for them to slow down once they hit their stride. They arrived at Tessa's front gate in a jumble of harnesses, and leashes. With a little thrill, Andi realized her backside was pressed against Max's front as they tried to untangle themselves. Once they were free, Andi led the way up the walk to knock on Tessa's door but just as she raised her hand, the door flew open. Tessa grabbed her by the hand and dragged her inside, the dogs followed and Max brought up the rear.

"Tessa, what's going ..."

"Shh," she said quickly, almost pushing Max out of the way as she shut the front door and tumbled all the locks into place. She gazed out the peephole and the room was quiet except for some snuffling from Bert and Sarge as they sniffed the floor. Finally, Tessa exhaled and Andi saw her shoulders slump.

"Tessa, what is it?" Andi asked softly. She turned from the door and Andi got her first good look at Tessa in weeks. She

was paler than Andi had ever seen her and there were dark circles under her eyes as if she'd been alternating between crying and not sleeping.

Without saying a word, Tessa led the way into her living room. That was when Andi realized why the room was so dark. The window that overlooked Tessa's backyard was covered with a cardboard box, duct taped in place. "They broke in," Tessa's voice was almost a whisper. "And they left this ..." she moved an open newspaper off her tiny cafe table to reveal a single sheet of paper.

"Don't touch it," Max said quickly. Andi cut her eyes to him. Before scanning down the paper. Which didn't take long since there were only two words centered on the page, typed and printed from a computer.

"Found you."

Andi looked up at Tessa where she stood, holding the back of one of the cafe chairs in a white-knuckle death grip. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that you're not involved in some elaborate game of hide-and-seek."

Tessa swayed where she stood and Andi and Max moved quickly to support her and bring her over to sit on her couch. There was a glass of water on a coaster on the table and Andi grabbed it.

"Here, drink." While Tessa sipped the water, Andi looked around the room. "Where's Sage?" Panic slid through her when she glanced back at the hole in the window, covered with the cardboard box.

“They took her,” Tessa’s voice was weak.

“H-how do you know?” Andi asked, feeling her heart starting to pound in her chest. What kind of animals would take someone’s cat?

“They left me a voicemail,” Tessa whispered. She turned her phone over in her hand and tapped on the screen.

“Guess who? Sorry we missed you. We’ll be back though. Very soon. In the meantime, we’ll keep this kitty for company since we can’t have you. But, if you call the cops, kitty is going to have a little accident. Isn’t that right?” There was the sound of a cat mewling and then a hiss and the message ended.

“Have you called the police?” Max asked.

Andi and Tessa turned to look at him, horrified. “No,” Tessa said. “I don’t want them to hurt Sage. But ... you two ...” she leaned forward and buried her face in her hands. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight. They said I couldn’t call the cops ... and I don’t have any other friends out here ...”

“Who are these people?” Andi asked.

Tessa shook her head. “I don’t know if I can tell you. I don’t know him anymore.”

“How are we supposed to help if we don’t know what’s going on?” Max’s voice was gentle, but he was right.

Then, something Tessa had said to Andi popped into her head. “Tessa, was this someone you cared about?” All those weeks ago, talking about high school loves right on that very couch.

“Danny,” Tessa whispered. “Danny Argent.”

Max leaned back in his seat. “That bank heist in New York? The one where ten people were killed?” Andi just looked at him. He shrugged. “It happened, what, eight months ago?”

Tessa nodded.

“Yeah. When I was in Fallujah, we’d watch the news from the states when we got a chance. I saw the news story about it. Four guards, three tellers, the bank vice president, a mom, and her kid ... all gunned down. They were only able to identify two of the five that did it. Daniel Argent and ...” Max frowned, thinking.

“Linus Becker,” Tessa whispered.

“But, what does this have to do with you, Tessa?” Andi asked, turning her attention back to her. “Do you know them?”

Tessa hung her head and nodded. She started to shake as tears streamed down her face. Andi put an arm around her and hugged her to her side. “Danny and I ... were high school sweethearts. I . . .,” she raised her eyes to meet Andi’s. “I loved him so much. We ... were even going to get married. But ...” She shook her head. “Then I found out what he and his friends did for a living. They were small-time when we were together. Liquor stores, bodegas.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I was so stupid. Even after I found out. I tried to get him to quit. Linus was his best friend though. And ... Danny was my first love. I didn’t want him to get hurt but I was so stupid. I just stayed with him. Until ...”

“Until he killed ten people?” Max asked.

Andi was about to compliment him on his tact, but to her surprise, Tessa just nodded. “Yeah. They were a part of a crew in New Jersey by that point. And when I heard his name on the news I tried to find him. I ...” She cleared her throat and straightened in her seat. “But when I saw the footage of him ... shooting people in the bank, I knew he wasn’t the man I had once loved.” She paused and gave Andi a watery smile. “You can never go back, right? Only forward, as Jordan would say.”

Andi just nodded and Tessa continued. “Anyway, I got caught by the police and I had two choices. Either testify with immunity or be charged as an accessory. I ... I didn’t have any money and the lawyer they gave me told me to testify or there would be a plea bargain and I could go to jail for something I didn’t do and knew nothing about. So, I testified. I told them everything I knew about Danny’s friends, where they hung out, everything I knew about the crew in New Jersey they’d joined up with, names, the sounds I’d heard during phone calls with Danny. With my testimony, they were able to send three of them to prison. Joel Russo, McKree Scott, and Simon Pierce. But ... they didn’t catch Linus or Danny.” Andi shivered. *The phone call? The letters?* But she didn’t ask yet. Tessa was drawing a shaky breath to continue. “After I testified, the FBI put me in the witness protection program.” She smiled. “Tessa Cartwright isn’t my real name. They sent me out here, to hide.” She shook her head. “It was supposed to be temporary. This island is so small, it’s hard to hide

someone. Not like the big cities. Still,” Tessa looked around the room wistfully. “I’ve liked being here.” She shook her head. “Now, I’ll have to move again. If they don’t kill me first.”

“So Danny and Linus are on the run,” Max said slowly. “And they found you, to ... stop you? From testifying again?”

Tessa shook her head. “There’s that, but ...” she raked her fingers through her short hair. “They’re convinced I have some piece of evidence. Notes from when they were planning the heist or something. Something they’re afraid that if I turn over, they’ll be convicted. They’ve been almost caught twice this year. The second time was ... last Sunday.”

“The day of the Resolution Redo party,” Andi said. “So that’s why you didn’t come.”

Tessa nodded. “They’d been holed up in Seattle. They ... they’d figured out where I was. Once they figured out my new name, they were able to get my phone number and address by hacking into the carriers until they found me.” Tears were streaming down her face. “I told Agent Ames what was happening and they were able to close in on them in the city, but when they got away ... I panicked.” Tessa’s gaze fell on Sage’s cat tree by the curtained window and she started to sob. “And now they have Sage.”

“What about the FBI?” Max asked. “They’re going to move you, right? They’re not going to just leave you here, are they?”

Tessa sniffed. “They’re trying to make arrangements, but they don’t really believe me.” She shook her head. “They

never have. They don't think Danny and Linus are going to try to kill me. They think it's more likely that they're in Seattle planning a job and they just sent me a few letters and phone calls to distract the FBI and freak me out."

"But ..." Andi motioned to the window. "Hole? Broken window? Kidnapped cat? Threatening voicemail?"

Tessa cried harder. "They didn't believe me. They weren't willing to send someone out on the ferry. They think I'm safe here since they don't think Linus and Danny will come out in the open. He thinks they'll just be laying low somewhere."

"They don't have to take the ferry to get here," Max said.

"They could take a private boat," Andi said, nodding. "Have they been checked to see if anyone has had a boat stolen?"

Tessa shook her head. "I told you, I'm on my own. I mean ... I'm used to it, but, Andi ... I'm scared." The last words came out in a whisper.

"Well, you don't need to be now," Max said quietly. He got to his feet and Andi thought she saw a flicker of Sergeant Lyons as he went to the door to peer out the peephole before turning back, frowning at the floor, thinking. "So, *you* can't call the cops."

Tessa put her hands to her forehead in frustration. "I thought of that. I'm scared they're watching the house ... or they will be. I'm terrified that if even one of those police four-wheelers shows up outside my door or a person in uniform is seen in the area, they might ... kill Sage and ... leave her on my doorstep

or something.” Tessa cried harder into Andi’s arms. Andi rubbed her back.

“Don’t worry. We’ll think of something. We’re a team. We’re not going to leave you and we’re going to get Sage back.” She met Max’s gaze, eyes wide.

Max blinked at her. And then he smiled. “I’ve got to make a phone call. But I think I have an idea.” He held up a hand. “Don’t worry. I’m not calling the police.”



“So, do you think we should try to find this evidence they think you have?” Andi asked twenty minutes later when Max gave her the thumbs up from his post over by the peephole.

Tessa shrugged. “Sure. I’ve looked for it a hundred times, but I never found it.”

“Well, where do you keep all your ... well, everything that’s not in this room?” Andi asked, looking at all the bare surfaces and the empty shelves under Tessa’s TV.

“Upstairs,” Tessa said, getting to her feet. She paused and looked back at Max. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

“Pretty sure,” Max said, giving her a reassuring smile. Tessa didn’t look convinced but she headed for the stairs.

Andi turned back to Max. “How sure is ‘pretty sure’?”

He shrugged. “Fifty-five, sixty percent?”

Andi groaned. “I like my odds of finding whatever the robber’s version of the Holy Grail is upstairs, a lot better than your odds for this plan to work.” She was standing close to him and even though in less than an hour they’d been talking about how they could never be what they were again, her body was doing everything in its power to disprove it. It still hummed when she was this close to Max. But more than that, just like Tessa, a part of her was always going to care so much about the man standing in front of her. No matter what they couldn’t be anymore.

Max must have felt it too, because after a moment, he wrapped an arm around her, and pulled her to him, pressing his lips against hers. Her hands were in his hair and her mouth was on fire as her senses overloaded. The kiss ended as quickly as it had happened and they broke apart, staring at each other. “Sorry,” Max breathed, “old habit.”

“What?” Andi panted.

He looked a little embarrassed now. “It’s just ... every time my team was about to move into a hot zone, I ... I imagined kissing you like that and telling you ...”

“Andi?” Tessa called.

“Coming,” Andi said. She wanted to hear the rest of what Max was saying but he jerked his head for her to go.

“You two stay away from the windows,” he said.

Bert and Sarge were lying on the floor, facing the door, ears perked and breathing steady, just like Max. She on the other

hand ... She hustled up the stairs in a daze. *He'd thought about kissing me like that even after we broke up?* It was a tiny ray of sunshine fighting its way through her personal sky of panic. When she'd left with Bert to get some quiet and some fresh air, she'd never imagined ...

"In here," Tessa called quietly. Andi looked around. The doors to all the rooms on the upper floor stood open and it was designed exactly like her parents' house as just a shotgun hallway with four rooms and a bathroom at the end. The rooms all looked empty from what Andi could see, except for the master bedroom where Tessa sat on the floor with a cardboard box next to the only two pieces of furniture in the room, her dresser, and her bed.

"So," Andi said, dropping down to sit on the floor in front of Tessa. "It wasn't so much that you didn't like clutter ..."

"No," Tessa said with a sigh, "It's that I don't have much. I had to leave New York with Sage and this cardboard box of random crap." She laughed and raised a hand to cover her eyes. "I packed in ten minutes when they came to move me. I threw what I thought I'd need in here. But ..." she shook her head and dropped her hand to stare dully at the mess of books and papers before her. "Now, there are a million things I wish I'd brought instead. The album of photos of me with my parents before they died, books I loved to read, photos of friends that I've lost ..." Her voice trailed off and she angrily snatched at the stack of papers sitting on top in the box. "Instead, what do I have to show for the first thirty years of my life? Some junk mail that happened to be on my table the

day I packed, a letter about renewing a warranty on a car I don't have anymore ...” She shifted through the junk and dumped them on the floor, reaching in to grab another handful. “Well, dive in.”

Andi pulled a short stack of books out of the corner of the box and looked down at the titles. “You really like the classics, don't you?”

She laughed and shook her head. “I was packing in a blind panic. In happier times, Danny and I picked those up at a garage sale because they have nice covers. We thought they'd look fancy on a bookshelf when we had friends over.” She shook her head. “Another lie that I bought hook, line, and sinker.” She squeezed the handfuls of paper in her fists, balling them up. “God,” she said through gritted teeth, “Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and push Linus in front of a train for what he did to Danny.” She relaxed her hands and dropped the papers. She was quiet for a moment, but when she spoke again, her voice was calm and sad. “But then I remember that Danny chose Linus over me. Over and over. And that's how I know that I loved him more than he ever loved me.”

It was a vertical kick to Andi's chest. She had a feeling she knew what Tessa meant. Idly, Andi flipped the gold-edged pages of the books, one by one. She was flipping through *The Bell Jar* when a flash of blank page caught her eye. She did it again, and she found a thin piece of paper stuck between two pages.

“What’s this?” Andi asked, turning the book upside down so the paper could fall out.

Tessa looked up from the paper she was reading and moved over on her knees to look down at it. It had been folded into quarters and on the side lying up, facing them, a lop-sided heart had been drawn in pencil with the initials D.A. and J.C. inside it.

“Careful,” Andi said as Tessa reached for it. Tessa paused and dug in the box, pulling out a pen to use to open out the folds.

There was a crash from somewhere downstairs. Andi was on her feet before she had a chance to think. “Max!” The dogs were barking and growling and Andi reached the bottom of the stairs in time to see Max tucking his phone into his back pocket. He turned to face the living room window, smiling, but then his gaze met Andi’s and he paled.

“Well, hello Darling,” a rough voice crooned. Andi recognized it from the voicemail. She just hoped that Tessa had the sense to stay hidden upstairs, even if she didn’t. “Come on down here. Nice and slow, or we’re going to redecorate Jenna’s living room with his insides.”

Jenna. The J.C. initials? Andi thought. She took a deep breath and came down the rest of the stairs slowly with her hands up. There were five men in the room, all in black with handguns drawn. The room was filled with the smell of the sea and Andi thought she could see the edge of wetsuits poking out of the collars of their dark shirts. *So that’s how they were*

coming and going. Bert and Sarge stood their ground between the gunmen and Max. She moved to stand next to Max, with her hands still in the air. In front of her, Bert backed up, growling low in his throat until he was right in front of her. Beside him, Sarge had done the same, protecting Max. Andi's heart ached. What if things went sideways and Bert and Sarge were killed? There was a man at the back of the group holding a limp ball of fur in one arm. *Oh god. Sage.* The gunmen weren't wearing masks which meant one of two things. Either, they were very stupid, or they didn't plan to leave any witnesses. *Not this time.*

“They're just dog walkers,” one of the gunmen in the back chuckled. “Let them put their arms down at least, Danny. They look ridiculous. Besides, Stubby over there looks like he might fall down on that peg leg of his.”

“Yeah, you can put them down.” Andi and Max lowered their hands, but the guy called Danny had a wicked twist to his smile as he surveyed Max. “Peg leg, huh?” he laughed. “So what would happen if I shot him in his good foot?” He took a step forward and Sarge's wolf ancestry rose to the occasion. His hackles were raised and his teeth were bared. And Andi suddenly wished that Sarge had been a goldfish, safe at home in a bowl, instead of staring down the barrel of a semi-automatic handgun wielded by a killer, when all he wanted to do was protect his human. Max was stoic beside her. He didn't say a word, but when Andi reached for his hand with hers, he gripped her tight.

“Oh, but look at him,” Danny taunted. “So serious. Scared shitless he won’t be able to protect his girl? After all, he’s outnumbered and outgunned. With just ...” Danny glanced down at the dogs. “A couple of shaggy, gimpy pets to protect him. He surveyed Andi. “And a pretty girl at that. Come over here, Darling. Let us have a look at you.” Andi squeezed Max’s hand and he rubbed his thumb against the back of her hand. It was an old gesture. Something he’d always done when Andi was scared before a competition, or worried about a test ... but this was so much bigger. Like everything in her life this last year. Everything in *his* life. But there it was. That simple gesture that made her breathe.

Danny sighed impatiently and took a step toward her. Sarge and Bert were still growling and Andi’s heart was in her throat. She didn’t want them or Max to be shot. If she had to ... the thought sent a disgusted shiver down her spine. Danny took another step toward her and Bert lunged, sinking his teeth into Danny’s leg. He dropped his gun, either out of shock, or because he realized that with Bert’s teeth two inches from his crotch there was a good chance he might shoot his dick off if he tried to shoot Bert. But a shot rang out from the back of the group and Bert howled before letting him go.

“No!” Andi screamed. Bert fell. He was still breathing but after a second, blood started to pool under him. Andi let go of Max’s hand to get to Bert and the power went out. The gunmen paused in confusion and then there was shouting and breaking glass as more bodies hurled through the broken windows behind them. The front door crashed open and two

more men ran in. In the dark, Andi couldn't see beyond the sliver of moonlight pouring in from the broken window in the living room. There was a crash as Tessa's TV fell and there were grunts of pain and gunshots.

"Andi," Max yelled. "Get Bert and Sarge outside. Then get Tessa out of here." This was followed by him grunting in pain.

"Max!"

"Go!" She felt her way back to the living room and found the blanket on the back of Tessa's couch. *I'll buy you a new one*, she thought as she crawled along the floor on her hands and knees, back to the kitchen. She almost cried in relief when she felt Bert's shaggy body and his warm tongue licking her hand.

"Hang on, boy. We're gonna get you out of here," she whispered as she wrapped him in the blanket. She scooped him up and called for Sarge but he didn't come. She got to her feet, staggering under Bert's weight as he whimpered in pain and she headed for the open front door and the dim glow of the lamp posts lining the street.

"Watch your step, Andi," she recognized the voice as Jax. "We had to cut power to the whole house and those steps are slick."

She got all the way to the street and she saw Amelia passing by her bedroom window upstairs. Maybe it was a sister thing, but for some reason, Amelia turned at that moment and looked down at the street. Andi waved her hand as best she could, still holding Bert and Amelia disappeared. Two seconds later, the

front door banged open and Amelia was stumbling out to the street, all long legs, and their dad's slippers.

"Take him," Andi croaked. "And call the police. Tell them to get over to Tessa's house."

"But ... is that why those guys ..."

"Now. Please." Amelia took Bert and sprinted back inside. Andi thought about running in after her and getting a flashlight, but there wasn't time. She needed to get Tessa out.

She stumbled back inside and was knocked sideways by what she assumed was a gunman being thrown by one of Max's team members because he was damp and she could smell the salt water on him.

"Sorry, ma'em," she heard one of the members say as the gunman was jerked back into the middle of the room. She heard Jax curse and then another muzzle flash followed by a bang that hit the living room ceiling shattering a glass light fixture that then rained glass down on all of them.

Andi felt more blind than she had before in the aftermath of the muzzle flash, but she kept feeling around until she found the stairs. She crawled up them on all fours, afraid to stand up in case another wild shot found her. At least on her hands and knees, she was partially covered behind the banister.

"Tessa," she hissed when she reached the second floor.

"In ... in here," Tessa's voice was faint.

"Tessa, are you ok?" Andi found Tessa's foot first. She listened and she could hear Tessa breathing hard. "What?"

What is it?" She felt around on the floor and her hand found Tessa's side. It was warm and wet. "Shit," Andi whispered. *Find the wound*, Andi's vet training screamed. The shot that went up into the living room ceiling. They were right above it now. Andi tried to keep her voice calm as if Tessa was a scared animal needing an exam. Andi tried to not think of Bert across the street, possibly in even worse condition. She hadn't stopped to look. *Why hadn't she stopped to look?* Another voice in her head that sounded a lot like Max said, *Because if you had, Tessa would be bleeding out alone right now.* "She's not going to bleed out at all," Andi said under her breath.

"What?" Tessa breathed, her voice sounding even fainter now.

"I have to find the wound," Andi said quickly. "Sorry." She felt up Tessa's side in the dark and she found the place where the flesh had torn, where the blood was hemorrhaging. If there was light, she'd be looking for a towel and an ace bandage to make a compress, but as it was ... She pulled her coat off and then her long-sleeved shirt. She threaded it under Tessa and felt with her hands to carefully ball the shirt up right over the wound. Then she tightened the shirt sleeves around her until Tessa sucked in a sharp painful breath. "Sorry," Andi said. "But we have to stop the bleeding." She moved around, her hands wet and slipping on Tessa as she helped her sit up. "Can you move? We need to get you out of here."

"I think so," Tessa said. Her voice was so weak. Andi pulled on her coat and with Tessa's help, got her back to her feet. They were in the hall when they heard the front door slam and

the sound of bodies fighting in front of it, scrambling on the hard floor.

“We’re going out the back,” Andi whispered, an idea coming to her. Tessa’s house was identical to her parents’. The back stairs. It was slow going getting Tessa down the hallway and then the stairs into the kitchen. They’d have to go out the back door and around her side yard.

Andi had to lean Tessa against the island counter while she unbraced the sliding patio door. The kitchen door burst open and Andi smelled seawater. “They’re trying to get away,” the man yelled. Andi had managed to get the door open, but the man was running at them now. She swept her hand across the island and her fingers closed on the only thing still sitting on it. A bottle. She swung back with all the anger in her for what these losers had done to Bert, and Tessa, and were probably doing to Max and Sarge at that very moment and she brought it down with a loud crack, right on the man’s head. She felt the bottle break and the smell of coconut rum hit her in the nose.

“Damn,” Tessa wheezed. “I was looking forward to some eggnog when this is over.”

“I’ll buy you another one,” Andi muttered, blinking in shock at the man lying crumpled on the floor. Andi grabbed the pole Tessa used to brace the patio door. At least it might be something she could use as a weapon. And helped Tessa out into the backyard. She tried to keep her voice calm as she reassured Tessa they were almost there ... almost there. But

Andi's heart was banging so hard in her chest that she could hear it in her ears. *What if she bled out because I moved her?*

They pushed through Tessa's side gate and rounded her house to the front yard just as the pair of red Kojak lights came into view, the tiny, rather sad sirens on the golf cart ringing, and followed by the six-wheeler marked with Hope Island Sheriff's Office. Bill Benson was the first one out of the golf cart and he was sprinting over to them faster than Andi had ever seen him run.

"Andi, what ..."

"She's been shot," Andi said.

"I brought EMS with me." He nodded back at the six-wheeler where Missy Tolliver, one of Hope Island's two EMTs was swinging her leg over, and grabbing her bag and a stretcher. Andi stayed with them, helping Missy get Tessa secured and examining her wound under the light of a headlamp.

"It looks like a through-and-through," Missy said, replacing the fresh gauze. "But we need to get her to the hospital."

There were two men in dark suits approaching them from the street and Andi immediately picked up the door security bar and stood, shielding Tessa from them. Missy got to her feet beside her, to do the same.

"Whoa," the men said when they saw Andi two-handing the bar. "We come in peace. Agent Ames and Agent Brooks." The man motioned to his carbon copy beside him. "We're here to

see Jenna Carter.” Missy looked confused, but Andi took a step toward them.

“Finally decided to show up and do your jobs?” Andi spat. “She’s been shot, jackasses. Because you wouldn’t get off your collective asses and move her when she told you they’d found her.” The men were motionless. Their expressions didn’t change, but Andi saw Agent Ames flex his hand. “You’re pointless,” Andi muttered. She turned her back on them and looked at Missy. “Let’s get her to the hospital.”

“Andi,” Tessa whispered. Andi dropped down next to her.

“Yeah?”

“The evidence. It’s in my right pocket. Give it to them so this can be over.”

Andi gently dug into her pocket with a pair of long tweezers Misty handed her and when she had the scrap of paper held in the tweezers, she marched across the lawn and held it out to them. “I don’t have a silver platter, but here’s the thing they were apparently willing to kill Tessa ... Jenna over.” Now they were moving. Agent Ames took the tweezers and stared at the note.

“We’ll meet you at the hospital.” Andi didn’t say anything to them as they turned and walked away.

“My tweezers ...” Missy said, watching them go.

“I’ll buy you another pair,” Andi said, grunting as they slowly lifted Tessa ... Jenna on the stretcher. “Tweezers for you and rum for T ... Jenna.” She smiled down at her and

Jenna met her gaze. “Nice to meet you, Jenna. When this is all over, we’re going to watch more Christmas horror movies and try a second round of eggnog. No matter what time of year it is.”

Jenna smiled, and then her face clouded over. “Where’s Sage?”

“I ... I’ll get her ... just don’t worry. I’ll bring her to see you in the hospital.” Andi looked at Missy. “Can you get her there by yourself?”

Missy nodded. “Yeah. I do this all the time. Well, not this. Usually, it’s power tool accidents and drunken slip-and-falls, but ...” Missy looked like she missed those incidents at the moment.

As soon as they were gone, Andi headed back toward the house in time for the power to blink back on. She stuck her head in through the open front door to see all the members of Max’s team on their feet, night vision goggles on their foreheads, and a wetsuit-wearing scumbag on the floor beside them. Bill Benson was standing by the door, hands on hips.

“Now boys, we have rules against vigilante justice, and ...” Andi put a hand on Bill’s shoulder and he turned, sour-faced. “Andi ...”

“There are two FBI agents at the hospital. Agent Ames and Agent Brooks who, with Tessa ... sorry, Jenna Carter, should be able to fill you in on everything.”

“And look at it this way,” Max’s voice reached Andi and she spun on the spot to see him sitting on Tessa’s couch next to Sarge with a ball of quivering fur in his lap. “Guess who *you* caught, Deputy? Daniel Argent and Linus Becker. And ... sorry, I didn’t have the pleasure of getting to know the rest of you.”

Bill hooked a work boot under the nearest body and turned him over like a stone. “I’ll be damned. Hey, Danny Argent. I heard all about New York. Oh don’t worry, the ferry will run just for you tonight.” Bill grinned up at the members of the fire team. “All Army, huh?”

“Sir, yessir,” they all chanted, but the smiles on their faces could best be categorized as “smartass”.

“Well, since you’re all so full of piss and vinegar, I don’t suppose you’d mind walking these sorry pukes down to the station with me would you? They’re not all going to fit on the golf carts with me or Barry and I’d hate to show favoritism by letting some of them ride and some of them walk.”

Andi stood to the side while the four members and Bill marched the five men out the front of the house and down the lawn to the street. Jax was bringing up the rear and he paused in the doorway with a half-conscious burglar to call back to Max. “Hell of a send-off, Sarge. I don’t think I’ve had this much fun on leave since my first deployment.” He paused. “Don’t tell my fiancée that, ok?”

She heard Max laugh. “Get out of here, Bronson, and don’t fall behind.” When he was gone, Andi headed inside.

“Are you ok?” Andi asked, holding her breath for his answer. He had blood smeared on his shirt and his face and there was a black eye already forming over his left eye, but he was smiling up at her when he nodded.

“Most of this blood isn’t mine,” his smile was wide and there was a light dancing in his eyes that she hadn’t seen since senior year when he threw the winning pass for the touchdown at the state championship.

“What is it?” Andi asked.

He shook his head. “I just ... it was nice to ... to feel useful again, you know?” She didn’t know, but she thought she might understand.

“What about Sarge?” He was licking his front paw but like Max, the specks of blood on his fur and around his mouth didn’t look like his. With some coaxing from Andi, he stood and she felt around on him. He was stiff, but everything felt fine and he didn’t cry out or try to bite her. She swallowed hard and looked down at the quivering ball on Max’s lap. “Sage?”

Max was stroking her gently. When he stopped she poked her head out of her tight ball and looked up at Andi. She was damp and she looked mad and scared. Andi was about to take her coat off when she realized she wasn’t wearing anything but a bra beneath it. She felt embarrassed at first, but then she remembered, no one was still at the house at the moment, except for Max. And he’d seen her in less. She held her breath

as she unzipped her coat. She caught a glimpse of Max, sitting up straighter on the couch and she tried to hide her smile.

“Bold fashion choice,” he said as she pulled off her coat. “I have to say I approve.”

“Tessa ... Jenna was shot. I used my shirt ...”

“Of course you did,” he grinned. “That’s my ... That’s why you’re always the one with the good ideas.”

She tried to ignore the flutter in her stomach when he’d almost called her, “my girl”. “And you’re the one with the plans. I haven’t been back across the street, but stashing your team members in my house, disguised as a house party, was a stroke of genius.”

“Just in case they were watching the house. Though, it was a long shot considering there was a good chance they saw Tessa ... Jenna ... drag the two of us inside.”

Andi scooped Sage into her jacket and she felt the quivering cat stop shaking as she wrapped the fabric around her. Max was on his feet. Well, foot.

“Where’s your prosthetic?” Andi panicked, turning on the spot, and looking around.

“It fell off in the dark,” Max said with a shrug. “So I just fought without it.” He was smiling again. “But, I guess I might need it back to get home. I never was very good at hopscotch.”

Andi retrieved it for him and once he had it fitted around his leg, he pulled off his bomber jacket and wrapped it around her. She was encased in his scent and his warmth and for a

moment, they were so close, she was sure they were going to kiss again. Then the wriggling ball in her arms reminded her that she was holding a very scared cat, there was a husky voyeur who was pacing by the door, and a bleeding Bert across the street.

Andi's house was in chaos when they arrived. She handed Sage to Amelia to calm down while her dad and mom grilled Max for details while they stood on the porch and waited for Barry and Maggie from the police station to come photograph the scene across the street. Amelia followed Andi into the kitchen where Bert was still sitting on his blanket. He stopped licking himself and started howling in pain when he saw them enter.

"So dramatic," Amelia muttered. Andi got him to lie down for her and she started looking him over.

"I know. You're such a brave boy."

"How did this happen?" Amelia asked, crouching down beside her while she cuddled Sage.

"He was trying to protect me," Andi said softly, gently moving the long shaggy hair from side to side while she gently cleaned the area with a hot, wet towel.

Bert's tongue was hanging out and he was smiling up at her, with hair in his eyes and a toothy grin.

"He's exactly the kind of dog I thought Brandon would have. I mean, they have a lot in common," Amelia said. Andi glanced at her and saw from the way she was fussing with

Sage that Amelia didn't expect her words to land the way they had. Bert had protected her. She was his human, now that his human was gone. She knew Bert still missed Brandon from the way he would sometimes search the house for him, room by room. But Bert had moved on. He'd given his loyalty and his love to the person who had loved his human. Her eyes filled with tears which she was only able to blink clear with a laugh when she found the spot where he'd been shot.

“They nicked him in the butt,” she chuckled. Amelia laughed and Bert gave an indignant snuffle before howling again in dramatic agonized pain.

Max

“And thanks for hosting the guys over here for most of the evening,” Max added to Mr. Morgan when he’d finished filling them in on everything that had happened. He couldn’t stop smiling and he could feel the remnants of adrenaline pulsing through him.

“It was our pleasure,” Mr. Morgan said. He glanced at his wife and then grinned at Max. “It was kind of fun to see what it would have felt like if we’d had four grown sons running around the house instead of two daughters.”

Max chuckled. “And what was the verdict?”

“Well, they like football, so point in their favor, though Andi likes football too, as you recall.” Max could feel Mr. Morgan’s gaze on him as he dropped his gaze and scratched the back of his neck. “But the farting contest ...” he said.

Max jerked his head up. “They didn’t ...”

Mr. Morgan shrugged. “I don’t think it *started* as a contest.”

Mrs. Morgan rolled her eyes. “I think *you* started it. They just finished it. Max, do you know what crop-dusting is?”

Max summoned every ounce of his military training to keep from laughing as he solemnly nodded. “Yes, ma’em.”

She smiled. “You know, you’re the only one who’s ever called me that. It’s nice to have you home.” She shivered as the cold breeze started to pick up around them. “I’m heading inside.” She held her arms out to Max and he gently hugged her. “Goodnight, Max. And ... thank you, for everything.” Her voice was soft but he could feel the weight of her words. He had a feeling she wasn’t just talking about that evening. She pulled back and that feeling was confirmed in her eyes. With a final squeeze of his shoulders, she turned and headed inside.

Mr. Morgan was staring across the street where Maggie and Barry were photographing and gathering evidence with the lights blazing in every window. “I gotta say, we’re all pretty lucky you and your team members were around tonight. If you hadn’t been ...” He shook his head. Mr. Morgan gave him a hug as well and that nagging feeling of time travel rolled over him. He and Andi had had dinner at her house the night before he shipped out. Her parents had hugged him on their front porch and then Andi had walked home with him.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, the front door opened and Andi stepped onto the porch. Max turned to see Mr. Morgan kiss her on the forehead before saying a final goodnight to Max and heading inside.

“How’s Bert?” Max asked. He really liked the shaggy dog. The shot from what he’d seen hadn’t looked fatal, but ...

She gave an exaggerated sigh but she was smiling. “Nicked in the butt. He’s fine. I think his fluff saved him. Thankfully it’s hard to aim at something when there’s all that fur in the way.”

She’d changed and reclaimed her coat, though he could see Tessa’s ... Jenna’s cat snuggled in it against her chest. For a fleeting moment, he thought it wouldn’t be so bad to be a cat. She held out his bomber jacket to him. “Thanks ... for this, and for ... well, everything.”

He nodded and when he took his jacket from her, his hand skimmed over hers. He tried to push away the memory of that hand in his, of her hands on his body. He cleared his throat, “You did pretty good, yourself.” He grinned at her. “You didn’t panic, you kept your cool. You *planned*, Andarchy. I’m impressed.”

She shook her head. “Nah, I was still flying by the seat of my pants. I just ...” her eyes met his. “I just kept hearing this really annoying voice in my head saying ‘you have to think ahead, Andarchy’ over and over.”

“Huh, sounds like a smart guy,” Max said, with a solemn nod.

“I didn’t say it was a guy.” The cat was moving around in Andi’s jacket and she paused to stroke her little head and whisper to her that everything was ok. He smiled, watching her. Andi really had found her purpose in life. He knew it the day he’d dove over the counter to stop the cats from killing her. She’d been more worried about their safety than hers. She

never got angry with them. She listened to what they weren't saying and it was like watching a team move as one, or a sniper load his rifle. It was the proud faces of recruits at the end of basic, and the slight, even prouder single nod of a good drill sergeant, knowing the recruits were ready for what came next. The Georgia job offer floated to the top of his mind again. It had been a constant thought the last few days and after tonight ...

"I'm going to sneak Sage in to see Jenna at the hospital," Andi said, pulling him out of his thoughts. "Wanna come with me and cause a diversion?" The Andarchy face was back and his thoughts of Georgia faded.

"Sure. It might be a good night to get detained, possibly arrested for sneaking an animal into the hospital."

"Hey, the jail cells are full at the moment," Andi said. "Now's the best time."

"That's what I like about you, Andarchy. You're always thinking. Of course, there's always the possibility that they'll just chain us to the fridge door in the station break room."

"Oh there you are, Max Buzzkill, I was afraid there wouldn't be *any* guardrails on this little endeavor."

They headed down the front walk and turned toward the town square. "Alright, let's hear them," Max said. "In reverse order, if you don't mind. Most ridiculous *Looney Tunes*-eque ideas first, so then the logical ones will seem really plausible by the time we reach the hospital."

“Aye, aye sir,” she said, giving him a three-finger salute with the wrong hand.

He gave a weary sigh and shook his head, still smiling. He’d commanded a unit of soldiers in a warzone, but here was his Andi, snapping him back to reality with a Navy acknowledgment and something that looked like a Girl Scout salute gone wrong. *Not your Andi anymore.* He hated the voice in his head for the constant reminder, but he knew it was right. They couldn’t start over, even as much as a part of him wished they could. They weren’t the same people they had been. *You can’t step in the same river twice.*



Unsurprisingly, Andi had a brilliant idea for subterfuge, misdirection, and stealth. This, of course, required Max’s planning to distract and chat up the nurse at the reception station, and then follow Andi up to Jenna’s room when the coast was clear. They planned while they walked and Max decided to just let himself enjoy this moment. If he took the job in Georgia, there was a good chance he’d never have it again. Andi Morgan would meet someone else. She’d keep moving on. And so would he. Life could be good again. He repeated these thoughts to himself while he laughed, and teased her, and tried to talk Sage into being on his side in their arguments as they walked. *But all good things, and bad things, eventually come to an end.*

When they got to the hospital, it turned out they didn't even need a plan. The tired nurse behind the reception area waved them toward the elevator with Jenna's room number, and without a second glance. Andi and Max shared surprised looks while they waited for the elevator's doors to open. "The Sheriff's up there, so if you two are planning any chaos with that cat, I'd do it before you get to the third floor."

"So much for my stealth," Andi muttered, looking down at herself. Sage had settled down into a ball by Andi's belly. She was petting Sage through the coat, holding her from underneath with her free hand, and when she smiled up at Max, the image was so heartbreaking to him that he had to look away. It was an image he'd imagined so many times. Not with a cat of course, but ... He pushed the thought away as the elevator doors opened and they wound through the labyrinth of nurses, identical rooms, patients, and equipment until they reached Jenna's room. He stood by the door, watching Jenna's face light up when Andi let Sage out to walk up the bed and settle by her head.

"You know," Deputy Bill Benson's voice caught Max off guard, and for a fleeting second, he thought he and Andi were going to be in trouble for bringing the cat with them. Then, he remembered he wasn't eighteen and about to be questioned about some huge prank they'd pulled. "If it hadn't been for you and your Army buddies, tonight could have been ..." Bill scrubbed his hand down his face and Max didn't miss the pale worry. "Damn feds didn't even have the courtesy to give us a heads up that we had someone in their program living out

here. If I'd known, we could have kept an eye out." Max nodded and Bill held out a hand to him. "You boys have the thanks of a grateful Sheriff's Department."

Max shook his hand and said, "We were just happy we could help. Sorry we didn't call you sooner, but ..."

Bill was already nodding. "Jenna told me. No cops or they were going to kill her cat." Bill's face was grim as he turned to look at Jenna and Andi petting Sage on the bed. "Evil bastards." Max nodded, his gaze drifting too often to Andi's animated face as she talked to Jenna. Bill clapped him on the shoulder and chuckled. "I suppose that this good deed would be enough to wipe out any outstanding investigations into goat stampedes, punch spiking, itching powder in certain Parade of Tree costumes, etc." He surveyed Max with a serious frown and Max felt his mouth go dry. Then Bill winked. "After all, Stuart Irving is working all the way on Wall Street now. And S.I. has passed from being a constant 'entity of interest' to being a Hope Island urban legend. I suppose sometimes it's just best to let sleeping dogs lie." Bill tipped his ballcap to Andi and Jenna and with a final nod to Max, stepped back into the hall.

Max turned to meet Andi's wide-eyed gaze. "Lucky for S.I.," he finally said, keeping his voice low.

Andi shook her head. "For years, I used to wake up in a cold sweat expecting a knock on my dorm room door and then my apartment and it to be Deputy Benson or the Sheriff with a warrant for my arrest for ..." Andi trailed off and cleared her

throat as she went back to picking at the edge of Jenna's blanket.

"Alright," Jenna said, she carefully crossed her arms and looked from Andi to Max. "Now that the law isn't a factor, it's time. What does S.I. actually stand for?"

Max met Andi's gaze. "The Spanish Inquisition," they said together.

"What?"

"Well, no one expects it," Andi said with a shrug. "No one expects a straight-A, cheerleader, and the high school quarterback to be the pranksters."

Jenna groaned and covered her face.

"That's what I did the first time Andi suggested it," Max chuckled.

Andi nodded. "But then Max suggested we make Stuart the living legend and it all just ... kind of took off from there."

"You two are dorks."

Max nodded. "And we were really big *Monty Python* fans."

Andi decided to stay with Jenna for a while, so he left the hospital alone, heading home to see the guys before they headed back to the mainland in the morning.

"Oh good, you're back," his mom called when she stepped inside. She was grinning but she looked a lot more like she had when he and Gray were home. Happy, but slightly harassed. In

the living room, the rest of the guys turned to look at him from their spots on the couch or stretched out on the air mattresses.

“Hey, Sarge.”

“Hey, nice of you to join us.”

“Shut up, Jax. Everything ok with Andi and the gal whose house we broke into?” Wang asked, looking up from the book on his knee.

Max nodded. “Yeah. Andi’s with her at the hospital. Through-and-through wound. She’s going to be ok.” Every face was turned toward him and he could see the relief and smiles that only came with good news. He’d gotten so used to seeing those looks after a good mission or even a bad one when nothing happened besides them wasting time, and waiting. Even then they smiled. And the mission didn’t feel like such a waste. And they were looking at him like he was still their sergeant. Not a twenty-six-year-old washout, now short half a leg and a career. He wanted this feeling back. The chance to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his brothers in arms and see them nod and smile knowing they were going to make it through whatever was up ahead. Max moved past them to the kitchen to fill his mom in on anything they hadn’t already told her. And it was time to tell her about Georgia.

The low thrum of the TV was drowned out by the snores he hadn’t heard since leaving Iraq. They made him smile but a part of him was thankful that it wasn’t the serenade he listened to every night now.

“So, you’re going to take it then?” his mom asked quietly. Her face was guarded, but she was smiling as if they were discussing the weather instead of his future.

“I ... I think so,” he said, nodding. “I have to report by February 1st. That’s Wednesday. So, I need to tell them ... by tomorrow.” He met her gaze. “It’s ... Mom, tonight, just feeling like I was a part of something again. Part of a team. I think ... I think I need that.” It had been a long time since he’d talked to his mom like this, open and searching. He watched her face, hoping she’d tell him what she really thought, but knowing she wouldn’t. She’d always held her thoughts in reserve when it came to him or Gray making decisions about their future. *“I want it to be on your terms,”* she’d told him in high school when he’d briefly considered going into the Marines instead of the Army. *“It’s your life. I want you to choose it.”*

“You’ve always been a team player, Max,” she said. “You’re a natural teacher. You know Jackson’s been talking his mom’s ear off about wanting to apprentice with Baskin this summer and learn how to hang drywall? Apparently, he had so much fun doing the little stuff with you, he’s been watching YouTube videos and reading every construction book in the library.” Max chuckled and her smile softened. “And you taught Gray how to be a man, even when you had to teach yourself.” Her eyes were full of tears now.

“I didn’t teach myself,” he said gently. “You taught me, Mom.”

She hugged him in the fierce Mama Lyons hold that always made it feel like she was stronger than he'd ever be. "All I ever wanted was for you boys to be happy. Fulfilled. Maybe lesser hellions." They laughed. She pulled back and looked up at him. "There are lots of ways to be a part of a team, Max. And there are lots of ways to serve your country and the people fighting for it in the service."

Those words stayed with him when he went to bed. It felt oddly empty without Sarge at the foot of his bed now. He'd left him over at Andi's to keep Bert company for the night. At least if he was posted in Georgia, Sarge would be able to come with him. But what about his mom? She'd be alone again. He could get her another dog. Or a cat ... she'd gotten really attached to Sarge in just a few weeks. He'd talk to Andi about getting another pet for her ... and there it was. The big thought he'd been avoiding since he'd left her at the hospital. *But there's nothing to think about. She told you she wasn't ready. That you weren't the same people anymore. She rejected you ... twice.* The words of his old drill sergeant echoed in his head. "*How many times do you need to hit your head before you realize you're trying to go through a wall, not a door?*" He smiled and closed his eyes, willing himself to ignore the lack of Sarge by his feet, the thoughts of his mom being alone again, and Andi. He tried to just focus on the elation he'd felt with the takedown, working with his team, their smiles, and their nods when they realized everything was going to be ok.

But, his mind decided to get one more parting shot in before he drifted off. Just before he left consciousness, or maybe just

as he was starting to dream. The vision of Andi with her hands on her belly, smiling up at him flashed through his head. And in his imagination, it was his ring, on her finger.



ANDI

There was a tongue on Andi's neck.

"Mmmm, Max," she whispered. Then, there was a second tongue on her other cheek. Her eyes flew open and she stared up into the panting, smiling faces of Sarge and Bert. "Right," she muttered, swiping at her face and closing her eyes. "Now I remember."

"Hey, Andi," Michelle's voice called from the open door. Andi shot Sarge and Bert an annoyed look, telepathically asking them why they hadn't figured out yet how to close the door behind themselves.

"Morning, Michelle," Andi said sitting up. The two dogs bounded off the bed, deciding to change targets to the human who was already standing and dressed.

"I was wondering if we could ... hang out today? I just ... I'm really missing him."

"Of course," Andi said automatically. She'd hoped that after Andi had told her she could stay with them as long as she wanted, Michelle wouldn't feel like crying all the time, but she was still struggling on a daily basis. "Actually, I have to go to

work today and the open house is tonight. We'll have a lot to do. Fun stuff to do." *And hopefully a lot of adoptions*, she said, sending the thought out to the universe. *Come on, Karma. Pay up tonight.*

"I'm waxing the floors today," her mom called to them as they came down the stairs with Bert and Sarge. "So if you could take Bert with you to work, that would be lovely."

"Is she always like this," Michelle asked, watching Andi's mom move around the living room, organizing and occasionally tossing DVD cases into a box labeled for the Hope Chest, the town's thrift store.

Andi shook her head. "Just from mid-January until the start of February. Then she goes back to normal."

Andi sent Michelle ahead of her to the shelter with Bert. "It'll give you a chance to get your bearings on your own," Andi said with a grin. "If you're going to be living here, you should get to know the town." Michelle smiled, but when she still looked worried, Andi nodded down at Bert. "I used to take him to work with me all the time. As soon as you get passed De-Floured, he'll realize where you're going and drag you the rest of the way there. Though, probably not as hard today. I think his butt is still sore." She and Sarge walked with Michelle and Bert to the town square and then she turned and headed for Max's house. Her nerves were growing with every step she took. *This is stupid. Why are you nervous? It's Max.* But something had shifted for her in the past few days. It wasn't exactly hope, but it was something hope-adjacent. If

Max was back in Hope permanently, and she was ... but the thought of permanently being Doc Simmons' "spare vet" without any say in the practice was daunting.

Still, for Max ... *whoa. What are you saying?* She didn't answer the voice in her head. Sarge looked up at her and she scratched him behind the ears as they walked on. *Stop carrying rocks.* It was a new day and she was climbing the hill with only what she needed for the day. She just needed to get Sarge back to Max and then make the open house a hit. That was all she needed to accomplish today. Well, and figure out how to distract Michelle so she could *talk* to Max at the open house. She started to smile as a plan formed, Max's voice in the back of her head coaching her as she put it together.

"Hey." Andi looked up to see Max coming down his street toward them. "I was just on my way to pick him up."

"Oh, sorry," Andi said, handing over Sarge's leash when he reached them. "I just thought ... well, I was about to head to the office with Bert anyway, but I sent him along with Michelle and ..." She was babbling and she could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. She cleared her throat. "Mom's waxing the floors and I think she was afraid Sarge would judge her if she missed a spot."

"Yeah," Max said. "I can see that. But he's easily bribed."

"That's very duplicitous for a military man," Andi said, mock frowning down at the dog. But he wasn't looking at her anymore. He'd taken up his post by Max's right leg and he was smiling up at him, his mouth hanging open. "So, will I see

you tonight at the open house?" she asked, hoping her voice sounded casual.

"Oh, probably not," Max said, meeting her gaze. Andi's heart fell. "My team members are heading out today. I was going to take the ferry with them back to the mainland. Wang says Jax got them on the wrong bus *twice* when they were trying to get from the light rail to the ferry terminal." He paused and he must have read the disappointment on her face. "I ... I'll try to make it ... when I get back."

"Oh, no worries. Well, thank the guys for me," Andi said. "For all their help."

Max nodded. "Do ... do you want to come by and see them? Maybe have a cup of coffee?"

Andi smiled, but shook her head. "Nah, I have to get to work." They stood close together for a moment, just looking at each other. Sarge yawned and then gave an annoyed woof. Andi was the first to move. "I'll ... I'll see you tomorrow then, right? For the Snow Ball? I mean, the setup and everything? Apparently, you and I are punch bowl monitors?"

He nodded, but he wasn't smiling now. "Yeah. If ... I don't see you tonight, I'll ... see you tomorrow."

Andi was thankful for all the distractions when she got to work. Michelle and Annabelle were decidedly in each other's way until Andi sent Annabelle outside with Clipper. "Michelle," Andi said, thankful for the sudden quiet. "Can you look on Shirley's computer and see if you can figure out how

she books appointments? The software is called PawCarePlus.”

“Oh,” Michelle said, spinning in the office chair to look at the computer. “No problem.” Andi took a deep breath and went back to cleaning in preparation for the open house. She had an hour before her next appointment and she wanted to make it count. “So, is *Max* going to be here tonight?” Michelle’s voice was short and Andi ground down on her back teeth before she answered.

“No, I don’t think so. He . . . he’s going back to the mainland with his friends.”

“Good riddance,” Michelle muttered.

Andi glared at the back of Michelle’s head. She knew *why* Michelle didn’t like Max, but she was being unfair. *But she’s hurting*, the voice in her head said. *Let it go*. So, Andi went back to cleaning without another word. Bert passed Andi and sat down beside Michelle’s chair. Andi paused where she was on her hands and knees scrubbing the baseboard to watch Michelle absentmindedly stroking Bert’s head. After a minute, she started talking to him about the software as she read through the help pages and clicked around. Andi smiled. *We don’t deserve pets. Even when we’re horrible, broken, hurting, and mean-hearted people. They still love, they’re still loyal. They’re still there.*

Bert was quite the show pony at the open house. He’d pad into a room where people were laughing and talking while they played with the other pets, and as soon as anyone would

look at him and the bandage on his butt (which was little more than a Band-Aid), he'd let out a pathetic whine. It had been netting him finger food from the table in the reception area all night. Andi chuckled as she turned around to smile at Annabelle.

“Well, how do you think it's going so far?”

Annabelle nodded as she looked around. “Pretty good. No takers yet, but the night's still young.”

“God I hope this works,” Andi whispered.

“Have a little faith,” Annabelle said. “And get yourself something to eat. I've been with you all day and you haven't eaten anything. And I've seen Hangry Andi. It's not pretty.”

With a sigh, Andi moved from the pet plaza to wind her way through the people in the reception area. She got in line for the finger food and smiled when she saw Michelle in the corner talking to Zane. Her face was dry and she was grinning at something Zane was saying. She felt some of the tension releasing from her shoulders when the front door opened. For what felt like the hundredth time that night she jerked her head around, hoping to see Max coming through the door.

“I've had it up to here with those mice, Agnes,” Sue Whitehorse was muttering as she stomped inside and shook the rain off her arms like a wet dog, forcing everyone around her to take a step back. “We're getting a mouser.” Sue's beady gaze swung around and found Andi. “There's the woman I want to see.” Sue hooked a damp sleeve through Andi's arm and turned her away from the food table. Andi barely had time

to acknowledge Agnes Redding, Sue's business partner before Sue was propelling them back to the pet plaza. "Now, Agnes and I have noticed that our greenhouse and our prep room have started having a mouse problem. They're not rats," she practically barked in Andi's face. "But, I think if we got a mouser cat in there, the whole problem would go away. And ... well, when Agnes is out, it'll give me someone to talk to so I don't start feeling like I'm going crazy. This morning, I had a whole conversation with a wilted poinsettia about how much it sucks to get old and start to wilt both upstairs and downstairs," Sue said, pointing at her chest.

"Oh, well we have some great cats," Andi said quickly before Sue could give her any more visualizations that were bound to haunt her for the rest of her life. She escorted the women to the play area where the cats were climbing around, playing, and being petted by various townspeople. All except Mr. Giggles. Andi thought about him for a moment, but then visions of Sue and Agnes' customers emerging with a nice bouquet and an unwanted facial piercing made her change her mind. She scanned the rest of the contenders. Tori Simmons was sitting on the floor, leaning back against the counter, looking every bit as chill as Slomo who was stretched across his lap. Probably also a bad contender for a mouser.

"Oh! Look at this one," Agnes cooed, moving over to scratch Seven's chin. She looked over at Andi. "Himalayan, isn't he?"

"Balinese, actually," Andi said. "Though, most likely a mix."

“Oh, mixes have the best personalities anyway,” Sue said approvingly. She reached up to pet him just as Eleven tackled him from behind. Andi had to tell them before they got too attached.

“And that’s his brother,” she said, already feeling the opportunity slipping away. “They’re litter mates and kind of ... a package deal. They’ve been together so long, I don’t know that they’d do too well by themselves.”

Sue chuckled and looked over at Agnes. “Kind of like you and me, huh?” Agnes smiled and scooped up Eleven. Sue picked up Seven and Andi watched as the hard lines on Sue’s face softened as she and the cat stared at each other nose to nose. Then Seven started purring and rubbed his face along Sue’s chin. Beside her, Eleven had tucked his head under Agnes’ chin and both women were quiet, all their attention on the cats in their arms. After a minute, Sue looked over at Andi. “And you think they’ll be good mousers?”

Andi grinned. “Balinese are considered some of the best. And if ... if you’d want to take them both, you’d have a heck of a tag team.” She held her breath.

“Well of course we’re taking both,” Agnes said, as if it was obvious. “Only an idiot would turn down a good thing because it was more than they thought they could get.” The old bite was back in Agnes’ voice.

“I can help you fill out the paperwork,” Michelle said, coming over to greet them.

“Uh, me too.” Tori was on his feet with Slomo draped over his shoulders. “This cat ... like ... he makes me think.” Andi saw Tori turn his head to meet Slomo’s giant eyes and some kind of understanding passed between them. “Little dude, do you like pizza?”

“Slip one of the small bags of cat food into the adoption package for Tori,” Andi muttered to Annabelle as she went by. “Just in case.” Andi was overwhelmed by how much the community had risen to the occasion and the needs of the shelter. Donations were made, music was playing, and people were laughing. Ella Danforth and Cal Dickson came in to adopt one of Cinnamon’s kittens and Cal named him Hans on the spot.

Ella shook her head. “Why?”

Cal grinned and pulled her to him. “Because he’s going to be the *Hornblower* cat. Why not name him after one of the founders of all the insanity he’s going to preside over?” Then he kissed her hard, before she could object.

“Fine,” she said emerging, “but his litter box is going by your desk.” Before he could object, she turned in his arms and bent down to say goodbye to the kitten. “Bye Hansy.” Andi quickly turned away. She hadn’t missed the way Cal’s fingers had tightened their grip on Ella’s hips. It was the same story when Carol Springfield and Patrick Dorsett took a break from refreshment monitoring to look at the kittens.

“Writers either need a cat or a dog,” Carol was saying. “I used to read the articles I was working on to Wiener.” She

looked over at Andi. “The neighbor’s cat from upstairs.” She turned back to Patrick. “They make excellent first audiences.”

Patrick smiled down at Carol as she ran a hand through his hair. “I thought I was your first audience.”

“Second,” she said. “I never want to subject you to the first round of hot garbage that falls out of my head.” She kissed the tip of his nose and turned back to study the kittens. “Which is why we need a cat. Preferably two since you’re going to corrupt yours with the thought that plays are superior to novels.”

“I will ...”

Carol looked at him, an eyebrow raised. It was almost startling how much she looked like Cate Blanchett.

“Probably do that,” Patrick said with a nod. “Ok, two cats.”

Andi was surprised to see Carol go right for the little girl who was a lot smaller than her siblings. “I want her.” The large boy cat beside her became Patrick’s.

“Now we just have to come up with names,” Carol said.

“I’ve got names for them,” Patrick said. “How about Ebenezer and Belle?”

Carol chuckled. “He’ll get beat up at school with a name like ‘Ebenezer’, Paddy.”

Patrick thought for a moment. “Well calling him Scrooge just seems mean.”

“What about Benny for short?” Andi asked.

“Benny and Belle,” Patrick said, nodding.

“I like it,” Carol said. Patrick kissed her on the cheek and Andi smiled.

God, to have that again.

“How are we doing?” Annabelle asked, bringing in more adoption gift bags from the break room.

“Well, Slomo, the Slurpee Twins, and three of Cinnamon’s kittens have been adopted,” Andi said, feeling the giddiness in her chest competing with the longing she felt as she watched Patrick and Carol return to refreshments duty, glancing at each other from either end of the table, unable to wipe the smiles off their faces.

“I miss that,” Andi said, realizing too late she’d said it out loud.

“I think you’ll have it again,” Annabelle said, squeezing Andi’s hand. “Maybe with Max.” Andi’s chest ached. That was when she noticed Michelle watching her, frowning. Annabelle must have noticed too because she cleared her throat. “So, that leaves Clipper, three of Cinnamon’s kittens ... and Mr. Giggles.”

Andi nodded. “Yeah. And I keep thinking the party is winding down, but then Miss Mandie and Bruce show up with a case of wine, or Mrs. Thompson brings in cat-shaped cookies.”

Annabelle laughed. “Welcome home to Hope.”

And she was right. Twenty minutes later, a new group of people hustled in from the rain that was absolutely pouring at this point.

“Abby,” Andi called, waving to her as the woman wiped her feet and unzipped her *Star Trek* raincoat to reveal rainbow-striped overalls underneath.

“Hey, Andi!” She turned to the tall, bespectacled man next to her. “Have you met ...”

“Aaron,” he said, holding out a hand to shake hers. “Though, I think I remember meeting you ... there was lizard poop involved.”

“Dragon poop,” Andi and Abby said together. He grinned and winked at Abby and she chuckled.

“He knows the exact combo for pushing my buttons.” She raised an eyebrow at him and the smoldering look he sent her way made Andi shiver, remembering that look in Max’s eyes when he’d sat on her couch. Before ...

“He’s actually why we’re here,” she said and Andi snapped back to the moment.

“Oh?”

“I ... we were hoping to get a cat,” Aaron said, tucking Abby into his side.

Andi again contemplated Mr. Giggles, but she shuddered to think what he might try to do to Mr. Burns, Abby’s bearded dragon. It was too much of a risk.

“A kitten?”

“Uh, sure,” Aaron said, blinking at her. “Are there ...”

It took less than five minutes for Aaron to pick out the remaining boy kitten in Cinnamon’s litter.”

“Well, Burney,” Abby said, her face serious. “Now’s the moment of truth. What do you want to name him?”

Aaron frowned at the kitten, thinking. “What about Thomas Moore?” Andi and Abby groaned. “No?”

“Why not Smithers to go with Mr. Burns?” Abby asked. Andi could tell by the way she was bouncing in her Chuck Taylors that *she* was excited about the idea.

“Then *I’ll* feel like I’m Mr. Burns every time I call him. ‘Here, Smithers.’ ‘Get in here, Smithers. Did you go on an Amazon shopping spree while I was sleeping?’ See?”

Abby sighed. “So you want to name him after a dead writer?”

“Well, I *am* an English teacher,” Aaron chuckled.

“What about Homer?” Andi asked. They both turned to look at her. “Dead poet *and* someone Mr. Burns could rope into his diabolical plans.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, nodding.

“I like it,” Abby said. She hugged Andi and then turned to Aaron. “And Homer would *totally* go on an Amazon shopping spree while you were sleeping.”

The party was starting to thin out and Andi was on the professional-grade version of cloud nine. The last two of Cinnamon's kittens had been adopted by Reverend Anderson and his wife who were now empty nesters.

"I'm hoping having kittens around will discourage him from making the Confounding Carolers full-time," Mrs. Anderson muttered to Andi. "Glenda already has them roped in as Cupid Carolers for Valentine's Day. But the madness has to stop somewhere. I'm hoping by the time the kittens come home to us in April I'll be able to keep him busy until Christmas."

"Good luck with that," Andi chuckled. Rev wasn't known for being able to sit still. Having two new kittens might help though.

The biggest surprise of the night was while they were starting to clean up, the door opened and a tall man with silver-streaked dark hair came in. He was wearing the uniform of one of the commercial fishermen and he looked nervous as he swept his knit cap off his head.

"Hi," Andi said, smiling up at him.

"Ma'am," he said, nodding at her. He stood like he was ex-military and Andi was strongly reminded of Max. *Maybe in ten years*. That thought stung. Would she even get to see Max in ten years? Something about Max not coming to the open house had been rubbing against Andi like sandpaper all night. "I'm P.J. Willis." That name. She'd heard it before. Miss Mandie had mentioned him.

"You work for the Whorleys, right?" Andi asked.

He nodded. "I was wondering ... I saw a gal walking a German Shepherd around town the other day and when I asked around, they said this open house thing was happening tonight and he was at the shelter ... I swear, he looked just like my old Jack. I lost him five years ago and I just ... I wondered if ..."

"He's still here," Andi said. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

She went back to cleaning up the pet plaza area while P.J. and Clipper played out in the side yard. They were both soaked, but she could see P.J. smiling through the window and Clipper was bounding around, happier than she'd seen him since Sarge was adopted.

Both of them were smiling when he handed back the paperwork and headed back out with Clipper by his side.

"A happy ending," Annabelle said, coming to stand next to Andi. Andi nodded and she felt Annabelle's head on her shoulder. The sound of hissing filled the air and they turned in unison to see Mr. Giggles' kennel starting to vibrate again.

"Well, almost," Andi said. *But that's life, isn't it?* The thought was bitter, but it stayed with her as they finished cleaning up.

Charlotte arrived for the night shift just as the support group members were leaving. And Annabelle went to fill her in on the party's success.

"Thank you so much for all your help tonight," Andi said as they said their goodbyes. Jordan paused at the door and clapped Andi on the shoulder.

“You’re almost there. Just one left, right?”

Andi nodded, words finally forming for what she’d wanted to say to Jordan. “We would have never been able to do it ... *I* would never have been able to do it this month if it wasn’t for you and the support group.” And then she hugged Jordan.

When they pulled apart, Jordan was studying her. “So, what’s next for you, Andi?” she asked. “You’ve gotten almost all the pets adopted. The memorial bench for Brandon is happening. What do you want to do now?”

Andi blinked at her. “I ...” Jordan just waited, smiling at her with that easy, friendly smile. Not expecting anything, but with her undivided attention on her, caring what Andi was going to say. Andi paused and thought. What *did* she want? If she was being honest. She wanted Max. She’d wanted him since she’d seen him standing in the aisle at Bumble’s staring down at fallen cans, blushing when she claimed his *Playboy*. She waited for the guilt to consume her with the thought. For sense to win out, for logic to return. For the mantra of, *you had your shot at happiness with Brandon, and it’s over. And you had your shot with Max and you ended it when you went your separate ways.*

But, instead, Agnes Redding’s words rang out, in her head. “*Only an idiot would turn down a good thing because it was more than they thought they could get.*” She wanted Max Lyons. Even if it meant spending the rest of her life being a “spare vet” in her hometown. If she had Max to share it with,

she could handle anything else that came her way from boredom to life-threatening situations.

Jordan winked at her. “You know what you want. You just have to sip some of that kindness you give to everyone around you,” she nodded over at Michelle who was sweeping the floor in the pet plaza. Jordan met Andi’s gaze. “And ask for what you want.” Jordan grinned. “And keep bringing the good ideas in. Without you, I doubt we’d ever have an assistive animal program in town. When you have time, maybe this next week, I’d love to talk to you about a therapy pet program for veterans.”

Andi smiled, thinking of Max and Sarge and her heart was so full she could feel tears in her eyes. “Yes. Let’s do it.” She’d fight Doc Simmons tooth and nail to get that program and he could cut her salary to the bone if he was worried about the damn budget.

She was still smiling when she was pulling her coat on.

“I know that smile,” Charlotte chuckled from behind the desk. Andi looked up and Charlotte waggled her eyebrows at her. “You got some. And you’re thinking about getting some more. Am I right?”

Andi’s face was on fire. “What? No, I ...” She had been thinking about Max, but for once, her thoughts were completely innocent. Well, almost.

“It’s just us girls here,” Charlotte continued, waving a hand around. “I’ll bet it was from Sergeant Tall-Dark-and-Serious. Tell me, is he just a beast between the sheets?”

“Ready to go, Andi,” Michelle snapped, heading for the door. “We need to go home.”

Charlotte frowned, watching the door close behind Michelle. She spun in her chair to look up at Andi. “Does that girl have something against you getting some?”

“Something like that,” Annabelle muttered, coming to stand next to Andi. “When’s she leaving?”

Andi joined Michelle outside. “Well, that went pretty well,” she said, hoping to diffuse Michelle before she exploded into a crying, screaming bomb on the sidewalk.

“Did you sleep with Max?” Michelle asked.

Andi’s first instinct was to deny it. *Spare her feelings. She’s Brandon’s sister.* But this instinct was almost immediately eclipsed by Andi’s frayed nerves, the letdown she felt that Max hadn’t made it, the worry she still felt for Mr. Giggles’ fate, the constant guilt for her feelings for Max and Brandon, and her steadily growing annoyance with Michelle’s judgment. “Yes.”

Michelle whirled around to face her. “You cheated on my brother?”

“No,” Andi snapped. “I didn’t cheat. It happened the day before you got here.”

“How could you?” Michelle was starting to cry again, but Andi stood her ground.

“Michelle, I loved your brother. I loved him so much. But he’s been gone for almost a year. I wasn’t ready to let him go

before, but ... stop.” Michelle sniffled, but her sobs paused and Andi forced herself not to roll her eyes. She’d had a feeling that the sobs were performative, but she pressed on, holding Michelle by the shoulders and staring into her eyes, forcing her to look at her. “But knowing your brother as well as you did, do you really think he’d want you *or* me to spend the rest of our lives without him, crying and being lonely and hurting and wishing we’d died with him?”

Michelle looked like Andi had slapped her.

Her face started to crumple again and Andi almost lost her nerve, but something inside steadied her and for the briefest moment, she swore she could feel Brandon’s hand on her back. “We have to keep living, Michelle. We have to put the rocks down. Or they’re going to crush us. I want you to be happy. I saw you with Zane tonight.” She was blushing now, her sobs again turning to sniffles. “I’ve known you almost as long as I knew Brandon. You’re smart, and fun, and you just need to find your feet again. I’m doing the same thing. I kind of hoped we could do it together.”

Michelle sniffed and looked down. “I’m ... I’m sorry, Andi. I know I’ve been ...”

“Hell?” Andi asked.

Michelle nodded. “I just ... I’m so angry.” She jerked her gaze back up to meet Andi. “One stupid accident completely destroyed my world.”

“I know,” Andi said, nodding. “But being angry about something we can’t change isn’t a rock that’s going to help us

get up the hill every morning.” She expected Michelle to say something hurtful or glare at her or start crying again. But, instead, she sagged where she stood and Andi pulled her into a hug. “We’re going to be ok,” she whispered, kissing the top of Michelle’s head. “Everything’s going to be ok.” She realized as they were walking home how much she’d said those two sentences in the last few days. To pets in her exam rooms, to Jenna in the hospital, to Sage in her coat, to Michelle. “*Serve yourself the same kindness,*” Jordan said. *Everything is going to be ok*, she thought as they walked. And as they walked through the square in silence, Andi saw a shooting star overhead.

Goodbye, Brandon, she thought. *I’ll always love you. Don’t worry. I’ll look after Michelle. We miss you.* And then she let her own tears come. Her vision was blurry, but with Michelle by her side, they made it home.

Max

“Well?” His mom stood in the doorway to the kitchen drying her hands on a towel. He knew she was trying to remain neutral, but he could see the lines of worry at the corners of her eyes. He hated that he’d put them there. Well, Gray had to bear *some* of the responsibility. He set his phone down on the coffee table, still a little shocked by the call he’d just had. She came around to sit down on the couch next to him. “Well?” she repeated.

“They want me to fly out from Seattle first thing in the morning.” He looked up at her. “I’m going back to the Army, Mom. I ... I’m going to be a drill sergeant.”

She was crushing him in a hug by the time he’d finished speaking. “Sweetie, I’m so happy for you. I know this is what you want. But I’m going to miss you.” There were tears on her cheeks when she pulled back from him.

“Mom?”

She waved him off. “Don’t make fun of me.”

“Well, I don’t have a death wish,” he laughed.

She swiped at her face, still grinning. “It was nice to have you home, even if it was just for a little bit. But, Max,” she squeezed his hand. “All I want for you is to be happy and fulfilled. And if this is going to do it, then I’m with you one hundred and ten percent, Drill Sergeant Lyons.” She chuckled. “You’ll have to make your recruits roar or something when you tell them to, just because you can.” She sighed as she got to her feet. “Well, then tonight is a send-off meal. After tonight, you’ll be back to eating in the mess with the rest of the Army. And you’re going to miss my cooking.”

“Well that’s a given,” he called as she bustled into the kitchen. He sat still, waiting for the excitement to hit him. *I’m back in the Army.* Not in deployment, but still ... *This is what I want.* The thought was almost stubborn, defiant. It was what he wanted, but it wasn’t the *only* thing he wanted. *But all good things come to an end.* Sarge hopped up onto the couch beside him and put his head on Max’s right knee and sighed. “Me too, buddy.” He patted Sarge’s side. “Me too.”

“Oh, were you supposed to do that setup for the Snow Ball today? I can call Jordan Bumble and tell her you’re not going to be there so you can have time to pack and ...”

“No, I’ll go,” he said quickly. He needed to at least tell Andi, face to face. A part of him thought that maybe it would be better to leave her a letter. He was starting to realize why Andi had left him a letter all those years ago. *But she’s not your Andi anymore. We’re not the same people anymore.* Then why was the thought of telling her so hard?



ANDI

Andi volunteered to set up all the chairs and tables in the square for the fresh air and so she wouldn't have to choke on the fumes from the snow machines. But also so she'd be able to see Max coming.

Amelia skulked by her and Andi was immediately suspicious. "It's daylight hours," she called to her sister. Amelia paused and then looked around, pretending not to see Andi. "Over here, you dork. I can see you and I'm not invisible, Bedelia."

It was her kryptonite and Andi was happy to use it in a "break glass in case of emergency" situation. Amelia glanced around again and then made a beeline for Andi.

"What?" she hissed.

"It's daylight hours," Andi said with a grin. "What are you doing out here?"

"Nothing," Amelia said, attempting an innocent tone that only deepened Andi's suspicion.

"Uh-huh," Andi said. "You wouldn't be ... plotting, would you?"

"No idea why you would ever get that idea," Amelia said.

"Andi," Max's voice distracted Andi and she heard Amelia jog away when she turned to look at him. Her heart was

pounding in her chest. He was walking toward her, hands in the pockets of his open bomber jacket over his faded jeans and work boot. He was smiling. It was a nervous smile, but it wasn't the stoic look she'd gotten used to as his baseline since he'd gotten home.

“Hey,” Andi said, wanting to smack herself in the face for sounding so breathy. *Play it cool and look for your opening*, her brain told her. *You have to think ahead, Andarchy*. She didn't want to screw this up.

“You pulled chair and table duty, huh?” Max asked, looking around.

“Yeah, short straw,” she said. *A white lie. Perfect start*. He studied the half-assed layout plan Mrs. Abbott had passed her while the Wild Oats set about the important task of double-checking all of Miss Mandie's mixed drink recipes. “So ... did you get the guys sent home in style?”

“Oh yeah,” he chuckled. “Mom was nice about it, but she almost started vacuuming around them while we were still standing in the living room. Happy to have them visit, but ...”

“She likes a clean barracks,” Andi said.

“Exactly.”

“So ... what's the order of events for the night?” Max asked as they set up the tables next to the traffic cones blocking off the Snow Ball's exterior perimeter.

Andi chuckled. “There really isn't one. Apparently, the theme the Wild Oats decided on was ‘homecoming’. So, there

are refreshments inside and a dance floor and places for people to sit and eat out here.”

Max paused and looked at her. “That sounds *entirely* too tame for a Hope event.”

Andi shrugged. “Well, there are *really* obnoxious fake snow machines inside that seem to work about thirty percent of the time, and I heard talk about naughty Pictionary stations out here.”

“Now that’s starting to sound like a Hope event.”

When they’d set up the final table, Andi cleared her throat. *This was the moment. Tell him now. Max, I’m in love with you. I want ... would you be willing to give us another shot? I know I don’t deserve it, but it’s here in front of us. And I’m afraid that if we don’t go for it, I’ll always wonder what might have been.*

“Andi, I need to tell you something,” Max said, beating her to the punch.

That’s what you get for spending too much time planning, she thought. But, what if he was about to tell her the same thing. Was that why he was smiling now? He looked nervous, but ... happy.

“Ok,” Andi said. “And I have something to tell you. But you go first.”

“No, it’s ok, you go,” he said.

“No, you. Mine can wait.”

He dropped his gaze to her feet and scratched the back of his neck. "I'm ... I've been offered a post at Fort Benning in Georgia as a drill sergeant for new recruits. And ... I said yes. I'm leaving tonight on the ferry and I fly out to Georgia in the morning."

Andi felt like someone had just knocked all the wind out of her. He was leaving. Again. And then she felt like an idiot.

"Andi?" Max was still standing in front of her.

She ignored the pain in her chest and forced herself to smile. "That's amazing, Max." Her voice sounded winded. Maybe his words had *actually* knocked the wind out of her.

"What ... what did you have to say?" Max asked.

Andi shook her head. "Nothing ... I ... Please be safe. And ... congratulations." She needed a miracle. She needed a way out of this moment.

"Hey, Doc, can you come in for a moment? Bruce finished off my martini olives and now his stomach is making these weird gurgling sounds."

Miss Mandie to the rescue. She cleared her throat.

"Coming." Her eyes were filling with tears, but she tried to keep her face happy for Max. "I better go see what's up." Before she could second guess herself, she wrapped her arms around Max and hugged him. "I guess our beginner's luck ran out, huh?" She hadn't meant to say it out loud. She felt him release her and she turned and headed inside, her vision blurring as she headed up the ramp into Town Hall. At the

moment, the only thing she could be thankful for was that he had gone first and she wasn't at the moment, pouring her heart out to a man on his way off the island.

She bumped into someone. "Whoa, you ok?" It was Jordan. Buddy's head found Andi's hand at her side. But she was crumbling. She was collapsing internally, again. And then Jordan's arms were around her. "I've got you. It's ok. Everything's going to be ok."

Max

He should have made her go first. Andi was terrible at hiding her emotions. It was one of the things he loved the most about her. She couldn't hide how she was feeling if her life depended on it. It was something that had worried him whenever he thought about Andi. She was tough, but the wrong kind of guy could hurt her because she wore her heart on her sleeve. He braced himself and rode out the painful twist in his heart. He was doing the leaving this time. Not that it mattered. And some other guy; good, bad, or ugly was going to waltz into the animal hospital with a sick poodle and a dazzling smile and sweep his Andi off her feet. *Brandon's Andi*.

He headed home and tried to focus on logistics. He'd packed before heading over to help with the Snow Ball. His mom and Sarge were going to fly out to Georgia once he had his housing on base squared away.

"Do you want me to ... take the ferry over with you tonight?" she asked over mac and cheese. He'd decided the menu for his last home-cooked meal with his mom for a while. And there was just something about the way the mac and

cheese had tasted before, that he wanted to feel now. Comfort food. He just wished such a thing existed for the mind and soul.

“No, it’s ok, Mom.” He gave her his best attempt at a smile. “I’m twenty-six. I should be old enough to ride it on my own.” She flicked a piece of macaroni at him and he ducked. He turned to see it smear the wall with cheese sauce just above a spackling patch he’d put on but not painted over. “I’ll fix that when I’ve got some leave time to get back here.”

“Oh, that old wall will wait,” he said, getting up and taking their plates. “It’s the other stuff that won’t.” She’d said it under her breath, but he’d heard it clearly. And he remembered what Andi had whispered when they’d hugged. He’d been so caught up in the feel of her, the desire to kiss her, pick her up and throw her over his shoulder or sweep her up into his arms and ask her to tell him to stay, like she once had ... he’d almost missed it. *“I guess our beginner’s luck ran out, huh?”*

It had been something they’d heard so much during high school when people would see them around town holding hands or catch them kissing.

“Beginner’s luck.”

“Young love. Lucky to have found it so early.”

“To be young and lucky again.”

They’d heard it so often, they’d started to use it as an excuse by senior year for when things were so easy for them while other friend couples broke up and started dating other people.

They'd stayed together through it all. *Maybe it was just too long? We're different people now.*

And then the sun was down and it was time to head to the ferry. His mom and Sarge accompanied him through town, skirting the Snow Ball festivities that were gearing up in the town square. He smiled when he saw the little bonfires, set again with swan-butt-up, but this time set as light and warmth against the cold mist that was falling around them. It was a nice touch. He just wished the memory of that night with Andi wasn't so painful. He could never understand how he could be professional, controlled, and mature in every other area of his life, but when it came to Andi, the jealous, rash, and ... vulnerable man inside him would surface. *Because you didn't want to lose her again. And a hell of a lot of good that did for you.*

He hugged his mom and Sarge until the last possible moment and then he headed up the ramp to board the ferry. He stood at the rail, waving to them illuminated by the light shining down on the *Welcome to Hope Island* sign until they were just specks in the distance. He sighed.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

He turned to see Jordan and Buddy standing down the rail from him. “Hey, Jordan.”

She had her head cocked to one side as she approached. “You know, if you just wanted to avoid the Snow Ball, you could have stayed home. I wouldn't have sent a retrieval team to bring you in.”

Max smiled. “No, I ... I got a post down at Fort Benning.”

Jordan’s eyebrows disappeared into her hair. “Georgia? Wow. Congratulations. What’s the post?”

“A drill sergeant,” Max said. He tried to recapture the enthusiasm he’d felt when he’d told his mom it was happening, but at the moment, he was having a hard enough time keeping the smile on his face. He motioned to her. “Why are you on the ferry tonight? Are *you* hiding out from the Snow Ball?”

She shook her head. “Nah. Tonight was the last support group event anyway. I’m mailing everyone their completion certificates. And I got a call from the VA hospital in Seattle where I work. A couple of my patients are having a hard time on their new meds.” She shrugged. “I know time is arbitrary and cyclical and basically an arbitrary human construct, but this time of year can be really hard on people.” Max nodded. “There’s so much expectation, hopes are so high, but they’re fragile. One missed day, one *bad* day, and they’re crushed. That’s why I wanted to start the support group for January. I figure, if people can start the year being kind to themselves, it can change the whole year for them. Forgive early and often.” She leaned on the rail and turned to look at him. “So, are you excited to be going back in?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I loved being in the Army. I ... the support group helped get me through January, Jordan. It really did. I was ... it was hard being home after ...” he nodded down at his leg.

“So you’re excited to be going back as a drill sergeant in Georgia?” Jordan’s question was just friendly, and casual. But it cut deeper with him than just a question to pass the time on the crossing.

“I want to be back in the game,” he said. “Not sitting in the stands.”

Jordan nodded. “I know what you mean.” She shook her head and stared out at the dark water past the ferry’s running lights. “I’m actually kind of worried, Max.”

“Why?”

“I’m leaving behind a lot of people on Hope that still need someone to listen to them. A lot of vets that were just starting to come out of their shells and talk. And here I am leaving them behind. You know? It just makes me wonder, what I’m walking away from.”

Max *did* know what she was talking about. But he tried to keep his mind off of Andi and focus on Jordan. “Do you have to leave?”

She shrugged. “Do any of us *have* to do anything outside of the service? No, not really. And even there, we can quit. But, I have people on the mainland that I’ve promised to help. And I can’t be in two places at the same time.”

Max understood this too.

She blew out a breath and turned to look at him. “You think you’ll like being a drill sergeant?”

He shrugged. “I told you I liked basic training.”

She nodded. “You won’t mind it when it’s your whole life until you retire? Recruits in, you get them through, and then ten weeks later, there’s another set? Do this five to six times in a year and then repeat?”

He frowned.

She grinned. “It’s only a forty-minute ferry ride, so I’m going to have to be more blunt than I would like to be. Why do you *want* to be a drill sergeant?”

“I want to serve,” Max said simply.

She nodded. “And be on the field, not in the stands.” He nodded. “Ok, what if you could be back on the field, but instead of being a player, or an offense coach, which is basically what a drill sergeant and everyone above him is, you could be a defense coach?”

He frowned. “I’m not following.”

She laughed. “I suck at football metaphors. Look, Max, I’ve been watching you this month. You have the ability to draw the best out of the people around you. Why do you think your team members instead of going home to their families for a week, home to their girls or guys, instead of going to Disneyland, decided to take a ferry out to this cracked pot of an island to see their Sarge? Huh? And Andi? People tell me she was the walking dead for the last six months. You came home, and she almost believes she can breathe fire. You do that, Max. Just by being there. By listening, by trying to serve. Have you ever thought about being a counselor for veterans?” He opened his mouth to argue, but Jordan wasn’t done. “You

have the combat background. You have the field experience. I can tell by looking at you that you've seen the fire, and the blood, and the bones. That you've saluted and given the finger to death on the same day. And it's serving a population that is often forgotten ... like a ... used shell casing once it's fulfilled its purpose." It was so eerie to hear Jordan repeat his own thoughts back to him. She clapped him on the shoulder. "Just something to think about."

He'd felt so sure ... or at least, a lot *more* sure when he'd gotten on the ferry than he did at the moment. He could still see the plan for this transition that he'd written out for himself. It was on a page of the notebook in his bag. He could still visualize the bullet points and steps. But now? A veteran's counselor? Six groups of new recruits, year after year. *Basic training until I retire?* The faces of his team members as he talked to them, seeing calm and understanding settle over them as they understood he would be with them. But he couldn't call them and talk about what was going through his head. There was too much to explain. He thought of Andi. *Yeah, Andi who'd been crying as she left him again. "I guess our beginner's luck has run out, huh?"* The words cut fresh wounds in his chest. He glanced over at Jordan. She was staring out at the water again, he had a feeling by design. Like she was waiting for him to make up his mind about something.

"So, when you have a big decision to make, what do *you* do?" he asked.

"I just always make sure I'm running *toward* something instead of away from something else. And I like to weigh the

outcomes.”

“What do you mean?”

She turned to look at him and her smile was a little too knowing. “I look at all the possible outcomes of doing something or not doing it. Then I decide if I can live with the ones that could happen if I don’t take a chance versus the ones that could happen if I do. It’s pretty easy from there. Listening to a little music never hurts either.” With that, she winked at him and moved down the deck to buy a cup of coffee. She brought one back for him and she and Buddy settled themselves on the bench behind him. He stood at the rail and thought.

Through everything that had happened since coming back and how between Jordan and Andi, he’d started to go out to events, see people, reforge friendships with people like Zane, pranks with Andi, time with his mom, even the kid, Jackson. Life had happened. Living had happened. And suddenly the thought of Georgia and basic for the rest of his life *didn’t* feel like living. But, being a counselor? Spending time with other vets, hearing their stories, supporting them? That had been his favorite part of being deployed. Even the boring missions, just riding in the Humvee with Wang or Curtis or Jax and shooting the breeze, talking about life.

And then there was Andi. And as he thought about everything, one question came back to him over and over. *What would she have said if she’d gone first?* And the answer to his situation became so clear and simple that he wanted to

laugh. No matter what it was, he wanted to hear what she had to say. The ferry docked in Anacortes and Jordan came to meet him at the rail.

“Well, Sergeant Lyons,” she held out her hand to him. “It’s been a pleasure. I hope I’ll get to see you around.” But he didn’t shake her hand. He pulled her into a hug.

“Thank you, Jordan. Sorry, Chief Bumble.” She chuckled and they broke apart.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going home,” he said with a nod. “I have some questions I need answered.”

“Please disembark. We’ll be departing back to Hope Island in fifteen minutes,” a passing deckhand said.

“Oh, I’m taking the ferry back,” Max said quickly, reaching for his wallet. “I need to get a return ticket.”

The deckhand muttered darkly and this time Max couldn’t make out all of it, but he distinctly heard, “time wasters”.

“I don’t think you’ll be sorry,” Jordan said. She pulled her business card out of her wallet and handed it to him. “Give me a call if you decide you want to look into becoming a veteran counselor. I really do think you’d be a great one.”

“I will,” he said, taking her card. “Thanks, Jordan. For everything.”

Jordan smiled. “You two are so wrapped up with giving to the people around you. My only hope is that you’ll fill her cup

and she'll fill yours with the kindness you both need. Alright? So look after each other."

"But," Max started to say, "how can you be so sure she'll even ..."

Jordan just laughed and waved. "Music, my friend. Listen to some music on the way home. Something familiar and then you'll understand."

When Jordan was gone, he bought his return ticket and sat down on a bench. *What if she's still not ready?* "Outcomes," he muttered to himself. "Ok. So, I go to Georgia and she moves on and finds someone else, or she doesn't, and I see her for maybe a few days when I have vacation and come home." He didn't like the thought of either of those outcomes. "Ok. Or I stay in Hope and I tell her I love her. Either she tells me she's still not ready. And I tell her it's ok. And be her friend. Maybe one day she'll be ready and she'll want me. Or," he felt his heart picking up speed. "I tell her and ..." he thought of her face when she'd wanted to tell him something she'd never gotten the chance to say. *"I guess our beginner's luck has run out, huh?"*

He pulled his earbuds out of his bag and connected them to his phone. It was a long shot and he was sweating just thinking about it. But, for Andi, he was sure as hell going to try.

Andi

“Hurry up,” Annabelle called outside her bedroom door.

“Everyone else is dressed and ready to go. We look like a *Freaky Friday* swap version of the class of 2014 out here. We just need our homecoming queen.”

“This dress is so soft,” she heard Michelle say. “It almost makes me forget that it’s January and we’re all going out in midriff crops. I forgot 2014 was the last time it was in fashion.”

Jenna snorted. “And it was a bad idea back then too. No bras and crop tops. Add in this slit that goes to my hoo-ha and I should just introduce myself as Mrs. Pneumonia since that’s the only thing getting inside me tonight.” Andi chuckled and she could hear the other three girls laughing and possibly falling on the stairs. Ok, the eggnog pre-gaming was probably a bad idea. But Jenna had shown up at the house with it right after her encounter with Max and then Jordan and Andi had wanted to drink. Luckily she was tapering off of her buzz and she’d had the presence of mind to chase it with ibuprofen and

a lot of water. *Thinking ahead, Sergeant ... sorry Drill Sergeant Buzzkill.*

Andi glanced at herself in the mirror over her dresser and tried to smile. She was wrapped in her toga-wrap style dress with gold accents that she'd worn senior year to prom with Max. It wouldn't matter since he wouldn't be there anyway. "Let's just go have fun," she said to her reflection. She smiled as hard as she could, hoping she looked like she meant it and the other girls would believe her.

The other three tottered their way down the sidewalk in Andi's high heels and three of her homecoming and prom dresses from previous years. She smiled, watching them laugh and hold onto each other to keep from falling. Andi, again, thinking ahead, had picked the dress that came with white Sketchers. She smiled remembering Max in his white tux when he'd thrown the jacket off, her heart beating as their song had played. The careful choreography they'd practiced over and over, always ending in laughs and kisses ... The memory was a fresh stab to her gut, but she breathed through it and looked up at the stars. She didn't expect to see another shooting star. The one from the night before had felt like Brandon, waving goodbye. That final step had been how she'd found the courage to say what she wanted to say to Max. She shook her head. And then she never got the chance to say it.

The Snow Ball was in full swing when they wound through the bonfires heading for the front door. She'd been lucky enough to have Jordan help her get them lit and the swan butts arranged before Esther caught them. Of course, this time,

Esther wasn't on the planning committee and the Wild Oats had given her thumbs up all the way around for the swan butts.

Inside, they headed for the refreshments table where a very bored Mrs. Abbott was standing guard over the non-alcoholic punch bowl.

"Here to relieve you," Andi said, grinning at the woman.

"Not sure how you knew I had to pee, but I'm not going to question it. Have fun girls," she called, tucking something into her purse.

Andi chuckled and Jenna looked at her. "What?"

"It's probably pointless for us to be guarding this now. Mrs. Abbott just slipped a flask back into her purse."

"Let me see," Michelle said, ladling punch into her cup. Andi smiled while they all watched Michelle knock the punch back.

"Well?" Annabelle asked.

"Cherry Kool-Aid is definitely a *note* in that concoction, but I also distinctly tasted rum, peppermint schnapps, and Fireball."

"Ew," Andi said. "We'd probably be doing everyone a favor if we just swapped this out."

"We'll help!" Jenna said, jumping in to help them carry the huge punch bowl into the kitchen.

"Oh, and everyone, be on your guard tonight," Andi said.

“Why?” Michelle asked as they bucket-brigaded gallon jugs of Kool-Aid from the fridge to the counter.

“Just a feeling,” Andi said with a sigh. “I saw Amelia skulking around the square today. She wouldn’t say what she was doing, but she and her friends have been trying to figure out a senior class prank and they might think that picking a Wild Oats-hosted party is a smarter idea than a regular town event.”

“Well, they’re not wrong,” Annabelle muttered.

They carried the fresh bowl of punch back to the table, but then the other three just stood next to Andi, watching.

“You three can go dance. I can watch a bowl of red sugar water on my own.”

“But-” Michelle started to say.

“Hi Michelle,” Zane said, emerging from the crowd right behind her. “You wanna dance?” Michelle froze, her eyes wide.

“Yes, she does,” Andi said. “Take her away.” When they’d disappeared back into the crowd, she rounded on Jenna and Annabelle. “And then there were two.”

A fast song started and Jenna sighed. “Annabelle, may I have this dance?”

“Oh, this dance is going to have *you*, girl,” Annabelle said, grabbing Jenna’s hand. She looked back at Andi. “See? We’re going.”

“Well keep going,” Andi chuckled, waving the punch bowl ladle at them. She stood and watched all the couples of Hope dancing on the floor or sitting with their knees touching on the edges of the dance floor and Andi smiled. As much as it hurt, she was going to be ok. Everything was going to be ok. And maybe, if she was very lucky, she might get one more chance to tell Max how she ...

Guitar chords faded in, and then a baseline with a single cowbell hit. *No. No, Amelia.* “Please tell me this isn’t your senior prank,” she felt her face starting to turn red as the crowd turned to look at her. And then Jenna and Annabelle were running back to get her.

“We’re here to give you some relief,” Annabelle yelled. “Or at least, he is!” They shoved Andi forward just as the lyrics to the old Eels song started and then she was standing in the middle of the open dance floor and she could feel the eyes of almost everyone in town watching her and the man in the brown bomber jacket standing by the DJ’s table. He turned around, mouthing the words along with the song and her heart was in her throat. She saw him start to sway with the song and just like riding a bike, just like kissing him, just like remembering how to laugh, and how to cry in joy, and how to live, the steps came back to her.

“That I was made for you and you were made for me,” she sang along as she danced toward him.

“The road in front of us is long and it is wide, we’ve got beginner’s luck, we’ve got it on our side.”

Rare, beautiful, innocent, and all-or-nothing beginner's luck. He caught her and she locked eyes with him as he spun her. "Balance out," they breathed together and he smiled and she laughed, feeling tears spilling out of the corners of her eyes.

"Let's have some fun," he whispered. And then they were on the ground and he was swinging her behind his back. They were singing along and laughing and the world around them disappeared.

She met his gaze when the instrument break started.

"Do you trust me," he asked. She saw the worry lines at the corner of his mouth.

"Always," she said. They took a deep breath. "One, two, three ..."

And then she was up, sitting on his shoulder as he held her hands. The crowd went wild as the song came to an end. There was a rumble, which she thought was just the crowd, but as soon as she climbed down from Max's shoulder, every door to the main room flew open and an avalanche of plastic ball pit balls flooded in. There were screams but everyone looked like they were too sauced to make much of a run for it. Andi turned to squint at the front windows. Elf hats. Half a dozen of them. And she saw Amelia's face pressed to the glass.

"Damn it, Bedelia," Andi laughed when the wave finally settled and the room was buried up to their waists in ball pit balls. Around them, people were laughing and starting to swim

around. She was still holding Max's hand and she felt him pull her close.

"She did learn from the best," he said, cupping her cheek in his hand. "Andi, I ..."

"Come with me," she said quickly, starting to wade through the balls toward the kitchen, still holding his hand. "I'd like to talk to you without the fear of slipping on a ball and taking you down with me every second."

"Well, that would be memorable."

They pushed their way into the kitchen and managed to force the door shut again with only fifty or sixty balls spilling in behind them. Finally, she turned to look at him.

"Max, there's something I need to tell you." He nodded, waiting and watching. Stoic Max, but there was something hopeful in his eyes. "A month ago, I thought my life was over. And then you came along. Again. A second chance I *never* thought I'd have. And I'm in love with you. And ... I'm sorry I wasn't ready before. But I am now. And I don't want to lose you again. Ever." It hadn't taken her as long to say it out loud as it had in her head and now she held her breath. Luckily, she didn't have to hold it long. Max had her in his arms and was kissing her before she had time to blink. He lifted her and set her on the countertop. She was losing herself in the kiss, trying to remember if she'd locked the door and trying to figure out how fast she could get out of the dress she was wearing. Then he ended the kiss and stepped back, still keeping her face cupped in his hands.

“Andi, a month ago, I thought *my* life was over. Everything I’d worked for was over before I was thirty. But . . . that’s just a job. I can find the things about it I loved, right here on the island. And more than that, I can find a *life* right here.” He put her hand on his chest, right over his heart. “I knew when I met you that I’d won the lottery. I almost threw that ticket away twice.”

“I did it the first time,” Andi said.

He shook his head. “No. That time was my fault too. You were being practical. And I didn’t argue. And you even tried to keep our friendship going. I had a chance to prove to you that I still loved you. You sent me a birthday card and I didn’t write you back. That was on me too. But, beginner’s luck is so rare. High school sweethearts, kindred pranksters, I just want to grow old with you, Andi. Until we’re those eighty-year-olds on the news pranking teenagers. What do you think?”

“I think Hope better watch out because Andarchy and Sergeant Max Buzzkill are back in town and at their full strength,” Andi said, pulling him into her and wrapping her legs around him. She could feel the animal inside him fighting against his control and she couldn’t resist. “And I’d still like you to be *my* drill sergeant.” His breath was ragged as he kissed her hard bucking his hips against her.

“I think we could arrange that,” he breathed, moving to her neck.

There was pounding on the kitchen door. “Hey, are there loose balls in there?” Miss Mandie slurred. “We’re trying to

round them up.”

Andi grinned up at Max, and rolled her hips against him. “No ‘unrounded up’ balls in here!” She yelled back. And then she and Max lost it.

“You’re right,” he laughed. “This town doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Just wait until our cubs are big enough to be our flying monkeys of prank-destruction,” Andi said, smiling up at him.

“Our ... cubs?” His eyes were wide and the smile on his face took her breath away.

“Well, yeah,” Andi said, wrapping her legs tighter around him. “You’re a Lyons. I assumed you’d want a pride.” And then he was kissing her hard and with each kiss, he was wiping out all the time lost, all the sadness and wishing she was dead, all the pain of the last year. It was a new year. And that meant a fresh start and beginner’s luck for everyone, but especially for them.

Epilogue

Andi

“So, I don’t know where you and Sergeant Hottie disappeared to last night, but I heard there were some ... loose balls involved,” Annabelle said, grinning at Andi over her coffee. Andi was exhausted, but she couldn’t stop smiling.

“Did you, now?” She downed more of her extra-large “Turn Your Head and Coffee” blend from De-Floured. *God bless Miss Mandie’s coffee-apothecary skills.*

“You’re not going to tell me?” Annabelle huffed. “Fine. Then I’ll just read the hickies on your neck. Hmmm ...” Andi tried to get away but Annabelle was way ahead of her in the caffeine arms race. “I see a health code violation in the Town Hall commercial kitchen ... yes, and ...” Andi squirmed out of Annabelle’s reach.

“Ok, ok. Can we just get to work? I know there are at least half a dozen appointments this morning.”

Annabelle was still grinning, but she held her hands up in surrender. “Fine. You’re right. Probably better for us to discuss your fridge-adjacent fornication over drinks tonight. Jenna and Michelle are in. You’re our wild card.”

Andi shrugged, turning away from her so she wouldn't see her blush. She bent down to check on Cinnamon and her growing kittens. "One drink. But, I've got something I have to do tonight."

"More like *someone*."

Mr. Giggles' hissed and they both turned to look at his kennel as the joy of the moment evaporated.

"Our last little fella," Andi said sadly. "I wish I could adopt him, but ..."

"Your house is already full of people who like their faces and belongings in their current, un-shredded state?" Andi nodded. Annabelle sighed. "I'd adopt him but I live in a shoebox and I think it might end up looking like a fight club with the two of us in there."

"What are we going to do? We can't just let him be shipped off to the mainland. Hope is all he's ever known. And ... the new shelter, people won't understand why he's this way." Andi chewed on her lip, thinking. "He's just one cat. Surely we could just keep him ..." But that wasn't a happy thought either. It was rare for Mr. Giggles to want to even come out of his carrier, let alone play or be petted. It broke Andi's heart to think of him spending the rest of his life, angry and alone. It would be even worse for him surrounded by strangers in a strange new place.

They were quiet as they listened to the kennel hiss and yowl. "Any ideas?" Andi asked.

Annabelle shook her head. “No. But this is Hope. It’s a new year. Well, technically it’s almost February, but hey,” she turned to look at Andi. “Love? Hearts and flowers? Surely someone would *love* to have a cat ... that wants to kill them in their sleep ...”

The jingle of the front door made them turn.

“Where the hell is everybody else?” Fred Welks growled, looking around the room. “I thought there was an open house today.”

“Hi, Mr. Welks,” Andi said, blinking at him. It was hard for her brain to accept what she was seeing. Mr. Welks was the town grump and besides coming out to fire his leftovers gleefully at the Out with the Mold fight, he was rarely seen at other town events. The thought of him turning up, two days late for the shelter’s open house party, and carrying what looked like a tray of chocolate cupcakes was something she definitely hadn’t had on her bingo card this morning. “Uh, the open house was on Friday.”

“Damn it, Eudora,” Mr. Welks muttered under his breath. “She told me it was today. I should have known better than to listen to her. Damn woman’s got squirrels where other people have brains.”

Andi cut her eyes to Annabelle in time to see her bite down on her lip to keep from laughing.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Welks,” Andi said. She expected him to just turn around and leave, but instead, he dropped his tray of

cupcakes on one of the chairs in the reception area and unwound the scarf around his neck.

“Well, I’m already here. No sense going home without a look. Let’s see these fur balls.”

“Oh,” Andi straightened up. “Uh, sure ... most of the pets have been adopted but ...” Mr. Welks didn’t wait for her to escort him. He found the door to the pet plaza and Andi and Annabelle had to leap out of the way as the door swung open, with such force Andi wondered if he’d kicked it open. “Uh ...” Mr. Welks marched down one side of the kennels, glancing from empty kennel, to empty kennel.

“Seems like you have lots of rooms to let,” he said with a snort.

“Oh, Doc Simmons wants to start a pet hotel,” Annabelle said quickly. “That’s why we had to get everyone adopted. He says Hope can’t support a shelter without ...”

“Simmons is a cheapskate and a quack,” Mr. Welks muttered, pausing at Cinnamon’s kennel. Andi had no idea what to say to that. Instead, she focused on his face, waiting to see the transformation she’d come to expect when people interacted with animals. But it didn’t come. He glared in at the kittens and huffed. “These ones all find a home?”

“Yes,” Annabelle said quickly. “All the kittens and Cinnamon ... the mother, too.”

“We’re just keeping them here until they’re old enough to go to their new homes,” Andi added, not sure what else to say.

Mr. Welks straightened up and turned to glare at the other set of kennels. Mr. Giggles' kennel caught his attention with the low-level growling coming from inside. Instead of avoiding it or staring at it from where he was like any sane person would, he marched over and glared in through the kennel's grated door. And then Andi saw it. Mr. Welks' face softened. "This the McAfee kid's old cat?"

"Uh ... yeah," Andi said.

He nodded. "I remember him. The McAfees live behind me. All that racket from the four kids ..." He shook his head. "The cat liked to climb the fence and break into my greenhouse." He scratched the stubble on his chin while he thought. "I did have fewer varmints going after my tomatoes those days though." The kennel stopped hissing and a moment later, Mr. Giggles' fluffy, white face appeared, just on the other side of the door. Andi held her breath. Beside her, Annabelle squeezed her hand. If Mr. Giggles took Mr. Welks' only remaining eye ... the thought of what the insurance company would say ... Mr. Welks leaned closer to the kennel and Andi started to hyperventilate when his long crooked nose pressed against the door.

"Mr. Welks," she said quickly. But it was too late. Mr. Giggles opened his mouth ... and a pink tongue lashed out, licking the tip of Mr. Welks' nose.

"I could use a good guard cat," Mr. Welks muttered. "And I'm partial to not having my hard work go to waste. The tomatoes in my greenhouse are looking good this year if I can

just keep the pests away.” He turned to glare at Andi and Annabelle. “Anyone claimed him yet?” Andi and Annabelle both shook their heads slowly. Andi wasn’t sure if she’d ever be able to speak again after the miracle playing out in front of her. Mr. Welks nodded. “Then I guess I’ll take him.” He reached up and opened the kennel and Andi and Annabelle jumped back. But instead of leaping onto Mr. Welks’ face, hissing and scratching, Mr. Giggles looked out at Fred and leaped into his arms. Andi caught a glimpse of Annabelle and saw that she wasn’t the only one standing there stupidly with her mouth hanging open.

“I’ll ... I’ll get the paperwork together,” Andi said quickly, fumbling to grab one of the adoption bags from Friday night. As Mr. Welks signed the papers, she watched in awe as Mr. Giggles nuzzled and rubbed against the sleeve of his coat.

“That’s about enough of that,” Mr. Welks muttered. Mr. Giggles stopped, but matched the old man glare-for-glare. Finally, the ghost of a smile crossed Mr. Welks’ face and he chuckled as he turned his attention back to the page in front of him. “He smells the greenhouse on me.” Mr. Welks looked up. “I grow catnip to keep the bugs down and I would always find this cat on his back, rubbing it on his face.” He shook his head and went back to filling out the form. “Now, as I recall the youngest McAfee kid named him something ridiculous like Tickle or something?” He glared at the cat and the cat glared back, almost daring Mr. Welks to say it.

“Mr. Giggles,” Annabelle said. She almost melted under the combined glares from the cat and Mr. Welks.

“Well, I’m just going to call him Mr. G.” The cat turned to look at him and Mr. Welks gave him a curt nod. The cat was still for a moment and then Mr. G returned the nod, dipping his head and mewling low in his throat.

As Mr. Welks and Mr. G left, Andi and Annabelle were quiet, still shell-shocked by what had just happened.

“Did ... did Mr. Giggles ... Mr. G’s meow just now ... sound like Mr. Welks ...”

“Muttering?” Andi asked. “Yeah.”

Annabelle shook her head. “People really are like their pets.”

Andi shrugged. “I think people look at animals and they see vulnerable versions of themselves and it makes even the biggest crank,” she nodded toward the door, “want to be kind.”

Andi was thankful Doc Simmons had allowed her to see patients on Sundays when she argued she was going to be paid to be there anyway. If it wasn’t for the constant parade of pets coming in and out for their appointments, the hospital would have felt pretty lonely with only Cinnamon and her kittens left.

“I miss them,” Annabelle said with a sigh, looking at the empty kennels.

“Me too,” Andi said, coming to stand next to her. She put a hand on Annabelle’s shoulder. “But I’m still going to need you to work your old magic and book the new appointments.”

Annabelle groaned and turned back to the computer.

“I hate this thing. If only Doc Simmons would just let us use Google or something to book appointments instead of this garbage software ... When is Shirley coming back from vacation anyway? ”

Andi shrugged. “I don’t know. She left a voicemail saying something had come up and she was extending her time off. She just said she’d call when she was ready to come back ...” Andi fell silent as she watched the two figures approaching the hospital’s front door. “Annabelle, are we ... are we witches?”

“I mean, sometimes you can be a real ...” Andi grabbed the sides of Annabelle’s head and turned her to look at the two people who had just reached the glass door. “Did ... did we summon them?”

Doc Simmons pulled the door open for Shirley and for what felt like the tenth time at least that day, Andi felt her jaw drop. Shirley had been holding Doc Simmons’ hand. She dropped it and stretched up on her patent leather pumps to peck him on the cheek before she bustled into the lobby.

“Hello, girls! Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year,” Andi said quickly.

“Happy New ... February,” Annabelle muttered. Andi kicked her foot under the desk.

“We’re just stopping by before we head out of town,” Shirley said in a rush, “But I thought this was in-person news, so I talked Dickie into coming in.” She smiled back at Doc

Simmons and then Andi saw Annabelle's jaw drop. "Well get in here, Dickie, and tell them!"

"Te-tell us what?" Andi asked, looking between Doc and Shirley.

Doc Simmons was struggling to maintain the stern professionalism he'd brought out every time he went toe-to-toe with Andi. "Yes ... well, I'm retiring Andi."

Now Andi needed to sit down. Too bad Annabelle was already in the chair. She thought about sitting on Annabelle's lap for a moment but thought that might just make the situation weirder.

"O-oh," Andi said, doing her best to change course midway to make it sound like a question, rather than the second miracle of the day.

Doc's cool demeanor broke when Shirley put her arm around his waist and pulled him to her side. "You see girls, I've been in love with *this man*," she squeezed him to emphasize each word, "for fifteen years. Ever since I started working here. I'd just about given up hope when I finally retired, but then Annabelle wanted to be a Vet Tech, and when he called me and asked me to come back, I started to hope again. Then, for New Year's, I made a resolution to say exactly what I want. I marched over to his house in a raincoat and heels and ... well, you don't need to know those specifics, but now ..." she held out her left hand to show them a ring. "We're getting married!"

“Congratulations,” Andi said, automatically. She couldn’t feel her face so she quickly moved a hand to make sure she was smiling. “That’s fantastic news.” She poked Annabelle in the shoulder.

“Yeah, that’s ... that’s great,” Annabelle said.
“Congratulations.”

“And I decided it was time to pass the torch,” Doc said, clearing his throat. Andi could see him struggling to regain some of his cool demeanor. “You’re a fine vet, Andi. And you’ve got lots of ideas and ... lots of energy. You’ll do well by this place.”

“We’re going to travel,” Shirley said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “We’re leaving tonight for Seattle and then we’re flying down to Florida to get on a cruise to Mexico!”

“Wow,” Andi said.

“So,” Doc said, trying one last time to control the conversation. “You’ll need to do some hiring for Shirley’s position. I ... I don’t know if you’ll want to bring on another vet just yet, but ...” He nodded approvingly at the empty kennels in the pet plaza. “I heard about your successes this month. Well done. Of course, if you hold off on hiring another vet, you should be able to support a shelter ... a *small* shelter. If it gets as big as it was before ...” He tried to look stern.

“Now you tell us,” Annabelle muttered. Andi poked her again.

“I think we could support both a shelter and boarding pets here. And with some new programs ...” She decided to quit while she was ahead. “I’m sure we’ll manage.”

Doc Simmons nodded and held his hand out to her. “It’s been a pleasure working with you, Dr. Morgan. I’ll be over once we get back from Mexico to officially sign the paperwork, turning the practice over to you.

“Th-thank you, Doc,” Andi said. They were silent again as Shirley hustled him back outside, pausing in the doorway to blow a kiss to them over her shoulder.

“Does ... does this qualify us for Ripley’s?” Annabelle asked into the silence.

“I think we should go get lottery tickets on our lunch hour,” Andi said, sitting down on Annabelle’s knee, still staring out the glass door where Shirley and Doc had disappeared.

But the day wasn’t over.

“Is this ok?” Max asked, leading Andi off the pathway on the hillside. Sarge and Bert didn’t seem to care.

“Sure. But if you’re planning to push me over the cliff, Bert will just be one more witness you’ll have to silence.”

“I know how to bribe him,” Max said. “Though I wish I didn’t.”

“Yeah, sorry about him eating your boxers ...”

For once, it wasn’t raining and the sun had decided to make an appearance just in time for the sunset.

“Max, what is all this?” There was a blanket stretched out with a second one for them to pull around themselves, a picnic basket ... and a six-pack.

She looked at him. “That night ...”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s not summer, but I didn’t want to wait. I got as close as possible to all the other details. I even found McElroy’s in a dusty corner of Bumble’s,” he said, pointing at the cheap six-pack.

“You know it’s good because it doesn’t even say ‘beer’ on the can. Just McElroy’s Brew,” she chuckled as she unhooked Bert and Sarge from their harnesses so they could chase each other around on the hill and wrestle. She helped Max settle next to her on the blanket and then pulled the second blanket around them. “This is perfect, Max.”

“Really?” he laughed. “From what you told me about your day, I was pretty sure this would be underwhelming compared to getting Mr. Giggles adopted *and* Doc Simmons turning the practice over to you.”

She snuggled into his side. “Nah. Small miracles compared to being here with you. Like the kind that would be attributed to lesser gods. Like, Tidy the god of cat litter, and Grampus the god of cranky old men.”

Andi turned to watch the dogs playing and she breathed in the salt air, the smell of evergreen trees, and Max Lyons sitting beside her, his arm around her, putting back together something so perfect that she never thought she’d have again.

A future. Her gaze fell on Bert and Sarge who were fighting over something Sarge had in his mouth.

She chuckled. “Wanna play ‘stick or poo’?”

“What?”

Andi nodded at the dogs. “It’s a game Annabelle and I used to play with the dogs at the shelter when they found something in the yard and trotted back inside to show us. It was almost always a stick or a piece of poo and we’d bet against each other. The loser had to clean it up when they dropped it. I’m going with a stick. If it’s a poo, it’s a really small one and I doubt he’d be carrying it.”

Max laughed and pushed himself up. Andi was momentarily distracted by the flex of hard muscles under the sleeves of his shirt as he climbed out from under the blanket and got to his feet without help. He whistled for Sarge and he broke into a run.

“Last chance for a guess,” Andi said, leaning forward to squint at what Sarge was carrying.

“Neither,” Max said. “I know what he’s carrying.” Andi frowned, but before she could say anything, Sarge was beside Max. He sat and let Max take the thing from him. It was something black and square. “Andi Morgan,” he said, turning to look at her. He reached out and pulled her to her feet. And Andi’s heart stopped in her chest. “Andarchy, Dr. Morgan, my Andi,” he slowly got down on one knee. “I know it’s only been eight years ... well, fifteen years, actually ... but ... I knew the moment I walked into that classroom in sixth grade

and you looked up from your book and smiled at me, that I wanted you in my life, for the *rest* of my life. I,” he scratched the back of his neck. “I waited to ask you this before, and I always regretted it. And I didn’t want to wait and risk losing the opportunity for a second time, so ... Andi, will ...”

“Yes!” She screamed.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Hold on, Andarchy. You didn’t even let me finish.”

“Sorry,” she said quickly, covering her mouth.

“Will you ...”

“Yes!”

“Marry me?”

“Pretty sure with the way things are going today that if I say it a third time, I’ll accidentally summon something. So ...”

She tackled him to the blanket and kissed him hard.

“Hang on, woman. You haven’t even seen the ring yet,” he grumped, sitting up and pulling her back against him so she was sitting between his legs. He opened the box and kissed her cheek as she pulled the ring out of where it sat in the velvet.

“Max,” she breathed. “It’s beautiful.” The fact that it was an opal held between two comet tails, confirmed what her heart already knew. She really did have beginner’s luck because she found The One on the very first try. She read the inscription inside the band and her eyes filled with tears. “You were going to ask me before?”

“Yeah,” Max’s voice was soft, muffled in her hair as he held her close. “But I have a feeling that today was actually the right time to ask.”

“So, I’m going to be a Lyons now,” Andi said softly, tipping her head back to kiss the bottom of his chin. “I guess that makes me a lioness.”

“You’ve always been a lioness,” Max said. His voice rumbled through his chest, making Andi shiver. “Now, you’re *my* lioness.”

Bonus Epilogue

For access to a bonus epilogue in which we catch up with Andi and Max one year later, head here and join Teagan's

Hopeful Romantics mailing list:

<https://tinyurl.com/AuldLangMineBonus>



Preview for Cupid Can Suck It

Molly

“Please keep walking,” Molly muttered under her breath as she saw the bouncing blonde bun pass under the high windows directly in her line of sight. “Don’t stop, don’t bring that bullshit in here ...” The bun paused and she held her breath. “Keep moving, keep ...” The door handle rattled and Molly glared up at the ceiling and the universe by extension. “Really? You were too busy to just make something shiny or heart-shaped pass by and distract her?”

“Molly!” Glenda Kissinger’s voice filled the office, the audible equivalent of overdosing on canned frosting. Molly felt her upper lip involuntarily curl at the vomit-inducing assortment of red, pink, and gold junk the woman was carrying. Luckily, Glenda’s face was somewhere behind a giant golden cupid’s butt, so Molly had time to force her expression into something resembling a smile by the time she emerged. Glenda dropped the grocery bags full of decorations on the floor in front of her assistant’s desk and gave an almost euphoric sigh that made Molly feel she might need to step out and give Glenda some alone time with the cupid butt. Her bun was practically quivering as she gave Molly an exuberant

smile that was bordering on unhinged. “Isn’t it the most wonderful time of the year?”

“Tax season?” Molly asked. She wondered how much of a running head start she’d need to be able to successfully vault over Glenda, before she could get one of the plastic bows and razor sharp, heart-pointed arrows out of her bag and shoot her in the ass. Or the neck. Glenda’s smile was hard. A lot of teeth. She looked like someone who wasn’t above darting people in the neck.

Glenda’s high-pitched laugh made Molly twitch. “No, silly! It’s exactly *two weeks* until Valentine’s Day! Happy Valentine’s *month!*”

“Right,” Molly muttered.

“And as the town-appointed Valentine’s Day Maven,” Glenda continued.

And the only person to ever volun-threaten to get the job, Molly added in her head.

“I’m in charge of lending a hand to all the businesses in town who don’t know where to start with decorating for the season!”

“Well, I like to start with a shovel and a really deep hole,” Molly said.

Glenda either didn’t hear her or was pretending not to. “So, I’ve brought you some lovely things the elementary school made ...”

They were heart-shaped mosaics, made of macaroni splattered with blood red paint and...

“Are those raisins?” Molly asked, leaning over the nearest one.

“Craisins,” Glenda said, turning her attention back to the rest of her bag of horrors. Molly was fairly certain that she was looking at the Mary Poppins from hell. “And ...” She pulled out what looked like a naked Ken doll, spray painted gold with felt wings hot glued to his back and a tiny bow and arrow glued to his hand. Molly bit down on her lower lip to keep from laughing, but the flash of annoyance on Glenda’s face as she glared at the naked doll wasn’t making it easy. “These were donated by the Wild Oats club ... John must have accepted them.” She muttered the second part under her breath, but Molly could still clearly make it out in the quiet office. Normally, she didn’t mind being the only one in the building, but today, she could have really used Sharon at the front desk to head off Glenda at the pass. At the very least, Glenda would have been outnumbered. *Of all the days for Sharon to need a root canal.*

Glenda was turning pink now as she kept pulling more and more naked golden Ken cupids from her bag. Molly was transfixed as they were lined up on the reception desk, ass up and face down. Was ... was it intentional? *What, Glenda? Are you shaming them? Just because they’re ok with their plastic-cast panty lines?*

Glenda looked horrified by the time she pulled the twelfth one from the depths of her bag. “My god,” she muttered. “I’ll bet Mandie is behind this.” In an instant, Glenda’s chipper smile became a plotting death glare.

“They’re ... interesting,” Molly said quickly, hoping that by standing there, she wouldn’t have to one day testify in Glenda’s homicide trial.

Glenda gave her head a shake and looked around, thinking, and judging by the look on her face, having an entire conversation with herself inside her head. When she finally spoke, it wasn’t to Molly. “Yes, but then the children will see ... but in here ...”

Molly didn’t like where this was going. “We don’t have much table space for decorations ...”

Glenda’s gaze snapped onto Molly and immediately she felt herself starting to sweat. “If you take the cupid Kens, I’ll take all the macaroni mosaics over to the library.”

It was a tempting offer. Kind of ... *Wait*.

“But ...” Molly started.

“Like you said, it’s tax season. You have *adult* customers. If you have these ...” Glenda picked up one of the Kens by his wings with two fingers. She held it in front of her as if it was something that had, a moment ago, been clogging a floor drain, “semi-pornographic *cupids* here, everyone wins.”

“How does everyone ...” Molly tried again.

“Besides some heart garlands, they’ll be the only decorations you have to display. And Rob over at the library won’t have to field every scandalized parents’ complaints by displaying them.”

Molly sighed. She wasn’t going to win. She’d known Glenda too long. She was famous for what the rest of the town called the “Kiss-off”. Basically, any time Glenda Kissinger wanted to do something, but needed audience participation or to get permission, she’d present you with what on face value sounded like an option, but was in reality, an ultimatum. Once her prey finally, and inevitably agreed to her ridiculous terms, she’d skip off, happy with her outcome and leave the other person to assume the fetal position and cry, wondering where they went wrong.

Glenda was already repacking the macaroni mosaics.

“Wait,” Molly said in desperation. There were a dozen naked golden Kens. It was a small office with only one room. It just had two desks, one tiny end table in the waiting area, and a window sill as far as flat surfaces went. Where the hell was she going to put twelve naked Kens? And then how was she going to survive February when there would be golden Ken butts in her line of sight every time she looked up from her computer monitors, no matter *where* she put them.

“You want some of these macaroni mosaics too?” Glenda asked. And there it was, the “Kiss-off”.

Kiss of “fuck around and find out” was more like it, Molly grumbled in her head. If Glenda ever faced off with Darth

Vader, he'd be the one wearing clown shoes and riding a unicycle over Lando's altered deal. At least in the *Robot Chicken* version.

"N-no," Molly said, again forcing her face back into the painful smile. "The Ken cupids are enough." Apparently they weren't, because Glenda *still*, as a parting shot before skipping back out the door, draped crepe paper heart garlands over Molly's book cases, around the door frame, Sharon's chair, and the lamp in the waiting area. She probably would have attempted to wrap Molly's chair in them as well if Molly hadn't immediately reclaimed her seat when she saw Glenda go to work on Sharon's.

"Well, that about does it," Glenda's overly-cheerful tone was back. "Happy Valentine's Day! I hope you and your ..."
Glenda paused and Molly braced herself. "Wait, that's your little *sister* who's getting married in two weeks. But I'm sure ... your time will come. Anyway, Happy Valentine's!" And then she disappeared out the door, her goblin's bag of red and pink hell considerably lighter than it had been when she'd entered. Molly watched the woman's bun bob away under the windows, heading back toward the town square.

"Don't mention it," Molly said to the empty room. She stared back at her computer screen, trying to ignore what looked like the aftermath of a doll-sized Burning Man on Sharon's desk, directly in front of her.

She forced herself through the Barrett's Schedule S, but as soon as she'd signed off on it, she knew she was going to have

to do something about the damn Kens. Otherwise, she was going to lose her sanity and along with it, the momentum she'd been building since New Year's Day. If it killed her, she was going to break her previous year's record in tax completion time for her clients. Not an easy feat, but she was confident she could do it. Just ... not with a dozen molded plastic Ken asses mooning her for a month. With a sigh, she got to her feet and moved over to Sharon's desk. She wasn't going to sit. Sharon was a slender, tall woman whose chair fit her like a glove. Molly could sit on the arm rests, but her curves were too powerful for Sharon's chair. Instead, Molly decided to stand, arms crossed, staring down at golden, sculpted plastic carnage.

“Well, how bad did all of you screw up in a previous life to wind up here?” she asked the Kens. Maybe if they were all standing they wouldn't look so ... She tried lining them up. She blinked at the Ken cupid's backsides. “Well, now it looks like I'm on the wrong side of a post-rave lineup ... or waiting in line for a Barbie urinal.” She tried grouping them together into three groups of four. “And now I'm just interrupting a themed key party,” she muttered. She decided office wide dispersal was probably the best way to go. “Little bombs everywhere, rather than one big one,” she grumbled, dropping a pile of them on one of the waiting area chairs, a pile on the windowsill and leaving a third pile on Sharon's desk. She paused and then with a heavy sigh stomped back around the room and collected three of them to place on her desk. “There. Can't be labeled a bad boss for making Sharon be the only one

who has to have her desk invaded by oversized naked cupid dolls. At least they're not *as* creepy as the baby cupid version would be." She shuddered. Valentine's Day was creepy for *so* many reasons, but the cupids were top of the list.

She stared around the room and tried not to puke. Molly *hated* February. It wasn't really the month's fault. It was actually a great time for a C.P.A. Busy, with just two months until the tax deadline. Nice and distracting. She just hated Valentine's Day. Anywhere else on the planet, this hatred could be boiled down and concentrated to a single day, like a sunbeam through a magnifying glass, with any luck setting it on fire. But in Hope, Valentine's Day lasted the entire month *and* it got a running start at the end of January. It was February 1st, which was also considered the wrist-slapping day for any business that didn't look like the aftermath of a Care Bear frat party. "Not really fair," Molly muttered as she looked around. "I feel like I got more of a spanking than a wrist-slap this year."

She was pondering what her chances would be for getting away with staging an office burglary, where the only things stolen were the decorations, when her phone rang.

"Molly, it's your mother." As if her caller ID hadn't already told her this.

"Are you sure?" Molly asked, slumping down to sit in her chair.

"After thirty-nine hours of labor with you, I'm positive." She sounded harassed, but that had become the new baseline

for her since Christmas. “The wedding is just over two weeks away and there’s still so much to do. Your sister called me from Portland before six this morning, panicking about booking us all in at the Hope Away From Home Inn for the night after the wedding.”

Molly groaned. “Why? You and Dad live here, and *I* live here. Why can’t we just *go home* after the wedding?”

“*I know*,” her mom sighed. “But Beth wants us all to stay together at the Inn and have breakfast there the next morning in our pjs. Something about Saturday mornings when kids were little.”

“Will there be *Looney Tunes* and fighting over cereal box prizes too?” Molly asked. “If so, I’ll think about it.”

Her mom sighed again. “No. And she keeps threatening to make us all wear *matching* pajamas.”

Molly groaned. Of her three younger sisters, Beth was the biggest romantic. She was also the smallest in stature and had the figure of a petite supermodel. Not that Megan and Ellen were far behind her. Molly, on the other hand, had cleaned up in the curves competition and her boobs were cup sizes ahead of everyone else. This made being forced to wear matching family uniforms much more odious for her. The modus operandi for this ritual, usually performed by Beth or Megan, always ended with getting Molly a size that was either too small or several sizes too large. There was no middle ground. And after thirty-five years of it, and a horror reel of embarrassing memories with photos that liked to play through

her head when she couldn't sleep at night, she realized that there were *no* winners in the Frasier Family photoshoots.

"Just tell her no," Molly muttered.

"She's the bride," her mom said. "You can't tell the bride no."

"Yes you can," Molly said, straightening in her seat. "I'll do it."

"No, you won't. She's already stressed enough as it is."

"A stress that's entirely of her own making," Molly muttered. "If she'd just let you or Megan, or hell, even Ellen help, she wouldn't be so freaked out now. It's not like we haven't already gone through this *twice* before."

"Yes, but Megan and Don got married in Seattle and Ellen and Gary got married in Hawaii. This is different. It's our first *island* wedding," her mom said. "And hopefully not our last." It was an afterthought, but Molly didn't miss her meaning. The irritated itch started at the back of her neck.

She decided not to take the bait and just try to wrap up the phone call, before a client came in. But, just as she thought it, the front door opened. Molly held her breath until she saw the burly, bearded foreman for Baskin Construction fill the doorway. She let out a relieved sigh and smiled at him. Daws grinned back at her and waved, a bulging folder in one hand. Dirk Dawson was one client Molly never got tired of seeing. He was easy going and sarcastic. Not to mention that he was easy on the eyes in a beardy, barely-tamed mountain man way.

He had thick dark brown hair and deep blue eyes that reminded her of Hope Beach after a storm. And he liked to fish, the one hobby she'd never been able to get her sisters or her mom on board with. Not that she minded. It was something she and her dad shared. And with Daws, it was just nice to have another person who understood.

“Look what I brought for you,” he mouthed, shaking the folder at her.

“Lucky me,” she mouthed back. She motioned to the phone. “Just a second.”

He shook his head and mouthed, “Take your time.”

She watched him move over to the waiting area while her mother continued to yak in her ear. He paused in front of one of the leather wingback chairs. Molly's heart flatlined when she realized what he was looking at. The trio of naked, golden Ken cupids she'd meant to “arrange” on the end table. She'd just left them in an orgy-like heap on the chair seat. Well, if three constituted an orgy. Probably more of a plastic threesome. She started breathing again when she heard Daws chuckle before moving toward the other seat. A paper slipped out of the bulging folder he was holding and he bent over to pick it up. In a split-second of “free play” time, her mind got away from her and her eyes followed. Dirk Dawson had a nice ass.

Assets, her brain corrected. He did have nice assets ... with Baskin. He kept the books clean for her ... He's a client and he's your friend. Get it together, Molly.

But her brain was still stubbornly fixated on him and the way his jeans curved around all the right contours. *Ok, brain. Play that out. Since we're in fantasy land, let's pretend that we'd even have a chance with him.* Daws had a reputation around town. Daws the Dog. The Revolving Daw. Not that he cheated, at least ... not that the rumor mill could ferret out. No, he just always seemed to have a different girl on his arm. *It's the Pacific Northwest, Molly thought with a chuckle, The mountain man stereotype is our Fabio.*

Meanwhile, her mom was *still* talking in her ear about wedding crap. She turned her back to him so she could concentrate. She needed to solve whatever horrible wedding-related crisis her mom was having and get back to work. “Was there a particular reason you were calling? A client just walked in and I need to ...”

“I’m swamped with place cards, a meeting with Reverend Anderson about the ceremony, and trying to decipher the cryptic voicemail your great aunt Elizabeth left last night about a shoe buffer. I was hoping on your lunch break you could run over to the Inn and book our rooms?”

“Can’t I just call it in?”

“No,” she said with yet another sigh. “Because it’s part of Beth’s bridal package, you have to talk to Betty over there and ...”

Molly’s antennae went up. “And what, Mom?”

“Fine ... You’re the only one who hasn’t signed the release forms for the dance class we’re all taking for the first family

dance at the reception,” she huffed. “Not that I guess it matters since it’s a couple’s dance.”

The itch on the back of Molly’s neck was momentarily interrupted by the stinging blow to her chest. And there it was. *Direct hit, Mom. You sunk my battleship.*

“I mean, the photos will look odd without you out on the dance floor with the rest of us, but maybe Maddie can Photoshop you in. Or maybe one of your cousins can be your dance partner ... maybe Tanner. He’s tall for a twelve-year-old. Oh! Or maybe Alexis can. You know she’s on her high school dance team ...”

Molly tried to push the stinging sensation away as the familiar suffocating depression descended on her. Whenever her mom, or her sisters, or any well-meaning or not-so-well-meaning townspeople felt the need to point out Molly’s solo status, the same crushing feeling came over her. The closest thing she could compare it to was the end of the first *Terminator* movie when Sarah Conner crushed the terminator in a metal press until the red light in its eyes went out. That was how discussions about her “not getting any younger” and “needing to put herself out there and meet people” always made her feel. They were Sarah Conner with the remote and she was the terminator. Though, she had to admit, if she was an *actual* terminator, she doubted if anyone would taunt, tease, or prod her about being single. That’s what she needed. Red eyes, a metal chassis, and the ability to strike fear into the heart of every person who ever dared to bring up her relationship status.

But, unfortunately, she wasn't a terminator. She was just a thirty-five year old C.P.A. and the oldest daughter of four who was about to be the *maid* of honor for a third time, now for her *youngest* sister's wedding.

"Or, you remember Lola, my friend from college? Her grandson, Peter ... I think he's at least sixteen. Maybe he'd be a good option. I should give her a call ..."

Molly was sweating. Normally, she could play this off, but now there was couple dancing in play which Beth could not be talked out of and if she didn't say something, she was going to end up awkwardly dancing with a cousin, on display and forever immortalized in wedding video and family photo as the most pathetic of the Frasier sisters.

"I have a date," Molly blurted out. Her heart stuttered to a standstill in her chest. *You have a what*, her brain screamed.

"You have a what?!" her mom asked.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *No turning back now. You've already said the "d" word. Just plow through the rest of the phone call. If you hurry, you can help Daws and then catch the noon ferry so you can jump off into the deepest part of the strait halfway to the mainland.*

"You have a date?" Her mom's voice was hopeful, a complete one-eighty from the put-upon sighing that she'd started the conversation with.

"Uh ..." Molly's voice cracked. She cleared her throat. She needed to sound convincing enough to make the conversation

end, but vague enough that her mom wouldn't see through her. "Yeah. I have a date. We'll ... we'll be dancing together. So no need to find me a cousin." She heard her mom drawing in a deep breath. It was the bowstring being ratcheted back, ready to launch a thousand questions at her. She needed to end this. Now. "Well, I need to meet with my client. I'll go by the Inn. Talk to you later. Love you, Mom. Bye." And she hung up. She took a breath, trying to heed the wisdom from her morning's ten-minute YouTube meditation and just live in the moment. She closed her eyes and took another deep breath. *You're not currently being badgered about being single. And Daws is here so your morning just got better. Focus on the positive. Not the fact that you just told your mom you were bringing a date to your sister's wedding in two weeks. Or the fact that it's not just a date, but a date that would willingly participate in the ridiculous choreographed family dance with you.* Ok, those thoughts weren't helping with the calming down process. Her phone buzzed. She opened an eye and picked it up off her desk. It was a text from her mom.

Mom: I know you have to go, but sweetie! We're so excited! I just told your dad about your date coming to the wedding and we literally jumped up and down. I'm calling your sisters! And your great aunt Elizabeth is going to be so excited for you too! I can't wait to tell the rest of the family! It'll be your turn next!

Now Molly couldn't breathe. She tried to remember how lungs worked with her nose and mouth. *Come on, you were just doing this. Out and in? In and ...* Little black dots were

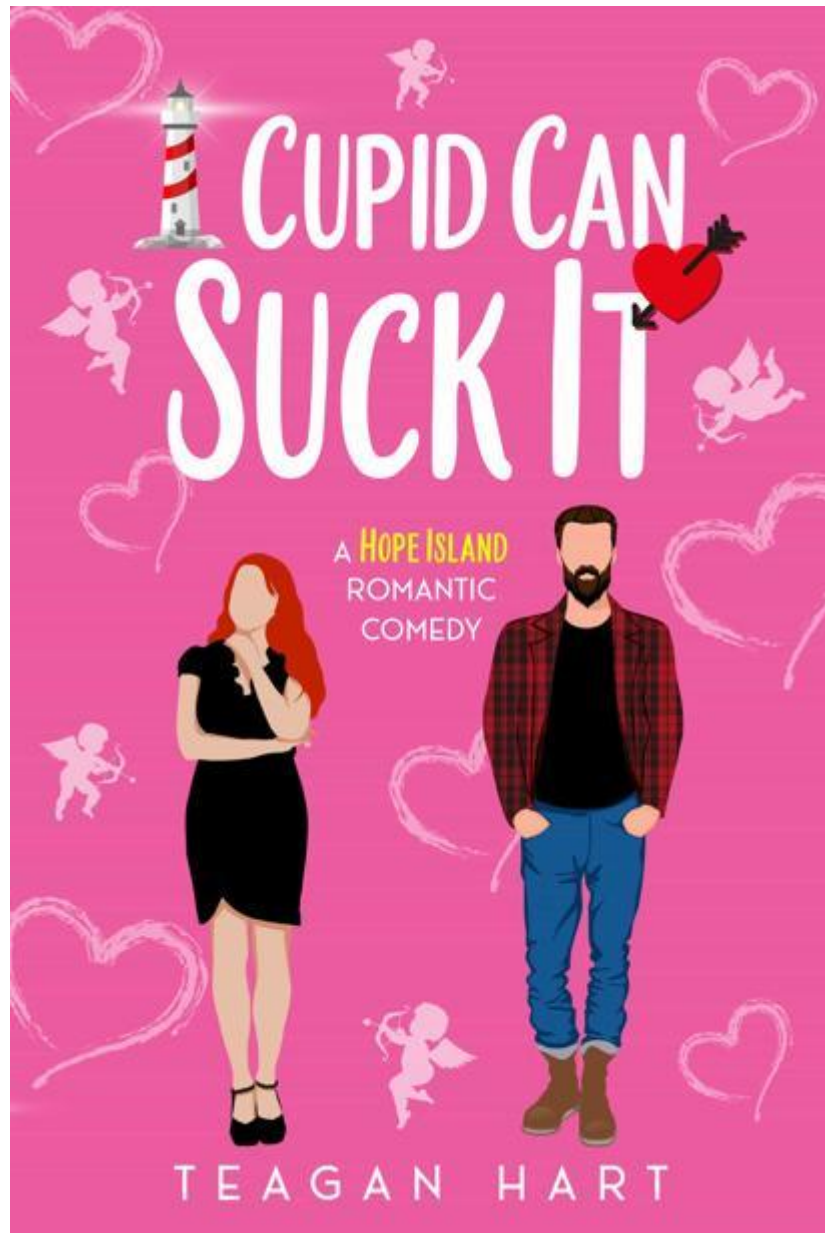
popping at the corners of her vision and the room was starting to close in around her. Her mom was telling her whole family. She was in deep shit.

The office was quiet except for Daws who was messing with the cupid Kens on the table in the waiting area.

“No, Steve! Don’t jump. Those wings are decorative! For gods’ sakes, your feathers are drawn on with Sharpie! No! Ahhhh!” One of the dolls dived off the lamp and Molly had the fleeting feeling that she knew how it felt.

She’d never done it before, but from the haze that was rolling across her vision and the tightness in her chest, trying to suffocate her, she was pretty sure she was dying. There was a strangled sound that filled the quiet room. Maybe it was coming from her. Her vision was growing dimmer. She couldn’t breathe. The only thing she could hear was the rush of footsteps, getting closer.

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