




SLEIGH RIDE OR DIE




A **HOPE ISLAND**
ROMANTIC
COMEDY

TEAGAN HART



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Sleigh Ride Or Die

*A Small Town Friends to Lovers
Holiday Romantic Comedy*

First published by Lightning Strike Press 2022

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First edition

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*For My Jimbear, my very own Ride or Die and the
Grumpy to my Stumpy.*

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

And to all my fantastically wonderful ARC readers!

“The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.”

- Barbara Kingsolver

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ABBY

“No. I’m not going to join your ritual torture cult,” Abby muttered as she stuffed the papers from her ninth-grade biology class into the drawer of her desk.

“You didn’t even let me finish the whole sales pitch,” Dana said. “Wait until you hear about what we wear when we make our nightly sacrifices.”

“Well if this gets graphic, feel free to keep it to yourself,” Abby sighed, dropping down onto the stool she used in lieu of a desk chair.

Dana snorted. “I don’t know about you, Locke, but I could use some ‘graphic’ these days.” Abby looked up at her friend in time to see Dana glance toward the classroom door. “Of course, not *all* of us can live next door to a stack of tall, bookish pancakes.”

Abby blinked and shook her head. “Ok, now I can’t tell if you’re horny or hungry.”

“Yeah, I missed lunch. Still, when are you going to, you know ... jump on it?” Dana jerked her head towards the hallway.

“Dana, what did we say about your House of Pain consumption during work hours?”

“I couldn’t help it. I was working on the Poe display. I needed my jams.”

“Well ... I *guess* that makes sense.”

“Yeah. What *doesn't* make sense is how someone can live next door to a person who speaks the same weird nerd language they do, is single, would drop anything they're doing to help with whatever hair-brained project comes up, *and* looks like everyone's college professor they had a crush on, *and* yet this someone *still* doesn't check that book out.”

Abby stared at her, deadpan. “I'm sorry. I got lost in that run-on sentence. Send help, a compass, and some sled dogs. Is that *someone* supposed to be me?”

“Yes you, you Vulture.”

“You mean Vulcan?” Abby asked with a sigh.

“Yes, pointy ears, emotionally clueless, yet lovable,” Dana said. “And don't play coy with me, Abs. I'm in the middle of a serious dry spell. I need to live vicariously through someone.”

“Not that it's any business of yours,” Abby said, dropping her voice, “but I'll see your dry spell and raise you a ‘dystopian-level drought’ but with nary a sandworm.” It was a truth Abby had been feeling more strongly lately. She wasn't sure if it was because of her looming thirty-third birthday on the other side of Christmas, a random spike in her hormones, or some kind of feral pull brought on by the excitement and expectations of the holidays. Probably a combination of all three.

“An entirely self-imposed dystopian drought,” Dana muttered. “Literally cross your porch and there's paradise, wrapped in tweed, one door down ...”

Abby felt her skin flushing in annoyance. “Dana ... he's my best friend. Just ... let it go,” Abby

muttered, rubbing her temples.

She heard Dana sigh. “If you don’t, someone else is going to, but fine. I’ll let it go if that’s what you *really* want.”

Abby glanced up and squinted at her friend. “That was too easy.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” she said, crossing her arms. “*Fine*. So you have no reason to *not* sign up for Santa’s Singles this year.”

“Ah yes, circling back to your ritual torture cult,” Abby said again. “What would Hope’s holiday season be without it? Nothing like awkward blind dates periodically accentuated by the giant whale-fart alphorn in the town square. I think I’d rather stay in my dry desert like the Road Warrior, or the *Dune* book with the guy who’s a sandworm and a god ... I don’t know. I lost interest halfway through that one. Regardless, I’m fine where I am and without being treated like a panda in a zoo.” The thought of volunteering for forced dating as some kind of hellish carpool lane out of her dry desert was enough to have her thinking fond thoughts about the impending Christmas break and the vibrator under her bed.

“Hey, I’m willing to cross the desert in search of a thunderstorm,” Dana said. She bit her lip and ran a hand through her hair, striking a pose.

Abby raised an eyebrow. “Is that your time-traveling audition for the cover of Penthouse or something?”

“More like ‘Pent-up’. Abs, I’m serious,” Dana sighed and Abby rolled her eyes. Dana had at least *had* relationships during the current presidency. It had been three years since Abby’s last romantic

endeavor had blown up in her face like a Whorley brothers' chemistry experiment.

"Hey, you two," a low voice called. The color drained from Dana's face, her eyes grew three sizes behind her glasses, and Abby had to stifle a snort of laughter as her old friend, the demure school librarian resurfaced.

Abby turned to look at Fred Goss, the gym teacher, poking his head into her classroom. He was a good-looking guy with deep tan skin and kind eyes.

"Did either of you happen to see a couple of miscreants smuggling dodgeballs?"

"The Whorley brothers again?" Abby asked.

Fred cut his eyes back to the hallway. "I suspect." He cleared his throat and gave Dana a half-smile. "Hey there, Dana. I-I meant to tell you how much I liked the new Poe display in the library."

"Oh, well, you know, it's his birthday next month ... and, I didn't want to disappoint ... him," Dana trailed off.

Abby stared at the space between Fred and Dana, and for a moment, she swore she could actually *see* the awkwardness, break-dancing on the floor, as well as feel it in the air.

"Well," Abby clapped her hands together and got to her feet. Either the sound or her movement jerked Dana and Fred out of their game of social freeze tag. "I've got Jake Whorley in my nine o'clock chemistry class in the morning, and Aaron has Turk in his sophomore English class at the same time across the hall. So, we could divide and conquer. If either of them is suddenly found to be

‘with dodgeball’, say under their Metallica shirts, we’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Uh,” Fred cleared his throat. “Good ... Th-thanks, Abby.”

She swept him with a bow.

“Oh, I know that bow,” a deep voice rumbled behind Fred. “Whenever Abs breaks out a bow, I know that there has just been some mid-grade sass bandied about.”

Abby shrugged. “Eh, low-grade at best.” She grinned at Aaron where he towered over Fred in the door frame.

He raised one dark eyebrow behind his black-rimmed glasses and she saw his hazel eyes glance from Fred, back to her. “Let me guess, the Whorley brothers?”

Fred turned to look up at Aaron. “How did you ... ?”

Aaron nodded back across the hall to his classroom. “I saw them out the window, throwing dodgeballs at each other. I assumed it was ‘unsanctioned play’.”

“You assumed right,” Fred muttered. “See you all tomorrow. I’ve got two Whorleys to skin alive.”

“Jake has a paper due,” Abby called after him, “So don’t just skin him. You better finish him off.”

When Fred was gone, Aaron grinned at her. “You about ready?”

Abby nodded. “Yeah. I think I’ve done enough damage for today. Let me get my coat.”

Aaron nodded. “Always good to stop when you’re ahead.”

He disappeared from the doorway and Dana grinned at her. Now that they were alone, her old confidence seemed to be back, performing an encore.

“What?” Abby asked, blinking at her.

Dana shook her head slowly and Abby felt a stab of annoyance at the wicked smile her friend was now giving her.

“Drought,” Dana nodded at Abby. Then she jerked her head back toward the hallway. “Meet thunderstorm.”

“Seriously Dana, not having this conversation with you again. He’s my neighbor and right now, he’s looking like he’s unseated you as my best friend. You were neck and neck, but I’m pretty sure he just came out ahead.” Dana’s eyes widened, her mouth opening, ready to twist Abby’s words into some kind of tantric double-entendre. “And if you rearrange what I said into something about necking, coming, or ... head, I’m disinviting you from my ‘Teachers Gone Wild’ start of break party.” Abby narrowed her eyes at Dana while she weighed the satisfaction of saying something saucy versus missing out on the annual teachers’ cutting loose party.

Finally, Dana blew out a sigh. “Fine. But, you should at least *think* about joining Santa’s Singles this year. Since you and your new ‘ride or die bestie’ across the porch won’t climb into that sleigh together, you should be out there looking for someone to jingle your bells.”

Abby closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Really?”

Dana sighed. “Cut me some slack. I’m high on Christmas cookies. The staff break room looks like

some kind of mis-decorated cookie Valhalla. Bob got them cheap from Miss Mandie. Apparently they're the rejects from the Bake-Off over at De-Floured."

"Whatever happened to 'just say no'," Abby muttered.

"Sugar overdose or not, I'm being serious, Abs." Abby opened her eyes and looked at Dana. She was taller than Abby, not that that was unusual. She was often dwarfed by her own freshmen. Dana pulled Abby into a hug. She would have fought it but she knew from experience that resistance was futile. Dana was an octopus when she wanted to hug someone. "You're not getting any younger," Dana murmured. "And I'm not either. You don't want to die alone, do you?"

Before Abby could respond, Aaron was back, his beanie pulled down all the way to his eyebrows, squashing his dark hair flat against his forehead. She and Dana broke apart and Abby couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. Aaron looked like a gangly teenager. Like a six-foot-five version of their students, despite the fact that they'd celebrated his thirty-fifth birthday over the summer.

"What?" Aaron asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

Abby shook her head. "Nothing."

"Uh huh, Nessie. Let's go. See you tomorrow, Dana."

"Nessie?" Dana whispered, glancing at Aaron's retreating back. "That new?"

Abby rolled her eyes and sighed. "Scotland documentary. Loch Ness."

“And your last name is Locke,” Dana chuckled. “It’s cute.”

“It’s annoying.”

“Thunderstorm,” Dana stage whispered, flashing jazz hands at her.

“I can do that too,” Abby muttered, giving Dana her own, single-fingered, version of jazz hands.

“Santa’s Singles,” Dana said. “Think about it.”

So Abby thought about it. She only thought about it for the twelve seconds it took for her to put on her coat, sling her backpack over her shoulder and cross her classroom. But hey, it still counted. By the time she reached for the light switch, she’d already stopped thinking about it. She joined Aaron in the hall and they started their daily exodus from Hope High.

“So, what’s Dana gotten herself into? Something about a ... cult?” he asked.

“Damn your Vulcan hearing,” Abby muttered as they pushed through Hope High’s front doors. She felt a momentary shiver of panic that he’d heard *everything* Dana had said.

“You know, Vulcans having better hearing than other races is a myth,” Aaron said.

“I know,” Abby muttered. “Voyager, season two.”

“Just checking, since you’re haphazardly throwing around *Star Trek* race misnomers,” Aaron said.

“Thanks, Spock,” Abby muttered. Relief was creeping in. She knew that if he *had* heard what Dana had said about him being a thunderstorm and Abby’s dry spell, he’d be torturing her relentlessly about it at that moment. Neither of them were very

patient when the opportunity to goad each other presented itself.

“So, I heard there were reject Christmas cookies in the break room,” Abby said.

“Yep.” Aaron pulled a napkin out of his coat pocket and handed it to her.

“Aw man, you’re the best ...” she kept her gaze on the napkin, feeling the stupid heat rise in her cheeks. *It’s just cookies, Abby. It’s what besties do. You’d have gotten him cookies if you’d been the one to make a pit stop in the break room.* She unwrapped the napkin and stared at the two round cookies. They were frosted pink and decorated by long brown sprinkles. “I ... I don’t know what to say,” her voice was deadpan as she tried not to laugh. “A pair of balls, all my very own.”

Aaron sighed. “Believe it or not, but those were the *tamest* of the cookies. I don’t think Bob inspected them before he set the box out for staff.”

“Didn’t want to look a gift ball cookie in the mouth, huh?” Abby asked, picking up one of the cookies to study it. The smell of the buttercream made her think that maybe she could just close her eyes and eat it.

Aaron snorted. “Something like that ... I think.”

“So, if these are my cookies and they’re the *tamest*, what, pray tell, did your cookies resemble?”

Aaron sighed. “I’m not telling.”

“What?!” She clutched her invisible pearls in mock outrage, “That is most ungentlemanly of you, sir. To have me show you mine without even *describing* yours.” She waited for the inevitable pink rise in his cheeks and she wasn’t disappointed. She tried to hold onto the playful

annoyance she was putting up as a front as they continued on, but she couldn't. She was too distracted. They'd just stepped outside the school and her vision was cluttered with the sight of the whole town of Hope in the throes of a full-body holiday dry-heave. The high school basketball team was already assembled, helping with the town decorations in front of the school and wearing their new Hope High Goats-themed sweat suits. The orange and red material was turned all the way up to "eye assault".

"I knew it," Aaron muttered as they waved and moved down the sidewalk toward them.

"Knew what?"

"That Michaels was yanking my crank about his elbow. He said he wasn't taking notes in class because he'd hurt it in practice and he needed to save his arm for this weekend's game."

Abby glanced up at the team's center, Adam Michaels, who was currently standing on a ladder, both arms over his head, securing a tinsel Santa to the light pole. The ladder was short and Adam's face was buried between Santa's black tinsel legs.

"Well, his arm seems fine now. But, he might need therapy after he climbs out from under Santa."

"Yeah, well, he'll deserve it. I can't believe I fell for that."

Abby shrugged. "You're kind. You take your students at their word."

Aaron shook his head. "I'm a pushover."

Abby smiled. "But the good kind. Like those breakfast things."

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Ok, either you mean turnover, or you mean popover. A pushover isn’t a breakfast item.”

“Both. Or neither. Whatever,” Abby said, her attention drawn to the festive window displays they were passing as they headed down Main Street. “I don’t know why people bother naming anything that’s for breakfast. Everyone’s half-asleep when they eat it anyway. Just shove it in your mouth and chew.”

Aaron chuckled. “You know, this sounds like a rant worthy of Miss Mandie. Wanna stop off for something before we make the long slog home?”

“Sure,” she shrugged. “I think I’ll need something to wash down these balls. I wouldn’t want to choke.” For a moment, Aaron sounded like *he* was choking. She grinned, unable to help herself. “But if there’s a line, I’ll have to catch you later. I have to soak Mr. Burns in some warm water tonight and scoop up some of his poop.”

A man passing them paused and looked at Abby, his eyes growing wide.

“She’s talking about her lizard,” Aaron said quickly to the man. The man still looked confused, but he gave them a quick nod and hurried on his way.

“He’s not a lizard,” Abby said, cutting her eyes to Aaron. “Mr. Burns is a dragon.”

“He lives in an aquarium, under a heat lamp and you make him outfits out of tube socks. Name another dragon that lives like that,” Aaron said, hooking his thumbs into his backpack straps and grinning at her.

Abby shrugged. “You don’t know what Smaug’s home life was like! Maybe he liked tube socks and

heat lamps.”

“At least *that* was what that guy heard instead of the choking on balls thing.”

She shrugged. “Who knows, maybe it’s an important safety tip he needed to hear. After all, it is the holiday season, the most wonderful time of the year *for accidents*.”

Aaron just shook his head. “Oh look, no line,” he muttered, as they reached Miss Mandie’s window.

He was right. Abby could see the larger-than-life proprietor behind the counter, leaning on the display case and sipping coffee. Abby was so used to Miss Mandie and her erotic bakery, De-Floured, that the sight of the Double D-elicious boob cupcakes and the Well-Endowed eclairs didn’t make her bat an eye. She glanced at Aaron and she had to drop her gaze to the sidewalk to hide her smile. When Aaron Burns had been hired at Hope High as the new English teacher and took the classroom across the hall from her, she’d immediately decided to make it her mission to get him accustomed to all the ... unique aspects of Hope Island. Well, she hadn’t decided to make it her mission *immediately*. To be honest, when she first met Aaron, she could hardly speak around him. He was tall and good-looking, and he read Middle English. Abby thought he’d been joking about that until he started reciting Chaucer’s jokes from *The Canterbury Tales* in the mercifully dead, vaguely-discernible language. Not unlike said dead language, after a while, she’d gotten the hang of Aaron’s rhythm, and she’d started to see what he was really like. They’d been best friends ever since. He was a nerd. And he was alone. He’d gone to school in Seattle, but the only family he had left was his dad and they weren’t close. The first

holiday season he was in town, when she'd found out he would be spending it alone, the training-from-birth of every Hope Island-born person had kicked in. No one was allowed to be alone in Hope. On a five-mile island and a town of just over three thousand, (not counting all the day-tripping and weekend-warrior tourists), it wasn't physically possible.

"Look what the school children spit out," Miss Mandie called to them when they pushed through the bakery's front door. "What's the going rate for paying off high schoolers to leave you with enough sanity to feed and dress yourselves?"

"I've got them on a lay-a-way program," Abby said.

"I told them I'd bring them a treat tomorrow," Aaron muttered, reaching for his wallet.

"Oh yeah?" Miss Mandie asked, arching her perfectly-penciled eyebrow at him. "What kind of treat?"

"I'm thinking maybe a pop quiz and some surprise homework. That's what the kids are into these days, right?"

Miss Mandie snorted. "Maybe when you were a kid. You look the type."

Abby dropped her backpack off her shoulders so she could dig out her wallet. "It sounds like Miss Mandie has you pegged, Burney."

Aaron sighed. "Two large coffees please, Miss Mandie. If I'm going to have to defend myself against *both* of you, I'm going to need caffeine."

"You're going to need more than caffeine if you're planning on drinking both of these," Miss Mandie said, filling the cups. "This is my special Christmas Chaos blend. Triple the usual amount of

caffeine.” She winked at them over her shoulder. “I like to serve it for December and then the day after New Year’s, I switch everyone over to decaf. Makes January more interesting.”

Abby shook her head slowly. “Miss Mandie, when they come for you with torches and pitchforks, I’m not saying that I’ll join them, but defending you might be a hard case.”

“Oh honey, I can handle myself.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Abby said, moving up to the counter. Aaron lifted one of the cups to his lips and Abby noticed the familiar glint in Miss Mandie’s eyes. It took a lot to flap Aaron, but in Miss Mandie’s hands, he was underwear on the clothesline, helplessly caught in her breeze.

“Hmmm, he’s a good coffee drinker. Gentle. Full-lips. You ever wish you were a cup lid?” Miss Mandie asked, glancing from Aaron to Abby. “Because I’m kind of thinking it wouldn’t be so bad right now.” Aaron choked, spewing coffee across the counter and making Miss Mandie take a step back. “Well, his dismount could use some work.”

Abby felt like her cheeks were on fire. She was torn between embarrassment for Aaron and a desire to weigh in on the cup lid argument and escalate that embarrassment. It was a game she and Aaron had been playing for the last three years. They called it Chicken-Too-Far. The premise was simple. Basically, it consisted of them daring each other to do something until the dare moved out of the comfort zone and the person being dared finally admitted that it was “too far” for them. They’d always played it jokingly, and always knowing that revenge would be coming for the person who started it. Lately, Chicken-Too-Far

had started to become a real challenge. Their friendship had just gotten so ... comfortable. Abby felt herself smile. There was something indescribably nice about having Aaron Burns as her best friend.

At the moment though, Aaron was still coughing. His face was bright red, so Abby decided to take a rain check on the Chicken-Too-Far. It wouldn't really be fair anyway. Not with Miss Mandie piling on.

“Just *one* of your chaotic coffees for me please, Miss Mandie,” Abby said, pulling out her card. “Still have another week before Christmas break and I have to keep a leash on my sanity while the students are around.”

Still choking, Aaron shook his head and pushed the second to-go cup toward her.

“Oh, this is for me?” Abby asked, frowning at Aaron. “I thought you were planning to go for some kind of record by drinking both of them.”

With a final gasping throat-clear, Aaron had control of his voice again. “What? You actually thought I was going to drink *two* of Miss Mandie's aneurysm-inducing, barely-legal-caffeine-level coffees? No. I don't feel like spending the rest of the day slowly vibrating into a million pieces while *smelling* the colors on YouTube videos.”

Abby shrugged. “I don't know. Sounds like a pretty good evening to me.”

“I especially like the ‘vibrating into a million pieces part’,” Miss Mandie added, reaching into her apron for a pack of cigarettes. “Bart, I'm going on break,” she called over her shoulder. She turned back to Abby and Aaron, stuck a cigarette between her lips, and made a shooing gesture at them as if

they were feral possums. “It’s my night to clean the floors in this place, so if you’re going to have an aneurysm or vibrate or whatever, kindly take it outside. I’ll send you Bart’s floor-cleaning schedule if you want to come back in for a repeat.”

They turned and headed back outside in front of Miss Mandie. The cold air was crisp, and Abby heard all three of them draw in a collective, deep breath. It was thick with the smell from Miss Mandie’s coffee roaster, wood-burning fireplaces, the salty sea air, and fresh greenery from the piles of garlands that were being wound around anything in the town square that stood still long enough.

“I love this place,” Abby said softly. She hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but at that moment, with her senses on overload from the sight in front of her, the smell around her, and the warmth of her bestie beside her, she hadn’t been able to stop herself. Aaron caught her eye and she saw the corner of his mouth twitch up in a half-smile.

They said their goodbyes to Miss Mandie and cut through the town square.

“Thanks for the coffee,” Abby said, tapping her to-go cup against Aaron’s. “Next one is on me.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Aaron said. “Of course, if this coffee is as strong as I suspect, the next one might be at my funeral.”

Abby shrugged. “I’ll pour one out for my homey.”

“Yeah, just put it in my hand while I’m in the casket,” Aaron said. “I’ll bet it’ll make a good cup holder when I go into full rigor.”

“That doesn’t last,” Abby said. “Bodies come out of full rigor after a while.” She shivered. The

thought of Aaron in a casket, even jokingly, stabbed at something deep in her chest. If it happened, she'd have to just ride into the afterlife and drag him back out. That was the kind of machine she'd need to invent.

“So,” Aaron’s deep rumble interrupted her stroll down Morbid Lane, “*Mystery Science Theater 3000* marathon tonight? I’ve got some grading to do, but I’d love to have a dangling carrot at the end of it to motivate me.”

Abby nodded. “Sounds good. I just have to take care of Mr. Burns first. I don’t know if you want to be present for ... that.”

“Dragon poop-scooping?” Aaron asked. “What’s going on with him anyway?”

Abby shook her head. “I don’t know. Doc Winters said she needed a stool sample to analyze. She thinks he might just be getting ... old.” Abby gritted her teeth against the hard lump forming in her throat. The thought of losing Mr. Burns was a second quick stab of pain in her chest. Why couldn’t bearded dragons just be immortal? Sometimes she hated biology and the inevitable entropy of life and the universe.

She liked her little apartment world with Mr. Burns in his aquarium and Aaron right next door. The thought of losing either of them knocked the breath out of her. *Stop it, Abby. Geez. The anxiety is strong with this one today.* Abby didn’t usually focus on depressing shit. What was with her? After a moment of racking her brain, the lightbulb blinked on. Damn it, Dana. She could still hear her words, “*you don’t want to die alone, do you?*” It wasn’t something Abby had really dwelled on in the last three years. But in comes Dana, Captain of the U.S.S. Depression, and it was instantly invading her

post-classroom thoughts. She was going to have to think of an appropriate retaliation for Dana. Post-Classroom time and brain space were sacred. Maybe editing her Spotify playlist. Swap her House of Pain out for Mariah Carey. That would show her.

“Home at last,” Aaron sighed. She glanced up at the green and white A-frame house in front of them. It had been divided right down the middle by the owner, Todd Miller. In doing so, he’d turned the three-bedroom, two-bathroom house into two, two-bedroom, one-bathroom halves with a wall dividing the master bedroom right down the middle. Aaron lived in the right half and Abby in the left. It was quirky and strange, like everything else that Abby really liked about her life. The porch creaked under Aaron’s heavy boots as he headed up the stairs in front of her.

“Should we name the hammer and make it a stocking for Christmas?” Aaron asked, pausing next to Todd’s abandoned hammer, still lying under the railing.

“We could,” Abby sighed, “but then we’d have to figure out visitation schedules with the hammer and whose apartment it would spend Christmas at, Easter, etc. It’s just easier to call Todd again and tell him to come get it.”

“I called the last time,” Aaron said. “It’s your turn.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Abby muttered. “Just as soon as I have three to five hours to spend on the phone with him, while he retells me the story of every Hope Goats baseball game he’s ever watched. Watching baseball is boring enough, *hearing* about someone *else* watching baseball is something I’m sure Dante wrote about. You’re the English scholar.

Was it in his description of the eighth or the ninth ring of hell?”

“It was in the seventh-inning-stretch ring.” He grinned and Abby rolled her eyes.

“Walked right into that one. Not unlike my future trip to hell.”

“I call shotgun,” Aaron chuckled. “After all, we both know you can’t navigate for crap.”

She sighed. “I get us lost *one time* and I never hear the end of it.”

He blinked at her. “We were in Bumble’s.”

She glared at him. “Right after their remodel. The *pet food* was in the *front*. The *greeting cards* were in the *back*. It was ‘Apocalypse Now’, baby!”

“At least we survived,” Aaron muttered.

“And I made sure the troops had sustenance,” Abby said, stomping up the porch stairs.

“Shoving a still-wrapped Twix in my mouth to get me to stop narrating our harrowing journey does *not* count as supplying sustenance.”

She shook her head slowly. “I should have left you to die on the field of the appliances and dish towels aisle.”

He chuckled. “Well, hindsight. Since you have Mr. Burns to tend to, I think I’ll get started on that grading.”

“Meet you on the other side?” Abby asked, glancing over at him as she dug her keys out of her coat pocket.

“Meet you on the other side of Hamlet essays and lizard poop,” Aaron said, nodding.

“Dragon poop,” Abby corrected.

“Right,” Aaron said. “Dragon. Hopefully, Mr. Burns doesn’t consider it to be a part of his horde.”

“From your lips to Smaug’s ass,” Abby called to him. He flashed her the half-smile again and for a strange second, Abby forgot how to breathe. She’d seen that smile a thousand times, her gaze always drawn to his mouth, his slightly crooked canine tooth and the single dimple in his right cheek. This time, she’d been looking at his eyes. And ... the smile had looked ... different.

The comforting sound of the *Star Trek* “whooshing” doors sound effect greeted her when she passed the novelty motion sensor and slipped inside. She shut her door and leaned against it. *Great. Now you’re not only catastrophizing about everyone dying, you’re also imagining things. It’s not even Friday yet.* She listened to the comforting quiet of the apartment around her and felt another irrational stab of fear in her chest. What would she do if things changed? If she lost a piece of this world? Aaron or Mr. Burns or her cozy apartment? As the floating thoughts landed in her brain she frowned. *What the hell!?* It wasn’t like her to jump off the deep end like this. Abby prided herself on her logic and practical thinking. What was causing all these bullshit thoughts? She felt her forehead. *Nope, not a fever.* She did an internal check. She didn’t feel like it was low blood sugar. She systematically named off and dismissed possibilities and hypotheses, letting the comforting hand of cold data guide her. Nothing biological that she could think of. She wasn’t even PMSing. There was only one other possibility. She’d suspected it all along, but she was hoping she’d been wrong. But as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote, “*Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*”

“Dammit Dana,” Abby muttered. “I hate you.” All her talk of dry spells and thunderstorms and dying alone. She groaned and pushed off the door. She just needed to forget it and distract herself. And what better way than dealing with dragon poop? “Well, Mr. Burns, your Smithers-stand-in is home. And the time has come.” She stopped in front of Mr. Burns’ aquarium in time to see the bearded dragon roll his eyes at her.

* * *

She was partially soaked and chasing the wet dragon around the bathtub when her phone rang.

“You win this round, Monty,” Abby muttered.

He hissed at her and bobbed his head in triumph as she dug her phone out of her pocket and sat down on the bath mat.

“Hey mom,” Abby muttered, rubbing the back of her neck.

“Abby! Your father and I just heard from your sister! She’s engaged! She and Ken are planning an island wedding this summer.”

Abby felt her heart pause in her chest. Her *little sister*, Barb, was getting married. Wow. “That’s great,” Abby said quickly before the shock really set in. She could feel Mr. Burns crawl up the side of the bathtub and onto her shoulder. He wasn’t hissing now and as he nudged her under the chin, she had the feeling that he was trying to make up with her for soaking her shirt. Or maybe he could sense that she was stunned and he was standing by to administer CPR. After a few seconds, she finally found her voice. “I thought Barb and Ken had only been dating for a few months.”

“Six weeks,” her mom said. “But, sometimes when you know, you know right away. She’s bringing Ken home for Christmas in a few weeks. We’re having a lunch to celebrate on Saturday. Ken has to work but Barb is coming in on the ferry that morning. Can you make it? I’ll be making everyone’s favorite Seven-Layer-Sin chocolate cake.”

“Can I bring Aaron?” Abby asked automatically.

Her mom sighed. “I suppose if you want to bring your *neighbor friend* with you, you can.”

“He’s my *best* friend, Mom,” Abby said automatically. “And he’s *family*.” There was a pause, and Abby held her breath, counting down to the inevitable in her head.

“I know he’s alone. But you two are *friends*. Not boyfriend and girlfriend, not in a relationship beyond pulling pranks on each other, everyone else, and taking part in your *hobbies*.” Abby sighed, but her mother wasn’t done. “Friends are great, honey, but they’re not who you marry. When are *you* going to have someone to introduce us to at Christmas?”

“I’m thinking maybe my mid-fifties, mid-sixties,” Abby said, running a crooked finger under Mr. Burns’ chin. This argument with her mom was so old, she had a *Thunderdome*-style wheel in her head that she’d just nod at the raggedy man to spin and feed her any response it landed on.

“Abby,” her mom said with a sigh. “You’re not getting any younger, dear heart. Mr. Burns can’t dial the telephone if you have a heart attack and die.”

“You don’t know that. We’ve been working on his dexterity,” Abby said.

“It’s all those toys in your apartment,” her mother added, not missing a beat and completely ignoring Abby’s sarcasm. She was immune. “Any person who steps in the door is immediately confused, not sure if they just walked into a grown woman’s apartment or some teenage geek’s dream house.”

“They’re not toys, Mother,” Abby said. “They’re action figures and replicas.”

Her mom’s sigh was put-upon. “Whatever they are, they’ll scare away anyone who even has a fleeting thought about having a serious relationship with you. I mean, just look what happened with Sam.” That mental kick landed in Abby’s gut. In the final round of the final boss fight she’d had with Sam, he’d been talking about moving in and helping her sell her collectibles on Ebay so she could “grow up”. That was when Abby had shown him the door. Perfunctory sex and her parents’ approval hadn’t been enough for her to forgive and forget what he’d said.

“And has there been anyone since? Any man willing to brave your ‘fortitude of solitaire?’”

Abby pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fortress of solitude?”

“That’s what I said,” her mom continued, the frustrated edge in her voice becoming more pronounced. “It’s been *three years* since you two broke up. What about the family you always wanted? You *love kids*.”

Abby did her best to push aside the old ache. “Yeah, well, the shine comes off that apple when you teach science to teenagers all day, every day.”

“I’m being serious, Abs. You don’t want to die alone.”

“I don’t know, Mom. It could have its advantages. It means I wasn’t murdered.” Abby felt Mr. Burns leap off her shoulder and touch down in the tub, sending a splash of warm water in a wave down her back.

“And having a friend that’s a *man* and that you’re close to is not going to help you find someone to get serious with either. It would probably be better for you both if you didn’t spend so much time together,” her mom continued.

Mr. Burns was splashing in the tub and Abby wasn’t in the mood to discuss distancing herself from Aaron, or what her odds were at finding a relationship beyond friendship. She didn’t know how to tell her mom that she didn’t think that was in the cards for her anymore. It was too painful to say out loud, even though it was a realization she’d been coming to over the past few years. “I need to go, Mom. I’ll call Barb this week to congratulate her. Love you.”

Twenty minutes later, Mr. Burns was back under his heat lamp, wearing his trademark “*Excellent*” t-shirt, and enjoying a treat of mealworms while Abby double-bagged his dookie and put it on the porch. She’d have to figure out how to get it to the vet’s in the morning. She’d forgotten about her early morning detentions.

“A problem for Morning Abby. Though, that bitch be crazy and tomorrow’s Afternoon Abby will probably pay for it. Oh well. Now that the dirty work is done,” Abby said, cutting her eyes to Mr. Burns while she washed her hands at the sink, “it’s time to have some fun.” She opened YouTube on her TV and hunted for the classic *MST3K* episode, *The Undead*. An ad started and she turned her attention back to the few dishes in her sink from breakfast.

“Do you live alone?” the ad began, “Are you worried about what would happen if you fell? Who would find you?”

Abby paused, soapy sponge in hand. She cut her eyes to the TV.

“With LifeCall Alert, you can have peace of mind while you live alone. With the push of a button, help can be on the way. You are never truly alone with LifeCall Alert.”

Abby squeezed her eyes shut and sighed. Three times in one day? Really? Were Dana, her mom, and YouTube conspiring against her?

Abby glanced up at the ceiling. “Et tu, universe?”

AARON

Just one essay left. Aaron leaned back in his chair and knocked back the last of his cold coffee. He'd finally reached the bottom of the pile, and there was only one possibility left for the remaining essay. He squeezed his eyes shut, asking for the patience of Plato, the sarcasm of Shakespeare, and the comedic relief of Chaucer to be with him, as he graded Turk Whorley's paper. He took a deep breath, set down his to-go cup from Miss Mandie's, and stared at the fancy cursive font header on the last essay, entitled: *Dear Hamlet, Get a Life*.

Oh Turk, Aaron thought, I'm so glad I saved you for last. He glanced at his empty cup. He felt like he might need something stronger to make it through this. The muffled sound of *Mystery Science Theater 3000's* intro music came through the thin dividing wall between his apartment and Abby's, and he leaned forward over the essay, grading pen poised over the paper. He had to finish fast. He didn't want to miss the start of the movie.

The essay was fairly representative of Turk's usual work. He went off on several tangents about Hamlet needing to get out more and get a pair of tights that weren't so tight, but he seemed to reach at least half of the conclusions that Aaron had been looking for. He gave Turk some extra points for

well-crafted sarcasm, made the additions in the margins about what Turk missed, gave him a B- and shoved the stack of essays back into his bag. He stood up to stretch and banged his head on the low-hanging chandelier above him. Aaron let out a string of curse words that would have made Chaucer do a spit-take, as he held the back of his head and backed away from the swinging light.

He was *not* going to tell Abby.

When he'd decided to turn his dining room into his office during the summer, Abby had been skeptical. Aaron's argument in favor was that he never *needed* a dining room since he lived alone and never had guests over, besides Abby and the guys from the teacher's basketball team.

Still, Abby had warned against it.

She'd looked at the light fixture and then Aaron and shook her head slowly. "This will be the room you die in, Aaron." Her tone had been so serious and her blue-green eyes had grown even larger if that was possible. Her mahogany-colored curls had swayed as she'd cocked her head to one side. "You're going to be grading papers one Friday night, stand up, bash your head on that chandelier, electrocute yourself, and be dead before you can make a sound. You'll pass through rigor, and I won't find you until Monday morning when we're supposed to leave for work. And you *know* how I hate being late." It was ridiculous and there had yet to be a weekend where they were both home and *not* hanging out in the three years he'd known her.

Yeah, he wasn't going to tell her that she had been right. Well, partially right, since he hadn't electrocuted himself and died. Even admitting that she'd been *partially* right was a safety hazard. He'd

seen her “told you so” dance, and it was more humiliating to be on the receiving end of an end zone dance from the other team. Though he had to admit, Abby was a terrible victory dancer. Aaron chuckled at the memory of the first time she’d beat him at the board game he’d created. She’d been so excited, that she’d jumped to her feet, spiked her game piece, slipped on the board, and sailed into his kitchen before losing her footing and landing flat on her back on the floor. He closed his eyes. Her hair had been loose, curls spilling around her head like a dark halo as she laughed her silent, vibrating, tear-spilling laugh that Aaron could never keep himself from joining in on.

A reverberating knock drew his attention and he grinned at the weird interior door that Todd had installed between the two apartments as emergency egress. “Hurry up, Burney, you’re missing the opening! And I’m up to my elbows in marshmallow so I can’t pause it!”

“So how did you knock on the door?” Aaron called back.

“A gentleman never asks, and a lady never tells,” Abby yelled.

Aaron kicked off his shoes and slid his feet into the Scooby slippers Abby had given him for his birthday when she found out that he’d never owned a pair. When he’d asked her why they were Scooby slippers *specifically*, she hadn’t really had an answer.

When he reached the connecting door, he knocked back. “Permission to enter the dragon’s lair?”

“Sure. Mr. Burns says it’s ok. But you must pay tribute upon entering,” Abby called.

“I think I know your house rules by now,” Aaron muttered, turning the knob and leaning on the door. The smell of petrichor and water lilies washed over him. It was a clean, earthy smell, like rain on mossy soil. Abby always said it had to be the smell of her soul, because of how calm it made her. He couldn’t argue with her. The scent, just like her pet bearded dragon, colorful overalls, curly hair, the mixture of astrophysics texts and graphic novels on her shelves, and impressive collection of action figures were so uniquely her. After three years of friendship, he could walk into a store and (in under a minute) pick the one thing in the store that she would want. Abby made friendship easy. She was this perfect balance of predictable and surprising. Never boring, but reliable. She could be a pain in the ass from time to time when she got an idea in her head for an experiment, retaliation, or a prank she wanted to pull. But every time she laid out her plan, by the time she finished, he was with her. If she told him one day that they were going to build a rocket ship out of a washing machine, an iron lung, and goat farts, just so they could go dispel the conspiracy theory about the moon landing, he’d be on the internet looking up how to make goats fart by the time she finished her explanation. And she’d always done the same for him. She was the first person who hadn’t laughed when he’d told her that his lifelong ambition was to make a board game as good if not better than Clue. Instead, she’d started taking notes and without even the hint of a smile, she’d started looking up books on game theory and listing off materials she had or could get for him to make trial game boards.

He didn’t know how he’d gotten so lucky. He hadn’t had a lot of friends when he was growing up. Being an only child without a mother and with

a father that traveled for work all the time, his grandmother had been his best friend for most of his childhood. He knew he was a nerd. His grandma had always told him that there was no better friend than a book. He both blamed and thanked her for instilling in him his love of reading, and making him want to become an English teacher.

As was customary, as soon as he entered Abby's apartment, he moved over to Mr. Burns' aquarium, scooped a mealworm out of the container Abby had left out, and dangled it over the side. Mr. Burns puffed up his neck and Aaron dropped the worm, just as he lunged for it.

A huff of impatience drew his gaze. Abby had pulled her hair up in one of those clips that looked like a bear trap. She was still wearing her blue overalls, dotted by tiny orange roses, over a damp-looking shirt, and she was staring down at her marshmallow and Rice Krispie-covered forearms. He saw her glance longingly at the sink.

"Existential crisis?" Aaron asked, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

Abby heaved an exasperated sigh. "I wish the human race would hurry up and evolve telekinetic abilities. I mean, come on Simian descendants. Get it together."

"On behalf of all of us scions of Simians," Aaron said, fighting to suppress his grin as he side-stepped her and turned on the faucet, "allow me."

"Scions of Simian would be an awesome metal band name," Abby said, brushing against him as she started to scrub her arms in the sink.

Aaron's reply about his lifelong desire to be a tambourine player in an ape-themed metal band was lost somewhere in his chest. The feel of her

warm skin, skimming across his abs, temporarily froze the thoughts in his head. Abby was saying something now, but his brain was having a hard time making out what it was. What was happening to him? He watched, his lungs temporarily forgetting what their function was, as Abby's slender fingers slid over his shirt, before grabbing the fabric in her fist, just below a white smear of marshmallow.

“Whoops, sorry bro. Marshmallow party foul,” Abby said, swiping at his shirt with a damp towel. “I dunno though. Maybe I should leave it. It kind of looks like gray matter. Might buy you some street cred in the tambourine-player metal world.”

“How ...,” Aaron started to ask, momentarily panicked that Abby had taught herself Harry Potter-style *Legilimens*. If she could read his mind ... he gave an involuntary shiver.

She rolled her eyes. “Last Christmas. Remember? My mom got my niece Flora that Fisher Price tambourine because she apparently hates my sister. And when Flora gave it to you, you treated us all to a performance of “Hotel California” for vocals and tambourine?”

“Dammit,” Aaron muttered, moving around the counter and flopping down on Abby's couch. “I thought that was a dream.”

Abby snorted before opening the fridge and disappearing behind the door. “It was. A dream come true for the rest of us. I told you my mom's eggnog wasn't for lightweights. The good news is that I now have the world's best ringtone on my phone now.”

“I'm calling your bluff, Locke,” Aaron said. “I've never heard this allegedly incriminating ringtone.” He turned his attention back to her.

“That’s because it’s *your* ringtone and you’re never in the room with me, *obviously*, when it goes off.”

Aaron couldn’t immediately answer. He was transfixed by the sight of Abby’s bare feet poking out from under the door, as she swore and shifted the fridge’s contents. Her feet were so small. She dropped something and bent down to pick it up and he quickly returned his gaze to her TV.

It was just stress. It had to be. That’s why he was having these ... fantasies. It was just because it was the end of another year, and he hadn’t dated anyone since before coming to Hope. Until now, he’d just been trying to find his rhythm, get used to the quirky small town, and get his classes squared away. But now he had a good routine. He woke up, worked out, read, walked to work with Abby, taught classes all day, walked home with Abby, and hung out with her until it was time to go to bed. He was even starting to get the hang of life in this weird little town. If anything, the last three years in Hope had only made him more certain than ever that he was exactly where he wanted to be. He’d never wanted a spotlight or countrywide recognition for his papers or anything. He just wanted ... stability. Something he could count on, like a school year, a comfortable little place to live, a hobby or two, and a best friend. He just needed *one*. And that was Abby. Abby was a favorite book that you never got tired of re-reading. And on each re-read, you discovered little details that just made you love ...umm ... *like*, rereading the book even more.

“Well, Burney,” Abby said, dropping down beside him and passing him a beer. “Flora repossessed her tambourine, but if you get a couple of these brewskis in you and decide you just *have* to

play an encore, I'm sure I could rustle you up some spoons and a spaghetti colander."

They were twenty minutes into the movie when Aaron felt Abby shift on the couch next to him. A whiff of petrichor tickled his nose, like opening a window right after a spring rain.

"Are you worried about dying alone?" Abby asked.

Aaron blinked. "What?"

She turned her heart-shaped face to look up at him. "Dying alone. Do you ever worry about it?"

"Uh, not really," Aaron said slowly.

"Really?"

"Well, to be completely honest, I hadn't really thought about it."

"So, you're not worried about it?"

"Well I am now," he muttered. "What happened today that made *you* start worrying about dying alone?"

"Dana, my mother, the universe," Abby sighed.

"Ok Vana, I'm going to need to buy some more vowels to piece this one together."

Abby quickly looked away and shook her head. "Never mind."

Aaron wanted to say something. The right thing. Whatever Abby needed to hear at that moment so she would know that everything was ok. But the moment passed, and the familiar sinking feeling followed, telling him it was too late to say the right thing even if he could figure out what that would be. It was the same feeling he'd had as a ten year old, chasing the ambulance that had taken his mother away after her aneurysm.

Whatever had been on Abby's mind, the chance to catch that ambulance had slipped through his fingers.

"Do you think they make Tom Servo cocktail shakers?" Abby asked beside him. She reached for her phone and Aaron studied her face in profile while she scoured the internet. He'd known Abby long enough to know when she was suppressing something that was really bothering her. And judging by the small worry lines at the corners of her eyes, this was one of those times. If he could just figure out what the hell to say ... he swore that's why he spent so much of his life studying the greatest writers. They always knew what to say, and how to say it ... perfectly. But studying it didn't make someone capable of doing it.

So instead he said, "Hey, on Saturday, do you wanna play test *Tenterhooks* again? I think I finally worked out the doubles rolling glitch," Aaron said. It felt like a best friend cop-out. But he'd had too much experience with saying the wrong thing, letting the wrong thoughts out, and scaring off or ruining a relationship because of it. And the fear of messing up his friendship with Abby was enough to stop him in his tracks.

"Awesome," Abby said. "I'm down. Though, I do feel kind of guilty about schooling you at a board game you invented." She glanced up long enough to wink at him and then went back to thumbing through *MST3K* Etsy pages. "In exchange, will you pull an Abbott and Costello with me this weekend?"

Aaron groaned. "What dumpster are we raiding this time?"

"Always so dramatic. I've yet to make you raid a single dumpster. Mrs. Burgess over on Seaside is

cleaning out her husband's woodworking shed and there's this vintage school desk ..."

"Say no more," Aaron groaned. He stretched his arm out along the back of the couch and took a pull on his beer. The brush of soft hair against his bare forearm jerked his attention away from Crow's on-screen antics. Abby had leaned back, her hair brushing his arm as she smiled at the screen and raised her beer. At that instant, Aaron wasn't worried about dying alone.

* * *

Aaron had never been the keg-standing, Jell-O shot-gunning type. In general, he'd never really liked going to generic college parties. He liked playing D&D and inventing board games and watching '90s nerd TV. And now, with Abby, he finally had someone to do all the things with. He had a good rhythm, doing all the things he loved.

Well, a tiny voice said in the back of his head, *almost all of the things*. Aaron didn't waste time slamming the door on that voice. He hadn't had sex in over three years. He knew it was probably a fact that would make his male friends choke on their pale ales. And it was getting harder for him to ignore. Especially when Abby was leaning her head on his shoulder, snuggling into the couch next to him and grabbing his shirt, trailing her fingers over his ... he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to separate what had *actually* happened from the dream that had knocked him on his back. Literally. With Abby straddling his hips, her lips trailing over his neck, his hands cupping her ... he groaned, feeling himself getting hard. *Stop*. This wasn't helping.

He hadn't been in a relationship beyond a few dates since college. Stella, the girl he'd dated in college, had been a fellow English major. She was brilliant and beautiful, but as soon as he started showing her his hobbies, letting his guard down, being his nerdy self, she'd broken up with him.

One of the few memorable conversations he'd had with his dad had taken place afterward. "*If there's no mystery left, Aaron, and it's just you standing there naked in front of them, it's a lot easier for them to weigh your faults and find the door. You've got to keep that mystery. Have friends that you can be yourself with. To keep a romance alive in a relationship, you have to keep some things to yourself.*" At the time, his dad was going through his second divorce with his third wife. Aaron assumed his dad knew what he was talking about, but the whole prospect felt so depressing.

Somewhere in his head, he just assumed Abby had already worked out his dad's logic and instead of pursuing any other kind of relationship was (like him) just feeling satisfied with their easy friendship and her daily rhythm. But now ... after her question about dying alone last night ... it was all Aaron could think about.

While these thoughts chased each other through his head, he'd been trying to reread the same passage from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* four times, and it still wasn't reaching him at the moment. He closed the book, shelved it and moved onto his workout.

This internal monologue swirled around him as he moved methodically through his morning workout, trying his best to keep his old nemesis, anxiety, under control.

The shower hadn't helped. Every time he closed his eyes under the hot spray the trickling of the hot water over his abs felt like her soft fingers. The fantasy had quickly turned to imagining her legs wrapped around his waist, her back sliding up and down on the shower wall while he ... he snapped his eyes open and twisted the knob until he was shivering under the cold water. By the time he stepped out of the shower, he was back to thinking about what Abby said the night before. What if Abby *wasn't* happy with the way things were? *Treadmilling, Aaron. Your brain is treadmilling. Slow down, and step off the treadmill. Abby is next door, you're walking to work together in twenty minutes. Task at hand. Clothes, shoes, breakfast, work.*

As if the universe knew that he could use a break that morning, when he moved back into his bedroom, he could hear Abby's calming yoga playlist on Spotify through the wall. He sat down on the edge of his bed and closed his eyes, focusing on the faint music drifting through the thin Sheetrock. And he breathed. And he thought about Abby, sitting on her yoga mat, cross-legged, eyes closed, hair in her constantly messy bun, smiling that soft smile she always wore when she was thinking about something that made her happy. Listening to the sounds of her personal favorite, Professor Elemental, Jonathan Coulton, and They Might Be Giants, maybe sprinkling in some Cake if she was feeling extra sassy. Her chest slowly rising and falling, as she shifted slightly, her hips rolling in those ... tight, yoga pants ... his eyes flew open.

He dragged his hands down his face and tried to focus on something else. *Anything* else. His mind was stubbornly anchored on Abby at the moment though, so he tried instead to focus on his attempts to untie the mental knot of how to ask Abby what

was really bothering her. Did ... did Abby want to get married one day? Have kids? It wasn't something they'd ever really talked about.

He rested his elbows on the towel slung across his lap and rubbed his temples. If Abby started dating someone, she wouldn't have time to hang out with him every night. She'd be busy with *them*. And she wouldn't have time to just hang out in the garage while he painted and carved game pieces and she refinished old furniture. And what if the jerk she started dating came over every morning to walk with her to work? And home? And grocery shopping? And then he'd be over there, cooking with her, turning on the water when she was covered in marshmallows, sitting on her couch with her, being surrounded by her petrichor and water lilies scent.

He could feel his anxiety rising again. *Stop it, Aaron. She's your best friend. You want her to be happy.*

It was true. He just ... he didn't want things to change. But change happened, whether he wanted it to or not. And people left. His mom had died. His grandma had died. His dad had moved to Maine and adopted a whole other family that didn't really include him. Stella had left him. But then, he'd moved to Hope.

He had to admit that he was currently the happiest he'd ever been in his life. But that was probably *why* he didn't want anything to change. He got to his feet, feeling the towel trying to slide further down his hips. He pulled it tighter around him and moved with purpose to his closet. *Get over it, Aaron. Abby deserves to be happy. If that's with some jerk boyfriend, then so be it. You're her best friend, and you will be supportive. Stop being so selfish.* He wasn't one hundred percent successful

in getting behind the sentiment. However, by the time he was dressed, downstairs, and standing on the porch, he'd been able to get his anxiety under control again. And he could recognize that he was being selfish, wanting to keep his best friend all to himself.

He stepped out on their porch and paused when he saw Abby frowning at something in a plastic bag.

“Everything ok over there?” he asked.

She sighed. “I need to drop this off at the vet’s, but I forgot Amy Smith and Darren Hobbs are coming in early to serve detention for not getting their chemistry project done on time. The detention is really just to give them time to get it done when I can be there for them one-on-one.” She looked torn between her students and Mr. Burns.

“I can take it,” Aaron said.

Abby frowned at him. “Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. My first class is Senior English. You know them. They’re never on time.”

A look of relief passed over her face and Aaron felt himself smile. “You’re the best,” Abby said. “Seriously. I owe you big time. Like, letting you beat me at *Tenterhooks* big.”

Aaron rolled his eyes and took the bag of dookie from her. “You talk a big game now, but just wait until I roll out the new rules.”

“Oh, I’m shaking in my doubles-rolling boots.” She paused and smiled at him. Aaron felt his heart stutter in his chest. “Seriously, Burney. I owe you.”

He shrugged. “It’s really not a big deal.”

“It is to me. And Mr. Burns. He’d never thank you, because he’s too much of a jerk for that. So, I’ll have to thank you enough for the both of us. Name your price.”

Aaron mentally kicked the door closed on all the hormone-fueled things that immediately came to mind. He felt heat rising in his face at the assault of unbidden fantasies that had just flashed through his head, especially of the scene with him on his knees and Abby sitting on the edge of her kitchen countertop, her legs over his shoulders, moaning his name. He cleared his throat. “How-how about ... cinnamon rolls?”

Abby nodded, a grin spreading across her face. “It’s a deal. Though, you know what goes *really* good with my cinnamon rolls?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Chili?”

“It’s like you read my mind.”

He chuckled. “Of course, that does make us uneven again,” Aaron added with a grin.

Abby sighed. “Them’s the breaks. I guess I’ll have to think of something to top cinnamon rolls. I can carry that until we get to the school,” she said, nodding down at the bag of Mr. Burns’ droppings in his hand.

“I got it,” Aaron said, nodding for her to lead the way. He watched her bounce down the steps, still protesting about him carrying the poop.

Abby looked like she always did. Dark brown hair pulled back, with a few strands escaping and curling around her ears. She was wearing her color-splashed painter’s overalls and a long-sleeved green t-shirt printed with molecular structures that Aaron had gotten her for Christmas the year before under her winter coat. She gave

him her usual half-smile and though the energy level of their morning banter wasn't any different than normal, he could tell by the bags under her eyes that she hadn't slept well. Abby was only a couple of inches over five feet and by the time they were wading through the hallway full of high schoolers, he had to focus to keep from losing her amongst the students. But every time he thought he had, he'd catch a whiff of her perfume or hear her make a snarky comment and like a magnet, he'd be drawn back to her side. *The mark of a true friendship*, Aaron thought. Yes. Friendship. Of the highest order as Abby always said. Ride or die besties. Nothing else.

AARON

Aaron sighed as the basketball pinged off the front of the rim and bounced off the front of the foldaway bleachers.

“Your game’s off, Burns,” Rob taunted, chasing the ball.

Aaron glanced at the clock as the bell rang, signaling the end of the lunch period. “That’s the buzzer anyway.”

“Something got you distracted today?” Rob asked.

Aaron shrugged. “Just tired. Almost Christmas break, papers to grade, that kind of thing. Not that you’d know anything about that over at the nice, quiet library.” Sometimes when Aaron’s class was wreaking havoc, he was jealous of Rob in his quiet office over at the Hope Library. It almost seemed as though his friend came over on his lunch hour to play basketball solely for the purpose of rubbing his sanity in the teachers’ faces.

Rob snorted. “Quiet? Are you kidding me? You’ve been in this cartoon of a town for three years. There is no such thing as ‘quiet’. It’s loud until you die.”

“How pleasant.”

“And the Christmas season is the worst,” he groaned, shooting from the free throw line and turning to study Aaron as it swished through the net. “But I consider myself to be a pretty intuitive guy ...”

“Do you now?” Aaron muttered, retrieving the ball, pivoting, and laying up a shot.

“I do,” Rob continued. “And it’s not just end-of-year exhaustion and holiday angst that’s plaguing you today, my friend.”

“It’s not?”

“No,” Rob said, retrieving the ball and giving Aaron the evil grin that always put him on his guard. “My friend, you have ‘relationship trouble face’.”

Aaron frowned. “First off, no I don’t. Second, that’s not a thing.”

“It’s totally a thing,” Rob said, pausing to square up and take another shot. “It’s just weird that you have it when you’re in a relationship with someone like Abby.”

Aaron sighed. “I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve said this to you but we’re just friends. Period.”

“You know, your mouth is telling me one thing but the rest of your face ...”

“Give it a rest, Rob. I think you’re projecting on me. Or trying to live vicariously through me. Either way, you’re going to end up ‘giving yourself a hand’, if you know what I mean. If I have ‘relationship trouble face’, you’ve got ‘non-existent relationship posture’.”

“Oh, excuse me, professor,” Rob muttered. Aaron grinned, stealing the ball from him to lay it

up. “Just saying,” Rob called after him. “Abby is a hottie and if you don’t get your ass in gear, someone else will.”

Aaron snorted. “She’d never go out with you, Rob. You’ve never seen *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.”

“Hey, I can be taught. Especially for someone like Abby Locke.”

“Cute,” Aaron muttered through gritted teeth. The gym door swung open and Fred Goss came in, a clipboard in one hand and scratching his head with the other. “Hey, Fred.” Aaron was glad to see Fred. If for no other reason than to distract Rob so he’d stop talking about Abby and ... how hot she was. Aaron felt a cramp forming in his stomach. Yeah, he knew how hot Abby was. And Rob was probably right. It was only a matter of time before some nice guy swept her off her feet and out of his life. But what was he supposed to do about it? She was his best friend. He *wanted her* to be happy.

“Hey guys,” Fred said with a grin. “Glad the empty gym isn’t going to waste during the lunch hour. Whatcha doing? Off-season training for our summer league?”

Rob shrugged. “That and trying to figure out what’s going on with Aaron’s ...”

“Fred, I thought it was dodgeball week,” Aaron said quickly, talking over Rob. He didn’t miss the smirk on Rob’s face.

Fred sighed. “It’s supposed to be. I confiscated the few that the Whorley brothers had, but they were the only ones I could find. I know we have more. I think they just got stuffed somewhere weird after the last dodgeball week in the Spring.”

“What’s eating you?” Rob asked, *finally* turning his attention to Fred.

Fred groaned. “Oh, I just got cornered by Bob. He told me that this year, I’m apparently going to represent the school as the judge for the school’s Twelve Days of Christmas Tournament.”

Aaron shivered. “Well, on behalf of all the rest of the school staff, thank you for falling on that grenade for us.”

“Who’s Bob?” Rob asked, trying to dribble between his legs. He failed and swore when the ball hit him in the crotch.

“He’s the principal,” Aaron said, trying not to smirk. “And he’s stalking the staff right now, handing out Christmas public relations activities like he’s Santa and they’re a sack full of starved raccoons.”

“Fun,” Rob muttered, still trying to recover some of his dignity.

Fred was grinning now when he turned to Aaron. “What did he *volun-tell* you to do?”

Aaron quickly glanced at the door and then lowered his voice. “So far, I’ve been successful in avoiding him.”

“Lucky,” Fred muttered.

Aaron shook his head. “Good karma I guess. The universe knows I’m already serving a life sentence as an elf in Santa’s Balloon Grotto.”

Rob and Fred blinked at him.

“How?” Rob asked.

“What?” Fred added.

Aaron sighed. “So, three years ago, I didn’t know my butt from the Plumber’s Day parade out

here and I happened to come across Paul McIntyre on the first day of December when he was ...”

“Assembling the grotto,” Fred and Rob said together, eyes wide.

Aaron nodded. “Yep. Well, I didn’t know the legend of Paul’s eight-hour Christmas story and I would have been forcibly strapped in for the whole thing if Abby hadn’t come across me, pretended we knew each other, and apologized for being late to meet me. She told Paul we had an appointment we had to keep, but Paul was not going to let us go that easy.” Aaron felt himself grinning at the memory. “So, she had to volunteer to be an elf for Santa’s Balloon Grotto that year. Paul haggled and I ended up getting roped into the deal too. And somehow, in the fine print that neither of us read, we now have to do it every year.”

“So you really dress up as an elf?” Rob asked, trying not to grin. “A seven-foot tall elf?”

“Six-six,” Aaron muttered. “You’re always exaggerating.” He cut his eyes to Rob. “About *everything*.”

“Does Abby dress up like an elf too?” Fred asked, grinning. Something about Fred’s grin, made the knot tighten in Aaron’s stomach. “I’ll bet she’s really cute,” Fred said.

“I’ll bet she’s really *hot*,” Rob added, grinning at Aaron. “I’d let her candy *my* cane.”

Fred and Aaron looked at Rob.

“What does that even mean?” Fred asked.

“You know...my cane...candy?” Rob said, backtracking.

“You know how ‘candy’ works right? Melted sugar? Boiling heat? It would take the skin right

off,” Aaron added. At the moment, the thought sounded like a fair punishment for the way Rob was talking about Abby. *About his best friend.*

* * *

“Ok class, I know we only have a few days left before winter break, but I need you to stick with me.” Thankfully, it was almost the end of the day. Just one more class after this one and he and Abby could head to the store. He was already thinking about chili and cinnamon rolls. Abby made the best icing. He warned his brain to just leave it at that and move on before it started imagining ... anything he could *do* with the icing. He gritted his teeth and looked down at his class notes. He just had to make it through the rest of the day. He could do this. He turned to his desk and scooped up the stack of handouts he’d printed at lunch.

“Since we’re studying Shakespeare’s sonnets, for winter break your assignment will be to write one of your own.” He paused and wasn’t surprised by the chorus of groans from his eleventh graders. Turk Whorley was possibly the most dramatic of the bunch, pretending to have a heart attack and keel over “dead” on his desk.

“That’s good,” Aaron said, “now take that anguish, turn it into properly-metered stanzas, and you’re on your way to being done with the assignment.” The students stared down at the handouts as they were passed around, resigned to their fate.

“Now, just to give you all a little guidance on this project, I want your sonnet to be about something that happens to you during Christmas

Break. It can be unexpected, mundane, happy or sad. Any or all of the above.”

“But, Mr. Burns ...” Anita Hollaway started to say. She was interrupted by other voices in the room.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Really?”

“Man, this sucks.”

“Why?”

But it was Turk Whorley’s voice that shut everyone else up. “Sonnets are supposed to be about two contrasting things, right? Characters or beliefs or whatever. How are we supposed to write one about Christmas break?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, Mr. Burns.”

“Is it supposed to be us versus the holidays?”

“Or like me versus my mom’s Turkey Surprise?”

“Ok, ok,” Aaron said, holding his hands up to try to keep his class from descending into hysteria, especially so close to the bell. “Turk is right, sonnets are used to examine the tension that exists between two contrasting events, beliefs, emotions, or characters. This could be anything during the holidays. Maybe you love the holidays, but someone you’re close to doesn’t. Maybe you hate them and it’s you *versus* the holidays. Maybe it’s braving the cold to put up Christmas lights, dealing with some family drama at the traditional get-together, or something fun, like you versus your mom’s Turkey Surprise,” he said, nodding at Alex King. “There are no limits on what it is, as long as

it's tied to *something* that happens to you or around you over Christmas break.”

“So are you going to write one too?” Turk asked, crossing his arms. “I mean, you wouldn't ask us to do something you weren't able to do, right?”

Aaron rolled his eyes. He could give Turk detention or tell him that his sonnet now had to be ten stanzas longer than everyone else's, but Aaron didn't like the precedent of punishing his students for speaking their minds. And to be fair, he also wanted to give his students an example of an adult not asking them to do something that they weren't prepared to do.

“I'll do you one better, Turk,” Aaron said, an idea coming to him that would both help keep his aura of authority and also please the rest of the class. “We're going to read them in class when we get back. And I'll read mine first. Followed by you,” he said, nodding at Turk. Turk immediately slumped in his chair, his spiky blond hair seeming to wilt with being one-upped. Aaron didn't miss the tips of his ears turning pink.

“Now that that's settled,” Aaron said, leaning back against his desk, “let's take the last fifteen minutes of class to work in groups and come up with a list of elements we've identified from Shakespeare's sonnets that should make an appearance in *your* sonnets.” Over the mutters of students and the scraping of desks as they formed four groups, Aaron could hear Abby's class across the hall laughing at something she'd said. From where he was, he could see directly into her classroom where she stood, leaning back against the tall counter that served as her desk.

“I’m not saying that the scientific method will *always* be the answer, but you can use it to solve more problems than just getting gum off your bum after an ill-fated bus trip. Alright, Samantha, what are the steps of the scientific method? Go!” Abby turned her back to her class and started writing on her whiteboard as Samantha fired off the steps in rapid progression. The rest of Abby’s class jumped in to add notes and Aaron smiled. He had never figured out how she did it, but there was some rare magic to Abby. How she could take something like science (which had bored him stiff in school) and turn it into something like a magic show, stand-up comedy, and Bill Nye mash-up was beyond him. It was just *her*. Her energy, her love of her subject, her love of teaching. He couldn’t stop the smile that crept across his face as he watched her stretch on tiptoes to reach the board’s eraser that was resting on the whiteboard’s top ledge. He was watching her in profile and even from where he stood, he could see her chest straining against her overall straps ... and how had he never noticed what the back of those overalls did for her ...

The bell rang, thankfully yanking him away from that line of thinking. He turned his back to the doorway and focused on his classroom as his students moved their desks back to their original formation and gathered their things. He waved to them as they filed out and immediately went back to his desk. He sat down with his elbows on either side of his laptop, determined to prepare for his last class, and keep his mind far away from how good his best friend looked in her overalls and the sudden fantasy that popped into his head of her wearing them ... with nothing on underneath. His elbow slipped off his desk. *Get a grip, Aaron. You’ve just been going through a multi-year dry spell in your romantic life, reading too much Shakespeare and*

Eliot, and now your hormones are mentally attacking your best friend.

Just ... get it together.

His gaze slid back to the hallway. He could see Abby stretching as she peered out her classroom window and Aaron gave an inner groan, squeezing his eyes shut.

Easier said than done.

ABBY

After three years at Hope High, Abby could tell when her students had mentally run out of gas. She'd call it her superpower, but she was pretty sure it wouldn't be good enough to get her into the Justice League or Dr. Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.

“So, does anyone else think that the alphorn in the gazebo sounds like a huge whale fart?” Abby asked, keeping her voice even, not breaking from her lecturing cadence. Samantha Wrigley jerked her head up from where she'd been taking notes and gave Abby a funny look.

Abby nodded at her. “Well, there's at least one sign of life. Do we think it's more of a whale fart or the sound that Cthulhu would make when he stepped on a Lego?” Now there were a few more heads rising to look at her. “And you're back. Ok, I know it's almost winter break, and *I know* it's almost the end of the day. Just hang with me for twenty more minutes and then you can have a change of scenery and hopefully more comfortable desks to fall asleep at for your last class. Deal?” There were a few grunts and some grumblings, but Abby decided she'd take it. At least there weren't any snores. With a little hop, she jumped up to sit on the edge of the tall counter she used as a desk.

“So, eight years ago, I decided to take a bus from Seattle to Tacoma to catch a Weird Al Yankovic show. I was seventeen and my parents weren’t able to drive me, but I decided I was cool ... I mean, I was going to see Weird Al, so of course, I was cool.” A few of the popular kids chuckled and Abby grinned. “So I walked right up to the Greyhound counter, got my ticket, boarded the bus, and as I walked down that aisle to my seat, I could feel people watching me. Was it because of my hazard orange overalls and my Weird Al hoodie? No, I knew it was because I looked incredibly cool with my backpack and my bus ticket, going solo to my first show. I got to my seat and was just as cool and nonchalant as I could be, but I plopped down on that sucker so hard that the vinyl made that wheezing fart noise, drawing the attention of this really cute guy across the aisle from me.” Abby paused as more of the class chuckled and focused on her. “Well, I tried to play it off like I’d meant for the seat to do that, so I moved around, trying to make it happen again. That was when I realized that there was something ... something small and ... awful, that was holding me in place on the seat.”

“Like gum?” Samantha asked, her eyes doubling in size.

Abby nodded. “Not *like* gum. Actual gum. A huge wad. Like a kid had shoved an entire pack of Big League Chew into their mouths on a dare, chewed, couldn’t handle it, and then deposited the wad on the seat, for an unsuspecting bum to sit in.”

“What did you do?” Frankie Cartwright asked, leaning forward in his seat.

“Well, I remembered this thing that I was taught in my tenth-grade science class. The scientific method. It had helped me solve countless

problems before getting on that bus, and by the power of Bowie, it was going to help me solve some gum on my bum.” Abby walked them through how she’d used the steps during that fateful trip to try different methods of getting the gum off of her and how she’d finally used ice that the woman in the seat next to her had offered to her and the gum had come off. “Of course, then I just had a wet butt that looked like the bullseye of a dart board, since I was wearing hazard orange overalls, but it was better than missing Weird Al because I was stuck to a Greyhound bus seat.” The class laughed. “I’m not saying that the scientific method will *always* be the answer, but you can use it to solve more problems than just getting gum off your bum after an ill-fated bus trip. Alright, Samantha, what are the steps of the scientific method? Go!”

Abby didn’t fight the smile that spread across her face, hearing her students jump in to help Samantha, asking questions and shouting out notes to add as Abby wrote them on the board. There’d been so many, that she’d had to erase some of her notes from earlier in the class.

When they were finished, Abby turned with a flourish and motioned to the board. “Ta-da! Behold! Your Christmas break assignment!” As she’d expected, her class fell silent. Abby’s grin widened. “For Christmas break, I want you to apply the scientific method to a situation you’re in. It could be cooking with your family, or figuring out what mom and dad got you for Christmas, though, I wash my hands of any stealth tactics you might use. If you get caught, I don’t know you.” The class chuckled and she continued. “You could use it to navigate a conversation with a family member you don’t see very often or maybe,” she tapped the board with her knuckle, “it’ll be

something you can use to solve an embarrassing situation as I did. Whatever you decide to use it on, remember to, what?" She asked, leading.

"Document," her class said, the lack of enthusiasm in their voices, more than evident.

"Exactly. Have fun with it though."

"Miss Locke?" Jake Whorley. Not really the bane of Abby's existence, but easily her most trying student.

"Yes, Jake?"

"I don't think applying the scientific method to an everyday situation is going to be that easy. I mean, you've always told us that scientists study *other scientists'* work in order to inform their own research, right?"

"Riiiiight," Abby said slowly, trying to peer ahead and see where Jake was going with this.

"So, don't you think *you* should *also* be applying the scientific method to your holidays, so we'll all have a base study to compare our own *research* with?"

Abby did her best to not roll her eyes. "But I gave you all an example of me using the scientific method in real life." She nodded at the board.

"Well, yeah," Jake said. "Like twenty years after it happened." Abby felt herself scowl. *Twenty years? How old does he think I am?*

"I mean ..." Apparently Jake hadn't noticed Abby's expression as he plowed on, "but at the moment, I'm sure you weren't thinking, 'oh, this is a perfect example of the scientific method being used in day-to-day life. I'm going to tell my class about this one day'."

"Well, no," Abby said.

“See? So having you *also* try to make all these steps fit into a holiday situation will give us all an, uh, *equal* set of variables, uh, for *experimentation*.”

Now Abby did roll her eyes. “Fine, Jake. I’ll do it too.” She paused as an idea came over her that would satisfy the class but also take some of the sass out of Jake’s arsenal. “In fact, I’ll present my findings *first*. Jake, you’ll present yours *second*. Deal?” Jake now looked like he’d been the one who’d been swindled.

“Deal.” He finally said, dejectedly.

The bell rang.

“Don’t forget! Pop quiz in the morning! Your last one for the year!”

“Really?” Frankie asked, his voice hopeful.

“For the actual year, yes,” Abby said. “Not the school year.” Frankie’s face fell and Abby clapped him on the back. “Don’t worry, there will be plenty more in the spring! And why are you worried anyway, Frankie? You’ve been acing them.”

Frankie grinned down at her and she saw his cheeks starting to color. “Thanks, Miss Locke. See ya tomorrow.”

She waved her class out of the room. The sound of bells outside her window made her turn in time to see Stanley Jacobs walking by the school, pushing a wheelbarrow full of garlands, decorated with big jingle bells. Behind him, she saw his wife, Esther, talking a mile a minute at Stanley, squawking every time he hit a bump on the cobblestone road, and complaining about how slow he was pushing the wheelbarrow. He paused, stepped back from the wheelbarrow, and motioned for Esther to take over. Ester just huffed indignantly and stormed off. Abby saw Stanley grin

before he started pushing the wheelbarrow again. *Well played, Stanley*, Abby thought. She smiled and stretched. She really did love this town. If she squinted, she could see Bumble's Market on the far side of the town square. Just one more class and she and Aaron would be heading out. At the thought of Aaron's chili, her stomach growled.

"I know," she said, glancing down at herself. "Chili sounds really good, right?" And Aaron's chili was easily the best she'd ever had.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Get out of the way, then!" She knew those voices. Marvin Casey and Mack O'Hara. She'd watched them fight as awkward freshmen, then sulking sophomores, now as jerk juniors.

"Hey, break it up!" Abby called, hustling into the hall. Granted, both of them had shot up about six inches over the summer and now towered over her even more than they had the year before, making the act of breaking up their fights a slightly different maneuver these days. The boys were ignoring her. "Didn't you two hear the bell? Penalties for throwing punches after the bell." Mack's fist narrowly missed Abby. She ducked, and a second later, Mack's sneaker squeaked on the floor as Marvin shoved him from behind, knocking him forward. He collided with Abby before hitting the drinking fountain with his face.

"You broke my nose, you dick!" Mack yelled. He lunged at Marvin and Abby didn't have enough time to dive out of the way. Marvin knocked into Abby and she fell, banging her head against the wall.

"Abby!" Aaron yelled from across the hall. "Knock it off, you two!"

Abby blinked the stars out of her eyes from her impromptu smooch session with the floor and when her vision cleared, she saw Aaron, towering over both boys and holding them apart by the handles on their backpacks. “Marvin, Principal’s office. Mack, go sit down in my classroom and cool off.” The boys glared at each other but did what Aaron said. He was easily the tallest teacher in the school and when he set his jaw and glared, the students didn’t give him any lip. Luckily, it wasn’t often that Aaron had to put on his don’t-mess-with-me face, and usually once students saw it they made it a point to never see it again. Abby shivered, thankful she’d never been on the receiving end of his million-watt glare. Once the boys had departed, his face softened as his eyes found her. She was back on her feet and dusting her backside off as she stood to one side of her classroom door. Her freshman biology students were filing into the room, pausing to rubberneck from Abby to Aaron and then into his room where Mack was stuffing Kleenex up his nose to stop the bleeding.

“Be a high school science teacher, they said,” Abby muttered, looking down at the rip in the knee of her overalls and rubbing the bump starting to form on the side of her head. “It’ll be fun, they said.” She could feel the raw burning of the scuffed skin on her knee cap. She glanced up at Aaron’s face. The worry lines around his mouth were so deep she quickly decided to downplay the incident as much as possible. “The excitement never stops, huh?”

“Are you ok?” Aaron asked, his voice soft as he crossed the hall and stood in front of her.

That was an interesting question at the moment. The look in Aaron’s eyes was doing

something strange to Abby's insides. The closest thing she could compare the feeling to was the summer she and her sister had decided that they were going to ride every roller coaster at Disneyland until they threw up. But she wasn't in the nausea stage yet. The look in his dark eyes made her feel like she was still in free fall. What was that about?

"Oh I'm fine," Abby said, grateful her voice hadn't cracked. Someone bumped Aaron from behind and he took a short step forward to regain his balance. He was so close to her that she could feel the heat radiating from his button-down shirt. She caught a faint whiff of sandalwood and fir. It was coming from his shampoo and aftershave, as she'd discovered from using his bathroom when they were hanging out in his apartment. The combination of smells was so uniquely Aaron that she could close her eyes and find him in a crowd every time.

"You sure?" Aaron asked, lowering his voice. He was still scanning her face with the same concerned look. She was about to say something but paused when she saw his gaze land on her forehead. "That bump on your head looks like it might swell."

"Awesome," Abby said, deadpan. "Maybe I'll draw a face on it and tell my ninth graders to follow it during class. You know, like photographers do with rubber ducks to get babies to pay attention while they're getting their picture taken."

Aaron grinned. "That's what I like about you, Locke. You're always thinking."

That grin. And they were standing too close. *Stop visualizing him pinning you to the wall and*

kissing you. It's rude and it's never going to happen. Get it together, hormones. Stupid dry spell.

Searching for something, *anything*, to end the moment before she did something idiotic, courtesy of her head injury, Abby dropped her gaze and studied the floor.

“Oh crap,” she muttered, moving around Aaron.

“What is it?” he asked behind her.

She dropped to her knees and rubbed her thumb over the black mark made by Mack's sneaker when he'd tripped forward. “Sneaker mark on Mr. Sharpton's pristine floor.”

“So?” Aaron asked.

She glanced up at him. “So it's Thursday. Mr. Sharpton always ends his day at this end of the hall on Thursdays. Do you want to spend half an hour getting chewed out by him because there's a mark on the floor in front of our classrooms? And once he gets going, you're strapped in, baby. There's no exit ramp. Once, Dana dripped coffee on the floor as she was leaving the library and Mr. Sharpton caught her. She said it took two hours to get away. She missed her dinner plans and her cat was so upset she tried to sell Dana on Craigslist.”

“Ok, how drunk was Dana when she told you this?”

“Dead sober,” Abby said, trying to keep a straight face. “So I'm not taking any chances. Mr. Burns wouldn't waste time on Craigslist with me. He'd go straight to the black market and sell me for my organs. He's diabolical like that.”

“Well, you knew what you were getting into when you made a roommate's pact with a dragon,” Aaron sighed. He moved back into his classroom

while Abby scrubbed at the mark. It was starting to come up. She heard Mack clear his throat.

“I’m sorry, Miss Locke. I didn’t mean to knock into you.”

“Oh I know, Mack,” Abby said with a sigh. “What were you and Marvin fighting about anyway?” When Mack didn’t answer, Abby paused and looked up at him.

Mack shrugged. “I dunno. We just ... always fight.”

“Maybe *that’s* what you should use the scientific method to try to solve over break,” Abby said. Mack snorted and headed down the hall.

“Here,” Aaron crouched down next to her and handed her a Kleenex. “I don’t know if it’ll help, but it might save the skin on your thumb.”

A minute before the bell, Abby was finally satisfied that the mark was gone. “There. I’ve done the best I can. If Mr. Sharpton says anything now, I’ll just have to jump out my window.” She straightened up on her knees, coming face to face with Aaron. He was so close to her again. She could feel her heartbeat picking up speed. Was ... did he ... ? That look on his face ... was he ... nervous?

The bell rang and Aaron got to his feet, holding out his hands to her. He grinned. “Last class of the day.”

Abby just nodded. She was too scared to speak. For half a second, when they’d both been on the floor, she’d imagined herself leaning forward and pressing her lips against his. Mental face slap. How many times was she going to do this to herself? How many best friendships was she going to ruin by trying to turn them into something they would never be?

She did her best to distance herself from thoughts of Aaron during her last class. And she was almost entirely successful, but it was the last day before break and the students were every bit as antsy as she felt.

No more than a minute after the room had cleared following the final bell, Dana rushed in and Abby was able to finally blame someone outside her head for the hormone chaos taking over her body and mind.

“You!” she said, pointing a finger at Dana. “J’accuse! *You’re* the reason this is happening. All that talk of thunderstorms and dry spells.”

It was satisfying in the moment to blame her, but then Dana asked, “Abs, what the hell are you talking about?”

Abby paused. If she told Dana about all the weird thoughts she’d been having about Aaron, Dana would read the wrong thing into it. She’d do her “I told you so” dance, which was really just embarrassing, compared to the grace and skill of Abby’s “told you so” dance. Instead, Abby decided to change the subject. Dana was fidgeting with the strap of her bag and shoving her glasses up her nose every few breaths.

“Dana, what’s up? You look like a kindergartener just asked you where babies come from.”

“Oh god,” Dana muttered, squeezing her eyes shut. “I’d just forgotten about that. Thank you. I usually like to wait until the middle of the night to relive the most embarrassing moments of my life.”

“Sorry. So what’s up?”

“The Santa’s Singles meeting. It’s in five minutes. You have to come with me.”

Abby sighed. "I told you. I don't want to be any part of this mating ritual." Though, after the conversation with her mom the night before ... no. She still didn't want to, no matter how nice it would be to get her mom off her back and ... maybe ... no.

"You don't have to join. Just ... please, Abs. I'm too chicken to show up on my own," Dana begged.

But walking home and watching something, Abby's tired brain protested. *And Aaron ...* another part of Abby whispered. Abby silently commanded that part of her to kindly shut the hell up. Thinking about Aaron at the moment was a dangerous unlit jogging path through "Stephen King Land".

"Oh no, has she got you playing it now too?"

Abby jumped at the sound of Aaron's voice behind her. For the first time in her life, she was thankful that humans hadn't taken a different turn on the evolution highway and developed telepathy instead of opposable thumbs.

"Playing what?" Dana asked, glancing from Abby back to Aaron.

"Chicken-Too-Far," Aaron said. Abby could hear the smile in his voice.

"Chicken, what?" Dana asked.

Rather than having to waste prime chili and cinnamon roll time explaining something like their Chicken-Too-Far game to Dana, Abby jumped in. "Oh, Dana's trying to get me to go with her to that Santa's Singles meeting today." She didn't miss the wave of ... something that washed over Aaron's face.

He finally settled on a grin. "Santa's Singles, huh?"

Dana nodded. "I've decided to just go for it. This being single shit is for the birds."

"But I thought you and I were going to move in together when we hit sixty and wear muumuus and drink wine on the back porch and talk about gardening while the weeds grew up around us until we both died," Abby pouted. But the look of exasperation on Dana's face made her break character and grin.

Dana heaved a weary sigh, "Abs, I love you, but not enough to live with all your collections of memorabilia *and* your lizard."

"Dragon," Abby and Aaron said together.

Dana rolled her eyes. "Besides, I have *many* other reasons to want to find someone. As I'm sure *you* do too." She gave Abby a meaningful look that made the heat creep up Abby's neck.

"Dana's right," Aaron said. "You should do it too. It sounds like it might be fun." She could hear the teasing in his voice. *Oh, so he wanted to turn this into another round of Chicken-Too-Far, did he?*

"Ok," Abby said, turning to smile at him innocently. "If you think I should, then I'll do it." Aaron's look of wide-eyed surprise almost made her crack.

"Yeay!" Dana squealed, hugging Abby to her. It took a few seconds to extricate herself from her friend, but then Abby turned back to see Aaron's expression had changed. He was still smiling, but there was something tight about his expression.

"You know, Aaron, you're single. *You* should join *too*," Abby added. She had him. She knew it. She was going to be the winner of this round of Chicken-Too-Far. They hadn't played in a while but she was pretty sure she might have lost the last

round since she couldn't remember it. That usually meant she'd lost. Aaron held her gaze for a full ten seconds before he nodded slowly. She felt her own smile and innocent facade starting to crumble.

"You're right. I'm single and ready to mingle." Abby had to choke back a snort. Now she was on even footing again. Phrases like that were Aaron's tell. It was something he'd never say when he was being serious.

Dana huffed. "Ok, I can tell by the look you're giving each other now that you're both just screwing with me."

Abby turned back to Dana, ready to protest, but then she saw the vulnerable look on Dana's face. "Just because I'm willing to put myself out there to try to make a connection with someone, doesn't mean it's an open invitation to mock me," Dana said, her lower lip starting to quiver.

Abby felt a sting of guilt in her chest. "Dana, we're not mocking you. I'm sorry. It's ..."

Dana's face turned hopeful again. "So you'll come to the meeting with me? Just so I don't have to go alone?"

Abby's stomach grumbled again. She was *really* hungry. And she just wanted to go home and do the same thing they did every night. Eat, watch a movie, and hang out. She wanted to say it out loud, and explain to Dana why she didn't want to go with her. But instead, she looked at her friend who was slightly pale and taking short steadying breaths and knew she couldn't let Dana walk into the "Santa's Singles den" by herself. Not when she was already on the verge of needing a paper bag. Either to puke in or use to keep herself from hyperventilating.

“Fine. But if it turns into a time-share sales pitch, I’m out. We were planning on hitting Bumble’s on the way home and I’m *starving*.”

Dana’s face flushed in relief. She wrapped her hands around Abby’s bicep. “Oh, there’ll be plenty of time for that. And Aaron won’t mind, will you?” She turned to glance at Aaron and then looked back at Abby, grinning. “You’re just helping a friend out, so said friend doesn’t have to feel like a total loser for going by herself to a singles’ program meeting.”

Abby grabbed her coat and bag so Dana wouldn’t see her rolling her eyes. “Fine, but this is the only one I’m going to. After this, you’ll have to find some other dork to go to these meetings with. *This* dork has chili and cinnamon rolls to eat.”

“Oh, there aren’t any other meetings after this. This one just sets everything up and then all the singles just email each other and the moderator to set up dates and take it from there, or something like that. So, Aaron, you want to tag along?”

When Abby turned to look back at Aaron, she saw his lips pinch into a thin line. But when he locked eyes with her, he forced a smile. The same one he wore when her sister had tried to force a sixth deviled egg on him last Christmas.

“Sure. Give me a second.” Aaron disappeared into his classroom and Abby glared at Dana.

“What? He doesn’t seem mad about delaying your wild and crazy trip to the grocery store.”

Dana didn’t know Aaron the way Abby did. He was annoyed. Not just for being held up. There was something else in that expression. *What it was*, was the million dollar question. He’d never given her that look when she’d needed to stay to proctor

last-minute detentions or parent-teacher meetings. He'd always waited for her, grading papers in his classroom or reading until she was ready to go, even though she told him he didn't have to stay. But to be fair, she'd always done the same for him. They were ride or die best friends. They left no bestie behind. So, what was with that look?

The three of them headed down the hall, Dana pulling Abby along by the arm and talking over her shoulder to Aaron about a new set of gilt-edged Shakespeare editions that had just been donated to the library.

Ahead of them, they saw Fred Goss in the hallway. He'd dropped to one knee and was tying his shoelace.

"Hi Fred," Abby called as they approached.

Fred looked up and his face broke into a genuine smile as his blue eyes met Abby's gaze. "Hi, Abby." He nodded at all three of them. "Aaron, Dana. I didn't know you were all joining in on this madness. I was afraid that, uh, I might be the only one."

"Oh, we're just here for emotional supp-" Abby started to say.

"Oh good! You're here!" Greta Simpson, the guidance counselor, was standing framed in the door to the staff break room. Her blonde hair was perfectly pinned, her make-up was flawless, and she was wearing a red dress that made her look like a pin-up girl from the '30s. Abby noticed that Greta's gaze wasn't on her or Dana, or even Fred. It was focused on Aaron. "I'm so glad you came."

"Thanks," Dana said, "I wasn't sure if I was going to, but Abby here talked me into it." Abby

jabbed a finger into Dana's ribs and Dana gave her an evil grin.

"Well come on in, we're ready to get started."

Greta stood to the side as Fred, Dana, and Abby passed. Abby turned her head in time to see her checking Aaron out as he followed Abby in. An annoying itch started at the back of her neck. What was with Greta and that look she was giving Aaron? Like she was undressing him with her eyes. Abby shivered.

"You ok?" Aaron muttered behind her.

"Oh yeah, fine," Abby whispered back. There were three chairs together on one side of the big staff meeting table. Fred moved to an empty space beside Angela Gold, the secretary from the elementary office, who was sitting across from Aaron. She smiled at Abby and Dana and then nodded to Aaron, biting her lip.

Seriously, what's your damage, Heather? Abby growled internally at her body as the annoying itch intensified. Yeah, women found Aaron attractive. It wasn't a revelation. He was an attractive guy. And tall. And intelligent. And quirky. What wasn't to love? As a friend. What wasn't to love as a best friend? End of thought, brain. We're not going to go pro-sabotage. Not again. Aaron is awesome. So, calm your panties down. Support Dana and then get out of here and go make some chili and cinnamon rolls, she told herself.

"First of all, happy official start to winter break to all of you! And thank you all so much for being willing to join this year's round of Santa's Singles," Greta said from the head of the table. Her gaze did one orbit of the faces at the table and then locked onto Aaron. Abby felt Aaron shift uncomfortably in the seat next to her.

“Life is hard and love is rare. But it makes life worth living. And you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t want to find it too,” Greta continued. “I mean, don’t we all just want someone to love for the rest of our lives? And we’re all educators. We know the importance of love. Love for our jobs, coworkers, students, and this town. And as much as we all love this town, Hope’s small population can make finding that special someone difficult. That’s why I started Santa’s Singles last year. We didn’t have a lot of takers, but we still formed some friendships that have just gotten stronger over time.”

She glanced at Fred and then at Ira Wallace, the middle school math teacher. Ira immediately began to fuss with his bow tie as his ears turned red at the tips.

“So, the ground rules. Everyone will be sent a link to the Santa’s Singles page, courtesy of our *Hope Hornblower* newspaper’s hosting site. Don’t worry. Only people with the link to the page will be able to access it, so all of Hope won’t be watching over your shoulder as you participate ...”

“In this mating ritual?” Abby muttered under her breath. Aaron snorted and knocked his knee against hers.

Greta paused and then gave Abby a tight smile before continuing. “You can contact as few or as many individuals that you’re matched with as you’d like. The rules of Santa’s Singles are that you must initiate or accept at least three date invitations from the names on your ‘Santa’s List’. They’ll be logged by how many messages you send over the server. If there’s no movement from your email address on the server, the program will automatically send an email to the first match on your list, prompting that connection.”

“This is the *real* story of how Skynet started,” Abby muttered again.

“S-stop,” Aaron hissed, trying to contain his chuckle. “Teacher’s looking.”

He was right. Greta wasn’t even trying the tight smile this time. She was giving Abby a full-blown death glare. “Are there questions?”

No one said anything.

“Good. Now, I know it’s easy to make fun of people who are trying, even risking looking stupid to find ‘the one’. But before you pass judgment on them, ask yourself, have *you* found the one? Are you going to make sure you don’t die alone? Are you brave enough to be vulnerable?”

That shut Abby up. She wasn’t sure why but hearing her mother’s words, *and* Dana’s, and that stupid commercial, coming out of Greta, knocked the air out of her.

“What do you say, Abby?” Greta asked. “Are you brave enough?” Abby knew Greta probably didn’t mean the question to sound like a taunt, but it totally sounded like a taunt. She’d planned to brush Greta off and tell her “hell no”, that this was a ridiculous idea, that she was perfectly happy with her current life, and didn’t need some ridiculous dating program to find “the one”. But as she looked around at the faces of her colleagues, they all looked so vulnerable. If Abby called this whole thing stupid, it would be like she was calling *them* stupid. And they weren’t. They were kind, generous, and talented education professionals. They were her friends. Not as close as Dana and Aaron, but still, she didn’t want to hurt them. So, she was already feeling weak in her argument. And then her scientist brain chimed in, telling her that she wasn’t superstitious, but hearing so many

times in under twenty-four hours that she was destined to die alone couldn't be a *good* sign.

"Why not?" Abby said, grinning at Greta.

Greta blinked at her. "O-Ok." Her gaze shifted to Abby's left. "Dana?"

"Really?" Aaron whispered to Abby.

Abby just shrugged. She'd explain everything to him when they got out of there. How bad could it be? Three dates. She'd just hang out with her fellow teachers and whatever townsfolks joined in on this goofy social experiment, have some laughs, talk about the curriculum, and then she'd go home and hang out with Aaron. Easy peasy.

"What about you, Aaron?" Greta asked, focusing her cat-ready-to-pounce gaze back on him.

Aaron hesitated and Abby bit her lip, hoping he'd think of a good excuse to get himself out of it. A girlfriend in Canada? That he gave up dating after leaving college? That he had needy house plants to take care of?

"Sure," Aaron said. There was a weird, hard edge to his voice that Abby almost missed due to her surprise. Was ... was Aaron *willingly* joining the Santa's Singles? Or was he just feeling cornered like she was? She turned in her chair to look at him. He was frowning, but when he saw her looking at him, he gave her a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Excellent," Greta said. Abby was certain this time that the enthusiasm in Greta's voice had nothing to do with Santa's Singles just having another participant. Greta's gaze stayed on Aaron longer than it had on herself or Dana.

Abby reached a hand up to scratch the back of her neck. She'd never disliked Greta before. Yeah, she was a little up-tight and she always dressed and acted like a Hollywood starlet. Then again, Aaron had told Abby that *she* often dressed and looked like a cartoon character. There was no accounting for taste. Abby wasn't bothered by how beautiful or smart or intelligent Greta was. It was something else. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on. But, gun to her head, she'd have to guess, however strange it felt to admit it to herself, it had something to do with the way she was looking at Aaron. And for the first time Abby felt the full weight of being a cartoon character compared to someone like Greta Simpson. And she felt ... juvenile.

"Alright everyone," Greta said, picking up a stack of papers and moving around the table to hand them out. "I know you're all used to *giving* homework instead of getting it, but I'll need each of you to complete these questionnaires so that the matching can begin!"

Abby glanced down at the cover page when Greta dropped hers on the table in front of her. Santa ... hugging a cupid, with Santa's Singles printed in a font that looked like the bastard offspring of Comic Sans and Blackadder. Abby cut her eyes to Aaron and didn't miss the look of disgust on his face as he mentally boarded the same train of thought she had. Maybe this time, their round of Chicken-Too-Far *had* gone too far. There were now questionnaires, dates with coworkers, and ... Santa possibly assaulting a baby cupid involved.

As she turned the page and looked down at the small print and sea of questions with fillable bubbles, she had a sinking feeling that this time,

she at least, was in over her head. *Question 1: What do you want most out of life?* Abby groaned softly. She felt a gentle nudge to her foot and looked over to see Aaron, pencil poised over his own questionnaire and watching her, a concerned look on his face.

“You ok?” he mouthed.

Abby nodded and gave him a weak semblance of a smile before turning her attention back to the questionnaire. *What do you want most out of life?* She was sitting so close to Aaron that she could smell his deodorant and feel the warmth radiating off his leg, only inches away from hers. She took a deep breath and bent over her paper. Ok. She could do this. It was just another test. She could feel herself starting to perspire as she moved down the line of questions. It felt like some kind of mental strip poker that she was losing, hesitating to reveal her hand with each probing question. She was out of her element, thinking about things that were so ... personal. She tried to breathe slowly and control her heart rate. In college, after every grueling final, there was only one thing that could wipe her mental slate clean so she could relax. Swimming. She was starving, but she needed that slate wipe or ... she tried to focus on the next question. *What qualities are the most important to you in a future partner?* Abby felt herself gulp. Yeah. Swimming, then chili and cinnamon rolls and *MST3K* with Aaron. That was her carrot, dangling in the distance. She just had to make it through the mental beating with the stick it was attached to. She took a deep breath. She could do this.

AARON

Aaron wasn't entirely sure what had just happened. An hour ago, he had been looking forward to buying the stuff to make chili and cinnamon rolls for dinner. He'd been daydreaming about Abby's cinnamon rolls, which she always made with too much icing, which was his favorite way to eat anything sweet. That happy thought had been delayed momentarily, but for a good cause. He knew Abby loved Dana and would do just about anything for her friend. But he guessed in some ways, he was to blame for what happened next. Sure, they'd joked about it before the meeting, but it had just been yet another round of Chicken-Too-Far. Hadn't it? Maybe he'd completely misread the situation. Maybe Abby had *wanted* ... No, she'd been joking with him about it. But then why had she agreed to do it anyway? It didn't make sense. Aaron scratched his head, trying to suss through what exactly had happened. Maybe Abby had just said yes because Greta had put her on the spot ... but the Abby he knew wasn't that easily cornered. It had to be ... Santa's Singles? Was ... was Abby *looking* for a relationship?

She'd finished her questionnaire first and nudged his foot, moving her hand in their sign for a wave, telling him she was going to go for a swim. She'd used that code so many times when they

caught each other's attention across the hall. He'd mime shooting a basketball to tell her he was going to the gym to play during a break, she'd mime a wave to tell him she was going to the school natatorium. Today, she'd looked like she really needed it. It was rare to see Abby so obviously freaked out, but when she'd finished her questionnaire, all the color had been drained from her face. He'd just nodded when she gave him the sign. It was how Abby cleared her head. It was her basketball.

And she knew him well enough to know that when it came to anything with bubbles to fill in; tests, ballots, or ridiculous questionnaires, a part of Aaron would have a panic attack if he didn't take his time and fill in each bubble to match the example. Abby never gave him shit for being that way. She would just wait for him to finish. He couldn't blame her for not wanting to wait in the stuffy break room... especially considering the way Greta was staring in their direction.

He was relieved to finish and drop it on the table next to Greta. He hadn't missed the smile and wink she'd given him. It was ... odd. Greta wasn't really his type and from what he knew of her, he was pretty sure he wasn't hers.

He'd made it to the hallway before the full weight of what he'd just filled out hit him. The questionnaire had been a very bizarre combination of impersonal and creepy. Questions ranging from; *What is your leadership style*, to *How do you dress when you're comfortable and home by yourself?*

Hope's natatorium was just down the hall from the gym, with a set of tall windows overlooking the pool from the hallway. The six-lane pool was empty, except for a dark blue blur in the lane closest to the windows. He could spot her swimsuit

at fifty paces. It was covered in dark blue octopuses putting on lipstick with their long tentacles. He smiled, remembering the argument he and Abby had had about whether or not octopuses had lips.

“Hey, Aaron!”

Aaron jerked his gaze away from Abby in the pool and turned to see Fred speed-walking down the hallway toward him.

“What’s up?” Aaron asked.

Fred came to a stop in front of him and glanced through the windows at the pool before returning his attention to Aaron. “Um, I just ... I wanted to ask you ... I know you two are really good friends. I-Are you and Abby ... dating?”

“No,” Aaron said quickly. Too quickly. The look of relief on Fred’s face made Aaron’s stomach cramp.

“Oh, good,” Fred said, his smile shifting into the relaxed, happy-go-lucky Fred face that Aaron was used to. “I ... well, I’ve wanted to ask her out for a long time, but I always just thought, you know, you two were together.”

“We’re friends. And neighbors. *Best* friends,” Aaron added, though he wasn’t entirely sure why he felt compelled to elaborate.

Fred nodded. “Yeah, I figured that much. I just thought I’d ask, you know, to make sure it was ok with you. I mean ... I really value my friendship with both of you. It’s just, this goofy Santa’s Singles thing is perfect. One date, right? I mean, if we’re even *matched*. It’ll be no big deal if we don’t click. But, I *never* thought she’d join ... Now that she has, the timing just seems perfect, know what I mean?”

Aaron didn't know what to say and he wasn't sure he'd be able to say it without growling if he *did* have the words to say. So, he just nodded. Movement through the window caught his eye and he saw Fred turn to watch Abby get out of the pool.

"I didn't know she was a swimmer," Fred said beside him.

Aaron nodded. "Yeah. She was captain of the swim team here her senior year."

"Oh, wow," Fred said beside him, and Aaron didn't miss the way Fred's voice had dropped lower as he practically pressed his nose against the window, watching Abby wrap her towel tightly around her and head to the locker room. "I'll have to dig out my swim trunks."

Aaron was barely able to stifle the growl of annoyance this time. He tried to breathe and push it down. Fred was a good guy. He was his friend. And Abby was his friend. *You should be happy your friends might go on a date ... that they might ... go swimming together ... and get close ... in the water.*

"Anyway," Fred said, turning back to grin at Aaron. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that there's nothing between you and Abby. I was really worried this would be so awkward."

"Yeah," Aaron forced a chuckle, "awkward."

Fred's phone beeped and he dug it out of his pocket. He thumbed across the screen, frowned, and with a sigh glanced back up at Aaron. "See you tomorrow, Burns. I gotta go take care of some stuff. I hope you've been working on your outside shot. You, me, and Rob. Last man standing tomorrow at lunch?"

Aaron nodded. "See you then." He watched Fred walk away, a new wave of jealousy following the

constant spring in Fred's step. If they matched up, he was going to take Abby out on a date. Not being Abby's best friend had one advantage: being able to pursue her.

It wouldn't be worth it.

He saw the door from the natatorium open further down the hall and Abby strolled out, her partially dry hair still in the messy bun at the back of her head. She tugged her hood up and turned to smile at him.

No, not being Abby's best friend wouldn't be worth it, just for the chance to take a shot at the possibility of a romantic relationship with her. Look at everything you'd miss.

"Well, there were a lot more than seven circles in that hell we just filled out. Good to see you're still standing," she said with a smile and a nod at Aaron. "Ready to blow this Popsicle stand and finally start our break?"

He grinned. "Yes. And starving. I believe we had arranged a barter? Chili in exchange for cinnamon rolls."

"Mmmm," Abby's contented hum shot through Aaron, leaving heat in its wake. "Your chili sounds so good right now."

Aaron couldn't speak, afraid his voice would crack as he tried to banish the mental images parading through his head.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Abby said, "Barb got engaged."

"To Ken?" Aaron asked, glancing over at her.

"Yep."

"Didn't they just start dating?"

Abby sighed. “Mom says sometimes when you know, you know. Whatever that means. Anyway. There’s a lunch tomorrow for them at Mom and Dad’s, though I guess it’s mostly for Barb since Ken has to work. Anyway, Mom’s making the Seven-Layer-Sin chocolate cake. Wanna come along?”

“Sure,” Aaron said with a shrug. He liked Abby’s family. They weren’t that much like Abby, but he would see glimmers of her in her dad and mom from time to time. Her two sisters, Katherine and Barbara were a lot girlier. Katherine was the typical island mom, though snarkier than most. Barb was a little more wild, but still level-headed and with a directness about her that she must have gotten from Abby.

The cold sea breeze and the bump of Abby’s shoulder against his elbow had a calming effect on him as they walked outside. He was finally starting to feel balanced again.

“So, on a scale of zero to dumpster-fire, this day escalated quickly,” Abby muttered. “I’m starting to feel like we should just turn into the skid and pick up some supplies for s’mores while we’re at Bumble’s. Thoughts?”

A strange wave of relief rolled over Aaron and he felt a smile forming on his lips as they pushed through the front doors of Bumble’s market. “Sure. I think chili and cinnamon rolls with a s’mores chaser sounds like a pretty good way to end today.”

“Seconded,” Abby sighed, pulling a plastic shopping basket out of the rack and moving off down the nearest aisle. She pushed her hood back and the fluorescent light glinted off the silver pen, which was at a different angle now, still stuck in

the messy bun at the back of her head. He chuckled. She'd taken the time to put it back in her hair even after getting out of the pool. Even from a distance, he could tell it was the space pen he'd slipped into her stocking the year before. He grinned, remembering the big deal she'd made about it, telling him that she'd wanted one ever since she was a kid. A fleeting thought crossed his mind and he quickly dismissed it as T.S. Eliot's influence. He didn't want to look too closely at or dissect the thought that in a way, Abby was *his* space pen. Ever since his lonely childhood, he'd hoped for a friend like Abby. Someone he could just be his weird self with. *Which is yet another reason, Aaron, he firmly told himself, that you are not going to screw up anything with Abby. If she wants to start dating someone, you will be nice and supportive. Because that's what best friends do. Ride or die.* With that decided, he took off down the aisle behind her.

It was clear to even the untrained eye that Bumble's was at war with Hope's town square for who had the most over-the-top decorations. There was a nativity scene made from cans of baked beans, a wreath display made of heads of plastic-wrapped lettuce, and a full-sized Santa made out of red and white plastic buckets and plungers.

"If I needed a plunger right now," Abby said, studying the display, "I'd have to wait for New Year's because I'm pretty sure the Bumble's would put my head on one of those plungers if I unhanded Santa."

"He knew the job was risky, going in," Aaron said, dropping cans of chili beans into the shopping basket. "I just stole Baby Jesus out of his cardboard manger and am planning to make chili with him. You think that would translate to

purgatory time or a 'do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars' stint in hell?"

Abby chuckled and looked around them to make sure the Bumble's weren't in earshot. "I'd like to think the holy family might have a sense of humor, or at the very least be slightly offended that they were being represented by Bush's finest beans commemorating their special day. Maybe you made things better by stealing the bean-y main event. Our only hurdle we still have to clear is to play it cool and yet still get out of here before someone notices he's gone. Just ... play it nonchalant, Burney. And follow me."

Aaron couldn't resist screwing with her. He started singing "Chili in a soup pot", to the tune of "Away in a Manger", but pronouncing it as "Chil-lay".

Abby was doing the silent, shaking laughter that always made him start laughing too. Of course, this unfortunately drew the attention of Mrs. Bumble as she was rearranging bundles of radishes and carrots, hung like ornaments from a wooden tree display. Aaron stopped singing and just hummed as they strolled by.

After that, and to Aaron's relief, the rest of their shopping trip fell back into their usual ritual of alternating between Monty Python-esque sketches and re-enactments of "Supermarket Sweep" episodes. The familiar exasperated look on Mr. Bumble's face made Aaron grin and before he could stop himself, he turned to wave at him as they went through the checkout stand.

To say he was in a much better mood on the way home than he had been on the way to the market, would be an understatement. That good mood lasted all the way through cooking dinner, with

Abby darting around him at the stove, swearing and muttering about the consistency of the cinnamon roll dough she'd thawed. It even lasted through Mr. Burns' unimpressed look at the two of them when they presented their finished products to him for inspection. Finally, they carted their plates, bowls, and glasses to the coffee table and Abby started paging through Netflix for something they could watch. She settled on *All the President's Men* and they started to eat. Aaron's good mood even lasted through Abby's commentary on Dustin Hoffman's feathered hair and how all the burglar scene was missing was some Benny Hill music.

"So, I know we haven't talked about this," Abby said, taking a deep breath.

Aaron froze, his spoon halfway to his mouth. He felt his heart pick up speed in his chest. *What did she want to talk about? She was nervous. Did she ... was she going to say ...*

"But, now as the time is upon us, we can't really avoid it any longer." She turned to grin at Aaron. "Paul McIntyre emailed me. We have to cover the opening night of the court tomorrow night, but then we've got a one week reprieve because I told him we were giving tests and grading a lot of papers as it's the end of term. But starting next week, we have to strap on our jingle shoes and tights and play our elf selves for Santa's Grotto three times that week. Time for Grumpy and Stumpy to ride again."

Aaron started to breathe again, only *slightly* disappointed that Santa's Grotto and elf costumes had been the topic she'd wanted to discuss. He sighed. "Man, I like Paul and I *guess* it's not so bad with you doing it too, but I *hate* being an elf."

“I think most elves probably hate being elves. At least the Santa-type elves. I mean, being an elf in Middle Earth is probably pretty bitchin’, but Santa’s elves? Do they even have a *union*? Or healthcare? Or any say in their uniforms?”

“I’m guessing no,” Aaron muttered, pausing to lick frosting off his thumb. “Otherwise I wouldn’t spend two weeks every December being called ‘Buddy’. Especially when you just *handed* them the nickname ‘Grumpy’. Thanks for that by the way.” He felt Abby’s eyes on him and glanced at her in time to see a devilish grin form on her face. “What?”

“Oh nothing,” Abby said quickly, turning back to the movie.

Aaron gave a dramatic sigh. “What is it?”

“I was just remembering Billy Timmons last year screaming, ‘Santa! I know him!’ and chasing you around.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “No, Billy Timmons quoted the *entire* film at me. If you recall, his mom just *left* him there with us while she went Christmas shopping.”

Abby smiled and Aaron realized he was having a hard time holding onto his annoyed frown. “He’s a cute kid,” Abby murmured.

“He’s alright. Terrible taste in movies, but otherwise, he’s pretty cool.”

She chuckled. “Maybe one of us will have a kid like Billy one day.”

“Maybe,” Aaron murmured, forcing his attention back to the TV. *Not hiking down that trail of thought*. Only in the deepest depths of his mind that only got sips of air during that twilight time between sleeping and waking did Aaron allow

himself to think about what having kids would be like. And for the last three years, during that “anything goes” time, the fantasy had always included Abby. *Danger Will Robinson. Change course. Change course!*

If he was being completely honest with himself, he didn’t mind being an elf, especially with Abby. They had characters they played for the kids. The young ones would look at them with wonder and excitement for the season. He could tell that even the older ones were willing to suspend their disbelief for a half hour so they could tell Santa what they wanted for Christmas. And they were willing to pretend that Abby and Aaron were Grumpy and Stumpy, (Abby had decided on their nicknames), Santa’s bookkeeping elves, on tour with him like tight-wearing roadies.

“Well, I guess we should count our blessings that our students are too old for Santa’s Grotto,” Abby said, settling back into the couch beside him. “Though, I guess I wouldn’t put it past the Whorley brothers.”

Aaron groaned and closed his eyes. “Don’t tempt fate by invoking their names. I swear the pair of them are like Beetlejuice. The *last* thing I need is for one, or both of them, to call me Buddy or Grumpy for the rest of the year.”

“Or the rest of your life since the odds are in their favor that one or both of them will flunk and be eternal students at Hope High.”

“Bite your tongue,” Aaron muttered. “That might be enough for me to retire.”

“A teacher retiring before forty,” Abby said, chuckling darkly. “That would be a sign of the end times.”

They settled into a comfortable silence for a while, watching the film, Aaron letting his mind wander. Then, during the first meeting with Deep Throat, Abby's open laptop dinged from a side table. She reached for it and over her shoulder, he saw Abby open her email app.

"Students begging for forgiveness, an extension, or explaining that they had an out-of-body experience tonight, preventing them from finishing their homework?" he asked, snagging another cinnamon roll off the plate between them.

Beside him, Abby froze. He could feel her energy shift and when he turned to look at her, he could feel the anxiety pulsing out of her rigid posture.

Aaron set down his plate and turned to look at her. "Abby, what is it?" He could feel his own pulse starting to pick up speed. Was it her mom and dad? Had something happened to her sister? One of the kids? No. That would've been a phone call. It took her almost a minute to answer him. He felt impatience ramping up his own anxiety. What was wrong?! "Abby?" he asked again.

She shifted in the seat and dragged her computer onto her lap, bowing her head to look down at the screen as she scrolled back to the top of the email. "Uh, nothing's ... wrong. Well, at least, nothing ... unexpected."

Now Aaron was even more confused. "What do you mean?"

Abby sighed and turned the computer screen to show him the email. "I just ... apparently our matches have been made. And now ... I guess I have a date with Fred Goss."

Aaron felt an annoying itch in his chest. Fred ended up being matched with Abby after all. And

apparently, he didn't waste any time. He stared at the screen. It was a framed email, like the server had generated it, and the frame was a sickening pink-hearts and candy cane striped motif.

"Wow," Aaron said, trying to keep a playful tone in his voice, "that is the email template equivalent of a nervous flop sweat."

"Right?" Abby snorted. "I feel like it needs an intervention and a firm hand on its shoulder to tell it to stop trying so hard." She nudged him with her shoulder and he caught a whiff of her water lilies scent. "Are you also the proud recipient of an identical electronic voice-cracking herald?"

Aaron dug his phone out of his pocket, dreading the email he had a bad feeling would be there. Why had he volunteered for this ridiculous human experiment? Abby sighed beside him, rereading the email on her screen. *Oh yeah, that's why.* He'd volunteered because Abby had volunteered. And here again, he was in murky waters. Why did he care if Abby took part in this bizarre tradition? The Chicken-Too-Far game had ended before they'd gone into the break room. It didn't have anything to do with him ... did it? The thorough, Middle-English scholar in him told him that there was some context, conjugation, or underlying meaning that he was missing by just accepting this on face value, but he pushed that thought down and thumbed open his email app.

Yep. There it was. An identical Santa's Singles email.

"Well, Sparky, who'd you get tinsel-tangled with?" Abby asked, glancing over at him and grinning.

"Uh," Aaron cleared his throat, pushing away the fleeting thought that when Abby smiled she

looked like one of the drawings of elves in his third edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. "Angela Gold?"

"Oh! She's nice," Abby said.

Abby's voice sounded strange and he looked back up at her. "Do you know her?"

Abby nodded. "A little. She's one of the secretaries for the elementary school, so she's down at the south end of the building. She's always been really nice to me. I'll bet you'll have a good time."

"What does she look like?" Aaron asked without thinking. He didn't miss her raised eyebrow when she turned to look at him. "I mean, how will I recognize her? I don't even know what she looks like."

Abby rolled her eyes. "She was the blonde sitting across from us at the meeting? The one who was smiling at you and biting her lip?"

Aaron just blinked at her. He remembered Greta looking at him when he came in and when he was leaving and he had a vague memory of the other people in the room, but he didn't remember anyone biting their lip. He dropped his head and reread the email. "She wants to go out for drinks and then stay for the Christmas Trivia night over at The Alhorn on Sunday night."

Abby snorted. "It must be the hot ticket in town. Fred's asking me to go with him to the same thing."

Aaron groaned. "I suck at trivia."

"You and me both, brother," Abby said. "Unless it's about literature or nerd crap. Then, I think you and I could hold our own."

“But it almost never is,” Aaron sighed. “It’s always sports, and I just end up embarrassing myself.”

“Or pop music,” Abby muttered darkly. “Gun to my head, I couldn’t tell you if a song was Taylor Swift, Adele, or Avril Lavigne. I hope Fred doesn’t do the ‘you have dishonored me’ thing and slap me across the face with one of his mittens.”

“Solidarity sister,” Aaron said, nudging her with his shoulder. “I’ll bring those mittens your niece and nephew got me last year with the lights and the music box in them in case you need to defend yourself in a slap fight.”

“What about you?” Abby asked. “If I’ve got your gloves, how are you going to defend yourself in case Angela gets upset about you not knowing box scores for some tennis player?”

He chuckled. “Or not knowing what box scores are. There’s a good chance I can outrun her, but in case she wants to cat fight, I’m tapping you in. I’ll do the slapping thing with Fred.”

Abby nodded. “Deal.”

Aaron sighed. “At least you can pick Fred out in a crowd. For the life of me, I can’t visualize who Angela is.”

Abby chuckled, but Aaron could see that the smile hadn’t reached her eyes. “She’s tall. Almost as tall as you, I guess. I have to look up at both of you. She’s got long blonde hair and blue eyes and she kind of reminds me of Uma Thurman.”

Aaron frowned, trying to remember if he’d ever seen this woman. “Ok. Uma Thurman from *Kill Bill* or Uma Thurman from the remake of *The Producers*?”

“She’s kind of quirky, so I’m thinking more like Uma Thurman from *Batman and Robin*.”

“Awesome,” Aaron muttered. “I always wanted to date a supervillain.”

Abby shrugged. “At least it’ll make the night more interesting. What about Fred? You know him pretty well, right? I mean you two are on that teacher’s basketball team together. I never really talk to him beyond basic pleasantries.”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah. Well, if you’re holding out for a super villain, you probably should keep looking. I think Fred is more Fred Rodgers than Freddy Krueger.”

“Darn. The whole boiler room incident would have made him so interesting,” Abby sighed.

“He’s a nice guy,” Aaron continued. Even in his ears, the words sounded a little forced. “You’ll have a ... good time with him.”

She nodded. “And I’m sure you’ll have a good time with Angela.”

He couldn’t tell if he was imagining the strain in her voice or if he was just projecting his own feelings onto her.

“Huh,” Abby said, “there’s a link at the bottom of the email.” He glanced over to see her squinting at her screen. “It says, ‘Click here to view your matches’.” Aaron felt his heart starting to pound in his chest. What if he and Abby ... would that mean he could ask her out? Visions of the stars aligning, their friendship not being in jeopardy, taking her out, showing her a good time, just as friends, and because they *had* to go on three dates for this ridiculous game. Then kissing her again. And not stopping there ... He let his mind go wild for a moment before the guilt could catch up with

him and the reminder that he *shouldn't* be thinking about his best friend like that. He held his breath as she tapped the link.

She glanced up at him. "Aren't you going to check yours too?"

"Sure," he said, hoping he hadn't sounded *too* eager. He scrolled down through the email and found the link. He tapped the link and waited for it to load. It was a short list of names. His heart started to sink as he read through them, his anxiety growing each time he read a name and it *wasn't* Abby's.

"Wow, only five matches for me ..." Abby said softly.

"Six for me," Aaron said.

"Really?" she looked at him, surprised.

He shook his head. "I'm surprised it's that many. I can't believe you only have five."

She shrugged, "Five is a lot. I'm kind of weird." She grinned, but he noticed it didn't reach her eyes.

"No you're not," he said quickly. "You're *perf ... peculiar*. There's a difference." She chuckled and he swore inside his head.

"Oh well," she said. "Who'd you get?"

He sighed and glanced down his list again. "Angela, Tina Birch, Dawn Hemmings, Lana Pearson, Ana Franklin, and ... Greta." He frowned at her, thinking and trying to hide his disappointment. "Besides Greta and apparently Angela, do any of these other women work at the school?"

Abby shook her head. She wasn't smiling now. She was pale and she wasn't quite meeting his

gaze. “Tina works at the bank. She’s a teller. Really quiet. Dawn is over at the library. She’s really nice. Loves cats and *really* loves Hard Rock Cafes. I worked on a project with her about five years ago, trying to get more STEM books ordered for the library, and we worked at her house one day. She has a whole wall dedicated to her Hard Rock Cafe shirts. Lana Pearson is one of our local insurance agents. I don’t know her very well but I know she helps out or sponsors or ... something like that, with the city band concerts in the gazebo in the summer. And Ana Franklin works over at the Hope Away From Home Inn. I think she’s the receptionist. Nice gal. Very friendly.”

Aaron shook his head. “I don’t know *any* of them. And I’m supposed to go on a date with *three* of them?”

Abby shrugged. “I don’t think it has to be three dates with three different people. Just three dates total. So, if you and Angela hit it off, you could just go on three dates with her and be done.” He could hear her trying to be cheerful and find that ever elusive silver lining, but Aaron couldn’t see it.

“What about you?” he asked her, dreading her answer. If she wasn’t a match for him, the chances of him being a match for her weren’t looking good.

She sighed. “Fred, as you know, Darren Spruce, Jack Bingham, Terry Bernawitz, and Matt Porter.”

He blinked at her. “*All* of yours are teachers at the school.”

She sighed. “I’d analyze the situation, but I need more data. And those questionnaires were all over the place. I don’t know how they scored us or how they used the scores to match us.” She shook her head and gave him a sad smile. “But whatever measuring stick they used, apparently you and I

didn't 'measure up' to it. It's too bad. It would have been a perfect excuse to stay home and watch *MST3K* for three nights and mark our homework 'complete'."

"Yeah," he muttered, trying to force a chuckle.

Aaron couldn't concentrate on the movie after that. And he couldn't manage much more than a comment here and there to add to Abby's movie commentary. He was looking around her living room, imagining how the homey feeling and Abby-ness of the place would change if she started dating someone like Fred Goss and he moved in with her. Not to mention that her little couch wouldn't be able to fit the three of them. He'd end up having to sit in a kitchen chair or one of the recliners that sat like a solo island in the archipelago that was her living room furniture. That thought made him feel queasy.

"Well, it looks like they got Nixon again," Abby said, clicking the TV off. "It was touch and go there for a while, but it's hard to beat the team of Red-Hoff."

"Red-Hoff," Aaron said, deadpan. "For Redford and Hoffman? Not Hoffford?"

"With three 'f's? No sir. Red-Hoff. As in 'my team is Red-Hoff, your team ain't doodly-squat.'"

He shook his head. "You are such a dork."

"Careful friend, those rocks you're tossing around are going to go through your glass walls."

"Fair enough," Aaron grunted as Abby pulled him to his feet. She'd over-exaggerated her yanking on his hand, pulling with more force than he'd expected, and he stumbled forward bumping into her. She staggered back and without thinking, he reached for her, trying to steady her on her feet.

“Mayday, mayday,” Abby squealed as they stumbled back. “We’re going down!”

Not if he could help it. She was so little. If he fell on her, he’d flatten her like a pancake. He pushed away the bizarre, but thankfully brief image inside his head of himself on top of Abby. Their feet were tangled together, but they finally found the wall, or more accurately, Mr. Burns’ aquarium. Abby’s back was pinned against it and Aaron was pressed against her. Time froze around Aaron. Abby’s startled eyes were looking up at him, and he was momentarily lost in their blue-green depths. He could feel her chest pressing into his stomach and he couldn’t seem to remember how to breathe. Abby shifted against him and time started to return to normal as he realized that her startled expression was now accompanied by a light pink in her cheeks. She shifted again, still so close, so much of them touching ... and to his horror, Aaron felt himself stirring. *Whoa! What the hell?!* His brain was completely detached from his body and a rush of shame filled him. *She’s your best friend, you jerk. Knock it off.*

As if he could hear Aaron’s thoughts, Mr. Burns hissed from inside his aquarium.

“Whoops,” Aaron muttered, springing back from her. “Sorry, She-Hulk. You’re a lot stronger than you look.”

“Wh-what do you expect?” Abby stammered. “I have a dragon for a trainer.” Aaron could see her mentally dusting off her bravado and scraping together her calm. How many times had he watched her do this after teaching a difficult class or dealing with an asshole parent? But ... it was the first time he could remember her having to do it because of something *he’d* done. He scratched the back of his neck and looked at the floor. There was

an awkward tension in the air between them. One he'd never felt before. His gaze fell on Abby's feet.

"Your socks," Aaron said without thinking. In Aaron's experience, Abby had two modes: barefoot or loud, colorful socks. "They're black."

"Oh," Abby's voice was starting to slide back into her usual sarcastic banter. "I need to do laundry. I'm all out of sock-firepower."

"Well, 'reloading' definitely sounds a lot cooler than 'doing laundry'," Aaron said, inwardly wincing at how awkward he sounded now. For a brief moment, he wondered if he'd stumbled sideways into an alternative dimension because it had been *years* since he'd felt awkward around Abby. Once they'd become friends the trajectory of their comfort level with each other had been steadily moving toward "animal onesie-wearing while side-by-side toenail clipping" levels of comfort. Then, with a single physical movement, where they were essentially chest to chest, that trajectory felt like it had left the rails. *Correct course*, his brain hissed. *She's just Abby, your Abby ... Your bestie.* Nice save, brain. *One weird moment isn't enough to screw it up, right?* The silence in his head that followed that question was unnerving. Why did things feel like they were ... shifting? With a new wave of annoyance toward his stubbornness and Greta's pushiness, he realized it had to be the ridiculous Santa's Singles stuff. Dating, relationships, and all the stuff that went along with them hadn't been something he or Abby had really talked about since becoming friends. She'd never brought it up and he'd just been searching for stability for so long, he was happy to have a friend, a job, and a place to live that gave him a routine. Then they'd gotten comfortable and ... he'd *thought* they were both content.

So she had a date with Fred Goss, who had perfect teeth, was an incredibly fit guy, and would figure out pretty quick how to make Abby laugh. As far as he knew, Fred didn't know much about *Star Trek* or *Mystery Science Theater 3000* or Professor Elemental. For a moment, Aaron felt superior in his nerd knowledge. He probably wouldn't *completely* take Aaron's place in Abby's life. On the other hand, Fred had worn a rebel alliance hoodie to play basketball in. He knew *Star Wars*. That would be some common ground with Abby. What if they hit it off? And they ended up ... in Abby's bedroom ... which shared a wall with *his* bedroom ... He wasn't usually jealous of Fred Goss, but he realized that just in one day, he'd been jealous of the man twice ... both times because of Abby.

"Ground control to Major Tom," Abby's voice and tug of her small hand on his shirt sleeve brought him back to the present and away from those unnerving thoughts.

He gave himself a shake. "What?"

"You looked like you were trying to burn these plain old socks off my feet with some kind of laser vision you had yet to tell me you possessed. At first, I was just impressed. But the longer the battle inside your head wore on as you grappled with whether you should do it or not, the more annoyed I got that you hadn't shared the secret of your sock-burning power with me. And then after that I fell down a rabbit hole of what your superhero name would be. But then you made this gulping noise and your face went white, so I thought I should interrupt your internal monologue before half of you permanently stops talking to the other half."

Aaron mentally stomped down on the feelings that were rushing through him at the realization

that she'd been able to watch his internal battle playing out on his face like some sort of docuseries. Instead, he forced a grin, trying to return to his nonchalant bestie facade. "So where did you land with the superhero name?"

She sighed. "Top contenders were Sockcinerator and Undarning Man, but the outlook on marketing merchandise for either one of those isn't very good."

"Oh well," Aaron said, thankful for the familiar ground they'd stumbled back onto. "I guess I'll just have to fall back on my world-class board game inventing potential."

"So, *Tenterhooks* is ready for another test play?" Abby asked, carrying their dishes into the kitchen.

Aaron followed her. "Just as soon as I get the new game pieces painted." Abby moved to put the extra food away and Aaron slid in front of the sink, picked up her Aquaman scrub brush, and started doing the dishes.

"Oh, thanks," Abby said, leaning across him to pull a Tupperware container out of the cabinet.

Her skin and her scent brushed against him and he had to redouble his grip around Aquaman's throat.

"I guess Cookie, the ship's gruel-slinger, might keep you on for another run at sea, matey."

"Something for my resume," Aaron muttered, but he smiled as he set their plates in the dish drain. "I think I'm going to go finish the pieces in the garage tonight. So, maybe we could play tomorrow."

"Well, tomorrow night is Santa's Grotto, Grumpy. Then, Sunday night is that trivia thing," Abby said. He didn't miss the strain in her voice.

“Oh right,” he said quickly. “Well, maybe Monday night then.” Unless Abby and Fred hit it off and she immediately had *another* date with him. Or they decided to immediately move in together or elope or ...

“Want some company?”

Aaron turned to look at her, confused.

She chuckled. “In the garage tonight. I was planning on carving some new handles for that dresser we found last trash day.”

“Ah yes, the one that some incredibly bored kids tagged with a one-dimensional penis and the word ‘loser’?” Aaron asked.

“Yes! The dick loser dresser,” Abby said, clutching her hands to her chest. She looked up at him with a fake big-eyed innocent expression. “I’m so touched that you remembered.”

“How could I forget,” Aaron grunted as they pulled on coats and shoes, “You made *me* carry the end that the penis was ... pointing at, so it looked like it was calling me a loser. Which the Whorley brothers happened to see when we passed them on our way home.”

“They probably didn’t even notice,” Abby said. “They were stuffing something into the alphorn in the town square.”

“Oh, they noticed,” Aaron muttered, leading the way down the porch stairs and across the patch of brown grass that separated their duplex from the little one-car garage. “Jake pointed and then shoved Turk so hard, he tripped over the alphorn and I heard them both laughing as we went by.” Aaron dug his keys out of his pocket. “I’m still waiting for that shoe to drop.”

“Paranoid,” Abby muttered, as he flipped on the light in the little garage.

“Take a snapshot of this conversation,” Aaron called over his shoulder to her as he fired up the old hydronic heater. “When the Whorleys draw ‘dick loser’ on my whiteboard in Sharpie, you get to clean it off.”

“Deal,” Abby said, bumping into him, her teeth chattering as she nudged him aside so she could warm her hands. “I swear, it gets colder in here every winter.”

“Well, you *are* the scientist in this ... garage. Is that how it works? Winter weather equals cold?” Aaron turned away from her to flip the light on over his workbench, thankful he’d managed to cover with ‘garage’ instead of ‘relationship’ which had been on the tip of his tongue. Best friends *was* a relationship. But at the moment, “relationship” felt like something else entirely.

“At the rate climate change is going, winter won’t equal cold for long,” Abby muttered. He heard drawers rattling in her dad’s old tool cabinet. Aaron couldn’t help the smile on his face. That tool cabinet had been the only thing Abby had wanted from her parents the previous Christmas. Her mom had nearly lost it, arguing with Abby about what her potential future relationships would think of Abby wielding power tools. Luckily, Abby didn’t pay any attention to her mom. She was independent and not easily swayed and so damn confident. Aaron didn’t know how she did it. She was never rattled by anything. She rarely overreacted and he’d never seen her be insecure. He would kill to have that kind of confidence.

“So, um,” Abby said, behind him. Aaron turned to see her perched on a stool she’d hacked down to

a comfortable size for her height. She was bathed in a halo of light from her own work lamp as she studied a piece of wood in her hand, her palm sander resting on the table next to her. She'd pulled on her huge plastic safety goggles and the space pen had now been joined by a pencil she'd stuck in her hair. "You know Fred pretty well ..."

Aaron didn't like where this was going. He shrugged, hoping his lack of enthusiasm would change the subject. "Eh, we play basketball together, but besides that, I don't really talk to him much more than you do. Why?"

Abby shrugged, but even from across the room, he could see the uncomfortable heat on her face. "No reason. I just ... why would he pick *me* to go on a date with?"

Because you're funny, smart, beautiful ... Aaron internally groaned at his brain. It had to be an old movie line that had just chosen that inopportune moment to spring to mind.

Aaron shrugged. "I mean, you're *ok*." He grinned at the narrow-eyed expression she sent in his direction.

"Being serious here," Abby said. "I'm about to go play trivia with this guy. Do I need to bring my A-game or can I sit in the back of the bus and screw around while he drives?"

Aaron pushed away the vision of Abby with someone in the back of a bus "screwing around" especially when the person she was doing it with was Fred Goss.

"He's a nice guy," Aaron said grudgingly. "He's funny. And pretty smart. He has a good inside game on the court."

“Hooray,” Abby muttered, as she changed the palm sander’s paper. “Well, at least I have my sports genius for trivia. Prepare to get trivia-spanked.”

Spanked. Aaron shifted uncomfortably on the creaky chair at his workstation, now working hard to banish *that* image from his brain. “Turnabout is fair play, Nessie,” he said quickly. “Tell me about Angela?”

Abby’s sander rumbled to life and he sighed. He wasn’t sure if she’d heard him. He just knew that now he had to wait until she turned it off to try asking her again. In mock exasperation, he turned in his chair to perform a dramatic huff so she’d be sure to see it. She didn’t. Or at least if she did, she pretended not to. And not for the first time in the last few days, Aaron wished he had a camera at that moment. Her tie-dyed Chuck Taylor’s were bracing on the bottom rung of her stool. Her paint-spattered overalls were peeking out from under her heavy winter coat. There was a curly tendril of dark hair escaping from her messy bun, and even behind the plastic safety glasses, he didn’t miss the intense concentration in her eyes and the little smile on her lips as she focused entirely on the task at hand. A not-unpleasant hum ran down his spine wondering if Abby wore that same intense look of concentration when she was doing other things she enjoyed.

“Ok,” Abby sighed after flipping off the palm sander and sitting up. She pushed her goggles up on the top of her head and turned to look at him. “What were you asking?”

But Aaron didn’t even remember. Whatever it was, it didn’t feel as important as sitting with Abby in their garage at that moment, working on their projects, and just breathing the same air.

AARON

“You ready for this?” Abby asked as they headed down the stairs just after eleven-thirty the next morning.

“For chocolate cake? Definitely. For the squealing and jumping up and down, I’m tapping you in,” Aaron said with a grin.

Abby chuckled. “I don’t know, I’ve seen you hold your own with the gremlin twins. The real trick is to just join them. If they’re screaming, you scream. If they’re running through the house, by George, you kick off your shoes, throw your hands in the air, and do it too. I think Jane Goodall did a documentary about assimilating to be accepted into the social hierarchy.”

“Excellent,” Aaron said as they strolled through town. “I doubt your parents will see anything wrong with a six foot six inch tall, thirty-five year old man running, screaming through the house with his arms in the air along with their granddaughter and grandson.”

“They won’t even bat an eye,” Abby said, trying to suppress a grin.

He gave her some serious side eye. “You just want to see me do it.”

“So bad,” she said, a note of pleading in her voice.

Lunch was a war campaign being waged in the Locke’s kitchen when they arrived. They hadn’t even taken off their coats before a bowl of egg salad was shoved into Aaron’s arms along with a wooden spoon, and a knife was pushed into Abby’s hand, directing her to the celery.

“Chop it small this time, Abby,” Mrs. Locke said with a sigh. “Not like last time. Your father almost choked on those big hunks ...”

“What’s this about ‘big hunks’?” Abby’s oldest sister, Katherine, asked as she swept into the room with Abby’s one-year-old nephew Asher on her hip. Aaron counted to three in his head and he hadn’t finished before four-year-old Flora and her three-year-old brother Tanner came barreling into the room after their mom. Flora had her toy tambourine in hand and Tanner had an armload of plastic dinosaurs.

“False alarm, Kat,” Abby said, reaching out to tickle Asher’s bare foot until he gurgled and grinned. “Big hunks of celery.”

Katherine sighed. “Oh man, I was thinking that maybe there was something going on and we’d have a *second* engagement to celebrate.” Aaron felt his throat go dry when Katherine turned her gaze on him and winked. Every time he saw Katherine, she’d subtly teased Abby and Aaron. He knew it was teasing, but it seemed ... more pointed today. He turned his attention back to the bowl of egg salad, doing his best to suppress his gag reflex. Why did her family always hand him cooked eggs? His least favorite smell in the world and it was gifted to him every time as if they were saving it for him. Abby had figured out he didn’t like deviled

eggs. He should probably tell her to just amend it to be *all* cooked eggs when not inside another recipe, like bread or cake.

Lunch was the typical flavor of chaos that accompanied any Locke family gathering. Flora sang three Disney songs, accompanied by her banging on her tambourine. If the chocolate cake hadn't been served in time, it would have been four. Asher spit up on Kat's egg salad on her plate and Aaron had to bow his head so she wouldn't see his grin. *Same, Asher. Same.* Tanner was creating a masterpiece with ketchup, dinosaur-shaped nuggets, and food he was stealing off his dad's plate beside him.

Barb sat between Mr. and Mrs. Locke and was pretty quiet, aside from embarrassed "thanks" offered to each family member as they congratulated her in turn. Aaron didn't miss the way her eyes flicked from Abby to him throughout lunch. *What was that about?*

"So, Kat's married, and soon Barb, too," Mrs. Locke said, smiling at Barb. "Just one more and all my girls will have their 'happily ever afters'." Out of the corner of his eye, Aaron saw Abby shift in her seat. But then in Abby fashion she cleared her throat.

"And you and Dad will get free passes to Disneyland for life, right?" Abby was grinning, so the rest of the table laughed, but Aaron could tell the grin was forced.

After lunch, while Mr. and Mrs. Locke cleared the table, the rest of them stumbled in a haze of chocolate overdose and sky-high blood sugar into the living room. Also a Locke family tradition. They always offered to help, but at celebratory meals, Mr. and Mrs. Locke always shooed them away into

the living room while they cleared. Aaron suspected it had something to do with how hyper the kids got after dessert and the two of them just wanting a few minutes of quiet. *Well played, Grammy and Grampy Locke.*

Barb flopped into an armchair, Kat and her husband Gerald took the couch, and Aaron and Abby squeezed onto the loveseat.

“I wanna sit there,” Flora announced, pointing to the four inches of cushion between Aaron and Abby.

“Alright, Flora-Bora,” Aaron teased, helping her up.

“I’m *not* a bora,” she huffed, shoving their legs out of the way and using her tambourine to force more space for herself.

“Whatcha got there,” Abby asked. “Ouch!” Flora had turned on the spot and whacked Abby on the chest with the tambourine. Flora held up her clenched hand.

“Cheer-i-yos,” Flora said, carefully.

“Mmmm,” Abby said. “Can I have some?”

“No, these are *mine*. If you want some, you gotta get your own from Mama’s purse.”

“Oh, what about cookies?” Aaron asked. He knew that word was like catnip for Flora. He wasn’t disappointed. Flora turned her evil toothy grin to him and put a finger to her lips. “Shhhh.”

Abby glanced at Aaron and then Flora and winked before excusing herself and going into the kitchen on her *Mission Impossible*-style cookie heist. How Flora and Abby could still want cookies after that chocolate cake was beyond him. He was

ready to slip into a sugar coma. As soon as Abby left, Asher started crying.

“Oh, he’s sleepy,” Kat said, lifting him to rest against her shoulder. She glanced at Gerald. “Come on, Daddy. You know he won’t go down easy unless you sing to him.” Gerald groaned, but he was smiling when he got to his feet. He followed Kat out of the room and Flora climbed off the couch, humming to herself and spinning in circles, banging her tambourine off of everyone and everything she could reach. Tanner toddled over to the couch and spread out his dinosaurs on the cushion like little plastic spikes, just waiting for an unsuspecting butt to find them.

“So, Barb, congratulations,” Aaron said awkwardly, suddenly very aware that he’d never been alone with her before. “Ha-Have you set a date?”

Barb’s arms were crossed and she was almost glaring at him. *Seriously, what was her problem with him?* Barb lived in Seattle most of the time since she was finishing up her degree. He’d only seen her at Christmas and one Easter family gathering since he’d moved to town.

“I-,” Aaron tried again, casting around for something to talk about.

“Sing, Awen, sing!” Flora screeched, turning and running at Aaron’s knees. Now he was sweating for a whole other reason. He was sober and the thought of singing in front of Abby’s family at her sister’s engagement party sent his heart rate into marathon mode.

“Ok,” Mrs. Locke called, marching into the living room. “Who took all the cookies?” Her gaze fell on Flora and Tanner and she crossed her arms.

“Flora, Tanner, did you take all the cookies out of Grammy’s cookie jar?”

Flora smiled up at her and shook her head. “No Grammy, I pwomise.” Tanner shook his head and smiled, copying his sister. At a young age it seemed, the Locke children learned the timeless life axiom, “snitches get stitches”.

“What’s in your hand then, you silly billy?” Mrs. Locke asked, pointing to Flora’s balled fist.

Flora turned her hand over and opened her fingers to show her the half-mashed, sticky Cheerios. Mrs. Locke sighed.

“Tim, did you eat the cookies in the cookie jar?” She turned and headed back to the dining room. Aaron heard the muffled sounds of Mr. Locke denying any cookie theft just as Abby strolled back into the room.

Flora and Tanner ran at Abby and when they’d attached themselves to her knees, Flora crooked her finger at Abby to come closer. Abby bent down so Flora could whisper to her, though she hadn’t figured out that volume was the key when it came to whispering. “Do you has the cookies, Aunt Abby?”

“What is this? Some kind of cookie-theft ring?” Barb chuckled from her chair, the hard look on her face softening as she studied her sister, niece, and nephew. Flora paused and looked at Abby, her eyes wide.

“It’s ok, you two, Aunt Barb is cool. She won’t tell on us.” Abby pulled out three cookies and slipped them to Flora and handed another three to Tanner.

“I don’t know. Do you have a cookie for me?” Barb said with a grin. “To buy my silence?”

Abby sighed. "I guess that's fair. She pulled the last cookie from her pocket and handed it over to Barb. Flora stuck her little hand in the pocket on Abby's overalls and dumped her Cheerios. Tanner, after watching his sister, picked up one of his dinosaurs and toddled over to shove it into another pocket of Abby's overalls.

"Dare, Aunt Abby. I give you my Cheerios fow da cookies," Flora said, smiling.

"And you has dinosaur," Tanner added.

"How do either of you have room for cookies after all that cake," Aaron asked with a grin.

"Always woom fow cookies," Flora giggled, spewing crumbs.

Aaron, Abby, and Barb took turns chasing and playing with the two toddlers until Kat came back to gather them up. Barb seemed to warm up when they were all playing with the kids, but Aaron couldn't shake the feeling that she didn't like him. And when they left, Barb had hugged Abby, but only said a strained goodbye to him.

* * *

"Those ornery monkey farts," Abby chuckled, reaching into her pockets as they walked home.

"What is it," Aaron asked.

She pulled her hand out of her pocket and showed him a few Cheerios, another dinosaur, and one of her mother's costume earrings. "I didn't even *see* them burying their treasure in my pockets the second time."

"Little magpies," Aaron snorted.

“You best check yourself before you wreck yourself,” Abby muttered nodding at him. “Check your pockets too.”

Aaron dug into his pants pockets and pulled out a metal spring, a bolt, yet another dinosaur, and the slender pepper shaker from the dining room table. “The Artful Dodger has nothing on Flora and Tanner.”

“Here,” Abby said, holding her hand out to take the pilfered items from Aaron. “I’ll sneak them into Mom’s stocking at Christmas. She’ll never know that her grandchildren are pick-pockets in training.”

“Well, all in all, a fun outing,” Aaron said with a sigh. “And as always, that chocolate cake is good enough to be a controlled substance in most states.”

“Yeah,” Abby said, smiling, but it was the same “placating parents” smile..

“What is it, Abs?” he asked, lowering his voice. “What’s wrong?”

Abby shook her head. “It’s stupid.”

“If it’s coming from you, it’s not stupid,” Aaron said.

She sighed. “My mom thinks I’m going to die alone.”

“What?!” Aaron hadn’t meant to say it so loudly, but at the moment, his voice felt disconnected from the rest of his body. “Why would she think that?”

Abby shrugged. “My older and now *younger* sisters are both getting married before me.” She kicked a rock and sighed as it dinged off one of the old-fashioned light posts. “It’s just something she

said the other night when she called to tell me about Barb.”

So that was why she had asked him about dying alone. “You’re not gonna die alone,” Aaron muttered. He could feel Abby’s eyes on him, but he didn’t look at her. He didn’t want her to see the expression on his face. He was afraid she’d see the bitterness there and ask him to explain something he couldn’t really explain to himself.

Especially now with this Santa’s Singles thing, and *already* being matched for dates, Abby’s possibilities of dying alone were shrinking fast. He suspected Fred wouldn’t be the only one planning to take advantage of the Singles program and Abby’s participation in it as an opportunity to ask her out. It was only a matter of time before some lucky guy realized how amazing she was and got down on one knee. And in the corner, would be her best friend, cheering her on. *Because you want her to be happy, even if you’re not a part of it.* Even just thinking the words felt like chewing on broken glass.

“I know I won’t die alone,” Abby said. Aaron glanced at her. She grinned. “I mean, Mr. Burns will be there.”

Aaron felt a smile at the corner of his lips. “See, you’ll be fine. He spends all day making diabolical deals over the phone. Surely he can find some time in his busy schedule to dial 9-1-1 if you ever collapsed.”

Abby shrugged. “I mean, it’s a Barbie phone, and his desk is an old Tupperware container, but I’m sure the skills are transferable to the real thing, right?”

“Absolutely,” he said, nudging her shoulder with his elbow. “Any day now, you’re going to

come home to a thousand dollar phone bill because he's been racking up long-distance calls to a psychic hotline."

"Something to look forward to," she muttered. But she was smiling again and Aaron felt some of the tightness in his chest start to dissipate.

* * *

"How did you talk me into this again," Aaron called, staring at himself in the mirror on Abby's living room wall.

"Not me, Squiggy. Paul. Remember? It was either this or an eight-hour Christmas story," Abby called down the stairs to him.

"You know, at this moment, an eight-hour Christmas story doesn't seem so bad," Aaron said, his eyes resting on the large jingle bell attached to his red and green hat. He heard Abby's feet pounding down the stairs. She looked like an animated elf come to life, fighting with her own striped hat.

"Yeah, I'm starting to think we should have just bit the bullet three years ago, helped Paul blow up those balloons, sat through a story, and been in the clear." She reached the bottom of the stairs and paused, turning to look at him. He didn't miss the grin on her face as she surveyed him in his get-up.

He crossed his arms. "Now, consider carefully the comments you're about to make. Because we are dressed exactly the same."

"Well, not *exactly*," Abby dropped her gaze to Aaron's ankles. "What happened to your socks,

Grumpy?”

Aaron looked down. “What’s wrong with these?”

“Well, they’re argyle.”

“Aren’t we *bookkeeping* elves?” Aaron asked.

Abby chuckled. “Yeah. But, out of curiosity, what happened to your striped ones?”

Aaron shook his head. “I couldn’t find them. I suspect they ran off. Maybe to Vegas. I don’t think they wanted to be a part of this farce anymore.”

Abby grinned at him. “Oh come on. It’s not *that* bad.”

* * *

Three screaming, pants-wetting toddlers, four kicks to their shins, forty-seven “but why?” questions, a batch of cocoa that had been made with salt instead of sugar, and a pair of seven-year-old twins who would only speak “in reindeer” later, Aaron could tell that Abby was regretting jinxing them.

“Ok, Bonnie, are you ready to talk to Santa?”

“Santa’s not real,” the six-year-old said, crossing her arms.

“I’m right here.” Tonight’s Santa was Deputy Bill Benton.

“Aww Bonnie, you’re going to hurt Santa’s feelings. You sure you don’t want to tell him what you want for Christmas?” Abby asked.

Bonnie looked as if she was considering it and then she sighed. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt.”

Abby chuckled and held out a hand to Bonnie, ushering her over to the snowflake chair in front of Santa so she could list off her Christmas wishes to Bill. Her list was long and Abby saw Bill's feather-topped pen moving quickly as he wrote, trying to keep up. With a grin, Abby turned to look at Aaron. "She was a lot more fun last year when she still believed."

Aaron shrugged. "I guess we can't expect things to stay the same forever."

Abby sighed. "Yeah, I guess." She sipped from her cup and gagged again.

"Why do you keep drinking that?" Aaron asked.

"Because it's warm," Abby muttered. "Disgusting, but warm."

Aaron looked around. "Well, if you can hold the fort, I'll run over to Miss Mandie's and get us all some coffee."

Abby smiled at him. "You're the best, Grumpy. But I can't feed you to the wolves like that. You'd have to walk into De-Floured, in your elf costume, and ..."

Aaron sighed. "Point taken."

"Besides," Abby said, looking past him and grinning, "your little friend just arrived."

"Hey! Buddy!" Aaron squeezed his eyes shut. Billy Timmons.

"Hi Billy," Aaron said, turning to smile at the boy. "Remember, I'm actually named Grumpy."

"Why?" Billy asked, blinking up at him.

"That's my name," Aaron said, patiently.

"Buddy?"

“No, I’m Grumpy.”

“Why?”

“Who’s on first?” Abby asked. Behind her, Bonnie had finished dictating her list to Santa and came back over, her arms crossed again.

“Well, he’s not Santa, ‘cause Santa doesn’t exist, but he wrote down what I wanted.” Aaron glanced over Bonnie’s head in time to see Bill, folding the paper he’d written Bonnie’s list on and slipping it to Bonnie’s mom.

“Santa does too exist,” Billy said. Aaron saw the boy’s lower lip starting to wobble.

“Nu-uh,” Bonnie said. “I’m older than you, so I know.”

“You’re wrong,” Billy said, taking a step closer to Bonnie.

“Bonnie, your mom is waving at you,” Abby said, pointing. But Bonnie wasn’t listening.

“It’s just a story told to little kids,” Bonnie sniffed. “I’m too old to believe in a story.”

“If Santa wasn’t real,” Aaron said quickly, trying to figure out what the hell he could say to diffuse the situation, “why would Stumpy and I be here, helping him update his list?”

Bonnie didn’t seem to immediately have a response to that line of logic. Out of the corner of his eye, Aaron saw Abby visibly relax. He turned to look at her and she mouthed, “thank you”.

“Is he your boyfriend?” Bonnie asked Abby, pointing at Aaron. Apparently, redirection was something she’d learned as well. Aaron felt himself start to sweat under his fleece costume.

“Grumpy?” Abby asked, blankly, looking from Bonnie to Aaron. “Oh, no, Grumpy’s my friend.”

“*Juuuuust* your friend?” Bonnie asked, an evil grin adding to the taunt in her voice.

“He’s my ... elf friend,” Abby said quickly. “And that’s the strongest friendship you could ever have. Everyone knows that elves live forever, and so if you have an elf friend, you’ve got a *friend* forever.”

Bonnie seemed momentarily subdued and Abby and Aaron breathed a small sigh of relief.

“What’s wrong with your socks?” Billy asked. “Buddy doesn’t wear ugly socks like that in the movie. Why aren’t yours striped, like Stumpy’s?” He pointed at Abby and then frowned up at Aaron.

After Billy finished his business with Santa and ran off to join his mom, Aaron muttered to Abby, “Sure, he remembers *your* elf nickname.”

“Hang in there, Buddy, the night’s almost over.” Aaron’s sigh was lost under the sound of Abby singing along to “Jingle Bells” with the Thompson triplets as she ushered them forward to meet Santa.

It really wasn’t so bad. It was nice being here with Abby. And what if this was the last year they did it together? This time next year, it could be some other guy playing Grumpy and getting called “her elf”. Or maybe she’d say yes, that elf *was* her boyfriend when Bonnie asked next year. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth that had nothing to do with Bill’s botched cocoa.

ABBY

“My elf feet hurt,” Abby muttered when they finally reached their block.

“I’ll see your elf feet and raise you my elf shins, elf butt, and one elf elbow,” Aaron added.

“Elfbow,” Abby chuckled.

“That’s enough out of you, Stumpy.”

Abby wrapped an arm around Aaron’s waist, pulling him to her side. “Oh come on, Grumpy.” A thrill ran down her spine as she felt Aaron’s hand squeeze around her shoulders. For one guilty moment, she imagined that broad warm hand trailing long fingers down other parts of her. God, it had been so long since she’d been touched like that ...

He’s your best friend.

As if he’d been able to hear her pitiful longings, with a final squeeze he released her shoulders and they kept walking in silence.

See, Abby? He could probably sense the pathetic way you were hoping he’d touch you. And he doesn’t want you to get the wrong idea and ever think you’re more to him than a friend. So knock it off and just accept it.

“You ok?” Aaron asked. They’d turned down their driveway and she saw him look down to study her in the pale glow of their twin porch lights. Abby felt a wave of shame smack her in the face. Was that pity in his eyes? Abby looked down, pretending to watch her footing on the porch steps as they climbed.

“Oh yeah, I’m good.”

Aaron sighed and Abby squeezed her eyes shut. Was this the moment? Was she about to get the speech about how they were friends and he wouldn’t want anything to ever ruin that for them? At least this time would be better. With Derek, the speech had been after. After she’d allowed herself to hope. After she’d embarrassed herself by telling him ... everything.

“I don’t know about you,” Aaron was saying, “but Grumpy could sure use a beer.”

Relief flooded through her, but she did her best to hide it. She just needed to keep a lid on herself now. Then later tonight, she could blow that lid off with some quality time with Mr. Buzz Aldrin under her bed. She just needed to remember if she’d plugged him in to charge.

“Stumpy could definitely use a beer. Or two. Or three. I think my shin is starting to swell where Davy Bryant kicked me for making him wait his turn.”

“Oh, are we comparing battle scars? ‘Cause ...” Aaron started.

Abby rolled her eyes. “I know. I know. You win. Getting puked on *and* peed on, in the same night, makes you the automatic winner.”

“So, showers, de-elfing, and then beer and ...”

“*Princess Bride?*” Abby asked, mentally thumbing through their go-to movies.

“My name is Aaron Burns. You made me deal with getting the screaming, puking, peeing Smithson toddler to Santa. Prepare to pay ... with beers.”

“Go get out of your elf *gear*, you whiny grumpy elf ... *dear*.” Abby said, doing her best to sound like Andre. She hadn’t thought the rhymes through all the way though, and she could feel heat rising in her cheeks as she realized what she’d said. *Really? That was the rhyming word you went with? Nice one, brain. You just love flirting with friendship sabotage, don’t ya?*

Aaron chuckled. “You might need to work on your rhymes. You’re not quite up to Fezzik’s level.”

Bravado always covered a multitude of sins for her. “Oh yeah, and the National Archives called. They want your attempt at an Inigo speech inscribed on a monument for posterity.”

With a final eye roll that didn’t quite cover the amused smile on his lips, he turned and headed for his front door, the bells jingling on his shoe covers and hat.

“Maybe you should be Sassy instead of Stumpy. Just give me twenty minutes and I’ll be de-toddlered, de-elfed, and ready for those beers you owe me.”

Abby snapped him a salute and her traitorous gaze followed him, tracing the outlines of his powerful calves and thighs in his *tight* striped elf tights under his argyle socks. The jingle of his keys broke the spell over her and before he could turn and see her standing there, watching him, she headed for her front door.

“Jeez Abby,” she growled beneath the whooshing sound of her *Star Trek* door sensor. “Get it together.” She gave her head a shake. “So what? It’s been a while. Why now?” Her sex drive had been a dormant protozoan for three years. *Three years*. Why was she suddenly obsessed with jumping on anything male that moved? It had to be all the stuff Dana had been saying, and the Santa’s Singles crap she was now neck deep in. She closed her eyes and growled. “Freaking Dana and all her talk about deserts and thunderstorms.”

Abby was a beer and a half in by the time Aaron knocked on the door dividing their apartments.

“Permission to enter the armory?”

“Granted,” Abby called. She was in sweats and a hoodie. The un-sexiest clothes she wore and a guaranteed way to get her out of the lust monster mindset and back to chilling on the couch with her bestie mode.

She looked up as Aaron came in, his dark hair still damp and tousled. She choked on her beer when she saw what he was wearing.

“Oh good,” Aaron said, grinning as he surveyed her on the couch. He plucked at his Hope High sweatshirt and matching pants. “You got the memo.”

“Just felt like a ‘sweats and beer’ kind of night,” Abby said, trying to keep her gaze on the beer she held out to him and not the way the front of his sweatpants fit. They settled down on the couch, side by side, like always. And within ten minutes, she was settling back into comfortable territory with him. Two beers became three, and then four as the movie carried on with the two of them verbatim quoting their favorite Fezzik and Inigo scenes.

“One of these years,” Abby muttered, feeling the words slurring slightly as they left her mouth. “We’re going to finally do it.” Aaron had been taking a pull on his beer beside her and she heard him choke. She turned to look at him. “You ok there?”

Aaron’s face was red and he was coughing his lungs clear. “What did you say?”

Abby nodded at the TV. “One of these years, we’re going to dress up as Inigo and Fezzik for Halloween.”

“Oh, yeah,” Aaron said, nodding quickly. “Dibs on Inigo.”

Abby blinked at him. “So ... I’m going to be Andre the Giant?” Aaron’s grin was evil. “You do know my elf name is ‘Stumpy’ for a reason, right?”

“I think you’d make a fine giant, Nessie.”

The beer wasn’t quashing the lust monster as fast as she’d hoped it would. And Aaron was so close. And he smelled good. Damn Dana. The first day back after the break, she was going to un-alphabetize her world. Her gaze fell on her laptop and she sighed. Of course, first, she had to make it through the break and all the stupid Santa’s Singles crap. Just the thought of how awkward those dates were going to be was enough to make her palms sweat. “I think I’ll have better luck pulling off Fezzik than someone who’s good at casual dating.” She hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but at the moment she was having a hard time finding her filter.

“I know,” Aaron groaned. Was ... was his voice starting to slur too? “It’s been so long. I don’t even remember what you’re supposed to do on a date.”

Abby pointed the neck of her beer bottle at the TV screen. “Just do what our friend Inigo does.”

He rolled his head on the couch to blink at her. “What, look at the girl and ask her if she has six fingers on her right hand, and if she says yes, tell her I’m going to kill her to avenge my sword-making father?”

Abby shrugged. “I think it would work.”

Aaron groaned. “And do *I* need to be the one who comes up with what we’re supposed to do? Or would that upset her? It’s a casual date. Am I supposed to ... hold her hand?”

Abby cut her eyes to Aaron. His face had gone gray and he’d started chugging the rest of his beer. He looked ... panicked. *Then why had he volunteered to join the stupid Santa’s Singles nonsense in the first place?* She’d thought the Chicken-Too-Far round had ended at the door, but maybe she’d been wrong. *Had joining just been another challenge that he hadn’t wanted to lose? So when she said yes, he felt like he had to or he would lose?* God, she hoped she was wrong. Otherwise, she was at least partially responsible for getting him involved in this ridiculous social experiment.

“You’re not the only one, you know,” Abby said, getting to her feet and weaving her way to the fridge. “It’s been three years since my last ...” Abby trailed off. *What the hell are you doing? Why would you tell him that?*

“Confession?” Aaron asked.

“Date,” she said with a sigh. Well, it was too late to back-track now.

“Really?”

She didn’t miss the strange look on his face. It was so intense she had to look away. *Yeah, I know,*

I'm a freak. You can just say it, Aaron. Though, she suspected it had been at least that long for him since she probably would have noticed him going on dates with how much time they spent together. Unless he had something going on online.

“Since your last date?” Aaron asked.

Abby frowned, returning to the couch and holding a beer out to him. “Well, yeah. I mean, you’ve known me for three years. You probably would have noticed if I’d ...”

“Well, yeah. I guess so,” Aaron said, keeping his head down, focusing on opening their beer bottles. He handed hers over and they were quiet for a few minutes, listening to Miracle Max and his wife bicker.

“I mean, that’s what we all want, isn’t it?” Abby asked, pointing the neck of her bottle at the screen. “Someone to fight with and call a witch, and work on chocolate-coated magic pills with, until we both die.”

“Totally,” Aaron yawned. “Why does getting there have to be so difficult?”

“Here, here,” Abby said, raising her beer to clink against his. They’d slowly been relaxing back into their homeostasis together, their postures sloping toward each other. She could feel her shoulder resting against his arm and his body heat seeping through the thick cotton of her hoodie. She was warm and comfortable, and her head was heavy. She let it drop to rest against his shoulder.

“I mean,” Aaron’s voice was soft now. “Do you even remember how to kiss someone? How it feels? Do you remember if you’re supposed to turn your head to the left so she can go right, or is it the

other way around? And what do you do with your hands?”

She glanced up at him and saw the lines of worry around his mouth. He was her friend. And she didn't want her friend to worry so much. To be so stressed and anxious over something he'd probably only gotten himself into because of a game of Chicken-Too-Far that she'd started.

“Don't stress about it,” Abby said. The beer was making it hard for her mouth to form words. “I've heard from semi-reputable sources that it's like riding a bike.”

Aaron paused and looked over at her. “I've actually never ridden a bike. Have you?”

Abby blinked at him. “You've never ... *of course I have*. I thought every red-blooded American kid had.”

Aaron shrugged. “Well, I guess I'm the odd kid out.”

“Huh,” Abby said, grinning at him. “I didn't know that there were still things about you I didn't know.”

“You sound disappointed,” Aaron said.

“No,” Abby said. “I'm actually kind of excited. I was afraid that we knew everything about each other and we were going to run out of things to talk about and just spend the next twenty years of our friendship taking turns, whistling the theme song from “Laverne & Shirley”.”

Aaron chuckled. “Nah. By the time we run out of things to talk about, we'll be old enough that we won't remember our first conversations, so we'll just start over.”

“Something to look forward to,” Abby said, grinning into her beer. And she meant it. Even if that’s all she ever had with Aaron, it would be enough. They turned their attention back to the movie.

“There will be no survivors,” they yelled together, but as Fezzik, Inigo, and Wesley made their way into the castle, they fell silent again.

“So, no guy in the last three years?” Aaron asked quietly. “Did ... do I know the last one you . . .?”

Trust Aaron to try to make small talk and normalize her lack of a dating life. “Nope,” Abby said with a sigh. “You got here a couple of weeks after it all imploded. He moved back to the mainland.” She studied him through her beer goggle haze. “What about you?”

Aaron was quiet for a minute. “Five years,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. We were both in grad school.”

“How in three years have we not had this conversation?” Abby asked.

Aaron shrugged. “We just had three years’ worth of other stuff to talk about.”

“Mawwage,” they both shouted at the TV.

“It’s gonna be weird,” Abby muttered, the alcohol haze settling around her and making her sleepy as well as filterless.

“What is?”

“Dating again.”

“Yeah. And ... kissing.”

“You’re really worried about the kissing part, aren’t you?” Abby said softly. She didn’t need to wait for Aaron to nod. She could tell by the return of the lines on his face. “We could always practice,” Abby’s mouth said before her brain could evaluate what she was saying. Maybe it was the beer, but when she met Aaron’s gaze and she opened her mouth to try to apologize, she froze. The intense look in his eyes was sending ripples of something strange down her spine.

“Abs,” he whispered. “Did ... did you just? You ... and me?”

The acoustic guitar theme of the movie was playing in surround sound, and she could feel the feather light buzz of the subwoofer under her couch. Her head was buzzing from more than the beer and the look Aaron was giving her was sending shockwaves down her spine, electrifying her nipples and making heat pool between her legs.

“Did you say ... we should kiss?” But there wasn’t outrage in his voice. There was ... something else. If she didn’t know him, she’d say it was ... anticipation? But that couldn’t be right. He didn’t think of her like that.

“You ... you were joking, right?” he asked. Maybe it was because that was the same thing Aaron always said when he was about to tap out of a game of Chicken-Too-Far, or maybe it was because there was something smoldering inside her, but whatever the reason, her mouth decided to act unilaterally.

“Aaron ... kiss me?” her voice sounded small and she wanted to cringe when she heard the note of pleading. That pause, after her brain had finally beat her mouth into submission and before Aaron said anything, was the longest pause she thought

she'd ever experienced in her life. Her brain had just flipped the dry erase board in her head and started pointing out all the miscalculations she'd made. Shit. She had to fix this. *Just say you were joking. That you were playing Chicken-Too-Far and you didn't mean it.*

She was about to open her mouth to say any or all of this when he turned on the couch, freezing her where she sat with a burning look in his eyes that took her breath away.

“As you wish,” he whispered. Abby wasn't sure if she was actually awake or dreaming. The feel of his warm fingers brushing against her cheek, his soft lips touching hers was overpowering her. Then her brain stopped working. There was so much heat and sensation. His kiss was soft, but demanding. Without thinking, she swiped her tongue along his lower lip, wanting to taste him. She pulled it between hers and he let out a soft rumble from somewhere deep in his chest that made her nipples harden to ball bearings rubbing against the fabric of her sweatshirt. On its own, her hand had moved to Aaron's chest, her fingertips fluttered over the exposed skin of his collarbone. His tongue touched hers and she moaned.

Flashes of images spun themselves through her mind, distorted in her beer haze, but still able to land after a moment of consideration. This wasn't the first time she'd been here. And the last time had ended something important to her. It had been a mistake. One that had cost her for years.

Finally, she forced herself to pull back, breaking the kiss. Aaron's eyes were slow to open. He was smiling. It was a lazy, content smile that made her almost lose her nerve. She was starting to sober up, at least in the moment. She looked down, focusing on the cartoon goat on his hoodie.

“Wow, I think you’re ready,” Abby whispered. “No bike needed. You’re ... ready to ... to ride.”

“Abby,” Aaron breathed.

She felt like the bottom of her stomach was about to fall out. She had to tell him quickly before he thought things were weird and decided to ghost out on her.

“Aaron, I completely understand. That wasn’t one of my best ideas. I’m sorry. I won’t put you in that position again and it’s probably best if we forget it ever happened.” Even as she said it, she knew it was a hell of a lot easier said than done. Aaron Burns was a damn good kisser. Especially for not having any practice for *five years*. Shit. And she was probably crap at it. And she’d had more recent practice than he had.

The credits were playing on the screen and she turned on the couch to watch, hoping she looked nonchalant. Aaron was quiet beside her. When the credits ended, he stood. Abby was careful to keep her eyes on the empties on the coffee table instead of his face.

“Well, a happy ending again,” she said. “Though, for a second there, I thought Humperdink wasn’t going to fall for it this time.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said. His voice sounded far away. “Real nail biter.”

“Well, I guess we should hit the hay. Tomorrow is the trivia battle at The Alphorn and our first ... dates.”

He groaned. “Thanks for the reminder,” he said. He paused and she felt her heart pause with him. “Night, Abs.”

“Night,” she said with a soft sigh to the bottle in her hand. She didn’t look up until she heard

their dividing door close behind him.

ABBY

The next morning, Abby had a massive hangover that only had a silver lining for the first two minutes she was awake. *Maybe I dreamed that I kissed Aaron. Maybe nothing weird happened and there won't be any fallout today. It'll just be something for me to dig a mental grave for and eventually forget about.* Of course, that happy thought ended as soon as she reached her stairs and saw the line of empty bottles on the coffee table. *Ok. So, it happened. But we were both drunk, maybe he was drunker than I was and he doesn't remember it.*

Unfortunately, because there was nothing to look forward to with the day ahead, there was nothing pleasant to distract her from her impending doom. If Aaron *did* remember, there would at best be awkwardness, and at worst, it would end with him telling her he was moving and to never speak to him again. And then, after that barrel of laughs, there was Aaron going on a date with someone who would *definitely* be paired with him at a photo shoot and was a genuinely nice person. Meanwhile, she'd be trying to come up with something to talk about with Fred Goss while trying not to watch Angela and Aaron. She groaned.

Why couldn't she just rewind the night to when she and Aaron had been Stumpy and Grumpy,

Santa's list-checking elves back at Santa's Grotto? Why couldn't life just be *that*? Just hanging out with buddies, being goofy, and having fun until you died? Why was there all this extra pressure, self-inflicted or otherwise? She felt her chest beginning to tighten again and the pounding in her head started reverberating through her entire body.

Oh no. Here we go again.

Abby sat down hard on her living room floor. She tried to breathe and she'd started to get her pulse under control when "Jump On It" started blaring from the pocket of her sweatshirt. She snatched at it, attempting to silence it.

"Oh my god, Abs! I have a date tonight!" Dana's voice was coming out of her sweatshirt and for a brief moment, Abby had thought that somehow Dana had not only snuck into her house, but into her sweatshirt with her ... somehow. She was half-asleep and having a panic attack so logic was going to have to just give her a pass on this one.

"What?" Abby croaked into the phone when she managed to pull it out of her pocket.

"I have a date!" Dana screamed.

Abby yanked the phone away from her ear and laid down on the floor. She turned her head and glanced at the door, joining her apartment and Aaron's. At first, it had felt weird sharing a wall, especially in her bedroom, but after they'd toured each other's duplex sides, they decided it really was the only reasonable option. They each had a guest bedroom downstairs, but they were tiny and didn't have closets. So, they'd both just made peace with the odd arrangement. Still, the wall wasn't that thick and they tried to be thoughtful about the amount of noise they made in the

morning, even though for the most part, they were on the same schedule.

But it was Sunday, and Abby knew that Aaron usually liked to sleep in. Hell, *she* liked to sleep in on Sundays. A pastime she now wished she shared with Dana. With a groan, Abby rolled to a sitting position and started crawling toward her Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man slippers which she'd left under the table Mr. Burns' aquarium sat on.

"Dana, what time is it?" Abby muttered, trying to keep her voice low in case they were loud enough to wake Aaron.

"Seven-thirty, why?" Dana sounded confused.

"Why the hell are you calling me at *seven-thirty* on a Sunday morning?" Abby tried to keep her voice below shouting, but it wasn't easy.

"Because I have a date! And I'm a nervous wreck, and you're my friend. And I need help!" Dana sounded on the verge of a panic attack.

Abby leaned on her kitchen counter and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and informed the morning shift that was running her brain, coordinating her limbs, and keeping her cool, that there was a friend in need. They needed to pump her full of one hundred cc's of calm, with a chaser of empathetic patience, and a cherry on top of helpfulness. Dana *wanted* to date someone. This was *important* to her. And Dana was important to Abby. Therefore, helping Dana was important to her. She exhaled softly. "I'm here, Dana. What can I do to help?"

"Can I come over in, like, an hour? I need help with ... well, everything."

"Yes," Abby said. "Let me choke down some Honey Smacks, feed Mr. Burns, and figure out how

the shower and doorknobs work, and then I'm all yours."

She heard Dana heave a huge sigh of relief. "Thanks, Abs."

"You bet. See you on the other side of ... eighty-three," Abby said, mentally telling herself that it wasn't *that* early. Any weekday and Abby would be halfway through teaching her sophomore biology class by that time. Yes, Abby answered the annoying voice in her head, *But it isn't any weekday. It's a friggin' Sunday. The day of rest. And it's winter break.*

"Sorry, Mr. Burns," Abby said, stuffing her phone back in her hoodie pocket and reaching for the kitchen light. "But duty calls. We're about to be hit by hurricane Dana and it sounds like it's going to be a 9.8 on the freak-out scale. Time to rise and shine, or in your case, rise and hiss."

Mr. Burns had burrowed into the sand on top of the heating pad that was stuck to the bottom of his aquarium. When she bent down to look at him, he cracked one eye open and glared at her.

"Don't look at me like that," Abby sighed. "We just have to be less lovable, that's all. I think it might be time for you and me to put the 'swamp witch and her dragon familiar' plan into action. Think of it. We could move to a swamp somewhere, just you and me, and no one would ever bother us there. Of course, I have a feeling that my diet would have to slide along the scale to look a lot more like *yours*. And then there's the whole question of whether or not we'd be able to stream shows and order pizza in our swamp. Hmmm. I think we might need one or two more skullduggery sessions on this plan." *And then there was the question of Aaron.* But that thought made her stomach ache.

To distract herself, she poured a bowl of cereal and thought about Dana. What was it like to be so excited about a date with someone that you were actually panicked?

Well, Abby, aren't you excited about your date with Fred tonight? The voice inside her head was sing-song. Nothing like being taunted by your own psyche before nine in the morning. She sighed and when she'd fed Mr. Burns and choked down her cereal, she dragged her feet up the stairs. Truth be told, she wasn't excited. It wasn't Fred. He was a nice guy. No. It was *her*. And her inability to be attracted to regular acquaintance guys instead of zeroing in on her best friends. There was a bad circuit, or a vitamin deficiency, or some law of physics that her subconscious just wasn't grasping. "Maybe *that's* what I should do my scientific method project on," she muttered to herself as she turned on the shower.

The date with Fred wasn't that special anyway. It was an assigned dating thing, courtesy of Hope Island's special holiday madness, the pushiness of Dana and Greta, and a computer algorithm. Besides, it sounded like *everyone* had a date. Dana, her, *and* Aaron. Abby lost her grip on the bar of soap she'd been holding and it ricocheted off the shower wall. She bent to pick it up. Luckily for her, with her short legs, it was a short trip. Now for someone like Angela, with legs like a hair metal music video diva, the same action would have been like *Into Thin Air*. She was tall. Like Aaron. He might really like talking to someone he didn't have to look down at.

"And their children would be beautiful," Abby muttered bitterly. "And supermodels. Or their own basketball team. Or both." She tried to ignore the knot that thought formed in her stomach. She had

a date of her own to think about after all. Fred Goss. He was attractive. He was ... sporty. Abby honestly didn't know what to do with a description like that. Besides swimming, she'd been terrible at sports growing up. Her mom had wanted her to do *all* of the sports offered at Hope High and she'd wanted to do one. Her father was the one who'd convinced her mom to compromise and let Abby just be on the swim team. And her mom had finally agreed and never missed a swim meet. And, Abby wasn't half bad at it. She wasn't tall, but she was pretty fast. And she could last a long time.

Swimming! Maybe that was something she could talk to Fred about. But beyond that she didn't know enough about him to load her social cannon with any other fodder. What if he unironically liked Steven Seagal movies? Or his favorite topics to discuss were body fat percentage and the intricacies of baseball pitching statistics? The night ahead suddenly looked very long to Abby and had her contemplating climbing back under the covers on her bed. But fate being the ever-loving killjoy that it was intervened before she could re-wrap herself like a burrito in her comforter. The doorbell rang.

Dana was already mid-rant, speed-talking before Abby could even get the door open wide enough for the willowy librarian to bustle inside. "I don't know what to wear or what to do with my hair or how to act, what to say ..." Dana swung around and gut-checked Abby with the full laundry basket she was carrying.

"And you thought *I* would know?" Abby gasped. Judging by the weight of the basket when it hit her in the solar plexus, Abby was sure that besides shoes and clothes, the basket also held about twenty pounds of books. Dana was fit. Not from the

gym, but from the library. Like the biceps of a waiter who carried heavy trays all day, Dana was ripped from the stacks of books she retrieved, carried, and re-shelved forty hours a week.

“Oh I’m so sorry,” Dana said, going pale as she shifted the basket to her hip and studied Abby. “Are you ok?”

Abby shrugged. “A little internal bleeding from time to time builds character.” Abby tried to smile but paused when she saw the expression on her friend’s face. Dana looked on the verge of tears.

“I don’t know what I’m doing anymore, Abby. I’m hurting you, I’m freaking out. What’s wrong with me?”

Abby grabbed Dana by the hand and tugged her gently towards the couch in the living room. “At the moment, I’m thinking too much caffeine. How long have you been up?”

Dana shook her head. “I haven’t been to bed. I got an email last night saying that the Santa’s Singles thing had matched me up with Gary Smith for a date today. He picked *me*. I mean, the thing just started. There hasn’t been enough time for the computer to get pissed at us for dicking around and match us up on its own. That means that Gary *picked me!*”

Abby wasn’t sure if it was the surprise of Dana’s “let ‘er rip” cursing which only happened when Dana was stressed to the max, or her own realization that that meant Fred had picked *her*, but now *she* felt off balance. Why had *Fred* picked her? *Okay, Locke*, the voice in her head piped up. *One existential crisis at a time. Get Dana sorted out. Then contemplate the gym teacher enigma that is Fred Goss.* Abby picked through all of Dana’s freak out, looking for something she could use to anchor

the woman in some calmer waters. “Gary Smith?” Abby asked, trying to put as much calm interest and nonchalance in her voice as possible, hoping it would rub off on her friend.

Dana nodded. “I don’t really know him.”

Abby nodded. “He’s the high school math teacher. His classroom is two doors down from mine, right by the fire exit.”

Dana flopped back on the couch and closed her eyes. “Great. I can just see our *Casablanca* moment now. Bogart has, ‘Of all the gin joints,’ and I have ‘So how about that fire exit?’”

Abby shrugged. “I’ll bet he’s never heard that one before on a date.”

Dana scrunched up her face and groaned. “I can’t do this, Abby.”

Abby settled back on the couch beside her. “Then don’t. Just message him and tell him you’re not ready for this. Or that you just don’t want to do this or that you don’t feel up to it. To be honest, I’m pretty impressed with Gary making the first move. He’s really quiet. And kinda shy.”

Dana opened one eye and looked at Abby. “Really?”

Abby nodded. “He always spends his lunchtime in his classroom eating and reading at his desk.”

“Reading?” Dana asked, the smile curving the corners of her lips, giving her away.

“Yeah. He was reading *The Odyssey* the last time I poked my head into his classroom to ask him if the formaldehyde smell from my biology class was bothering him,” Abby said.

“That’s a good book,” Dana said, nodding. “Thick, long ...”

“Ok, this is going to an uncomfortable place,” Abby chuckled.

Dana rolled her eyes. “Grow up, Abs. I just mean, if he’s got that kind of dedication and attention span, he might not be too bad ...”

Abby sighed. “D, you haven’t even talked to him yet. What is it that you librarians are always swearing as your oath? Something about judging a book by his cover or a man by the cover of the book that he reads or books judging ...”

Dana held up a hand. “Just stop before you hurt yourself.”

Abby grinned. “The point is, he seems like he might be a reader. So, start there.”

Dana rolled her eyes. “Start *where*? ‘Hey Gary, my friend Abby once saw you reading *The Odyssey*, and because I was having a freak out before our date, and not sure what to talk about, she told me. So, you like *The Odyssey*?’ Yeah. That’ll go well.”

“Some guys dig super honest women,” Abby said. “You don’t know. It might be a turn-on. Maybe he has an ancient Greek kink. Like, maybe you should wear a toga to dinner and ask him to call you Circe.” Abby wasn’t fast enough to get out of the path of the pillow Dana hit her with.

“This is serious. What if the date goes really well? And Gary and I ... hit it off, and ...”

“Thunderstorm?” Abby asked, unable to help herself.

Both women jumped as a booming knock echoed through the apartment.

“What the hell was that?” Dana hissed, turning to look at Abby.

“Aaron,” Abby said, rolling over the top of the couch and landing on her feet behind it. “It’s this interior door. It’s hollow, so it’s always loud when he knocks.” She raised her voice. “No matter how many times I’ve told him that he doesn’t have to knock on it like a *Game of Thrones* character storming into a brothel.”

There was silence on the other side of the door. “You ruin all my fun.” Even muffled through the door, Abby could hear the grogginess in his voice.

She unlocked the door without thinking and peered across the threshold at a bedraggled Aaron. He was wearing black sweatpants, pulled on in a hurry she suspected, considering the fact that they looked like they were on backward and riding tight in the ... she swallowed and quickly dragged her gaze upward. The navy blue hoodie he was wearing was only partially zipped and the hood was still half-tucked into the neck.

“Uh, I’m ... *we’re* sorry,” Abby said, trying to cough and cover the crack in her voice, “did we wake you?”

Aaron raised a hand to scratch the back of his neck. A flash of bare skin, accentuated by an exposed hip bone led Abby to the brief and unnerving realization that either Aaron was wearing the low-rider version of men’s underwear, or he was going commando.

“Hi Aaron,” Dana called from the couch. “Sorry, I’m just ...”

“Having a moment,” Abby said, thankful for something to distract her from the parade of inappropriate thoughts that were hurdling over her friendship barricades inside her head. “Uh, Dana has a date today.”

Aaron grunted. "We should get t-shirts since we're starting a club."

Abby squeezed her eyes shut. She heard the couch squeak and then the pounding of Dana's feet as she rushed across the floor to join them. "Are you two going out tonight?"

She wasn't sure if Dana had meant it to sound *that way*, but it had come out sounding like she thought Abby and Aaron were ...

"Yeah," Aaron said with a yawn. "Santa's got us all gift-wrapped and tagged for an awkward human gift exchange. Both Abs and I have dates tonight."

"Oh, really?" Dana asked, catching Abby's eye before looking back at Aaron. "I thought you meant you and Abby ..."

With every fiber of Abby's being, she wanted to make Dana stop talking. She had a stern talk with the universe. *You owe me one. After yesterday's screaming and projectile bodily fluids from those kids, and the whole 'dying alone' conspiracy.*

"Oh, well, who do you have a date with?" Dana asked, mercifully changing the subject, either taking her cue from the look on Abby's face or Aaron's.

Abby started to breathe again. *Ok universe. Not exactly what I wanted, but close enough that I'm willing to call us even. Just ... watch yourself.*

"Angela ... uh, Angela ..." Aaron mumbled, the frown of concentration on his face making Abby smile.

"Gold," she said.

"Right," Aaron nodded. "I've never talked to her."

“Oh thank god,” Dana muttered, shaking her head. “At least I’m not the only one.”

“Who are you going to the trivia thing with?” Aaron asked.

“Trivia thing?”

“Oh, I thought that was the hot ticket tonight. Both of our dates asked us to go to it with them. Where’s your date taking you then?” Aaron asked. He leaned on the door frame and crossed his bare feet at the ankles.

“He wants to go see the gingerbread replica of town at City Hall and then walk around the Nut-Crafter Holiday Fair,” Dana said with a sigh.

Abby shook her head. The town really needed to come up with a better name for the winter arts and crafts fair.

“Trivia would have been better,” Dana said. “Then at least there wouldn’t be any awkward silences to try to fill.”

Abby nodded. “I hadn’t thought of that.” Unfortunately, by speaking up, Dana’s attention shifted to laser-focus on her.

“And who are *you* going to trivia with?”

Abby sighed. “Fred Goss.” Maybe if she didn’t act like it was a big deal, Dana wouldn’t try to make it into one.

Dana raised her eyebrows. “Wow, I didn’t know you and Fred were ... friendly.” Abby saw the twinge of hurt in Dana’s eyes and Abby felt like crawling under her dining room table and living out her days with the cords for Mr. Burns’ heating lamp and pad.

“We aren’t,” she said quickly. “D, I know him about as much as you know Gary. And I’m pretty

sure that within fifteen minutes of trivia, one or both of us might start trying to self-sabotage our chance of winning just to end the date sooner.”

“Oh don’t be so dramatic,” Aaron said, cutting his eyes to Abby. “Fred’s great. And so are you. I’m sure the two of you will fall head over heels for each other and become the poster children for Greta’s Santa’s Singles marketing next year.”

Abby knew Aaron was joking, but his smile matched Dana’s. Forced.

“Anyway,” Aaron said, taking a step back into his apartment. “Now that I’m up, I’m going on a donut quest. Any takers?”

* * *

“Well, our powers combined,” Abby muttered two hours later, surveying Dana as she looked at herself in the mirror. “I’m glad you had hair and make-up covered. Because beyond cosplay, my skills in those areas are a bit thin on the ground.”

Dana was wearing a soft black sweater and skinny jeans tucked into knee-high suede fur-lined boots. “Are you sure I look ok?”

“There’s still time if you want to change gears and go for the toga look. Now, it’s supposed to be windy this afternoon, so there is a wind chill factor and a Marilyn-standing-on-a-grate possibility to take into account, especially with the selection of underwear you brought ...”

Dana rolled her eyes. “Ok, you can stop helping now. And sue me, I feel more confident when I’m

wearing something hot under my clothes. You should try it sometime.”

Abby didn't say anything. She didn't want to delve into the fact that she felt the most confident when she was wearing her *Star Trek* science officer bra and panty set. It was cotton and besides the print, there wasn't anything awesome about it. But it made her happy and it made her feel like a badass, like Uhura and Jadzia. So, in a way, she guessed she could see where Dana was coming from.

“So, uh, are you ok, what with Aaron going out with Angela tonight?” Dana asked, turning to look at Abby.

Abby raised an eyebrow at her. “Why wouldn't I be?”

Dana shook her head. “Denial. You do not wear it well, my friend.”

Abby gave an exaggerated sigh and looked at her watch. “Shouldn't you be going? It's almost four.”

“Shit!” Dana screeched. She looked around at the mess in Abby's room. “Oh Abs! We made a mess. I don't have time ...”

“I do,” Abby said, getting to her feet and handing Dana her coat. “Go. I still have a key to your apartment. I'll drop your stuff off on my way to The Alhorn tonight.”

“Are you sure?” Dana asked.

“It's on the way. And we *just* got you chilled out enough to not hyperventilate in front of the display of the gingerbread mayor and his disproportionate size to the buildings around him. Don't let all that work be for naught. Just go, meet Gary, and have fun. Just talk to him like anyone that was coming

into the library looking for a good book. Start there and then just breathe and let the conversation go wherever it's ... gonna go."

Dana looked doubtful, but she still smiled before heading for the stairs. Whether she was looking forward to something or dreading it, there was always one thing you could count on Dana for: to be on time. She was the human equivalent of a German train schedule.

With a final hug, Abby waved goodbye to Dana and headed back upstairs. She corralled all of Dana's tried-on-and-discarded clothes, and found two pairs of Dana's heels lurking under her bed from where they'd been kicked off. Thankfully, Abby had been able to talk her out of them. Abby chuckled to herself as she tossed them into the laundry basket. It hadn't been the fact that they were impractical for walking around in the grass at the craft fair during an island winter that had convinced her. It had been when Abby mentioned that Gary wasn't that tall and that in heels, Dana might tower over him. *That* was what had finally changed her mind about the heels and convinced her to go with the low-heeled boots.

Abby swore as she stubbed her toe on a hardback book wedged against her dresser. She picked it up and shook her head, smiling. It was Emily Post's *Etiquette*. She tossed it back into the laundry basket along with a couple of paperbacks heralding dating advice, the new Lucy Score book, which she paused long enough to make a mental note to add to her reading list, and a handful of *Cosmopolitan* magazines. As she was carrying the basket down her stairs, she had to smile. It really was a dating grab-bag for any anxious librarian.

An article in the magazine on top had gotten top billing across the glossy cover and as the words

registered in Abby's head, she paused on the stairs. "Are you lonely or just under pressure?" Abby set the basket down on the table next to Mr. Burns and before she could stop herself, picked up the magazine and flipped it open.

"Hey," Aaron called through the door.

Abby jumped and threw the magazine into the air. It hit the far wall and fell down behind her Christmas tree. She swore under her breath, but before she had time to go retrieve it, Aaron had cracked the door open.

"Sorry, I didn't want to knock and scare you or yell through the door, so this is my compromise."

"Not sure if we could shoehorn this tactic into the definition of compromise, but I'll allow it," she said, crossing the room and pulling the door open. "What's up?"

"Did you get Dana out the door ok?" Aaron had showered and he was wearing a dark blue button-down shirt and dark jeans.

It took Abby a minute to find her voice. "Uh, yeah. She's good to go Gary-gettin'." She closed her eyes and did a mental facepalm.

"Gary-gettin', huh?" Aaron chuckled. "Well, good for her and I hope Gary's up to it. Uh, Angela messaged me again and asked if we could get coffee before heading over to The Alphorn. You, uh, wanna come along?"

Abby shoved down the weird twinge in her chest and snorted. "I'm sure that would set a great tone for your date tonight. Nah, thanks for the offer, but you go ahead. I need to stop by Dana's on my way to The Alphorn anyway. I'll, uh, see you ... and Angela there."

“And, uh, I’ll see you and Fred there,” Aaron said. Abby was a little relieved that she wasn’t the only one being awkward at the moment. Then again, she was still wearing the Worf pajamas she’d pulled on after her shower and her Stay Puft Marshmallow Man slippers. Not to mention that her hair was a mess, while Aaron looked, well, perfect. A small stab of weird jealousy shot through her. Aaron didn’t even know Angela and he was dressed up for her. But they’d been friends for three years and he’d never put in any kind of effort like that when they hung out. Not that he’d needed to. Aaron could wear a garbage bag and still catch every eye in a room he walked into. Though, if he *was* in a garbage bag that might be why. Her assumptive hypothesis clearly needed more work, but the fact of the matter was that he looked, really, *really* good for his date. It just felt ... strange to see him make so much effort for something he supposedly *wasn’t* looking forward to.

He’s going on a date, the voice in her head hissed. With a woman that he might want to impress. That he might want to have a romantic relationship with.

“Ok,” Aaron said into the awkward abyss. “So, I’ll see you around six.”

“Six?” Abby asked, putting a hand on the face of the irrational jealousy and pushing it back.

“Yeah, uh the trivia thing starts at six. And you and your ... partner have to register before then. So, uh ...”

“Crap,” Abby said, glancing at her watch. “I better hurry.”

“Uh, yeah. Me too. S-see you!” Aaron called, pulling the door closed between them.

“Well, that was nice and awkward,” Abby muttered to herself as she trudged up the stairs. “Maybe if I’m lucky, it will set the tone for the whole evening. What do you say, universe?”

* * *

To some degree, Abby thought the universe might be giving her a pass, still trying to make up with her for the harsh psychic pain it had been road-hauling her with lately. She didn’t *hate* the way she looked when she pulled a forest green long-sleeved dress over her head and paired it with some black tights and her fur-lined boots. Her hair miraculously hadn’t crimped in any weird places when she let it down and brushed it out. She threw on minimal make-up which was still more than she normally wore.

She dropped Dana’s stuff off in her tidy apartment on Evergreen and was still fifteen minutes early when she strolled through the heavy wooden doors of The Alhorn. It didn’t matter that they were thousands of miles from Tombstone and that The Alhorn wasn’t known for its gunfights and player-piano. Anytime Abby walked through the door to the pub by herself, she always felt the whole room go still as if she was an outlaw crawling into a watering hole for a shot of whiskey and a hand of cards.

To balance her karma and reclaim some of the promised awkwardness of the night, she waved at the few faces that had turned in her direction. She spotted Miss Mandie in the far corner, leaning on her pool cue. The older woman raised her martini glass to Abby and winked. The tables around the small stage were filling up fast. She moved away from the door and scanned the people, looking for

Fred. A cold realization slowly descended on her as her gaze fell on the last occupied table. No Fred.

Calm your panties. You're just running early. Dana's bad influence no doubt. Abby tried to focus on the logic offered by the voice inside her head. She was early. And maybe Fred always ran late. Should she get a table and just wait for him? But what if she got a table and he really preferred booths? Or vice versa? She preferred booths. Mostly because it made her feel like an extra from *The Godfather*. But what if he liked sitting on hard wooden chairs without his back against a wall? She sat down hard on a vacant stool at the bar to try to decide what to do.

Another couple blew in through the door and it took a minute for Abby to realize it was Angela and Aaron. Angela had Aaron's heavy peacoat around her shoulders.

"Oh man, I swear the temperature has dropped ten degrees in the last hour," she was saying, leaning against Aaron's shoulder as they came in. "Thanks for letting me borrow this. It's so warm. I'll go grab us a booth. Can you get me a Manhattan?" She said all of this so fast that Abby had the irrational reflex to check under her butt to see if she'd sat down on the remote and was inadvertently fast-forwarding Angela.

"Uh sure," Aaron finally got out, saying it essentially to Angela's back as she headed away from the bar to claim the last booth. Aaron shook his head gently and turned to the bar. "Abby?"

She gave him an awkward wave, her special of the night, apparently. She relaxed a little when she saw Aaron's strained expression fall away and his face break into a grin.

“In time out already? I mean, I know you work fast, but Fred must be having a pretty bad day to already put you in the penalty box. Did you insult the Yankees? Tell him dodgeball wasn’t a real sport? Get lacrosse and rugby mixed up? I did that once.”

Abby shrugged. “I’ll thank you in advance for the great conversation starters, but no, Fred has yet to appear.” She forced a chuckle, “Maybe he meant to message Amelia Logan.”

Aaron frowned. “The social studies teacher?”

Abby nodded. “She plays field hockey. They might be soul mates. We have the same initials, so maybe when Fred noticed who he’d accidentally sent the invite to, he decided to stay home tonight.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Aaron said, shaking his head. “I’m sure he’s just running late. A guy would have to be insane to stand you up. And Fred is, well, sports-enthusiastic, but he’s not insane.” A warm brush of something was seeping into Abby’s chest. Aaron was a good friend.

“Hey, why don’t you let me buy this round of drinks and you come and sit with Angela and me until Fred shows. Maybe the four of us can be on a team and the night’s awkwardness factor won’t be so bad.”

Abby felt relief flood her. “Really? That would be awesome. But I’m buying this round of drinks. No arguing. And I know this will come as a shock to you, but not having been on a date in three years, my moves are kind of rusty.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “You don’t say. Not that I can throw rocks, of course. Besides, have you seen the price of glass repair these days?”

“It’s outrageous, harumph,” Abby said, adopting the New York accent she and Aaron called “Fat Cat Speak”.

“I say, harumph,” Aaron added as they turned to flag down Bobby Thompson behind the bar.

Abby ordered an Irish coffee. “Yeah, that sounds good,” Aaron said, doubling her order and adding the Manhattan for Angela. He fought Abby over paying for it and ultimately won by handing the bartender his card out of Abby’s reach.

“Technical foul,” Abby muttered, following him back to the booth. “Or whatever they say in sports-ball when someone uses their height to their advantage over their opponent.”

“I’m pretty sure they just say, ‘play ball’,” Aaron said, sliding into the booth across from Angela.

Without thinking, Abby slid in next to Aaron. Immediately she felt a chill emanating from Angela.

“Hi Angela, how are you doing?” Abby asked, hoping to put the woman at ease.

“Fine,” she said, giving Abby a tight smile. “I didn’t know you’d be joining us.”

“Oh,” Aaron said quickly. “Abby is just waiting on her date. I thought she could just hang out with us until Fred gets here. Then maybe the four of us could play as a team.”

The look on Angela’s face softened when she focused on Aaron but tightened again when she turned her attention back to Abby. “Oh, you’re dating Fred? Fred Goss?”

“Dating is a strong word,” Abby said, sipping her coffee. “Just a Santa’s Single date, like you and

Aaron.” Angela shifted in her seat and Abby didn’t miss the way she pulled Aaron’s peacoat tighter around her.

“Well, what time was he going to meet you here?” Angela asked, looking around the growing crowd.

Abby shrugged. “I don’t think there was a time in the email. Just trivia night. I assumed we’d just meet here.”

“It’s too bad he didn’t put more thought into it so you could meet up ahead of time and already have your own booth.”

Abby didn’t miss the pointed meaning in Angela’s tone. The clock over the stage said it was now six.

“Ok Hope-ians!” the booming voice of Mike Finnegan, The Alphorn’s owner, filled the room. “Time to sign up. And there’s only one call because it’s six o’clock and we’ve got to get this trivia show on the road.”

Abby felt a wave of panic wash over her, as she scanned the room again. Still no Fred.

“We could have a three-person team,” Aaron was saying. “I’m sure Fred will probably just get here late. Then he can just hang out and wait for us to ... finish.”

The chill coming off of Angela at this suggestion would have sustained the school during the previous summer when the HVAC had gone out and they’d all sweated their way through summer school.

“Nah,” Abby said, making the decision to not ruin their night and bring back the awkwardness that they’d been trying to kill all night. “I’m kind

of tired anyway. You two have fun. I'm just gonna head home."

The Angela-powered a/c shut off. Her smile became warmer as she nodded at Abby and tuned her face to "empathetic".

"Wait," Aaron said, frowning at Abby. "I'm sure he'll be here. And you could even just hang out with us for a while. Finish your drink. Watch us get trounced in trivia." He glanced at Angela. "Or watch Angela school everyone in trivia. I would get trounced by myself."

"Nice save," Abby muttered to him under her breath. She cleared her throat. "Nah. I'm just gonna head out." She chugged the last of her warm drink and got to her feet. She forced a smile, trying to hold onto the shreds of her dignity after being stood up. "You two have a good night. See ya later."

"I'll drop by after I get back," Aaron said quickly.

Another blast of cold air from Angela's icy gaze. But Abby didn't want to make things worse by saying anything else that might upset her, so she just nodded and moved back to the bar. She handed over her mug, buttoned up her coat, and headed back out into the cold.

The winds were picking up and Abby bent her head, pulling the knit cap from her pocket and tugging it down over her ears. It helped with the cold, but there was still the eerie low-howl of the wind as it wound between the buildings of Hope. The street was quiet. Everyone was already where they were planning on being for the evening. Either in one of Hope's three pubs, the few restaurants, or at home.

She kept her gaze on her feet, thinking of home, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, a bowl of Honey Smacks, and Mr. Burns' warm weight on her shoulder with his little dragon head under her chin. It was definitely missing a six-foot-six element, but still an excellent night. Far superior to going on an awkward arranged date with Fred Goss. And far superior to getting frostbite from Angela because she was horning in on her date with Aaron. She frowned. Angela had always been friendly to her. What was her deal? This time, Abby gave herself a physical facepalm. Duh. Angela *really* liked Aaron. She wanted to actually spend time with him tonight. She'd asked *him* out on the date.

Not that that had seemed to matter in Abby's case. With every step she took, she was more certain that there had been some kind of mix-up and that he'd meant to ask someone else out tonight. *Oh well*, the voice in her head said with a sigh. *Besides, this must still count as one date in the three-date requirement. One down, two to go, and you'll be free from this ridiculous ritual. It's not like you were actually looking forward to tonight anyway. Be honest with yourself. You're a hell of a lot more excited about cereal, TV, and Mr. Burns at the moment.* She couldn't argue.

Abby did her best to focus on that happy thought and not the fact that the only missing piece to making it a truly perfect evening was behind her, sitting at a booth with Angela Gold and playing trivia. *Those nights might be behind you now, Abs*, the voice said. If things went well with Angela, Aaron would be occupado. She groaned as she passed The Spark Theatre. What if Angela started coming over to Aaron's all the time? She'd have to invest in more space heaters just to keep Mr. Burns alive and keep from turning into one of

the Others from *Game of Thrones*. Winter was coming and its name was Angela.. Would she have to move? She tried to shake this line of thinking loose. She just needed to get home.

She cut down the alley behind Excavation, Hope's only lingerie store. It was a shortcut and, as an added bonus, took her out of the direct path of the blasts of cold air whipping in off the ocean. The night around her was still, except for the low moaning of the wind as it found every notch and cranny in the brick buildings on either side of her. The alley only had one light, halfway down the block, mounted to the backside of Sugar Rush, Hope's candy store. Abby was easily startled, but she was rational enough to not be afraid of the dark. Still, she wasn't going to hang out in the shadowy alley any longer than she had to. She picked up her pace, but she'd only gone a few feet when she felt her heart stop in her chest.

There was someone ahead, sitting on the ground, and leaning back against Sugar Rush's dumpster. This was odd for Hope. There were half a dozen operations in Hope that immediately scooped up anyone who was experiencing homelessness. Maybe this was someone who had too much to drink and had just passed out on their way home. Also not good. The temperature couldn't be much above freezing, and the wind chill off the ocean (even in the alley) was enough to cause hypothermia.

"Hey," Abby called softly as she approached the figure. She didn't want to startle them. They didn't move. "Hey!" she called louder. Still nothing. She was almost to the dumpster when she saw that the figure was bleeding from the head. Or he *had* been bleeding. He wasn't anymore.

And she knew him. It was Fred Goss.

And Fred was dead.

ABBY

Any other time, the Sheriff's Office golf carts topped with Kojak lights would have made Abby smile. They were an island joke and necessity. They were the comedic gift that kept on giving. And it was a little unfair of the universe to give her a gift like seeing four of Hope's deputies and Dragnet, the office's German Shepherd, ride in on the slow-moving, whirring carts, red light flashing, when she couldn't fully enjoy the sight.

Instead, Abby was numb, standing in the alley, staring down at Fred's stiff corpse and blood-stained face. A final dazed expression was frozen in place, his eyes hollow and staring through her.

"Abby?" Bill Benton, one of Hope's deputies and the school's safety officer was the first one to climb off the golf cart and head in her direction. It was a little jarring to see him in his cop uniform today after spending yesterday evening with him dressed as Santa.

"Hi Bill," she said numbly.

"Hey," Bill said, clearing his throat. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I don't know. I mean, it had already happened when I got here."

Bill pulled a notebook out of his pocket and flipped it open. “That’s ok. Just uh, tell me what you saw.”

She gestured at Fred. “Just Fred. Sitting here.”

“Fred ... Jesus, is that Fred Goss? When the call came in, they didn’t tell us who it was.”

Abby nodded. “Yeah. We were supposed to meet at The Alhorn for trivia tonight.” She returned her gaze to the toes of her shoes. It had just been a few days ago when Fred had stuck his head in her classroom, looking for the Whorley brothers and errant dodgeballs. She squeezed her eyes shut. What she wouldn’t give for it to be *that* day again. Where was the *Groundhog Day* curse when you needed it?

“And when he didn’t show up, you came looking for him?” Bill asked.

It took Abby a few seconds to hear Bill’s voice and process what he was saying. She blinked her eyes open and shuffled her feet, searching for something on the ground to anchor her attention on. The facts. He just needed the facts. She traced the toe of one shoe along a scuff mark on the dirt and grime-streaked concrete, and tried to breathe.

Abby shook her head. “I just assumed he stood me up. I was cutting down the alley to head home. I live over on Oceanview.”

“Where on Oceanview?” Bill asked.

Abby tried to not read too much into the questions Bill was asking her. She’d taken a few forensic science classes in college for fun and she’d seen enough procedural cop shows to know he was just doing his job. She gave Bill her address and answered his questions the best she could. They were interrupted by a narrow set of headlights and

an engine rumble that fell somewhere between crotch-rocket and Jeep Wrangler.

Abby and Bill turned in time to see Doc Brewer, the island's pediatrician and coroner, arrive clinging to the seat grips of the Sheriff's Office's six-wheeler, driven by Deputy Maggie Wright. Abby and Maggie had gone to high school together and Abby didn't miss the look of relief on her face when she waved at Abby.

After a ten-minute examination of Fred, Doc Brewer straightened up, one hand on his lower back while he made a face and ran his other hand through his thinning white hair. "Looks like blunt force trauma." Doc looked up and down the alley and studied the front of the dumpster. "There's some blood here. He must have slipped or tripped and just bashed his head against the dumpster. Dazed, he sat down and the internal bleeding of the injury caused enough pressure in his skull to end circulatory and renal function." He shook his head. "And that was all she wrote."

"This is a damn shame," Bill said softly, shaking his head.

Abby nodded numbly. What a way to go. Killed after head-butting a dumpster. There was a numb annoyance working its way through her. Fred was young. This was such a waste. He was kind. She knew that much about him. In the spring, she'd had to run something down to the office during her free period and she'd come across Fred kneeling in the hallway next to a chair where a little boy, probably no older than first or second grade, was sitting and trying not to cry while he held onto the Band-Aid on his elbow. He was waiting for his mom to come get him. To distract him, Fred was telling him a funny story about when he'd been the boy's age, tripped on his shoelaces, and knocked

down his whole tug o' war team. The little boy had giggled and Abby had smiled as she'd passed them. Fred was a good guy.

Abby couldn't look at Fred anymore. Not like this. She didn't want this image of Fred to be the last one in her head. They hadn't really been friends, but they were coworkers. Fred and Aaron had been closer friends. At least they'd been on the basketball team together. *Oh god*, she thought, squeezing her eyes shut. Aaron didn't know.

"Abby! Are you alright?" As if her thoughts had summoned him, Abby spun on the spot to see Aaron jogging towards them, his long legs making it down the block in half a dozen strides. The fear and concern on his face was shaking Abby's core. She'd been in a daze. None of it felt real. But then, seeing Aaron's concern and fear, flipped a switch inside her. *This was real. Fred was dead.* She'd never have a chance to talk to him, get to know him better. He'd never have a chance to punish the Whorley brothers for stealing dodgeballs again, or find someone and settle down, or travel, or become a professional sports star, or whatever he wanted. It had all ended for Fred tonight, in this cold, dark alley, next to a candy store dumpster.

That was when Abby cracked.

She was not a graceful crier. She blamed her older sister for being her example. All three Locke girls cried with their whole bodies. The exertion always took the strength out of Abby's legs and made her want to immediately assume the fetal position. It might have just been something in the evolutionary chain that had been passed down in her family because she didn't know anyone else who became so weak and vulnerable when they cried. If they were animals, her predators would only need to bombard her with puppy adoption

videos on YouTube, throw her in the pot while she cried, curled up in a ball, and then the soup would be on.

She felt Aaron's arm around her, under her elbows, propping her up while she tried to angrily shove down the wave of sadness pushing her towards the cliff of bawling, snotty depression. She could hear Aaron talking to the sheriffs, but they might as well have been adults in a Charlie Brown cartoon for all she heard and processed.

Get a grip, Abby. You can cry tonight, in bed, with the pillow over your face. Just keep it together right now.

"I'm going to walk her home," Aaron said, his voice finally breaking through the screaming inside her head. Bill said something to that and Aaron replied, but Abby was still giving herself an angry pep talk and wasn't paying much attention to the exchange. She wasn't going to completely fall apart, not on Aaron, not in this dirty alley in front of all of the Sheriff's Office. She was going to be a well-adjusted adult and walk away from this horrible scene and the depressing view that had been the last thing Fred had seen. The wave was swelling inside her though. She didn't know how long she'd be able to push the sadness down. Distraction. That's what she needed.

"Wh-Where's Angela?" Abby croaked.

"Oh, uh, she headed home," Aaron said. "I was a terrible trivia partner." She felt Aaron's arm tighten around her, pulling him into his side. "You're freezing."

Abby was numb from the cold. She was trying to dig her mental fingernails into the numbness to hold her together mentally until she could get home.

“Did-did you two at least have a good time?” She asked, feeling her teeth starting to chatter.

“Oh yeah,” Aaron said, and she didn’t miss the sarcasm. “One for the memoirs. Let’s just focus on getting you home and warm.”

The gruffness in Aaron’s voice told her that reality was starting to settle over him too.

“Aaron,” Abby half-whispered, half-whimpered. “I’m so sorry. I know Fred was your friend.”

Aaron took a shaky breath and Abby wrapped her arm around the back of his peacoat and hugged him to her side. “He ... Fred was ... I can’t believe ...”

“Me either,” Abby said.

They moved in almost mechanical silence the rest of the way home, stepping over the sink hole at the base of the dirt driveway leading to their garage. Up the front porch stairs and without hesitation, to Abby’s front door. She got it unlocked and she took a deep breath when the cheerful whoosh of the *Star Trek* doors greeted them. She was home. Aaron was next to her. Like so many previous nights. Maybe they could figure out how to time travel back to one of those nights before either of them had even *heard* of Santa’s Singles. Maybe then, Fred would still be...

“Oh my god,” Abby breathed, feeling her knees starting to give out. “I killed him.”

“What are you talking about?” Aaron asked, quickly moving her across the kitchen and sitting her down on the couch.

“Me. This was my fault. I’ll bet he was on his way to The Alhorn. If we hadn’t ... if I’d said ‘no’, he would ...”

“He would have probably either gone anyway or asked someone else, or gone down that alley on his way to Bumble’s market for frozen pizza and beer, or gone out walking and cut down the alley. Or, or, or. Abs, you didn’t kill him. It was an accident. Just a ... stupid, tragic accident.” Aaron’s voice cracked and Abby broke.

They sat side by side on the couch, her left hand gripped in Aaron’s right as they cried for Fred.

Abby didn’t remember falling asleep, but crying always merged blurry-vision alertness with sad and anxious dreaming to form one of the worst hangovers she ever had when she woke up. She peeled her crusty eyelids open and shifted to look at the empty couch next to her. There was something heavy on her chest. The heavy down comforter that she kept on the back of the couch during the winter. It was on top of her, pulled up to her chin. She shifted and it slid down enough to reveal Aaron’s dark peacoat underneath it.

“Hey,” Aaron’s voice was soft. She turned to look at him standing in the kitchen filling her tea kettle at the sink. “Feel like some tea?”

Abby gave him a weak smile. “Sure, just as soon as I can excavate myself from under here.”

“You were shivering,” Aaron said, “I couldn’t seem to get you warm enough. I thought about taking Mr. Burns’s heating lamp and aiming it at you, but ... he hissed at me when I touched it and I didn’t want to upset the dragon of the house.”

“Good call,” Abby groaned, tugging the coat off of her and doing her best to ignore Angela’s weird perfume smell that clung to it, covering up the scent of Aaron’s familiar scent. “You definitely don’t want to be on Mr. Burns’ shit list.”

“Been there, done that,” Aaron said. “Oh, hey, I forgot to ask you. Did the vet’s office ever call you with their findings from said dragon poop?” His head was down over the kettle, watching the water until it hit the fill line.

Abby smiled. “Yeah. Thank you again, by the way, for delivering it.”

“The vet, Andi, just took it from me and told me I shouldn’t have since it wasn’t her birthday, with a *completely* straight face.”

“Probably uses that one a lot. I’ll bet she gets handed bags of poop all day, every day. Gotta do something to spice things up.”

He nodded. “I can see that.” He set the kettle on the stove and turned to look at her. “Is everything ok with ole’ Monty?” She didn’t miss the hint of worry in his eyes as his gaze strayed to the aquarium.

She nodded. “He just wasn’t eating very well and he was extra lethargic so she wanted to check his stool out. She said it could be the weather and his immune system seems a little weak, like it’s trying to fight something off. She just told me to keep him warm and with food and water always within lunging-distance.”

“Check and check.” Aaron said with a nod at the warm glow coming from the aquarium as he pulled out Abby’s tea selection.

They sat side by side on the stools at Abby’s counter, sipping their tea and thinking about the evening. With anyone else, under any other circumstances, the silence would probably feel awkward or uncomfortable. But with Aaron sitting in her kitchen, it was almost comforting. Besides, what was there to say? What did you say when

someone you'd just spoken to days before was gone? When you'd never get another chance to say anything to them, ever again? Abby thought about everything she knew about Fred. It took less than a minute. Where did he live? Did he have any family? What were his hobbies? Who was his best friend? Did he have pets? Had he ever been in love? What did he want out of life?

But just like any combination of words that could be strung together and spoken aloud at that moment, none of it mattered. Whatever the answers were, she'd never hear Fred tell her. No one would. It was pointless to wonder. Pointless, just like the accident. Life was so short.

When their mugs were empty, Abby stood, taking them to the sink. She was back to feeling numb.

“You ok?” Aaron whispered.

Abby turned to look at him. “I was about to ask you the same question.”

Aaron nodded slowly. “Fred was a good guy. We weren't close friends. But we were friends. I'm ... I'm gonna miss him.”

Abby nodded. They stood in silence, inches apart, Abby staring at the fourth button down on his shirt, which had missed the buttonhole. They'd both been successful in *not* talking about what had happened between them on her couch the night before. But she shouldn't have been surprised. She'd told him they should forget about it. And Aaron was doing it. She should feel relieved ... but she didn't.

“We ...” Abby started, feeling her mouth moving before her brain had had a chance to weigh

in. And then she chickened out. “We should get some sleep.”

Aaron nodded and headed for the door between their apartments. “Night,” he called softly.

“Goodnight. And ... thanks,” Abby said as the door closed behind him. As she leaned against it, she had to admit that tonight’s events kind of put their drunken shenanigans from the night before in perspective.

She made it upstairs and into bed before the next wave of sadness crashed over her. As she cried herself to sleep, the fear and horror of the scene leaked into her dreams.

She was back in the alley, the light over the back door to Sugar Rush was flickering, like in a tourist-trap haunted house. Things were moving in the shadows. She was surrounded. Fred was alive, walking alone toward her, but she didn’t see his feet moving. With each flicker of the light, he was just closer and closer to her, until he was right next to her, standing in front of the dumpster. He lurched forward, his eyes wide, his expression of surprise fixed. She barely moved out of the way in time for him to bash his head against the edge of the dumpster, right where she’d been standing. His feet crunched on gravel, spraying the opposite wall with the loose rocks and sand as he fell. An echoing squeal like a sneaker on a basketball court echoed around the alley. Fred’s hand reached out as he fell, grabbing Abby by the front of her shirt. She felt it rip. His hand was dead, cold.

She sat up in bed, covered in sweat. Her cell phone was ringing, muffled in the covers. It took her a minute to regain control of her heartbeat and then dig the phone out of her blankets.

“H-Hello?” Abby’s voice was gritty and she tried to clear her throat. “Hello.”

“Abby?” It was Maggie Wright. “The Sheriff wants you to come down to the office today to make a statement since you were the one who found him. I know you talked to Bill last night, but they want to do it all formally so they can close the investigation. Are- would you be able to come in?”

It was the absolute last thing Abby wanted to do, but ... she thought of Fred. If he did have family, loved ones, friends that needed answers, closure; she had to.

“Sure. I’ll uh, be there in an hour.” She hung up and fell back on her pillows, her hand holding the phone, resting on her chest. She was drenched in sweat, but she swore she could still feel Fred’s cold hand at her throat, ripping her shirt.

AARON

Aaron woke up with his hand still pressed against his bedroom wall. He'd lain awake, feeling helpless as he listened to Abby's muffled sobs through the thin layer of Sheetrock that separated their bedrooms.

Fred Goss was dead.

A stupid, freak accident had ended the life of a guy who had been healthy, fit, and easy-going. And always so calm. If he was honest with himself when he really thought about it, he should have picked up on Fred's interest in Abby. They had always gotten along at school. He felt a wave of guilt crash over him, thinking about the annoyance he'd felt with Fred for asking Abby out. That was just Aaron being petty. Fred was a good guy, and he was only a few inches taller than Abby. Much less awkward than he ... *not going there, brain*. And Fred liked *Star Wars*. He and Abby would have had that in common. Another twinge of pain seized in Aaron's chest. He rolled over onto his back and cradled the back of his head in his hands as he stared up at the ceiling.

Why did things have to change?

Before that ridiculous Santa's Singles meeting, everything was fine. Everything was *good*. His life was stable for the first time in living memory. For

the past three years, it had been getting more and more stable every month. He was in his dream job, in a town he loved, in the best apartment he'd ever lived in, with his best friend next door. He was ... happy. Fulfilled. He had everything he wanted in life. Right?

And now? It had taken him days to realize it, but the reason he'd started feeling sick after that meeting was because somewhere deep in his psyche, the old anxiety had lifted its head and sniffed the air. It was the same anxiety and nausea he'd felt when his mom had died and his dad had taken him to live with his grandma. Then he'd felt it again when his dad had stopped coming home, even for the holidays. He'd felt it when he'd left for school, and again when his grandma had died.

Instability. The smooth sailing ship that had been his life was suddenly tilting starboard. He'd hit an iceberg and that iceberg was the ridiculous Santa's Singles. He thought Abby had just been going to the meeting to support Dana. But ... then she'd signed up. And the lounge chairs on the deck of the U.S.S. Aaron's Peace of Mind had tumbled over the rail and down into the abyss. He squeezed his eyes shut. So what had he done in response? Like a petulant child, stung by some perceived slight, he'd signed up too. If he could go back in time and kick his own ass for doing it, he would. He didn't date. And with good reason. He sucked at it. His date with Angela had been proof enough of that. She was attractive and he'd be lying if he said he wasn't flattered by her rapt attention to every mundane reply he made to her questions. But after the first five minutes of her wide blue eyes staring at him, hanging on every word he managed to put together, he'd started to squirm. It was like having to give an oral report on a subject you weren't good

at, in front of the whole class, while a teacher that always gave you preference looked on.

Aaron closed his eyes, feeling the sarcastic smile form on his lips. *Skydiving*. That was Angela's passion. When he'd finally been able to steer the conversation back onto her, she'd told him all about her weekend excursions to the mainland to surf or skydive. And ... her favorite show was *The Bachelor*.

In a way, he was glad Abby had been out of earshot so she wouldn't torture him later for that. Angela was sweet. She just ... well, they just didn't have anything in common. It had been hard for Aaron to stay focused on the recap of the latest episode that Angela was telling him in excruciating detail. His attention had kept drifting off to where Abby stood alone at the bar, glancing at the door, pulling her hat on, and pausing for just a moment before leaving. Abby's face was so expressive; he'd been able to watch the wheel of emotions turning through her, even from across the room. She'd been awkward and amused at first, that combination of emotions that always put the slightest pink tinge in Abby's cheeks. He'd never seen a flash of annoyance on her face at Fred being late. He'd seen her anxiety, and something like ... insecurity. Which, if Aaron was being honest, had been the most distracting part of the evening. It was something he couldn't remember ever witnessing in Abby. Angela had been talking about ... something. But all he could think about was how small and unsure of herself Abby had looked at that moment. That was not his Abby.

He groaned and rolled to a sitting position, putting his head in his hands. She *wasn't* "his Abby". Why was his brain doing this to him? He asked himself the question, hoping to come up

with a different answer than the one that he knew to be true. The truth was, Aaron was scared. More scared than he'd been in three years. He was scared of giving oxygen to something that had been growing for the last three years, but he was more scared of losing his best friend.

But then, what about what had happened on her couch, Saturday night? She'd *asked* him to kiss her. He felt his heart leap in his chest at the memory, but it was a momentary high. He'd thought it had *meant* something. But then she'd told him they should just forget it had happened. She wasn't mean about it, more ... ashamed? So, he hadn't mentioned it. But he didn't think he'd *ever* be able to forget about it. The sensation, the feeling of how ... perfect it was. It had been two days and even the *memory* had his body twisted in knots. *Stop focusing on what will probably never happen again*, the voice in his head snapped. He had to admit it had a point. And besides, after what had happened last night, he needed to pull on his best friend socks and focus.

He reached for his phone. It was just after six. If he hurried, he could go by Miss Mandie's and bring back some coffees and pastries before Abby woke up. He dressed as quietly as he could and crept down the stairs. He doubted Abby had slept well, if at all. If by some miracle she'd managed to drop off, he didn't want to wake her now.

The cold island air was bracing and Aaron turned the collar up on his jacket as he headed through town. The line at Miss Mandie's was mercifully short. Reverend Anderson, Mrs. Thompson, and ...

“Barb?”

She turned to look at him. “Aaron.”

“Hi, uh, I didn’t know you were still in town. But of course, you’re probably on break from school ...”

“Yeah,” Barb said with a nod. Still cold, still unsmiling. Maybe it was Aaron’s exhaustion, or just the pent up anger and sadness over what had happened to Fred the night before.

Either way, before he could second guess himself, he asked, “Barb, are you mad at me about something?” She hesitated and he plowed on. “You didn’t speak to me at your parent’s house and you’re looking at me right now like I just kicked a puppy. What did I do?”

“Nothing,” Barb said.

“But then . . .,” Aaron started.

Barb shook her head. “Get your coffee. I’ll meet you over there.” She nodded to a cafe table next to the window. Aaron was confused, but he placed his order with Bart behind the counter and took it over to Barb’s table. He’d barely sat down when Barb fixed him with a look that was so reminiscent of Abby’s serious face it took his breath away.

“Aaron. I like you. I always have. You’re a great friend to Abby. To our family.”

“Ok ...” Aaron said slowly when she paused. “So ...”

“What’s the deal with you and Abby?” she blurted out.

“What do you mean?” Aaron asked. “We’re best friends.”

Barb squeezed her eyes shut and slowly shook her head. “I know that, but ... are you just ... dragging her along?”

“Dragging her?” Aaron started.

Barb sighed. “Let me tell you a little story. In high school, Abby was best friends with Derek Miller. Since elementary school. *They* were best friends. But he led Abby on. In high school they went to prom together, he kissed her and she got her hopes up and then, he just ghosted her. No more hanging out. No explanation as to why. The school year ended, Derek left before the summer, and Abby spent the worst summer of her life, here, before college ... pining for him.”

Aaron had never met Derek but he already hated the guy. “That’s awful.”

Barb nodded. “Yeah. I love my sister, Aaron. I wish I’d beat Derek’s ass for what he did to her. *He* was her *best friend* too.” She sighed. “Look, I know what’s between you and Abby isn’t any of my business, but ... Aaron,” she met his gaze and those blue-green eyes, just like Abby’s stared through him, almost pleading. “Please, Aaron. Don’t hurt her.”

Barb’s words echoed in his head as he walked home. *Don’t hurt her.* That was the last thing in the world he’d want to do and he’d told Barb as much. She’d looked like she *wanted* to believe him. Abby’s half of the duplex was still dark, besides the soft red glow from the heat lamp in Mr. Burns’ tank. He set the coffee and pastry down on his kitchen counter and sat down on his couch to think. *What did Barb want him to do? He couldn’t ... If Abby didn’t feel ...* Aaron sighed and closed his eyes. Whatever he did, he couldn’t risk losing his best friend. But what was he supposed to do when, after they kissed, she told him to forget it had ever happened? After Barb’s story, he was just thankful *she* wasn’t ghosting *him*. Yet.

ABBY

Abby stared at the ceiling, trying to summon the motivation to move her legs and get out of bed. It was Monday. The first one of Christmas break. Normally, the start of one of Abby's favorite times of the year. Normally.

But this wasn't a "normal" Monday. Fred Goss was dead. She blinked her eyes, trying to keep the memory of the sight of Fred's expressionless face at bay. How long had he been there before she had found him? If she'd just left The Alphorn fifteen minutes earlier, would she have met Fred before he'd died? If she'd taken the shortcut to The Alphorn, would she have run into Fred before it happened? Would he still be alive if she'd been there to stop it?

She laid a hand across her eyes. And to think, she'd actually been hurt that Fred had stood her up. To be perfectly honest, Abby had never gotten any vibes of interest from him in the first place. Then again, Aaron was always telling her that she was oblivious when it came to someone dropping hints. She knew he'd been teasing her, but maybe it was a fair assessment. It might be part of the reason that Abby was still single. But she couldn't help it. So much of life was amorphous, uncertain. Why couldn't people just *say* what they *meant*? Why did everyone have to continually smack their

way around the shrubbery? Why couldn't life be more like science? Documented, with natural laws that were widely known?

Abby groaned, feeling a wave of embarrassed heat roll over her. She covered her face with her hands. Fred Goss had liked her? Enough to ask her out on a date? She'd always assumed that he'd liked Dana. Abby dropped her hands back to her sides and stared at the ceiling again.

Dana. She didn't know. With a groan, Abby rolled over to sit up. Dana *had* liked Fred. For a while, Abby was sure they were going to end up as a couple. But when it hadn't happened, Abby just assumed she was misreading the signs. Again. Still, Abby didn't want Dana to find out what had happened from the paper. She had to tell her. Maybe if Dana had had a good night herself, it would ... soften the blow?

Her phone dinged and she flipped it over to see a text from Maggie Wright on the screen. "You on your way?"

Abby sighed. Of course, *before that*, she had to go to the office and retell the Sheriff the *same* thing she'd told Bill the night before. Gotta love that bureaucracy.

She rolled out of bed and dragged herself down the hall to her bathroom. Morning grogginess was the stage of the day that Abby always wished she could be unconscious for as illogical as that would be. She didn't care. It was so irritating and the pull of just going back to bed, pulling the covers over her head, and staying there until spring was so strong ...

"Well Fred," she said softly as she turned on the shower. "At least you'll never again have to experience the mortal 'joy' of being forced to wake

up when you don't want to, relearn how your limbs work, and then strip naked and wait for the water to get warm enough to keep you from singing opera.”

It took every ounce of Abby's available willpower (and a promise to herself to go to Miss Mandie's for coffee after the Sheriff's Office) to get her dressed, down the stairs, and out the door. For half a second she paused on the porch, wondering if asking Aaron to come with her was reasonable. It was Monday morning. And it was Christmas break. And he was her best friend. Ride or die. She knew he'd go if she asked, but that was kind of a dick move to pull on your best friend on a Monday morning, especially when he'd been up with her all night. Her mind made up, she headed down the porch steps and turned onto the sidewalk, picking up speed, half afraid that if she didn't keep enough forward momentum going, her feet would stop. She was *not* looking forward to reliving the night before.

Just like before her grad school presentations, Abby began trying to mentally line up the facts with bullet points, a hypothesis, the factors, and the result. This mental exercise lasted until she was a block away from Sugar Rush. Making a split-second decision that her weary brain just sighed and shook its head at, she turned and headed down the alley.

Where the hell do you think you're going? She asked, looking down at her feet. But it was a moot question. She knew *where*. The better question was *why*. Why did she have this compulsion to *again* see the place where Fred had died? What was she hoping to get from staring at a dented and blood-spattered dumpster? She tried to reason with her feet.

It must have been working because by the time she got to the entrance to the alley, her steps began to falter and the bravado that had been trying to work itself up into something had experienced gravitational collapse. She stood on the sidewalk, peering down the alley. She could see the dumpster, like a stubborn, silent witness ... and murderer. It just sat there, unconcerned with what it had been an accessory to the night before. Abby wasn't sure why, but that really pissed her off. Screw that dumpster. It was an *asshole*. If she'd stepped where, or tripped over, whatever Fred had, *she* could have been the one that was found dead in the alley. Or Aaron, or anyone else in town.

No. She wasn't going to give the hulking metal jerk the satisfaction of going any closer. She turned her back on the alley and moved through town to the Sheriff's Office. She supposed it could have been her imagination, but for some reason the usual Monday morning bustle in the town square, with holiday activities and swarms of tourists coming up from the ferry, felt ... well, muted. Of course, Abby conceded, it was probably just the cloud of shock, anger, and sadness she was currently walking under.

Hope's Sheriff's Office had once been a bait shop. Or at least, so the local legend went. At Halloween, Marjorie Kemp, the mayor's wife, would lead the campiest ghost hunt imaginable, spending most of the forty-five minutes at the office, telling the legend of Jerry Farkle, the old bait shop owner who could never catch this massive white tuna fish, named Ole' Carl, who had supposedly evaded him for years. At this point in the story, she'd put the flashlight under her chin and say in a hushed voice that the chase had slowly driven him mad. Then she'd proceed to tell a

shamelessly plagiarized *Moby Dick*-esque story, with the lead roles being played by Jerry and Ole' Carl.

Abby grinned as she crossed the street to the office. She hadn't told Aaron what was coming three years ago when she dragged him on the ghost hunt with her. The scandalized look on his English major face as Marjorie told the story had been the ultimate payoff.

All the joy of the memory evaporated the moment she walked through the office's door, despite the very festive jingle bells tinkling on the handle. The room smelled like stale coffee and fir trees, and the amount and disarray of the decorations could only be described as "there appears to have been a struggle, and ... elves were involved ... somehow." Abby knew every person in the room. Two of them, she'd grown up with. She'd known Bill Benton most of her life and had babysat for his stepdaughter Ella before he was in the picture. Then there was the sheriff who was pushing eighty and had been sheriff of Hope, all of Abby's life. Bill and Sheriff Bud Tinsdale were in the far corner of the room, moving some papers around on a tall table, their expressions grim. Even from where Abby stood, she could tell by the color and glossy sheen, that they were looking at photos. Probably of Fred's body and the crime scene. She shivered. The sheriff muttered something to Bill and they headed down the hallway to his office.

"There you are!" Abby turned to see Maggie jump out of her chair and head her way. "The sheriff and deputy are trying to get all the paperwork taken care of before we get any further into the holiday season." Maggie sighed. "You know. They don't want any bad press about Hope being unsafe, scaring away the tourists."

Abby felt herself nod, but the words weren't really reaching her. Tourists? Fred had died and they were worried about how it would look to *tourists*?

Maggie glanced around the room, looking confused. "Where are they? I swear I just saw Bill and Bud a second ago."

"They were headed down the hall towards the sheriff's office," Abby said. Maggie gave a huff of annoyance and headed for the hallway. "But if they're already deep into a game of Twister, don't bother them. I'm sure they'll live without me repeating myself again."

Maggie paused and shook her head. "Uh-uh. You're not getting off that easy. Get yourself a cup of coffee and have a seat. I'm going to let them know you're here."

Abby sighed at the no-nonsense look on Maggie's face. It was the same one she'd pulled on Abby to get her to join the middle school soccer team for two disastrous games. And before that, when Abby hadn't wanted to enter the science fair in the fifth grade because she was shy, Maggie had signed her up, given her that look, and Abby had turned in her project. Maggie's no-nonsense look was fierce. Definitely too fierce to fight when she hadn't slept well and hadn't had any coffee. She moved over to the coffee machine on the counter and poured herself a cup. Or at least, she tried. The pot was empty.

"You fell for it too, huh?"

Abby jumped. In her desire to get her trip to the office over as soon as possible, she'd walked right past the only other person in the waiting area. He was a stocky guy with disheveled red hair and blue eyes with dark circles under them.

“That’s Maggie for you,” Abby said with a sigh. “Strange sense of humor on that one.”

The man gave her a half-smile that reminded her of Aaron’s. She did her best to return it and dropped onto the chair next to him. “So, what are you in for?” she muttered, looking around the squad room. If it hadn’t been for Fred’s accident, Abby couldn’t think of a reason she’d be in that room ... ever. Well, unless she was there to take Maggie out for dinner or something.

“My roommate,” the guy said, softly. “He ... he died last night.”

Abby felt a cold sweat breaking out on the back of her neck. She looked down at the floor, trying to breathe. Her gaze fell on his light green pant leg ending above a white sneaker. Hospital scrubs? Was the guy a doctor?

“I’m so sorry,” Abby managed. “Fred Goss?” Her voice was almost a whisper.

She looked up in time to see the man nod. “Yeah.”

“Abby?” Bill Benton’s voice made them both look up. “We’re ready for you.” She started to stand.

“Abby?” the man asked. She looked back at him. His eyes were wide. “Abby Locke?”

She nodded. “Yeah?” He looked like he had more to say, but Bill coughed and the spell of the moment was broken. She glanced back up at Bill who was holding the little swinging half door open for her. She looked back at the man. “I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be right here,” the man said, holding out his hand, pointing his finger at her like E.T.

Abby grinned. “Damn. And I missed a perfectly good Schwarzenegger moment.”

The man gave her a half grin. “I’m sure it’ll come around again.” She knew it wasn’t normal to make nerd movie references when they were there to talk about someone’s tragic death. But she understood needing something familiar and light in the moment to get you through the dark. Fred’s roommate seemed to understand too.

Abby felt a little lighter as she followed Bill into the “interrogation room” and side-stepped the mop bucket and stacks of life jackets.

Sheriff Bud joined them at the card table squeezed into the middle of the room and both men spoke gently to Abby, asking her questions about what she’d seen when she’d entered the alley. They asked if she’d touched Fred, if she’d noticed anything on the ground he might have tripped over, etc. The chilling thought that it could have easily been *her* body in that alley kept nagging at her. She wasn’t an especially careful person. She had a record of not being graceful or careful and she never remembered to bring a flashlight or look down at her feet when she was walking in the dark. If she’d walked down that alley on the way to The Alphorn ... but of course, she hadn’t because she’d had to go drop Dana’s crap off at her apartment first. She’d come to The Alphorn from the other direction. If she hadn’t needed to go to Dana’s and she’d been ready to leave when Aaron had, she might have cut down the alley with him. But if she’d tripped while Aaron was with her, he probably would have caught her before she bashed her head. She would have done the same for him. Though, considering Aaron’s size, she might have made the trip-and-fall worse by trying to save him. She ignored the weird flutter in her stomach,

as the memory of him helping her to her feet in the hall when Marvin Casey and Mack O'Hara had been fighting floated through her mind. The anger on his face when she'd been knocked down ... that was her bestie. She wasn't sure why, but something about that memory with Mack and Marvin stuck in her mind. And as distracting as it was, it wasn't the warmth of Aaron's large hands that she had felt through her overalls.

"Well, I think that does it," Sheriff Bud's rumble of a voice snapped Abby out of her thoughts.

"I can go?" Abby asked, pushing her folding chair back from the table. She was all too happy to leave the storage room and with it, attempt to leave behind the memory of Fred's staring, lifeless eyes.

Bill nodded. "Yeah. We just needed to make everything official so we could finish the accidental death paperwork. Thanks for coming down, Abby. I know this was probably not high on your list of preferred Monday morning activities."

"Eh, fifteenth or sixteenth. Just after a root canal but before herding cobras," Abby said, leading the way back to the hallway. She was only half listening to the chuckles and comments from the two men behind her. Like a dream that was so clear while she was asleep but slipping away the more awake she became, she was frustrated. She couldn't stop thinking of the fight in the hallway between the two boys and why she had the sinking feeling that she was missing something.

"What, no rubber hoses?" the man in scrubs asked when she pushed through the half-door, back into the waiting area.

"Pool noodles," Abby said.

“Mr. Simmons,” Sheriff Bud interrupted before the man could reply. He turned his attention to the old sheriff in time to accept the bulky manila envelope he was holding out to him. “Fred ... Mr. Goss’s personal effects. I couldn’t find any next of kin ...”

The man shook his head, “No ... Fred was an only child and his parents are gone. Car accident a few years ago.”

“More accidents,” Sheriff Bud sighed. “Bad luck must run in the family.”

“It gallops,” the man muttered.

With the air of a bow-legged island-dwelling harbinger, the sheriff nodded and then turned his back to them and headed over to Bill.

Abby glanced at the man Bud had called Mr. Simmons. He was staring at the envelope in his hands and the expression on his face was disbelief tinged with horror. Without pausing to actually think through what she was about to say, Abby said, “You look like you could really use a cup of coffee, Mr. Simmons.”

You know, mouth, Abby’s brain muttered, *it would be nice if you talked through these things before you said them.* She cleared her throat and nodded at the empty coffee carafe on the office’s countertop. “I mean since we were promised coffee and then Lucy pulled the football away.”

The man smiled. “Eric.” Apparently, Abby’s confusion was evident on her face because Eric put a hand on his chest. “Uh, me. I’m Eric.”

“Abby,” she said. She grinned and held her hand out to him. “But since my secret identity was blown by Bill over there,” she nodded back at the deputy. “You knew that already. By the way, in the

spirit of returning the favor, Bill's secret identity this year is the Balloon Grotto Santa." Abby saw Bill roll his eyes and shake his head.

She turned back to Eric in time to see him nod before shaking her hand. "Now, Abby, you mentioned coffee?"

Abby led the way into the street and started toward the town square. Eric paused outside the office. He was frowning when Abby looked back at him.

"Where are you going?" Eric asked. "The diner is this way."

Abby blinked at him. "Ledbetter's Diner? Why would we go there for coffee?"

Eric looked even more confused. "What? Isn't it the only place in town for coffee?"

Abby cut her eyes up and down the street. "Be careful, my friend. Miss Mandie has spies everywhere."

"Miss Mandie?"

"How long have you been in Hope?" Abby asked.

Eric shrugged. "About a month?"

"And you haven't found the bakery?"

Eric blinked at her. "I mean, I know there *is* one. It's just always closed when I'm coming off of work." He shrugged. "I work the graveyard shift at the hospital right now. I'll eventually get to move to swing, but you know, new guy. Gotta earn my chops."

Abby nodded. "Ok, that makes sense. I was torn between ripping off your human mask and exposing you as an extraterrestrial, or borrowing

the storage room at the Sheriff's Office to interrogate you about how much Dolly and Frank Ledbetter are paying you to bring people into their diner."

Eric crossed his arms. "I happen to *like* the coffee over at the diner. It's the only place on the island that's open when I'm on break or getting off shift at four a.m."

"Fair enough," Abby said with a nod. "Well, Eric Simmons, *come with me and you'll be in a world of pure imagination.*" She sang the last part and Eric raised an eyebrow at her. Abby froze. It had been so long since she'd interacted with a stranger. He probably thought she was nuts. With his E.T. impersonation and rolling with her snark, she just assumed he'd get it, but now ...

"So," Eric said slowly and Abby mentally braced for the kill shot. "Would that make me Charlie Buckets? Or Veruca Salt, Mr. Wonka? I mean, I assume you're mostly going for coffee to be nice to me, but I gotta tell you right now, I don't have a golden ticket."

Abby let out a mental sigh and felt herself starting to relax. He'd gone with her shtick. It was going to be ok. She raised an eyebrow at him. "You think very highly of yourself, Buckets. *I want coffee* and I just invited *you* to come along. If anyone is Veruca, it's me."

Eric fell in step beside Abby as they headed across the square towards De-Floured. "I don't know. Something tells me that you would have been the first person to pop and/or push Veruca into the chocolate river."

Abby sighed. "And I always think of myself as so mysterious."

Miss Mandie was behind the counter again when they arrived and joined the line of fifteen or so people, waiting to be served.

“What is that amazing smell?” Eric breathed beside her.

Abby grinned. “You’ll have to be more specific. I smell three different blends of her coffee, the maple glaze she puts on her Magnum-sized, Well-Endowed eclairs, and if I’m not mistaken, it smells like Bart burned someone’s Bunspanker.”

Eric was silent.

“What?” Abby asked.

“I’m ... sorry,” Eric said slowly. “I must have spaced out while you were talking. It sounds like you said, some, uh ... never mind.” Eric was blushing now.

Abby was confused until they drew even with the bakery case and Eric’s gaze fell on the line of long eclairs, the Double D-elicious boob cupcakes, the homemade licorice whips, and the sign on the countertop advertising the Bunspanker breakfast sandwiches.

“Ohhhhh,” Eric said. Then he blinked and did the double take that Abby always saw island newcomers do when they weren’t expecting to find what could be found at De-Floured.

“Miss Mandie used to be a porn star,” Abby explained.

“Got it,” Eric said with a chuckle. He glanced around at the other patrons. Abby saw his gaze fall on Reverend Parker and old Mrs. Tillsworth who were each devouring an eclair. “Wow. That’s not something ... I expected to see today.”

Abby followed his gaze and nodded. “Yeah, the unspoken rule around here is that you don’t make eye contact with someone while you’re eating a Well-Endowed.”

“I ... I’ll try to remember that,” Eric said as they finally reached Miss Mandie.

“Abs, what can I get you?” Miss Mandie called in her deep alto when she spotted her.

“Christmas Chaos coffee please, and now I want a Well-Endowed. What’s the filling on this batch?”

“Bavarian cream with a white mocha espresso mixed in.”

“Yes, please,” Abby said.

Both women turned to look back at Eric.

“And you, Dr. Red?” Miss Mandie asked, giving him a once over. “There must be some lucky patients over at the hospital. You just over for the day?”

“Uh, no, I actually just moved here,” Eric said. A woman behind him cleared her throat and his expression turned to panic, his eyes darting from the bakery case to the menu above Miss Mandie, to Abby, and then back to the counter. His stomach growled. “I, uh, I don’t know. Coffee for sure.”

“What kind, how many pumps, and how big do you like it?” Miss Mandie asked, trying and failing to keep a handle on her wicked smile.

Eric visibly gulped.

“Miss Mandie, you’re gonna make him bolt for the door,” Abby said, rolling her eyes. “Just give him the same coffee as me. And ... do you want an éclair?”

Eric glanced at the bakery case and quickly shook his head. "Uh, no ... I," he glanced back at the Reverend and Mrs. Tillsworth. His stomach growled.

"Maybe something more substantial," Abby said. "Have you eaten since coming off shift?"

Eric shook his head.

"Give him a Bunspanker," Abby said to Miss Mandie with a nod.

"He looks like he could use a good Bunspanker," Miss Mandie said, winking at him. "I'll throw in a Double D to keep him busy until his Spanker arrives." She turned away from them to fill two to-go cups from the big coffee pot.

Eric opened his mouth to ask, but Abby shook her head at him and lowered her voice. "She's throwing in one of her amazing cupcakes. Don't look a gift boob cake in the mouth. Just stick it in yours and say 'thank you'." Eric chuckled and nodded.

Miss Mandie handed the coffee cups to Abby. She held a cup out to Eric, and as he took it, he immediately reached for his wallet.

Abby shook her head. "Nope. My treat. Old Hope tradition. Newcomers always get their first time at Miss Mandie's free. Usually paid for by one of us old grizzled Islanders or Miss Mandie herself. That's how we get you hooked so you'll stay forever."

Eric chuckled. "Depending on how good this coffee is, I may or may not decide to join the cult of . . .," he glanced down at the to-go cup in his hand, "De-Floured." She saw pink rising in his cheeks again and he groaned.

Abby carried their tray to a nearby table, greeting Arnie Baker and Mrs. Thompson as she passed their tables. She didn't miss the way Mrs. Thompson waved her away while pushing her bifocals up her nose in time to check out Eric who was trailing behind her. They found a two-person cafe table in the front window and Abby set the tray down before falling into one of the chairs. The last few days were starting to catch up with her. She popped the top on her coffee and was about to take a sip when Eric set the manila envelope of Fred's personal effects on the table beside the tray. She heard the rustle of Eric's clothing as he shed his coat and sat down, but she couldn't drag her gaze away from the sad, wrinkled envelope. This was all that was left of the Fred that went into the alley the night before.

"Abby? You ok?" Eric asked.

Abby blinked. For once, her brain did her a solid and dragged itself away from thoughts of Fred. She glanced up at Eric and frowned. "You never said. How did you know my name?"

Eric shrugged. "Fred. He ... he talked about you sometimes."

Abby nodded. "I mean, we're ... we were coworkers."

Eric gave her a half-smile. "I'm sure that was it." It was a little unnerving how similar Eric's half-smile was to Aaron's. She quickly looked away from his face and her gaze landed back on the envelope. It was almost like having a third person sitting there, waiting for his opening to say something.

"So how did you know Fred?" Abby asked.

Eric let out a soft sigh and she glanced up in time to see the look of pain cross his face. “Kindergarten, boy scouts, middle school. We played basketball together in high school. When we graduated, we both got into the same college in Seattle and shared a dorm room. At least, for a semester.” Eric chuckled sadly and shook his head. “It’s true what they say, it’s never a good idea to bunk with your friends. Especially your best friend.”

Abby grinned. “Fred was a bad roommate?”

Eric shook his head. “No, I was.” Abby raised an eyebrow at him. “I was ... am. I’ve always worked at hospitals and overnight medical clinics. So, I keep weird hours, I’m not stealthy or quiet. I’m usually so beat when I get home from work that I make a mess, burn whatever I’m cooking for myself, and pass out on the floor. Every roommate I’ve ever had has hated me. But, Fred was different, he ...” Eric scrubbed his hand over his face and Abby felt her chest ache for Eric when she saw the raw emotion on his face. “He never complained. Not about my mess or noise, or my hours. He was just ... my friend.” Eric sniffed hard and Abby busied herself with picking at her éclair while she gave Eric a moment to collect himself. “After that first semester at college, I realized I couldn’t do that to him so I moved out. But ... we were still close.”

“I know a good roommate can be hard to find,” Abby said softly. Aaron wasn’t exactly a roommate, but he was close. And he never complained about hanging out in her apartment or the décor, or the way she liked to watch movies over and over again until she could quote them. He never complained about her chap-hop or goofy nerd music playing early in the morning when she did yoga. She and Eric were lucky to have found Fred and Aaron. “So

you came out here to visit him and decided to stay?" she asked.

Eric ran a hand through his hair. "Not exactly. I stayed in Seattle after school. I got a residency position at the hospital I interned with during undergrad and med school. But, about three months ago, my life took a hard left turn into the crapper. Fred was really ... there for me, you know? About five weeks ago, Fred showed up on my doorstep with cardboard boxes and an offer for me to come out here and live with him for a change of pace. I . . .," he chuckled and shook his head. "I leapt at the chance. Maybe, if ... I was a better friend, I would have been with him last night, and he wouldn't have ..."

Abby felt the spiky-toed boot of guilt kick her in the gut. Fred had been on his way to The Alhorn to meet *her*. She was the reason he'd been walking down that alley and slipped ...

"It wasn't you," Abby said. "He was on his way to meet me."

"Abby ..." Eric started. "You didn't tell him to go down that alley."

"Neither did you," she said, meeting his gaze.

They were quiet for a moment and Abby didn't miss the pointed look Miss Mandie gave them when she delivered Eric's Bunspanker sandwich. After she left their table, they ate in awkward silence for a few minutes.

"I have to say," Eric finally rumbled, finishing off his sandwich. "I think I'm a fan of the Bunspanker."

"Miss Mandie says that whenever someone says that, somewhere an angel has an orgasm," Abby said, using one finger to nudge the Double D-

elicious cupcake toward Eric. “Either that or gets a dirt bike.”

Eric chuckled. “So, did Fred ever join you for one of these ... cupcakes?” he asked, looking down at the silver fondant nipple ring through the nipple sitting on top of the buttercream frosting.

Abby chuckled. “Not with me, but they’re a Hope staple, so I’m sure he’s had at least one at some point.”

Eric glanced up at the ceiling. “Well, Freddy, this one’s for you.” He peeled the cupcake and in one go and shoved the whole thing in his mouth. Abby watched the war between man and cupcake, her eyes wide and mouth hanging slightly open.

“I’m impressed. As far as I know, no one has ever been able to eat one of her cupcakes in a single ... mouthful.”

Eric choked. Abby was on her feet and moving around to his chair before he swallowed hard and raised his hands to show her he was ok. She sat back down while he took a swig of coffee and cleared his throat. “Well, it almost got me.”

“Hmm. I hope you give a better performance than that when you’re around the real thing,” Miss Mandie muttered as she waltzed by with a tray.

Abby and Eric choked on their coffee.

“Well, welcome to Hope,” Abby coughed.

“Happy to be here,” Eric said. He scratched the back of his neck and then caught sight of the face of his watch, turned to the inside of his wrist. He groaned.

“Late for a date with your pillow?” Abby asked.

He nodded. “T-minus ten hours before I have to be back at work.” Abby saw a shadow of something

cross Eric's face as he picked up the envelope. "And I've got some phone calls I need to make."

Abby nodded and stood. "If there's anything I can do ... to help ..."

Eric smiled at her. "You've already done so much. Thanks for the coffee and ... ," he glanced down at the cupcake wrapper in his hand, "the weirdly anatomically-correct baked goods."

"They always make things better," Abby said with a grin.

She followed him out of the bakery and they stood blinking on the sidewalk at the Christmas tinsel-strewn madness around them.

"Subtlety isn't something Hope is known for, is it?" Eric asked, staring at the five-foot-tall plastic Frosty the Snowman that was currently menacing the sidewalk with its unblinking stare.

"Subtlety? Never heard of it," Abby said.

Eric nodded and turned to face her. "Thanks again. For everything."

"Thank *you*," Abby said. "I'm serious. If you need anything ..."

Eric nodded. "I know where to find you. Hope High School, science teacher, right?" Abby blinked at him. He grinned. "I told you. Fred talked about you." With a final wave, Eric took off down the sidewalk, tucking the manila envelope to his chest and pulling his coat closed around him.

Abby's feet were moving down the sidewalk back towards home and away from Eric, but her head was still turned, watching his progress until he turned the corner at the end of the block.

"Oof!" Abby knocked into someone. She jerked her head around in time to throw out her arms in

an ill-timed attempt to steady the person. She ended up awkwardly copping a feel of the poor blonde woman that she'd almost mowed down.

“Oh my god! I'm so sorry!” Abby sputtered, quickly springing back from her.

“Oh, it's alright. Normally I don't let someone get to second base with me during our first encounter, but, you're kind of cute.”

Abby's face was on fire. “I don't normally ... I'm just so sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going.”

“Hey, no harm, no foul. I'll forgive you if you can point me in the direction of a good cup of coffee,” she said.

“That I can definitely do,” she swept her arm behind her towards Miss Mandie's. “Your journey is at its end. De-Floured has the best coffee in town.”

“De-”

“Floured. Yeah. Just go with it. I promise you won't be sorry. Tell Miss Mandie that Abby sent you and to give you a cup of her Christmas Chaos coffee. Oh, are you ok with caffeine?”

“Are you kidding? It's my lifeblood.”

Abby grinned. “You'll be in good hands then.”

“Thanks,” the woman smiled. “I'm Sasha. Since we've already become bosom buddies, I guess I should introduce myself.”

“Abby ... me.” Her face was still on fire. “Nice to meet you, and again, sorry about stealing second base.”

Sasha rolled her eyes. “Don't worry about it. To be honest, it was the most action I've seen in

weeks.”

“Are you just visiting for the day?” Abby asked. In a town as small as Hope, everyone knew everyone else, and Sasha was either a day visitor or very new in town, like Eric.

“Visiting for the weekend,” Sasha said, smiling around at the street. “But I really like this place. I think I might want to move here.”

Abby chuckled. “Well, if you can handle Hope during the Christmas season, you can probably handle Hope during the other nine months of the year.” At the look of confusion on Sasha’s face Abby nodded solemnly, “Yeah, Christmas lasts three about months in Hope. It shares the stage with various other holidays from mid-October through mid-January, but we take the ‘season’ part of ‘season’s greetings’ very literally here.”

“Good to know.” Sasha said, blinking at her.

“Enjoy your coffee,” she paused, still trying to regain some shred of her dignity, “and welcome to Hope!”

“Thanks, Abby!” Sasha said. “I’m so glad we ran into each other.” Abby returned Sasha’s wave and continued down the street towards home.

The smell of evergreen, mixing with the sea air was overpowering. Abby took a deep breath and slowed her steps as she took in the seasonal magic all around her. There was no place on earth like Hope, especially during the holidays. It was a sight that Abby would never get tired of seeing. She turned the corner in time to see the sheriff and deputy cross the street away from the office, heading toward City Hall. And just like that, she felt the light balloon in her chest puncture and

deflate. Fred would never experience this joy again.
He'd never get to see another Hope Christmas.

Or anything else, ever again.

AARON

Aaron wasn't pacing. He was ... striding. It was what manly men did. Like Aragorn, nicknamed Strider. He was just doing it in his apartment, rather than across Rohan. He sighed and scratched the back of his neck. Where was Abby? He'd heard her moving around in her room when he'd gotten back from Miss Mandie's but he'd fallen asleep on the couch, waiting for the sound of her knock on the door between their apartments or at least the sound of her footsteps before he'd attempt calling to her. The sheriffs had mentioned she'd need to come in to the office today to make a formal statement. She'd been in shock, not that he'd been far behind her, but he'd just assumed that she'd ask him to go with her to the office. But the knock at the door had never come. And then she'd left. The sound of her *Star Trek* whooshing doors sensor had woken him up. It wasn't that loud, it was just ... familiar enough that he was always listening for it. She hadn't even crossed their creaky porch to knock on his front door. She'd just ... left without him.

He was confused. After the night before, after everything that had happened, he didn't think she'd want to go to the Sheriff's Office by herself. Was ... was she embarrassed from the night they kissed? He'd been doing his damndest to make

sure he wasn't acting any differently than he had before they kissed. And it wasn't easy. Every time she smiled or chewed her lip when she was thinking, it was like remembering a stanza of an E.E. Cummings poem. Still, per her request, he hadn't mentioned it, *per her request*. Despite all that, was this the start of her ghosting him? Usually he agreed with Abby, but not always. And this was definitely one of those times. Selfishly, he *didn't* want to forget about what had happened between them. That kiss was ... but he was just kidding himself. Best friends were still just friends. And as for this morning, she probably just saw him as a good friend, looking out for her. Besides, it wasn't like she needed an escort. She probably didn't even think about having him go with her.

The sound of her *Star Trek* motion sensor whooshing made him breathe a sigh of relief. She was home. She was safe. He was at the door between their apartments in two strides. "See, striding," he muttered to himself, "*not* pacing."

He paused at the door, hearing the familiar sound of Abby's keys landing in her Klingon blood wine goblet. He held his breath and before he could talk himself out of it, knocked on the door. He heard the patter of her small feet crossing to the door. Slower than usual?

The door creaked open and there was Abby, looking like she always did. Maybe a little paler.

"How ... how are you?" Aaron asked. Somewhere in his head, he realized how ridiculous the question sounded.

Abby shrugged. "I'm ok. Thanks. Nothing a little trip to the pokey can't solve." He saw a little smile forming on her face as she turned away from

him and headed over to Mr. Burns' aquarium. "Well, and some coffee and an éclair."

Aaron grinned. Ok. She'd been fed. The pastries he'd bought could be mid-morning sustenance. "I always thought that if Miss Mandie's was just a little closer to the Sheriff's Office, there might be a heck of a lot less crime in Hope. Not that there's a lot to begin with," he said.

"Yeah, but it would just reinforce the cop-donut stereotype," Abby said, setting Mr. Burns on her shoulder. He was wearing the "Excellent" t-shirt Aaron had bought for him last Christmas. He bobbed his lizard head at Aaron before turning his attention to the mealworm Abby was holding up for him.

"So appetizing," he said, shaking his head at Mr. Burns. He grinned at Abby. "So no room for brunch?"

She snorted. "Have you met me? I'm always up for brunch if someone else is making it."

"I picked up pastries, but that might be a dessert thing. Feel like something more substantial first?" he asked, breathing an inner sigh of relief. Maybe the hole in his stability from the iceberg wasn't so bad. Maybe things *would* stay the way they'd been.

"Sure. How about sandwiches?" Abby asked, heading to the fridge and starting to dig around inside. The cool air hit Mr. Burns and he hissed. "I know I have *that* stuff in here."

Within five minutes, Mr. Burns was happily back under his heating lamp and Aaron and Abby were both eating turkey sandwiches. They'd both opted to add a layer of BBQ chips to the meat and cheese to try to dress them up a little.

“So, how did everything go this morning?” he asked between bites.

Abby shrugged. “It was just the sheriff and Bill, again. Oh, and I met Fred’s roommate.” Was ... Was Abby avoiding his gaze? No. His imagination needed to get a hobby.

“His roommate?” Aaron asked.

She nodded. “A guy named Eric.” She looked up at Aaron, searching his face. “Did Fred ever mention him to you?”

Aaron felt a new wave of guilt. “No,” he said bitterly, shaking his head. “He always asked about what was going on in my life. I just ... how did I never think to ask him ...” Aaron trailed off, feeling a new pain in his gut.

“You weren’t the only one,” Abby said softly, shaking her head. “He was a coworker. And I knew almost nothing about him. That’s not supposed to happen. Not here in Hope when I can name off Ethel Mansfield’s grandkids *and* their birthdays, spot a MacGruder at twenty paces, and know every high school crush that all my female coworkers from Hope have ever had. How did I never stop and talk to Fred? *Really* talk to him. I mean, Dana always ...” Abby stopped and dropped her head to rest on the countertop next to her plate.

“What? What is it?” Aaron asked quickly.

“Dana. She doesn’t know.”

Aaron shook his head. “Unless she went to bed early and hasn’t talked to her neighbors yet today, she probably knows already. It is Hope after all. And something like this, everyone will be talking about it.”

Abby groaned and sat up. “I don’t know. Miss Mandie didn’t mention it this morning.”

Aaron shrugged. “You know Miss Mandie. The bakery and counting on Miss Mandie for a racy comment and a wink are things people around here seem to set their watches too. If she started talking about anything sad and depressing, I don’t know, maybe it would make the day harder for other people. And, I mean, this is just one outsiders’ opinion, but that seems like the kind of thing she wouldn’t want to do to other people.”

Abby blinked at him. He’d only been in Hope for three years, but he’d just offered a pretty good explanation as to why Miss Mandie hadn’t been sad and wanting to discuss Fred’s death and no doubt what the gossip mill was already saying about it. Aaron always swore that he wasn’t the scientist, but she had to hand it to him, he observed things like a scientist.

“Point taken,” she said with a nod. Then she sighed. “Poor Dana. I wish she’d been the one to have a date with Fred last night. If he’d been going to the craft fair with her earlier in the day, he never would have been in that alley and he’d ...”

“Abs,” Aaron said softly, “don’t keep torturing yourself. It won’t change anything.”

She shook her head. “I wish I’d never gone to that stupid Santa’s Singles meeting.”

Aaron’s phone dinged. He dug it out of his pocket, looked at the screen, and groaned. “Me either. I just got a message from the site thing.”

“Another date?” Abby asked, looking up at him.

He sighed. “Yeah.”

“You put your phone number in the system?” Abby asked.

Aaron shrugged, “It asked for it. I thought I had to.”

“Rookie mistake,” she said, shaking her head.

“And you’re the seasoned ‘playa’?” Aaron asked, raising an eyebrow.

“When it comes to signing up for alerts, apparently,” Abby said, sliding off her stool. “I only gave them my email.”

Aaron shrugged. “Does it matter? You probably have another mandated date too.”

Abby shrugged, “If an email arrives in an inbox but no one ever looks at it, did it happen?”

“Yes, Berkeley. It’s still there.” Aaron said, taking their plates to the sink. “So are you going to check?”

“Nope,” Abby said.

Aaron grinned. “Chicken?”

“Nope,” Abby said. “Protesting.”

“Bawk, bawk, bawk.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “I’ll check. Cluck you, by the way.”

Aaron grinned and brought their iced teas over to the coffee table before dropping down onto the couch next to her while she booted up her laptop.

“Well, it looks like I do in fact have an email from the server,” Abby sighed. “You’d think they’d give me a pass. Like that college tradition that people get all A’s for the semester if their roommate dies.” Even as she said it, she felt guilty. How the hell were they supposed to just go on more dates and pretend that a coworker dying was something they should just carry on after?

Aaron pulled his phone out and looked at her. “Check them together?”

“On three,” Abby said. “One, two, three.”

Aaron scrolled down the message on his screen and felt heat starting to rise in his face when he read the name of the person requesting the date. Beside him, Abby was quiet.

He glanced at her. “What door prize did you win?”

“Darren Spruce,” Abby said.

Aaron frowned. “He teaches fifth graders, doesn’t he?”

Abby nodded. “He’s nice. We worked together on a grant proposal the fall before last. Remember? The monarch butterfly tagging program?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said softly. Darren was good-looking. He was shorter than Aaron by a couple of inches and he had a Jude Law thing going on. And he was big on science too. He and Abby would have plenty to talk about.

“Who’s your lucky date?” Abby asked, turning to look at him.

“Uh, Greta.” Aaron said, frowning down at the message.

“The ‘Santa Singler’ herself,” Abby said, turning her attention back to her screen. “Well, you should use your manly wiles to get us off the hook, or disqualified, or something.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Aaron said, not really thinking about the words he was saying. He was watching Abby’s profile. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, a few curls escaping to curl by her ears, while she chewed on her bottom lip, reading. The pulse-pounding fear was back in his chest, trying to get a toe-hold. He could point back at the night they’d kissed, or maybe even before that,

maybe even before Santa's Singles. Whenever it was, he realized that there had been a slight shift in how he thought about Abby. In one sphere of reality, she was still his best friend and all he wanted was for her to be happy. But in another sphere of reality, he wanted Abby. And he wanted her to be happy with him. And at the moment, he was straddling both of them.

She groaned. "He wants to go to the Ugly Sweater Brunch tomorrow." For a moment, Aaron had forgotten what they were talking about. Abby seemed to notice. "Darren," she added, nodding down at her laptop.

Aaron felt relief flood through him. It was a date early in the day. That cut the chances of Abby and Darren going back to her place and ... doing things, in half. He gave himself an inner slap. Where had that thought come from? And after one date? He knew that wasn't likely. He knew Abby ... didn't he? And if they *did* it was still none of his business.

Come on, Aaron, that's all you've been thinking about since this whole thing started, the voice in his head taunted. The ever-present fear that Abby would meet her soulmate or at least someone she wanted to date long-term in this crazy social experiment, and then you'd have to listen to them going at it every night, through the bedroom wall you share with her. Sure that was the reason.

"Awkward small talk over bacon twisted into bows and waffles shaped like presents, all while wearing the itchiest sweaters known to man," Abby muttered. "Joy."

A thought occurred to Aaron and he sat up straighter on the couch, turning to look at her. It would solve his own date scenario, and make it so

he would still get to be around Abby while Darren tried to charm her out of her ... sweater.

“Hey, why don’t I see if Greta wants to go to the Ugly Sweater Brunch too? Then at least we’ll look stupid together.”

The relief on Abby’s face when she smiled at him was so palpable, that Aaron felt a new wave of heat wash over him.

“That would be excellent,” Abby said. She immediately relaxed back on the couch. They were quiet while they each tapped out a reply to Darren and Greta with the plan. Then Abby closed her laptop and slid it onto the coffee table. Aaron tossed his phone onto the smooth wood surface next to it and they let out a collective sigh.

“Well, our fate is sealed,” Abby said, closing her eyes, “but at least we’re going to the gallows together.”

“Why does it have to be ugly Christmas sweaters?” Aaron asked. He shifted slightly next to her and he didn’t miss the way his arm was brushing against hers.

“Yeah,” Abby said, nodding. “Why not ugly Christmas socks? Those I’d wear all the time.”

“Me too,” Aaron said, playing along.

“Because then we could be like Superman,” Abby continued, “You know, look normal, conform, be like everyone else. Then, when you need to summon your superpower, just roll up your pant leg and pow!”

“We’d have the power to ... repel?” Aaron asked, chuckling.

“Oh, yes! Boring conversation? Deploy the socks. Are people trying to cut in front of you in a

line? Deploy the socks. Mandated date getting too clingy?”

“Deploy the socks,” Aaron finished.

“Exactly,” she said. “As is, we’re all going to be like a room full of the same pole magnets, repelling each other with our sweaters, but unable to physically leave once Miss Mandie blocks egress with her bar table.”

“Hey, at least there *is* a bar table,” Aaron said. He tried not to react when he felt the warm weight of Abby’s head lean against his shoulder.

“One of the best parts of a Hope Christmas,” Abby sighed. They were quiet for a moment, though Aaron started to worry that Abby would be able to hear his heart pounding. “Wanna try out your updates to *Tenterhooks* tonight?” she asked.

“Yes,” Aaron answered quickly. He was so relieved that she couldn’t hear the banging in his chest that it took him a minute to realize what she’d suggested. When he did, it just made the ache inside him worse. She actually *liked* working on board games with him and test-playing them over and over again. If he lost her friendship, he was never going to be able to find someone else who’d humor him, let alone enjoy doing it. He could still feel Abby, leaning against him. She was so close to him, but still miles away. The truth was clear. If he wanted to keep her as his best friend, she was off limits to him. He mentally took his foot off the second sphere of reality and let it float away. If a best friend is what she needed, then a best friend is what she’d always have in him. The pain of the realization made him take a sharp inhale. Abby stirred and lifted her head to look up at him.

“You ok, Burney?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Well, Nessie. You prepared to get *Tenterhooked*?”

She chuckled. “Yes, but that catchphrase may need some work before it makes it onto the final box design.”

He did his best to feign mock outrage. “I’ll have you know I worked *weeks* on that line.”

Despite everything that had happened between them, the Santa’s Singles and Fred ... For just a few hours on a rainy Monday night in December, two best friends could time travel back to the place they’d been a few weeks ago; playing a board game in Aaron’s apartment, laughing and taunting each other in turn, without any expectations other than enjoying each other’s company.

ABBY

Dreading the Ugly Christmas Sweater brunch was a new experience for Abby. Usually, she looked forward to eating, drinking, and making merry commentary for her and Aaron on this beloved holiday tradition. This year, it felt like going to the gallows. *Just suck it up, go on your stupid date and try not to think too much.* Easier said than done.

“I don’t think that counts as a Christmas sweater,” Abby said, crossing her arms and giving Aaron’s chest a mock look of doubt.

“Why not?” Aaron asked, looking down at himself. “It’s a sweater.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Abby said, “I think Cthulhu is a much more imposing figure than Santa Claus and, of course, we should keep reverence for the Ancient One in our hearts all year ...”

“But?” Aaron asked, trying and failing to keep that half-smile off his face. His hair was tousled from tugging the sweater over his head and Abby was already feeling overheated in her own sweater. Yeah, just the sweater, not the strange rush of heat that passed through her when for one brief moment, his button-down shirt had ridden up while he was tugging the dark blue sweater down. She’d caught a glimpse of his abs and the muscles

moving in his back under smooth skin, dotted by soft hair and a weird hum had coursed through her, heading south. She gave herself a shake. *Do you want me to start calling him The Derek II*, the voice in her head threatened. *Because you know I'll do it if that's the only way you'll remember that he is your friend, not a piece of candy for you to eye-bang. Dry spell or no dry spell.*

“What? What is it?” Aaron asked, studying her face.

She blinked at him, scrambling to come up with something to reply that didn't include the word “banging”. His sweater. That's what they'd been talking about. “Uh, I'm afraid the mayor might not let you into the brunch. I mean, if *he* doesn't think it's a Christmas sweater.”

“Cthulhu is wearing a tiny Santa hat,” Aaron said, pointing at his chest. “I've got my argument ready. And you're one to talk, miss ‘Merry Sithmas’.” He raised an eyebrow and nodded at her sweater.

“There is nowhere in canon that says Siths *don't* celebrate Christmas. Besides, I have a precedent. This is the same sweater I wore last year, so he has to let me in.” She narrowed her eyes at him, but the effect was somewhat lessened by her barely contained giggle. “Where's the Christmas sweater you wore last year?”

Aaron shook his head slowly. “I can't *believe* you brought that up.” Abby tried valiantly but failed to turn her laugh into a cough. “You know *exactly* where that sweater is.”

“Well, not *exactly*. Not *now*.” Abby reached out and gripped his shoulder. “I just know it's in a better place.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “You were the one that told me Miss Mandie’s Tequila Sunrises weren’t that strong.” He groaned. “Man, just *saying* ‘tequila’ is giving me flashbacks.”

“There was definitely a different kind of snow falling on that poor knit elf’s head,” Abby snorted.

“As I recall, I wasn’t the only one making it ‘snow’ in the alley behind Bumble’s after we, and I remind you it was ‘we’, were overserved.”

Abby chuckled. “Yeah, that was the worst hangover of last year.”

Aaron nodded. “Let’s make a pact to not repeat that *weather pattern* this year, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, turning away from him to retrieve her wallet. “Especially since this year, we’d be puking on our dates instead of each other.”

And there was reality, back to kick her in the shins. She wouldn’t be standing around with Aaron the whole time, commentating on the other townsfolk and laughing with each other about the town’s zany ways. No, she’d be making stiff small talk with Darren, probably about their grant application and most likely the possibility of reapplying for it next year.

Meanwhile, Greta would probably be searching for a box to stand on so she’d be tall enough to put her tongue in Aaron’s ear. She tried to blink the thought away. Greta wasn’t a bad person. Yeah, she’d goaded Abby into joining Santa’s Singles and it was pretty clear to everyone that she had a thing for Aaron, but clearly lots of women did. He was good-looking, funny, intelligent ... kind. If he and Greta hit it off, she would be supportive. Even if it meant that on Friday nights, she’d be sitting on her couch with Mr. Burns, watching *MST3K* by

herself and eating popcorn while she heard Aaron and Greta through the wall ... A burning pain moved through her chest.

“Ready?” he asked, pulling on his black wool peacoat. She just nodded and zipped up her coat, following him out her front door. *Would they still have days like this if he and Greta started dating? Days where they hung out, he stood in her kitchen, sat on her couch? Days where she hung out in his living room, sitting cross-legged on the floor playing board games for hours? Or would it all end?* None of those thoughts were happy ones, so she cast her mind around for something else. Unfortunately, her mind strayed to Fred.

There was a palpable awkwardness between them as they walked across town. Abby wasn't entirely sure why, but whatever the reason, she didn't like it. In three years of friendship, she and Aaron had never had anything this awkward between them. But then again, they'd never lost a coworker and been strong-armed into dates. They paused when they got to the mouth of the alley where Fred had died and neither of them said anything.

“There's nothing there,” Abby said. She was surprised by how hollow her voice sounded. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Aaron turning to look at her. Before he could ask, she waved briefly at the alley. “No crime scene tape, no flowers, no memorial for Fred.”

“It's only been forty-eight hours. Maybe Hope is just in shock.” Her breath caught in her throat when she felt the warm weight of Aaron's hand on her shoulder. “We-we could always start one.”

Abby nodded. She felt tears starting to form in her eyes again and cleared her throat, trying to

push them down. “That would be good.” She wished she and Aaron could take the rest of the day to go find flowers and candles and make a wreath to commemorate Fred.

Aaron’s phone beeped and he scanned the screen before sighing. “How about after brunch, we put together a memorial for Fred? We’ll just power through these dates and our reward on the other side will be to do it up right, for Fred.”

“Deal,” Abby said, feeling some of the weight leave her chest. Maybe it was the promise of spending the rest of the day with Aaron after brunch, or maybe it was the thought that at least they could do something for Fred, or maybe it was the way that Aaron didn’t seem that enthusiastic about the brunch date or the “checking in” text from Greta. Whichever one it was, Abby was able to recover some enthusiasm for the Christmas spirit swirling around them as they trudged through the light rain and across the town square, which was, in reality, a circle. A fact that had bothered Abby’s scientific brain since she’d been a kid.

“I don’t know about you,” Aaron muttered as they started up the ramp leading to the tinsel town hall doors, “but I’m planning on making Miss Mandie’s table my first stop.”

Abby nodded. “Seconded.”

As soon as they were inside the doors, they were hit by a wall of warm air and the smells of bacon, pancakes, coffee, and evergreen. For a moment, the comforting warmth was so reminiscent of the happiness she’d felt at this event for the previous two years, that she forgot that ...

“Aaron, there you are!”

The voice felt like a punch in the gut to Abby. It was Greta, looking gorgeous in a very flattering blue Christmas sweater, dotted with sparkly snowflakes and a low V-neck.

“Uh, h-hi Greta,” Aaron stammered beside her. Abby glanced up at the look of surprise on Aaron’s face as he took in the sight of Greta. Abby looked back down at her bulky sweater with the wrinkled-faced Sith lord taking up most of the real estate on her chest from the high-rounded neck to the hem. In a catty part of her brain, Abby thought, *Apparently, Greta didn’t get the memo about it being an “ugly Christmas sweater” brunch.* She forced her brain to change course. *Who knows? Maybe Darren would be a good match.* He was ... attractive. Maybe her sister and her mom were right. Maybe she did need two people in her life; a great partner *and* a great best friend.

“That is the best Christmas sweater I have ever seen.” Abby looked up to see Darren raising a mimosa, toasting her.

Abby felt herself smiling. “Yeah, nothing quite says Christmas like Papa Palpatine.”

Darren held a second mimosa out to Abby. She glanced back at Aaron, but he was already gone. She could just see him, disappearing through the crowd ahead of them, Greta’s arm woven through one of his, pulling him forward like a husky looking for a specific place to tinkle. Well, Greta didn’t need to hike her leg. Her intent was clear and she’d marked her territory.

“Who won?” Darren asked.

“What?” Abby blinked at him.

“The look on your face just now. You looked like you were waging some kind of inner war, so I was

just wondering, who won?”

Abby did her best to play it off, “Oh, no. Sorry, just spacing out. It’s early. Thanks,” she said, taking the mimosa he was still holding out to her.

“Not an early riser, huh?” Darren asked, raising an eyebrow. “Odd for a teacher, and a scientist.”

She shrugged. “Just been a ... bad couple of days.”

Darren’s smile dropped and he nodded. “I heard about Fred Goss. What an awful accident.”

Abby nodded. They were quiet for a moment until the movement of the crowd around them prompted Darren to ask if she was hungry. They followed the flow of the room towards the massive buffet tables already groaning under the platters of breakfast food. While they waited in line, Darren decided to dive head first into the “twenty questions” portion of the date.

“So, did you see that latest episode of *House*?”

“*House*?” Abby asked, frowning. When she realized what he was talking about she shook her head. “Oh, no. Sorry, I haven’t been watching.”

“Oh,” Darren said, and she didn’t miss the tiny deflation in his chipperness. “Sorry. It’s my favorite show, so, I ... uh. Well, wh-what’s your favorite show?”

“Uh, probably *Mystery Science Theater 3000*? But the old episodes with Mike and Joel.” Now it was Darren’s turn to look lost.

“I think I’ve ... heard of that show? Was it from the ‘90s?”

Abby nodded. “Yeah. Mike, well Joel, *then* Mike, are shot into space by Dr. Forrester and Joel builds these robots to hang out with and to riff all these

horrible movies that Dr. Forrester forces them to watch as an experiment, in an attempt to make him crack.”

Darren shrugged. “Watching movies doesn’t seem so bad. What’s ‘riffing’?”

“Oh, just making fun of them. Keeping up a running commentary.”

Darren looked at her, horrified. “*During* the movie?”

“Well, yeah.”

“That sounds ... awful. Really? They talk during the movie?”

“It makes the horrible movies better. Trust me.” Darren still didn’t look convinced. Abby decided to try something else. She started listing off other TV shows she watched and when she got to Battlebots, she hit pay dirt.

“I love Battlebots!” Darren said, his face lighting up.

She breathed an inward sigh of relief. Darren was a nerd, but definitely a nerd of a specific breed. She had to admit though, she was pretty impressed with the breadth of his Battlebots’ knowledge.

“I mean, there will never be any Bot as original as Biohazard, but it’s hard to imagine a Bot that’s as deadly as Vlad the Impaler.”

Abby nodded. “Well, at least until there was Carbide.”

“Yeah, but Carbide ...” Abby had been letting her gaze wander the room while they waited in line. She assured herself that she was just taking in the general nuttiness. She was *not* looking for Aaron and Greta. She couldn’t see them in the crowd anyway. Instead, her gaze landed on

someone she hadn't expected to see; Eric Simmons, Fred's roommate. He was wearing a red sweater, plastered with a clumsily knit, slightly cross-eyed Santa, over dark jeans. His general body language was discomfort and uncertainty. He was hanging so close to the door that he looked like any moment he was going to bolt. The Hope citizen in her couldn't stand for that.

"I'll be right back," Abby said, leaving the line before Darren could stop her.

She was ten feet away from Eric when he spotted her and the relief on his face made her smile. "Abby."

"Hey! I didn't expect to see you here," she said, snagging two coffees from the caffeine table Bart was running while every now and then shooting daggers at Miss Mandie who was raking in the tips over at her mimosas and sunrises bar. Abby dropped a five-dollar bill into Bart's tip jar, shot him a wink, and handed Eric a cup.

"Oh, am-am I," Eric stammered, looking around nervously. "I mean, if this is just for townspeople, I totally understand, I can just ..."

"You *are* a 'townsperson', Doc Simmons. Just more freshly minted than the rest of us. Well, probably not Sue Gaston over there. She's been knocking back mint juleps that Miss Mandie has been sneaking her for at least the last half hour. It's the one time a year that she's off duty from the courthouse and Miss Mandie likes to help her cut loose."

Eric chuckled. "Well, I'll watch myself. Wouldn't want the whole town to have that kind of a file on me, at least not until I've been here for at least a year."

Abby nodded. "A year is good. Gives you a chance to decide if you're pro-parade or anti-parade." Eric gave her a blank look. "It's a big controversy in town. And about the most polarizing topic on the island. Some people feel like every town holiday should have a parade and the rest feel that parades are the physical manifestations of migraines and should be avoided at all costs."

"Oh yeah?" Eric grinned. "And which side are you?"

"Anti-parade," Abby grinned. "I thought you would have guessed." They were quiet for a moment while they sipped some of Miss Mandie's coffee and the world around them started to come into sharper focus. "This must feel like the middle of the night for you," Abby said, glancing at the clock on the wall.

Eric shrugged. "The chief of medicine gave me a couple of days off ... because of Fred. I ... I was sitting alone at home and just staring at Fred's chair and ... he'd told me about today. About this goofy sweater brunch. He'd already bought me a ticket and a sweater before I could tell him that I had to work. But now ... it just, it felt like something I could *do*, you know? Something I could do for Fred. Something he'd *want* me to do."

Abby thought about the memorial she wanted to put together for Fred. "I know what you mean." She was about to tell him about it, but he was talking again.

"It's just ... Fred was a do-er. He didn't wait for life to happen to him and when he knew something was right, he just ... he went for it. I always admired that about him. So ..."

“So you took the itchy, ugly sweater challenge and came out to honor Fred,” Abby said, nodding.

“Abby, a-are you ok?” The voice came from behind her. It was soft and strained and when she turned, she saw it was Angela Gold. Gone was the freezer burn feeling she’d had from Angela that night at The Alphorn. “I-I heard what happened to Fred.” Angela burst into tears and Abby was hugging the woman before she could think. She was just Angela Gold again. Another coworker. One who was also mourning the loss of Fred. When she could speak again, she took a step back, sniffing hard and glanced over at Eric.

“Oh Angela, this is Eric Simmons, Fred’s roommate,” Abby said quickly. “Eric, this is Angela Gold. She also works for the school.”

“Elementary School Office Manager,” Angela sniffed, still dabbing at her eyes. “Fred was a really good guy.”

“Yeah, he was,” Eric said softly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Darren moving in their direction holding two plates of food and balancing two fresh mimosas. Abby automatically moved to intercept him and give him a hand. She made quick introductions for Eric’s benefit.

“It’s ... nice to meet all of you,” Eric said. “I mean, I wish I would have met you sooner. But, I’m really glad Fred had such ... caring coworkers.” Angela started to weep again.

“They dated,” Darren whispered to Abby out of the side of his mouth.

Abby turned to look at him. “Angela and Fred?” she asked softly.

Darren nodded. “Last year. Angela broke it off, but I know they still cared about each other. I’d see them eating lunch together in the fall at the picnic tables on the lawn outside my classroom.”

Abby nodded. They were all affected by this. All of them just trying to get by, get together, hold it together, move forward, move on. They’d lost one of their own now. There’d be an empty space at the staff room table that in their small numbers wouldn’t be overlooked by any of them. It almost made it worse that it had been an accident. No one to blame but a cold, hulking blob of metal and a grimy alleyway.

While she’d been thinking, Angela and Eric had started talking about Fred. Eric was telling a funny story about when he and Fred were roommates in college and even Darren was riveted, listening. Abby wanted to listen, wanted to just stay there with people who knew and loved Fred and not think about anything else, but there was too much going on inside her head and her chest.

“I need some air,” Abby muttered to Darren, keeping her voice soft enough for only him to hear her. He glanced at her and nodded. She set down her plate and drink and headed out the front doors, back into the square. The air was crisp and there was a cold breeze coming from the footpath that led down to the ferry. It was sea air. So fresh and clean and salty and as it filled her lungs that it did more to wake her at that moment than any cup of coffee from Miss Mandie’s ever could.

Fred’s death was a wake-up call. It could have been any one of them that night in the alley. Angela, or Eric, Darren, her, or Aaron. The painful weight was on her chest again. She shook her head. She had to stop pining for someone who was never going to feel the way about her that she felt about

him. She needed to move on. Maybe not with Darren. She couldn't live with someone who hated the concept of *MST3K*. But maybe with someone else. She'd always have her friendship with Aaron, but that was where he wanted to stay. It had been three years. He'd never asked or even brought up the subject of anything else beyond friendship. So, he must not want it. And that was ok. So they'd kissed and it had been amazing, but she'd initiated it. He'd been gracious enough to not run away screaming after, but it was obvious it wasn't something he wanted to pursue. And that was ok too. Maybe three years was as long as they'd get to have their super cool clubhouse with just the two of them. Maybe it was time for other people to come into their lives. She wished she could feel as confident as the words sounded in her head.

"Well, no time like the present," she muttered under her breath. She did an about-face swinging her arms around with her and came nose to nose with Sasha who had her arm extended as if she had been about to tap Abby on the shoulder.

"Whoa!" Abby yelled, leaping back from her.

"I come in peace," Sasha said, hands raised. She had a coffee cup from De-Floured in one hand and a copy of the *Hope Hornblower* in the other.

"Sasha," Abby breathed, clutching her chest. "We've really got to stop the heart attack encounters. I mean, it's a cool fad, but I think nine out of ten doctors would tell us we were tempting fate."

"Seconded," Sasha chuckled. "So I'm guessing there's a story here," she added, nodding down at Abby's sweater.

"Oh! This morning is the town's Ugly Christmas Sweater brunch, here at Town Hall."

“Oh, I read about that in the paper,” Sasha said, turning to look behind them at the glass windows where the brunch madness was happening.

“You should come in,” Abby said, seeing a shadow of longing on Sasha’s face as she watched the people milling around inside.

Sasha glanced at Abby and then down at herself. “I forgot my ugly Christmas Sweater on this trip.”

Abby shrugged. “The mayor is on his third mimosa. He wouldn’t notice if Bigfoot joined in at this point.”

“Well that’s ... reassuring,” Sasha said with a grin.

“Seriously, it’s good food and it’ll give you a chance to meet more of the townsfolk. I mean, if you’re still thinking about moving here and we haven’t already scared you off.”

She grinned. “Not a chance. The longer I’m here, the more I don’t want to leave.”

Abby nodded. “It’s something we put in the water. Stephen King is planning on writing at least a trilogy about us.”

Sasha rolled her eyes. “Well, then I’m definitely moving here. I’m a graphic designer and maybe if I play my cards right, I can hook up with Mr. King to do some artwork for him.”

“Graphic designer,” Abby said, nodding. “There’s probably a lot of businesses that could really use someone with your skill set. I don’t know if you’ve seen Bumble’s Pork of the Day sign, but ...”

Sasha grimaced. “Yeah. I talked to Mrs. Bumble. She kind of seemed put out when I asked her about it.”

Abby nodded. "Oh, don't be offended. That's how Mrs. Bumble acts around everyone." The Hope citizen in her was urging her on. "Come on. I'll introduce you to some folks inside. If you really want to join our nutty little town, this will be the perfect way to rub elbows and make acquaintances. Plus, if we're lucky, learn a little dirt on one or two town members that may come in helpful later. Miss Mandie's brunch drinks always loosen lips."

"If you're sure I won't cause a riot for not being properly attired," Sasha said with a grin.

"Nah. And even if some people sneer, no one is going to cross the Emperor who is escorting you," Abby said, pointing at her sweater. She led Sasha inside and looked around. Most of the partiers were either sitting down at tables eating and drinking, playing Twister over by Miss Mandie's table, or charades at the mayor's table.

"Because the ugly Christmas sweaters aren't embarrassing enough," Abby said, almost feeling the need to apologize for her town's antics.

"I ... I love this," Sasha chuckled beside her.

"Come on, I'll introduce you," Abby looked around, but the only person from her group still standing around was Darren. She brought Sasha over and introduced her to Darren and then scanned the room.

"Where'd everyone else go?" Abby asked.

"Oh, Angela went off to get food with the doc. I haven't seen anyone else from the school staff."

Darren, who hadn't been born on Hope, but was a de facto Islander, was happy to take over introducing Sasha around. Abby trailed behind them, listening to Darren's easy explanations and stopping to answer Sasha's questions any time she

voiced one. Abby found herself smiling. It was easy to see that for Darren, teaching was what he was meant to do.

A sharp electronic beeping made Darren pause in his story about the infamous Kurt and Johann, the drunken sailors who had a kid's playground named after them. "Sorry," he looked around and spotted Abby. "My poodle is on medication. I have to go take care of her."

"Oh no worries," Abby said smiling. "This was fun."

"Yeah," Darren said, with a smile. "We'll have to do it again sometime." He nodded at Sasha, gave one last smile to Abby and followed the steady stream of people that were laughing and meandering toward the door. Towards the front of the line, Abby could see Eric's red hair and Angela's long blonde braid moving out the exit.

"I need to go too," Sasha said, glancing at the door. "I wanted to do some shopping downtown this afternoon."

"Oh sure," Abby said. "Islander life hack; make sure you hit all the stores you planned on getting to *before* you get to Seaside Treasures. The proprietor there is known for talking your ear off."

Sasha grinned. "Very good to know."

Abby waved goodbye to Sasha and then glanced around behind her at the remaining partiers. She didn't see Greta or Aaron. Her traitorous gut twinged in pain, but she tried to push it away. No more. It was a *good* sign that Aaron and Greta weren't hanging around. Maybe they went out somewhere to continue their date.

There was a tiny voice in the back of Abby's mind telling her she was in denial, but she

promptly told it to step off. She wandered through town on her own, just taking in the Christmas chaos that was the namesake for Miss Mandie's coffee. For a half hour, while she just walked, greeted people, and took in the sights, Abby forgot about everything else. Hope was her home and she didn't want to be anywhere else in the world. She could see herself walking the square in forty, fifty years, still teaching, still, hopefully best friends with Aaron.

After a while, her feet led her past Sugar Rush and Excavation and into Bumble's market. Before she could think twice, she'd purchased a bouquet of dark red carnations and white roses and taken it around the corner and into the alley. She didn't pause or let herself take time to think about what she was doing. Fred didn't get to go to the Ugly Christmas Sweater Brunch. He wouldn't get the chance to go on any other Santa's Singles dates, or spend the next fifty years teaching in Hope. She stopped in front of the dumpster and cleared her throat.

"Fred, the universe screwed you over. You got short-changed. Major league short-changed. I hope you're making the powers that be pay for it in the afterlife. You didn't deserve this." She set down the bouquet of flowers in front of the dumpster where Fred had been when she'd found him. She knelt and touched the dirty concrete. It wasn't scientifically founded, but the one superstition from her childhood that had held with Abby was her mom's belief that people transfer their energy into places they've been. Somewhere in Abby's soul, she hoped that she could feel Fred here, as he was, before that awful night.

"I'm sorry Fred," she whispered, feeling the grime of the alley under her hand. "I'm sorry that

this happened to you while you were on your way to meet me. I ...”

Abby’s eyes fell on something purple sticking out from under the dumpster. She reached forward and fished it out. When her brain realized what it was, the scientist in her was kicked into high gear. It was a piece of purple cloth. The edges were raw as if this piece had been ripped off of something. She turned where she was squatting and looked at the scuff mark on the concrete where the grime had been scrapped away, evidently when Fred had slipped. Two variables now. She was silent for a moment in the quiet alley, thinking, the gears in her head turning.

Finally, she muttered, “Fred, whatever happened here ... I’m going to figure it out.” She picked up the torn piece of fabric and held it up to the light which wasn’t much in the shadowy alley, but it was still enough to see the spatter of blood.

AARON

Aaron had lost count of how many mimosas he'd had. He wasn't much of a drinker, but he was doing more listening than talking, and drinking was something to keep his hands busy.

"Anyway," Greta said with a grin, fixing him with her deep blue gaze. "I've been talking your ear off about my yoga and social league stuff. What about you? What are your hobbies, Aaron?"

Aaron shifted in his chair. He was *not* squirming. Greta's look was just so intense. Was this the same one she gave her students when waiting for them to talk about themselves? If so, he was willing to bet she had a fairly high success rate. Greta was pretty. Really pretty. But he didn't know her that well. What hobbies of his would be considered a safe topic? If he talked about how much he liked watching *MST3K* episodes, she probably wouldn't know what that was and he'd have to explain it. And as much as he liked the show, he could feel his anxiety coiling in his chest, just thinking of that prospect. Should he tell her about how much he liked inventing board games and test playing them? That seemed like a bad idea to lead with. He'd made that mistake with a woman before. It was too exposing. The silence between them had already gone too long while she waited

for him to answer, so he decided to just go with something safe. “Um, I love to read.”

She smiled. “So do I! Poetry, fiction, nonfiction? What’s your poison?”

“Uh, all of it,” Aaron said, inwardly wincing at how vague he sounded.

“I’m really into French poetry,” Greta continued as if he hadn’t said something eye-rollingly vapid. She reached for a strawberry on her plate and nibbled the end off. She caught his gaze and he didn’t miss the hint of her pink tongue that trailed the places the strawberry had been on her lips.

“Uh, which poets are your favorites?” he asked, returning his gaze to his almost empty mimosa glass. He was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. That *must* be it. She wasn’t ... flirting with him, was she? *I mean, I know we’re on a date, but ... that tongue thing was totally accidental ... right?*

“Oh, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire,” Greta said with a fond sigh. “Do you like French poetry?”

Aaron shrugged, feeling the mimosas slowing time in his head as he tried to string together an appropriate response. “I’m afraid I’m a bigger fan of English poets. Lord Byron, Shakespeare, Chaucer.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Nothing more recent?”

Aaron felt heat rising in his cheeks that had nothing to do with Miss Mandie’s drinks. Sure, he read more recent authors, but how was he supposed to explain that the reason he loved Lord Byron, Shakespeare, and Chaucer was because he knew their works inside and out? No surprises, familiar words, he could remember the feelings he had the first time he read them and relive that joy.

He didn't have to worry about how the poem, the play, or the story would end, because he already *knew* how they ended. That was what it was like for someone with anxiety. His favorites were his mental security blankets. It was one thing that he and Abby had really clicked with. Her favorite shows were from the '90s. Her favorite books were Jane Austen and Isaac Asimov. He hadn't had to explain to her why he read and re-read the same books, watched and re-watched the same TV shows and movies. She understood anxiety without him having to explain it to her. Now, here he was, three or maybe four mimosas in, sitting across from a well-educated, beautiful woman, and he was going to have to explain his anxiety. Talk about a mood killer.

"Well, I suppose they're classic for a reason," Greta finally said. "What else do you like to do for fun?"

It took a minute for Greta's words to reach him. For a moment, he was reliving last April when the power had gone out all over town in a bad storm and he and Abby had sat side by side on her couch, reading by the light of the headlamps he used for detail work when he made game pieces. She had read *Robot Dreams* while he'd re-read *Hamlet* and they'd talked about creating a sci-fi Shakespeare board game called, "2B or not 2B".

When Aaron finally remembered Greta was talking to him, he blurted the first thing that came to mind, "Well Abby and I hang out a lot. We watch movies, play um ... board games." He carefully and successfully avoided mentioning that they were usually board games he'd invented. Greta's smile seemed to freeze on her face for a moment.

"So, you two are ... *old* friends?" Greta asked, and he didn't miss the emphasis on "old".

Aaron shrugged. “Just since I moved here three years ago. You know our classrooms are across the hall from each other. And she’s my neighbor. We share this kind of funky duplex.”

Greta gave a stiff nod and glanced around the room. “Well, it looks like the festivities are starting to die down. Feel like a walk?”

Yes. Yes, he did. It was hot in the town hall meeting room with all the steam coming off the buffet of breakfast foods, all the talk, and the accumulated body heat that was escaping through the horribly knit sweaters all around them. And he was trying valiantly to fight his way out of a mimosa fog.

They collected their jackets, cleared their trash, and Aaron breathed a deep sigh of relief when they made it outside to the sidewalk. Greta threaded her hand into the crook of his arm and Aaron felt himself stiffen. *What do I do? Do I say something? Maybe she’s just doing it to keep her hand warm? Or does this mean something more? Does she want me to say something about it? Should I just ignore it?*

“I love this time of year,” Greta said with a sigh, “but I’m a summer girl at heart. I already miss the sunshine. Not that we get a ton of it out here.”

Aaron nodded but didn’t say anything. One of the things he liked the best about Hope was the rainy, cloudy weather. The rhythmic sound of rain felt like a calming voice, the clouds, like a comfortable blanket. Too many things were exposed in the bright, harsh sunshine. He definitely didn’t mind the sun when it came out, twenty percent of the year on Hope Island, but he was glad it didn’t come out more often.

“It’s awful, what happened to Fred Goss,” Greta said with a sigh. “He was such a nice guy.”

Aaron nodded. "Yeah, he really was."

"Oh, that's right! You two played on the basketball team together."

"Yeah," Aaron smiled, more to himself than to her. "He was easily the best on the team, but he was so humble, he never bragged or anything. Instead, he had this great way of cheering the rest of us on."

It was Greta's turn to nod. "He was that way with his students too. There are so many of the young ones who shoot up six inches over the summer and are all elbows and long legs, trying to figure out how to get coordinated again. Fred was so encouraging. More than I could do for them. I swear every time they came out of Fred's gym, they were standing taller, heads held higher. Fred was a great teacher." Greta paused, and then hurried on as if she wasn't sure she should be saying what she was about to say. "Since you two are old friends, do you know how Abby is mixed up in Fred's ... accident?"

Aaron glanced at her. "Who said she's mixed up in it?"

"Well, everyone."

A hot flash of anger shot through Aaron's chest. He stopped walking and turned to look at Greta. "Everyone's saying that Abby had something to do with Fred's accident?"

"No, not like that," Greta said quickly. "I mean, everyone knows that Fred slipped. It was an accident. But I heard Abby had to go to the Sheriff's Office and it had to do with the investigation."

Aaron gritted his teeth and took a deep breath, trying to push his annoyance aside. "Fred had asked her on a date. They were supposed to meet at

The Alphorn as part of this Santa's Singles thing. He was on his way to meet her when it happened. Abby thought he'd stood her up, and she was taking that same shortcut through the alley on her way home when she found him. *That's why she had to go in to make a statement.*"

"Oh," Greta said. When she didn't say anything else, Aaron started walking again and he was acutely aware of Greta's hand still clutching the crook of his arm. They crossed the street and were halfway down the next block when she spoke again. "I just wondered if it was more. Becca Armstrong said she saw Abby leaving the Sheriff's Office with Eric Simmons, Fred's roommate. And she saw them go into Miss Mandie's for coffee together. I just thought that maybe she was more involved with Fred and well, maybe Eric, since she seemed to know them."

This statement felt like a one-two gut punch for Aaron. He hadn't forgotten that Abby hadn't asked him to go to the office with her. Now, if she and this Eric were hanging out, and if *everyone* knew, and had seen her with him ... After three years, he knew how the gossip mill in Hope worked. There would already be talk about them dating. There had been rumors about himself and Abby dating when they started hanging out, but after a year or two, the rumor mill got tired of being reminded that they were best friends and had moved on.

Greta was talking again. He half-listened to her go on and on about her holiday plans while he thought.

What had happened in the last week? He went from a content, stable routine with his best friend to a hormone-driven curveball, a kiss he couldn't shake off, and now a weird awkwardness between

them while they were both off on dates with other people.

He felt his anxiety starting to rise in his chest, and along with it, the fear. The crippling fear that he'd missed his chance. That the little glimmer of hope and longing he'd kept locked away for the last three years and had been growing stronger since he'd kissed her, would drive him insane. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd always promised himself, "*One day. You'll tell her how you feel one day. When the timing is right.*" Now, he was probably not going to get the chance. One of these other guys, tripping over themselves to ask her out, that didn't have their deep friendship to lose, would sweep her off her feet.

He glanced back down at Greta. She was beautiful. Her voice was animated as she told him a story about her parents' huskies and matching dog sweaters. She liked literature. She was intelligent. They had some things in common. He could see himself dating Greta. At least it would be someone to hang out with while Abby ... an irritating itch started at the back of his neck and he frowned. Why did the thought of her dating someone make him feel so ... and the thought of trying to build up the same kind of comfortable relationship with someone else ... someone like *Greta*, who made him nervous with every question she asked? Suddenly, Aaron felt very tired.

"So, how about Saturday?" Greta asked.

Aaron blinked. Oh no. She'd been talking about something. What was it? "Uh, tomorrow?"

"For a second date," Greta said. And he didn't miss the way she squared her shoulders and tipped her chin up to meet his eyes. "I'd really like to go on a second date with you. If you'd be up for it."

“Oh, uh, sure,” Aaron said.

“So, Saturday?”

“Sorry,” Aaron said, “I’m ... Abby and I have to work at Santa’s Balloon Grotto.”

“Oh,” Greta’s tone wasn’t cold, but it definitely wasn’t as warm as it had been moments before. “Ok. Maybe another night this week?”

Aaron shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Ok,” Greta said, and he heard the confident warmth returning to her voice. “I’ll call you tomorrow once you’ve had a chance to check your schedule.” They’d completed a loop around the town square and were back in front of Town Hall. “I’m this way.” She nodded down the side street that ran between the Town Hall and the library. She hesitated, looking at him, waiting for him to say something.

Aaron swallowed hard. “Ok, I’ll uh, well, I guess you’ll call me. So, um. Thanks for the date. This was ... fun.”

She smiled and winked at Aaron, but kept standing where she was as if she was expecting something. A cold sweat of panic was starting to run down his back. *What? What am I supposed to do? Did I miss something?* With an awkward wave goodbye, Aaron turned and headed across the square toward The Spark Theatre and home. He said hello to the few townspeople who greeted him as he passed, but for the most part, he was left alone with his thoughts as he walked.

Greta was nice. And beautiful, and interesting. Yeah. She was definitely a better match for him than Angela had been. Of the other four women he’d been matched with, he wondered who else he’d have to go on another excruciating date with.

A part of his brain wondered what it would be like to have had this exact date with Abby. Well, for part of it, he didn't have to wonder. Last year's Ugly Christmas Sweater Brunch had been, well, one of the best memories he'd had in Hope *because* of Abby. They hadn't been awkward small talk and embarrassing ... well, everything that had happened today. A shiver ran down his spine. Would ... would she have put her hand in the crook of his arm, as Greta had? Or, would he have found the courage to hold her hand, interlace her small fingers in between his? Would it have ended with a kiss on her couch?

He blew out a sigh and tried to shake off the oh-so-unhelpful feelings. He tried to imagine what kissing Greta would be like. But in his mind when he closed his eyes and felt soft lips on his, it wasn't Greta's designer perfume that filled his nose. It was water lilies.

He trudged home, and with each step, he tried to simultaneously shake off these pointless hormonal feelings he was having for his best friend, and prepare himself in case Abby had Darren or this Eric Simmons guy in her apartment. He knew Abby better than to think that she'd move that fast with a guy, or at least, he thought he did. He hoped he did. Hell, he actually *didn't* know. She'd been single the whole time he'd known her. A sharp pain shot through his chest at the thought of what he'd do if he could hear Abby and some random guy through the wall ...

He paused in front of their duplex and through the front window, he saw that there weren't any lights on in Abby's half. Well, except for the warm red glow from Mr. Burns' heating lamp. He frowned. Maybe she and Darren had really hit it off and went to hang out for the rest of the day. Or ...

what if they went to *his* place? Somehow, that thought scared Aaron more than the thought of them being in Abby's apartment. He pulled out his cell phone. It wouldn't hurt to just send her an "Are you ok?" text. He was about to start tapping out the text when he noticed the thin bar of light coming from the break in the old canvas curtains covering the garage door windows. Relief washed over him as he changed course and headed for the garage. The odds that Abby and Darren were having Barry White time in the cold garage that smelled like acrylic paint, wood varnish, and paint stripper were very low.

He pushed open the door and was momentarily transfixed by the sight in front of him. Abby was in her tie-dyed overalls, rainbow socks peeking out from under their hem as she hunched over a work table, perched on the edge of her stool. Her curly hair was pulled up in a ponytail with a few rebellious curls escaping to hang down by the sides of her face. She had two paint brushes, a small wood chisel, and a pencil sticking out of her hair and he could see flecks of paint coating her hands and exposed arms. The light from the work lamp cast her in a perfect halo and the look of concentration on her face made his breath catch in his chest.

She glanced up from what she was working on and he expected a wave of acknowledgment and a smile, maybe a comment about them both being back from their dates by early afternoon and it not boding well for them in the romance department. What he didn't expect was for her to jump off her stool and practically sprint across the garage to grab him by the hand.

"Oh thank god you're back. I have something I have to show you."

Aaron was having a hard time forming words. Her small hand had his in a death grip and she was tugging him along to her work table. When she let go of his hand and what he was staring at finally started computing, his thoughts drifted away from the amazing feeling of her skin on his. Spread across the table, there were poster board charts and a whiteboard he recognized as the one she normally kept on her fridge for grocery lists. She had action figures of Sam Baker as the fourth *Doctor Who*, April from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and a diorama of ...

“Is ... Is that the alley behind Sugar Rush?” Aaron asked, finally finding his voice.

Abby nodded and her large wild eyes found Aaron’s. “I’ve been formulating hypotheses for an experiment.”

“About the alley?” Aaron asked, frowning, trying to figure out where this was going.

Abby nodded. “About Fred. I don’t think it was an accident. Aaron, I think someone killed Fred.”

ABBY

“What?!” Aaron stammered, blinking down at her. “You think someone killed ... Abby, it was an accident.”

Finally the wave of relief and borderline giddy happiness that had bubbled up in her chest at seeing him fill the frame of the garage door had dissipated enough for her to get a handle on her emotions. He *hadn't* gone home with Greta. There was no lipstick on his face that she could see. There was a hint of perfume hanging somewhere around him, but she'd smelled the same perfume on herself after a faculty meeting at school. Greta just seemed to take the “if you bring something, make sure you have enough for everyone” edict to heart, especially with the scent she wore. She glanced back at Aaron to see him bending over the crude creation she'd been able to cobble together in her fit of manic energy. The dumpster was an old strawberry container she'd melted into a more dumpster-esque shape with a heat gun. The alley was cardboard and the figurines were ones that her nephew had ripped out of their pristine packaging the last time he'd come for a visit. It had been totally worth it, to see the excitement and wonder on his face as he held them.

“So,” Aaron said slowly, “in this scenario, April left the Ninja Turtles to go whack the Doctor in a

Hope Island alley?”

Abby rolled her eyes. “No. Mostly because April is supposed to be me.” She held her breath, expecting Aaron to laugh and shake his head, maybe head for the house. That’s what normal people would do when their roommate created a diorama, charts, evidence logs, and a theory for a slip-and-fall dumpster “accident”. Instead, Aaron glanced behind him, grabbed the old rolling doctor’s stool he always sat on when he worked on his game pieces, and rolled it over to join her.

“Ok, Doc Locke, lay it on me.”

Abby could have cried. Her best friend was with her to solve the case. Even with everything that had happened during the last week.

“I went back to the alley,” Abby said.

Aaron looked up at her. “With Darren?”

Abby shook her head, frowning. “No. By myself.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow. “Date didn’t go that well with Darren?”

Abby shrugged. “He doesn’t like it when people talk during movies.”

Aaron made a buzzer noise. “Strike one.”

“And Battlebots seemed to be the only thing we had in common.”

“Can’t buzzer that one. Battlebots are pretty awesome,” Aaron admitted.

“Anyway,” Abby said, rolling her eyes, “he had to go take care of his poodle, so we went our separate ways. I ... I took some flowers to where Fred ...” Abby paused, a painful knot forming in her stomach. “And while I was there, I ... noticed

something.” Abby leaned away from Aaron and pulled a stack of notes toward her. She’d ripped pages out of a lined notebook to sketch out her first impressions. “There are two things that I think the sheriffs missed.”

“Why do you think that?” Aaron asked. He was leaning over the notes she’d made and he was so close to her. A rebellious part of her brain wanted to lean into that warmth, but she knew that wouldn’t go anywhere good for her mental health and her campaign to make sure Aaron didn’t turn into Derek II, so she inched away from him on her stool and took a breath, trying to clear her head.

“Because if the sheriffs *had* seen them, I don’t think they could have ruled this was an accident.”

Aaron jerked his gaze up to meet hers and his hazel eyes were so intense that Abby felt like he was looking right through her to her soul. His expression was serious. He wasn’t going to make fun of her for her theory. She *could* tell him everything.

“I ... I took a couple of classes in forensic science techniques in college. They were my ... underwater basket weaving classes.”

“Your what?”

Abby sighed. “My friends and I would always take one goof-off class per term to give us something to look forward to when our major classes were wearing us down.”

“And ... and you picked *forensic science*?” Aaron asked.

Abby shrugged. “Stage combat was full. Anyway, their methods are basically just the scientific method applied to a situation, with geometry, physics, and some psychology thrown

in. So, when I was looking at the alley, I noticed the scuff mark.”

“The scuff mark,” he repeated, “from Fred slipping?”

Abby shook her head. “I don’t think slipping would make that kind of scuff mark. I mean think about it. What causes a scuff mark? Friction from the sole of a shoe against a hard surface, right? Usually when a foot is planted and *another object forces* it to move.” Aaron still didn’t look convinced. “Remember in the hallway? When Marvin and Mack were fighting? Marvin shoved Mack. *That’s* how that scuff mark got on the floor.”

“Ok,” Aaron said, nodding. “Definitely a possibility. But, are you one hundred percent sure Fred *couldn’t* have made that scuff mark by himself?”

Abby hesitated and then shook her head. “No. Not one hundred percent. But science isn’t about proving something one hundred percent. We’re not that arrogant. Science is always developing as we learn and discover more. I just *know* that I’ve seen scuff marks made by someone being pushed. It’s an observed phenomenon. I haven’t seen a scuff mark made in an alley from someone slipping on their own.”

“Unless that’s what happened to Fred,” Aaron said, nodding.

Abby did her best to purse her lips in annoyance and hide the grin trying to spread across her face. He always did this. Mr. Devil’s Advocate. “I’m not done. There was also the fact that there was ... blood spatter on the dumpster.”

Aaron’s expression sobered and he put his elbows on his knees. “Well, he ... he hit his head.”

Abby nodded, determined to press on. “Yeah. But if you only hit your head on something once, there’s no blood spatter. One time opens the wound. After that initial blow, there wouldn’t have been any repeating force to *cause* the ... the splatter.”

They sat in silence, both breathing softly.

Abby tried to push down the jabbing pain in her chest. Fred Goss had spent his final moments in a cold, wet alley, possibly with his killer, being brutally ... She jumped at the feel of a warm hand covering hers which was still gripping her knee. Just as quickly, the warm weight was gone.

Aaron cleared his throat. “That’s ... huge, Abs. If you spotted it, why didn’t the sheriffs? I mean, is there a possibility that he slipped, bashed his head, tried to get back to his feet and ... slipped again, bashing his head a second time?”

Abby sighed. “I mean, maybe? But, then there’s also ... this.” She pushed a poster outlining the unanswered questions from the alley aside and picked up the torn and bloody scrap of fabric she’d sealed in a plastic sandwich bag.

“What is it?” Aaron asked, his fingers skimming against hers as he took it from her and held it up to the light. “Is ... is that blood?”

Abby nodded. “My guess is that it’s Fred’s blood. But, I suppose it could belong to the killer.” Aaron frowned at her. “I found it under the dumpster. By the front wheels.” She took a deep breath. “When ... when I found Fred that night, he’d been leaning up against the front of the dumpster with his hands at his sides. I hadn’t thought anything about it at the time, but thinking about it now ... I swear Aaron, his right hand was under the dumpster. I think this fell out of his

fingers. Maybe ... maybe he was able to get a hand on his attacker before ... he died. Maybe this is an actual clue, something that could help us find out who did it.”

“Us?” Aaron asked, leaning back to look at her. “Abby, you need to turn this in to the sheriffs.” He glanced around the room. “All of it. Your theory, this evidence.” He shook his head. “You shouldn’t have taken it from the crime scene.”

“So you agree, it does look like a crime right?” Abby asked, sitting up straighter on her stool.

Aaron was quiet, looking from the charts and diorama back to her. “I don’t know, Abby. I mean, *who on earth* would want to kill Fred?”

Abby shook her head. “I think that’s what the sheriffs will say. Even when I bring them all of this. I don’t know who, Aaron. But the evidence is telling me that someone did. At least, it’s a possibility.” She hesitated. She needed his help and there was a chance that even though he was her ride-or-die bestie, he might tell her no or that she was being stupid. “I want to do an experiment.” She didn’t miss the upward tick at the corner of Aaron’s mouth as he studied her. “Just to ... *see* if my hypothesis could be right. Then, if it *could* be right, I’ll take all of this to the sheriffs.”

He nodded. “I’m in. I’ll be the Scully to your Mulder. Or, reverse that.”

Abby grinned. “Nah, you’re definitely Scully. You have the bone structure and you’re way more level-headed.” They sat in quiet for a moment, looking over the scribbled notes on the table.

“So,” Aaron finally said, “if your theory is correct, Fred didn’t slip. He was pushed ...”

“ ... and then someone ... bashed his head against the dumpster at least a second time,” Abby added quietly. “And left him to die.” She shivered.

“You know what that means?” Aaron added quietly. She turned to look at him and didn’t miss the grim set to his mouth. “There was a murderer in Hope that night.”

Abby returned her gaze to the alley diorama, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the garage’s temperature. “What if they’re still here?”

AARON

“Ok,” Aaron said between spoonfuls of Cocoa Puffs, “what do we need to test this theory?”

Abby looked over her cup of tea at him. He had a set of dark circles under his eyes that matched hers. She suspected that he’d slept as poorly as she had. Now here they were, neither of them well rested, and about to do something that could have legal complications. She choked on her tea. Not to mention deadly consequences if the murderer *was* still on the island and found out what they were trying to do ... “Aaron, you don’t have to do this.”

He set down his spoon. “What are you talking about?”

“This. Testing this theory, trying to figure out if Fred was murdered. It could get us both into trouble.”

“So?” Aaron asked, frowning.

“And if the murderer is still around here and sees what we’re doing ...”

“Ride-or-die, Nessie. I’m doing this with you.”

She sighed. “Ok. If you’re sure?” She paused and he gave her a solemn nod, despite the spoon full of chocolate cereal he was now lifting to his mouth. She drew her gaze away from his lips and

looked down at the stack of notes they'd been reviewing on the countertop.

“Ok. There are two ways we can go about this. I can go measure every angle, and element of the alley, and I can make a new diorama with exact measurements, recreate the conditions with a humidifier, actual dirt, and grime from the alley, pour a little concrete ...”

“Or?” Aaron asked, waving his spoon at her to get to the other option.

She sighed. “Or we go find a body.”

Now Aaron choked. “What?”

“Not a real body. Just one that's Fred's height ... and weight ... and mass, and has the same bone density, and musculature, and ...”

Aaron shook his head. “Ok, both of those options sound impossible. What else you got?”

“Well, I suppose we could just find a body that's *similar* to Fred's. Maybe close in height and weight, and use that to test our hypothesis that he was shoved rather than slipped and then had his head bashed in. Of course, we need to talk to Doc Brewer to see if there's any physical evidence of multiple cranial fractures to give our theory that Fred hit his head more than once more support ...”

“One problem at a time,” Aaron said, taking his bowl to the sink and rinsing it out. “Where are we going to find a body? Especially one that's even close to the same height and weight as Fred?”

Abby racked her brain, letting her eyes wander across the kitchen to where Aaron stood at the sink. The morning sun from her kitchen window snagged on the scattered gold highlights in his dark hair and the stubble on his chin. She sat up straighter and returned her attention to the mug

she was clutching between her hands for warmth. “Well, I have one idea, but it’s out there.”

“‘Out there’ might be all we have on this one,” Aaron said. “It’s not every day that someone dies in this town. And I don’t really feel up to playing *Weekend at Bernie’s* with us bringing a body over from the mainland on the ferry.”

She rolled her eyes. “I didn’t think we’d use a *real* body. I was thinking we should use Dean Martin.”

Aaron paused and looked at her. “Dean . . .?”

She sighed. “I always forget that you haven’t been here your whole life. It’s Mr. Elton’s dummy. It used to be a CPR dummy, but ten or so years ago, he bought Dean at a yard sale, had Mrs. Shiner, his pianist, make legs and arms and, well, a butt ... I guess for the legs to attach to. He mounted him to a hat rack on wheels and uses Dean in his couples dance classes when there’s an odd number of students.”

“Wh-Why is he called Dean Martin?”

Abby shrugged. “Because he looks like Dean Martin? He has the Dino Martini haircut.”

“Ok,” Aaron said slowly. “And you think Mr. Elton will let us borrow him?”

“Maybe?”

Half an hour later they were bundled into their coats, hats, and scarves and moving across the town square toward Mr. Elton’s Dance Academy.

“I’ll do the talking,” Abby said.

“Oh thank god,” Aaron said with a sigh. “I think coming from you, it’ll just sound weird. I think if I asked to borrow his dummy, it would sound creepy *and* weird.”

She chuckled. “And it’ll just sound weird and a little sad coming from me. I see your point.” She grinned at Aaron who looked as if he’d been about to say something, but then decided against it.

Abby squared her shoulders and knocked on the heavy wooden door. There was silence from inside.

“Maybe he’s not here. I mean,” he checked his watch, “it’s seven-thirty on a Thursday morning.”

Abby took a step back and looked up. She could see a stream of smoke coming from the little chimney that fed out of the pellet stove inside, so she knew *someone* was there. She pressed her ear against the wooden door. Faintly, at the other end of the long barn-like room, she could hear the sound of someone playing scales on the piano.

“It sounds like Mrs. Shiner is in there, at least.” Abby pounded on the door harder. “Mrs. Shiner!” She pressed her ear to the door in time to hear a loud bang of keys on the piano, the scrape of the stool and some dark muttering as the woman’s punishing footsteps got closer to the door. It didn’t matter rain, shine, hurricane, or blizzard, Mrs. Shiner was never seen without her three-inch patent leather pumps and Mr. Elton had never needed to purchase a metronome when he had Mrs. Shiner’s shoes on the job.

The door was wrenched open from the inside and they came face to face with her purple eyeshadow, perfect lipstick, and helmet of silver hair.

“I’m not looking for religion, girl scout cookies, or band candy. I’m just trying to get a moment of peace to play the piano and ...” she paused mid-tirade and looked from Abby to Aaron. “Oh, well, you’re too tall to be girl scouts or band students

and if you're starting some sort of slob religion, I'm not interested."

Abby glanced down at her sweat pants and then cut her eyes to Aaron's hoodie peeking out from under his jacket. Ok, so they weren't exactly in business casual, but *slobs*? She looked back at Mrs. Shiner's dress, with creases so sharp they looked like flower-printed razor blades, and she had to admit, next to her, they *were* slobs.

"We're so sorry to bother you, Mrs. Shiner. We were just hoping to ask Mr. Elton if we could borrow something," Abby said quickly.

"He won't be here today. He and Lawrence went to the mainland yesterday to get some Christmas shopping done. They won't be back until late tonight," Mrs. Shiner said all of this while absentmindedly tapping her foot to some internal rhythm that only she could hear. "What do you need?"

Abby decided to just go for it. If she told them no, at least she'd do it quickly and they could start trying to figure out another way to test their theory. "We need to borrow Dean Martin."

Mrs. Shiner's dark expression lightened. "Oh, the dummy. Sure. Ok." She turned and headed across the polished dance floor. Abby and Aaron shared a bewildered look.

"Did you expect it to be that easy?" Aaron asked.

Abby shook her head slowly. "Kind of feels like a trap, Admiral Akbar."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "A trap that she set, on the off chance that two school teachers on winter break would want to come by a dance studio

to borrow an old CPR dummy turned spare dance partner?”

Abby opened her mouth to reply, but hesitated and then changed course. “You’re right. It’s too obvious. Mrs. Shiner’s too clever for that.”

He rolled his eyes and nudged Abby inside the doors. She followed Mrs. Shiner over to the wall of cubbies where aspiring dancers stuffed their street clothes and shoes while at rehearsal. Sticking out of one row of cubbies were an assortment of arms and legs.

“To tell you the truth,” Mrs. Shiner grunted as she wheeled Dean Martin out of the shadowy corner by the cubbies where he stood sentinel, staring unblinkingly at the empty room, “I’m kind of glad you’re taking him to do, well, whatever you’re planning on doing with him. Do you have any idea how creepy it is to come in here to play while *he’s* here, in the corner, staring at you? He looks like that *Night of the Living Dead* dummy, all grown up, single, and ready to mingle.” She shivered.

“You ever try putting a cocktail glass in his hand?” Aaron asked. “Maybe that would help?”

Mrs. Shiner snorted. “You think a cocktail glass in the hand of a dummy would make him *less* creepy?”

“Do you think Mr. Elton will mind if we borrow him for a couple of days?” Abby asked quickly.

“Nah, it’s Christmas time. Lots of children dance rehearsals in preparation for the Christmas dance recital, the nativity, and Santa’s Court. No couple dance classes at the moment ...” She trailed off as if something had just occurred to her. Her

gaze narrowed and darted from Abby to Aaron and back to Abby. “Why do you ...”

“Thanks, Mrs. Shiner,” Abby said quickly. “Can we also borrow a set of arms and legs?” She cut her eyes to Aaron and jerked her head at the cubbies. Aaron’s lips formed a silent “oh” and he headed for the cubbies, pulling out limbs and studying their length.

“Are you two ... planning something?” Mrs. Shiner asked, her voice still suspicious.

“Practical joke,” Abby blurted quickly. “You know, something festive for the season that will ... uh, scare the Grinch out of a friend of ours.”

Mrs. Shiner didn’t look completely convinced, but Abby could tell that the proximity to her beloved piano was calling to her so after a final hard look at them, she nodded and clicked her way back to seat herself before the keys. “Take some pictures of their face when you pull it off. And don’t let anything happen to that dummy or Mr. Elton will go ballistic. And make sure to get it back here in one piece. Oh, and shut the door on your way out.” And then she started playing again. Abby and Aaron had a silent conversation about what to do next, using the extra arms and legs to gesture and drive home their meaning. They left behind the rolling hat rack that kept Dean upright and instead carried him out between them.

Of course, once they were outside, they realized they were in the middle of the town square on a Thursday morning, just in time to catch the arrival of two dozen kids in animal costumes and bed sheets arriving at Hope Church for the early Nativity rehearsal. On top of that, the morning ferry had just arrived, not to mention the swarm of joggers and fitness fanatics, making their final lap

by De-Floured for their daily reward of coffee and pastries. And Aaron and Abby were carrying a body past *all* of it. Granted, it was a dummy, but still.

“We should have put him in a garbage bag or something,” Aaron muttered.

“You think a body in a garbage bag would look better?” Abby asked.

Aaron sighed. “Well, we should at least come up with something to tell people when they inevitably ask why we’re carrying dummy Dean Martin through town.”

Abby racked her brain. “Window display for, um ... Ethel over at Seaside Treasures. Then, no one will hold us up.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said grinning. “Yeah, people would rather eat their own tongues than risk Ethel’s long-winded wrath.”

“Precisely,” Abby said. And no, Aaron’s full smile and wink were *not* the reason she tripped on the broken cobblestone sticking out of the ground by the gazebo. It was definitely Dean Martin’s bulky legs. For a dummy, he was heavy. “I guess they filled his legs and arms with sand so they wouldn’t flop around when someone’s trying to dance with him.”

“I get the arms, I guess,” Aaron muttered, redoubling his grip under the dummy’s armpits, “but why bother filling his legs? Who’s doing a dance where the dummy’s legs are, what, wrapped around their waist? I mean, why does Dean Martin even *have* legs? He lives on a rolling hat rack.” Strangers who hadn’t seen them carrying Dean Martin now turned to look at them after hearing Aaron’s question. The whole situation was so bizarre, Abby had to bite down on her lip to keep

from laughing. Aaron's mock indignation at having to carry the dummy was making her almost giddy.

"So, Darren wasn't really a fire starter?" Aaron asked.

It took Abby a moment to realize what he was saying. "Uh, no. I don't think it was a big loss for him though. It didn't seem like I blew any smoke up his sweater."

Aaron bent his head over Dean Martin, but she thought she saw the hint of a smile on his face and a vague shake of his head. It felt like a little cold slap on her cheek. Probably hard for him to think of her as someone "dateable" especially while he was on a date with someone like Greta.

"H-how was your date with Greta?" she asked. And she wanted to punch herself for the sharp pain each word caused in her chest. *Let it go, Abby. Best friends. You want him to be happy. Even if that's with Greta.*

"Oh, it was fine."

Aaron was blushing and Abby felt a window slam somewhere inside her. This was it. He liked her. And it was obvious Greta liked him. *The beginning of the end, old friend, Abby thought. Enjoy the little time you have left with him where it's just the two of you. It probably won't be long.*

"She wanted to go out again this Saturday," he said and Abby felt herself numbly nodding as she looked down to navigate around a pothole full of icy water. Dean Martin's open mouth and dead eyes stared up at her in feigned shock and she did her best to ignore them.

"Second date already, wow that's fast," she could hear the hollow tone in her voice but hoped

that Aaron couldn't.

"I told her that you and I were already working Santa's Grotto," Aaron said grunting. "I'm so glad we already stashed all the other stuff in the alley. Can you imagine trying to balance that *on top* of good ol' Dean here?"

"Yeah," Abby said, redoubling her grip. "You didn't have to cancel with Greta for Santa's Grotto. I could cover for you. Say you were sick or something..."

Aaron paused and frowned at her. "Leave no elf behind. We already had plans, Abs. I wasn't going to cancel with you for Greta." His gaze met hers and Abby felt a warmth spread through her chest. "I told her maybe some other night this week." The warm feeling imploded. They were going on a second date, possibly even *sooner* than Saturday. She tightened the lid on her feelings and forced herself to at least *act* happy and excited for him.

"Great," Abby said, forcing her face into a smile. "I don't know Greta that well. What does she like?"

"French poetry," Aaron started. Abby listened as they trudged down the next block, taking the long way back to the alley to try to avoid the crowd of tourists and the Confounding Carolers who'd just started an impromptu performance of hip-thrusting to Beach Boys' "Little St. Nick". All around her, on lamp posts, banners, shop windows, and street corners there were reminders of her favorite season in Hope. The air was crisp, and she was with her best friend. What more could she want? A couple passed them on the other side of the street. They were holding hands. They paused in front of a window display and the woman leaned her head against his shoulder. The

man turned and kissed the top of her head. Something ached inside of Abby.

“Abs?” Aaron was asking her something. She jerked her attention away from the couple and looked at him.

“What?”

He looked concerned. “Are you ok?”

“What? Yeah. Of course.” She tried to give him a reassuring smile.

Aaron misread the distress on her face. “Hey, this will work. At least enough to get the sheriffs really looking at it.”

“If our theory is correct,” Abby said, mentally chastising her thoughts. Here they were, trying to find out what really happened to Fred and she was wasting time throwing herself a pity party. So what if she had to keep how she felt about Aaron a secret? She was good at digging mental holes. She’d bury it so deep, the pain of knowing what kissing him was like, and knowing what it would feel like to see him smile and laugh and kiss someone like Greta would barely choke her every time she saw him. And she could live with that. What she *couldn’t* live with is repeating what had happened before. The pain was still so sharp that she knew even dusting off that memory would make her want to crawl under her bed and stay there for a month. She could bury these feelings alongside those in her mental relationship graveyard. And hang a wreath on them anytime she wanted to quietly relive kissing Aaron in her dreams.

They brought Dean down the alley and attached his legs and back to the dowel rods and wire skeleton they’d made to give him stability. Abby

knew the experiment wasn't perfect, but it was the best they could do at the moment.

"Ok, I think Dean, our Fred stand-in, is about as close to the real Fred as we can make him. Though, my shoes are probably about a size bigger than the ones he'd been wearing," Aaron muttered, staring down at the dummy's feet.

Abby shrugged. "Same type of sole, so we'll call it close enough. And you're sure about the weight?"

"Pretty sure. We all had to weigh in at the beginning of the basketball season this fall, though ... now that I think of it, I'm not sure why. Huh. Mrs. Butler from the front office just said we had to. Something about insurance."

"Ah, probably because it was *on* the form then. When I was filling out the regular insurance forms we have to fill out to teach, Mrs. Butler made me write in on every line of one section that the reason I wasn't answering the questions was because I didn't *have* a prostate. So, you heard Fred's weight?"

Aaron nodded. "Mrs. Butler announced them like an old-timey carnival barker as each of us stepped off the scale. It was ... a weird day. I can still hear her trilling 'two twenty-two' after Fred got off the scale."

"I'll bet she was just excited," Abby said, "I mean, she had so *many* lovely forms to fill out. Anyway, what about his height?"

Aaron nodded. "Yeah. We had to take our heights that day too. They were printed on the team roster which I always thought was kind of mean."

Abby sighed. “I’m glad they don’t do all of that just to let you teach. Like being confronted by a bear in the woods, I try to make myself look bigger in front of my students so they will fear me.”

Aaron snorted. “And how’s that working out for you?”

“Mixed results,” she sighed, unpacking her notes and spreading them out on a rickety folding table that someone had left next to the dumpster. “Ok, since we’re on the ‘gathering data’ stage of the scientific method, I say we get to the experimentation part.” She opened the Tupperware container holding the dish sponge and red paint. “Not blood, but I ... “ she gave an involuntary shiver as she glanced at the dumpster and thought of Fred again. She felt a warm hand on her shoulder.

“It’ll be ok, Abs.”

She cleared her throat and nodded, “Uh ... the paint is a similar viscosity.”

They spent the next two hours trying to emulate every possible configuration for a human body to trip or slip, make a scuff mark on the concrete and still get blood spatter on the dumpster with only one blow against the metal dumpster. They’d put a plastic bag over Dean Martin’s head and snappy suit to protect them from the paint and then attached the sponge with a rubber band to the top of his head and covered it with a thin layer of paper to serve as skin that would have to break before blood (paint) would come out.

“It’s not enough,” Aaron said, shaking his head. “There’s not enough force from one slip to cause that kind of spatter.”

Abby nodded, “And I know it’s not perfect, but we can’t get the shoes to make a scuff mark of any kind, even with me jerking his leg back as if he slipped.”

Aaron shrugged. “Well, let’s try shoving him.”

It only took one shove for the toe of Dean Martin’s shoe to drag in the dirt, leaving a scuff mark on the concrete. He hit his head on the dumpster and fell down. They left him there while Aaron bent over Abby who was measuring the light skid mark in the alley grime. She compared it to the mark that was left behind, presumably by Fred. The original was already starting to fade from exposure to the elements, but it was still visible enough to convince Abby. She looked up, surprised to find Aaron’s face so close to hers. “It’s almost the same width. Allowing for your shoe being bigger than Fred’s, I think it’s a safe assumption that it was his toe that made the scuff mark. Not his heel or mid-foot.” She stood up. “Shove me.”

“What?” Aaron asked, stepping back from her.

“Shove me,” Abby said. Aaron hesitated. “Just try. Don’t worry, I’ll grab the front of the dumpster before I hit it.

“A-are you sure?” Aaron asked. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” Abby said, turning towards the dumpster to hide the emotion on her face. “I’ll be fine. Just give me a shove.”

“Ok. Ready?” Aaron asked, gently placing his hands on her shoulders.

Abby nodded. “Now you have to really shove me if this is going to work.” She heard him sigh behind her. “Three ... two ... one!” Aaron shoved her firmly from behind and Abby stumbled

forward. She felt the toe of her right foot scrape the ground as the dumpster loomed in front of her. She managed to throw up her hands in time to stop her forehead from connecting with it and then she turned to look back at Aaron. He was staring down at the mark she made in the dirt. She joined him and they studied the cleared strip of concrete.

“No scuff, but you’re wearing white-soled shoes, so no surprise there,” Aaron muttered.

Abby nodded. “I think we can safely say that this part of our theory is correct. Now,” she swallowed hard. “The ... blood spatter.” Aaron nodded and she didn’t miss the grim set to his mouth. They tried to imitate what it would be like if Fred had tried to stand up and slipped and bashed his head on the dumpster, but the spatter pattern wasn’t right. Pushing him against the dumpster again didn’t work either.

“I think you’re going to have to try ... hitting his head against it,” Abby said quietly.

Aaron nodded and held the back of Dean Martin’s head, bouncing it off the lip of the dumpster three times, the sponge sending off sprays of paint with the second and third strikes once the paper had ripped. After the third strike, Aaron took a step back, still holding Dean’s head and he and Abby stared at the results. They were quiet for a long time while Abby measured the angle and direction and compared it to the dried blood specks around it. When she was done, she drew in a shaky breath.

“Abby,” Aaron whispered. “Then this means ...”

Abby nodded. “Upon analysis of the data from our experiment, we must conclude that Fred Goss ... *was* murdered.” A cold wind swept down the alley and Abby shivered as she pulled the sandwich

baggie from her pocket and held it out to Aaron.
“And somewhere between being shoved and having his head beat against the dumpster, Fred got a hand on his killer.”

AARON

“We have to go to the sheriffs,” Aaron heard himself say. The wind was picking up in the alley, stirring Abby’s papers under the broken brick she’d used as a paperweight during their experiment. “Now.”

He glanced over at her in time to see her nod, chewing her bottom lip as she surveyed the scene in front of them. Her shoulders were trembling and Aaron’s feet were moving before he could reason with himself about what he was doing. He watched, panicked, as his arm reached out and wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her against him. He felt her warmth hit him in the ribs, radiating through the layer of his jacket and the hoodie and shirt underneath as if they weren’t there. His breath caught in his throat. For one selfish moment, he closed his eyes to all the horror around them and focused on holding Abby. Would he ever get this chance again? This was madness. He was holding her like a ... well, not like a friend would. Well, maybe like a friend would. They’d hugged before. But, not like this. She was pressed so close to him. He was holding her too tight, he knew it. But he couldn’t stop himself. She was shaking in his arms.

He released her and after a second, she stepped back and looked up at him. Aaron felt his heart stop

in his chest at the look on her face. Shock? Worry? Regret? He couldn't be sure. What he was positive about was the fact that his best friend had never looked at him like this before.

She dropped her gaze from his, stepping back and wiping her eyes. She cleared her throat and it was the most sobering sound that Aaron could ever remember hearing.

"You're right," Abby said. "Let's go. Now." Aaron nodded and snatched the papers off the broken folding table.

The glowing Christmas decorations touting slogans of "Happy Holidays" and "Ho Ho Ho" felt like they were mocking them as they trudged across town to the Sheriff's Office. Aaron had to give himself a shake. They were on their way to the Hope Island Sheriff's Office to report a murder. An actual murder. Something that didn't happen in Hope. At least not very often. The crime statistics for the island town were a point of pride for its three thousand residents.

And Fred. Why him? A gym teacher and an all-around nice guy. A stab of guilt punched Aaron in the gut. Of course, it was less than a week ago when he was thinking dark thoughts about Fred for apparently having a thing for Abby.

Fred was so calm that he whistled during warm-ups before basketball games. As if they weren't about to play in front of an audience, judging them ... it was almost *irritating* how calm Fred was. What could he have possibly done to instill so much *rage* in someone that they'd want to shove him and then bash his head into a dumpster until he died?

"It has to be some kind of maniac," Aaron said out loud. He hadn't meant to, but he saw Abby nod

beside him while they paused to let a group of tourists oohing and ahhing about Hope's decorations pass in front of them.

"Who would want to hurt Fred? He was a nice guy," Abby murmured. From the look on her face, Aaron could tell she was saying it more to herself than to him.

The Sheriff's Office was practically hopping for a Thursday with three of the deputies on duty.

Maggie looked up as they entered. "Hey you two," she smiled at Aaron and then carried the smile over to Abby and added a wink. Aaron blinked at her. What was with the wink? Maybe it wasn't a wink. Maybe she had an eyelash in her eye.

"Mags," Abby said, putting the papers on the countertop in front of her. "We need to talk to you and the deputy."

Maggie's mouth creased in a small frown. "Ok, Abs. What about?"

"Fred Goss." Aaron didn't miss the crack in Abby's voice.

"The accident in the alley?" Maggie was on her feet now and moving over to stand on the other side of the countertop. Aaron saw her eyes drop to Abby's scribbled notes.

Abby nodded. "It's urgent. Can- can we talk somewhere private?"

"Uh, sure," Maggie said, moving over to the swinging half door in the high countertop and holding it open to let them pass. Once Aaron had cleared it, she moved to lead them down the hall into a ... storage room. There was an overhead fluorescent light hanging on a chain and a card table with four chairs around it.

“I’ll go get Bill,” Maggie said. “If you two want to just have a seat.”

They slumped down into two of the rickety folding chairs. Abby was moving her papers around, keeping her gaze on the table. He wanted to do or say something that would be comforting to her. He opened and closed his mouth several times, trying to think of something to say. *They’ll believe us, they have to. We’re going to do right by Fred. I’m sorry I held you like that in the alley. I know it wasn’t exactly best-friend-like.* It all sounded bad, even inside his head. Luckily, he was saved further embarrassment from blurting any of this out when Maggie, Deputy Benton, and the sheriff all came in. Maggie moved around the table and unfolded a fifth chair to sit by Abby while the two men settled themselves in the chairs nearest the door.

“Now,” the sheriff said, setting the tone for who was going to speak at this little interrogation session. “Maggie says you two have something to tell us about Fred Goss’s accident?”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Abby blurted out.

Aaron felt the atmosphere in the room shift.

The sheriff sighed. “Abby, I’ve seen this before. You’re feeling guilty because you’re his girlfriend and you weren’t with him. But honey, it was an accident.”

Aaron felt himself automatically shift back in his seat. He knew Abby well enough to know what was coming next.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Abby repeated. Her voice was even, but Aaron could see the laser beam warming up behind her eyes. He wondered vaguely if the sheriff’s face would melt like in that Indiana Jones movie. Before the sheriff could argue with

her, she picked up the stack of papers, tapped them on the table to straighten them, turned them toward the sheriff, and slid them across the table. "He was murdered."

Abby was experienced with holding control of a room full of bored and obnoxious teenagers who would rather be anywhere else. She carefully laid out their hypothesis, testing parameters, the evidence they collected, the data they analyzed, and their conclusions. She spoke with such authority and controlled dignity that Aaron found himself smiling, just watching her. Abby was ... amazing. When the sheriff tried to interrupt, she quickly acknowledged that she knew he would have questions but asked him to hold them until she'd finished explaining their conclusions, and carried on. Aaron studied the faces of the deputies and sheriff. Maggie's eyes were wide and her mouth was slightly open. Bill Benton looked concerned, but it was the sheriff's face that sent Aaron's blood pressure skyrocketing. He was almost ... smirking. He was listening to Abby with his eyes slightly out of focus, his gaze on the table, occasionally moving his wrist to glance at his watch.

When Abby concluded, she pulled the sandwich baggie with the blood-stained fabric scrap and her phone showing the pictures of the dumpster's blood spatter and slid them to the middle of the table for inspection. Bill picked up her phone and stared at the pictures. No one spoke. Abby's hands were resting on the card table, one over the other as she surveyed the officers in front of her. Maggie had snagged the baggie with the fabric and was studying it under the buzzing fluorescent light. Aaron glanced at the sheriff's face. His expression hadn't changed.

“While I appreciate all the trouble you went to,” the sheriff started, every word dipped in condescension, making Aaron’s hands ball into fists in his lap. “It doesn’t prove anything. You didn’t see anyone in the alley with Fred, did you?”

Abby frowned. “Well no, but why would his murderer hang around?”

The sheriff sighed. “Fred Goss died of head trauma from slipping and hitting his head on the dumpster. That’s it. The coroner confirmed it. And he went to medical school.”

Aaron felt his legs tense under the table. He’d had it. “Did he study *forensic science* in medical school,” Aaron ground out. He jerked his head at Abby. “*She* did. I’d trust her opinion on what happened over that of a pediatrician.”

The sheriff glanced at Aaron, and in that split second of a glare, he saw the initial fleeting look he’d gotten from the men in Hope since he’d arrived. It usually changed once he got to know them, but always at first, when he dared voice an opinion on something to do with Hope, it was the look that plainly said, “*You’re not from here. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Shut up.*”

Abby glanced at Maggie who handed over the sandwich baggie. “What about this?” Abby asked, pushing the scrap of fabric across the table towards the sheriff. “I found it under the dumpster. I’ll bet that that’s either Fred’s blood or the killer’s. It’s ripped.”

The sheriff shrugged. “It doesn’t prove anything, Abby. That could have come from anywhere. It was under a dumpster. It could have been there forever. And those spots on it could be anything.”

The room was quiet for a moment and Aaron saw Abby's spine stiffen and her expression drop to neutral as she stared, unblinking, at the sheriff. "Sheriff, why are you trying so hard to *not* want this to be a homicide?" She said it simply, without emotion, almost as if she were asking about the weather.

Now it was the sheriff's turn to get angry. His expression hardened and he put one knobby finger on the notes, tapping everything Abby had presented him with as if his finger was a hammer and all of her hard work and brilliant experimentation were nothing but a troublesome nail that needed to be pounded back into place.

"Now, listen here. I appreciate your situation. I know you're feeling sad and upset about Fred's death, but it was an accident. That's what the report says, that's what the coroner says. And Abby, think about it, there's *no motive*. Who in the hell would want to murder a nice gym teacher from a tiny island? Who would have so much anger that they'd want to beat him to death and leave him in a cold alley? See? It doesn't make any sense! It was an accident. Why can't *you* accept that?"

"Because it's not what the evidence says," Aaron ground out. He felt all the eyes in the room snap onto him and his inner anxiety screamed. He clamped a hand over its mouth and pressed on, letting his anger run this interaction. "You're choosing right now, Sheriff, to ignore the truth in favor of some hurried report from a doctor who serves as the coroner part-time. You're *ignoring* evidence."

The sheriff's voice was cold as he surveyed Aaron. "Son, I don't know you ..."

“I’m Aaron Burns. I teach English at the high school,” Aaron growled.

“... or how you’re involved in this,” the sheriff continued, raising his voice, “but I don’t have the time to listen to every half-cocked theory coming from a pair of ... teachers.” His phone beeped. He dragged it off his hip, glanced at the screen, and stood up. “Especially when I have *medical professionals* telling me something different.” He glanced at Bill. “And now Bill and I have to get to the docks. Apparently, an over-inebriated tourist is being belligerent and upsetting the incoming tourists.” And without another glance at Abby or Aaron, he yanked the storage room door open and headed out.

Bill looked back at them. “Keep digging,” he muttered, glancing down the hallway. And then he glanced over at Aaron. “I’m not an original islander either.” His gaze moved to Abby. “So my word doesn’t hold enough weight to sway the sheriff. He needs a motive. That would tip the scales. Find that and we’re in business.” Bill glanced at Maggie, and Aaron saw her nod. He didn’t miss their meaning. *Help them if you can*, Bill seemed to have been telling her. As soon as the door closed behind Bill, Maggie moved to Bill’s seat and looked at Abby and Aaron.

“This is huge.” They both nodded and Maggie shook her head. “I mean *really* huge. There hasn’t been a murder in Hope for twenty years. I mean, there’ve been a few close calls ... what happened with the old newspaper editor Clarence last Christmas. But ... nothing like this.” She reached out and put a hand over Abby’s and squeezed. “I know you’re brilliant, Abs. You feel pretty sure about this?”

Abby nodded. "I didn't want it to be true, Maggie. I ... but science is impartial. And we didn't have a perfect experiment. There's a margin of error, but as hard as we tried, we couldn't figure out any way for someone to trip, make that scuff mark, *and* leave blood spatter on the dumpster *without* multiple blows."

Maggie sighed. "Sugar Rush and Excavation are planning on putting up alley cameras, but it's too little, too late for Fred. I wish we had something like that to convince ole Sheriff 'Blinders', but we don't."

Abby nodded. "But Bill said if we could figure out the motive, the sheriff might listen to us."

Aaron straightened in his chair. "Then that's what we'll do." Maggie and Abby nodded. Abby turned to glance at him and he didn't miss the grateful half-smile on her lips and it felt like a calming hand on his chest, quelling the righteous indignation and anger he'd felt toward the sheriff for how he'd treated them.

"You two let me know if there's anything I can do to help," Maggie said. "Abs, you have my cell number." She pulled a card out of her pocket along with a pen and scribbled her number out for Aaron before sliding it across the table to him.

Maggie's attention was back on Abby. "I believe you. And I can tell, Bill does too. We'll do anything we can from here. Unfortunately, his roommate already claimed the body and sent it over to the funeral home to be cremated, so taking another look at the actual body won't be possible, but I can ask Doc Brewer for the x-rays and medical reports, anything additional he did besides the death report."

“That would be great,” Abby said, squeezing Maggie’s hand on the table. “Let us know if you find anything.” She got to her feet and glanced at Aaron. “And we’ll do some digging and see if we can figure out a motive.”

The wind had died down to a soft breeze by the time they left the Sheriff’s Office. They stood on the sidewalk and after a moment, they both let out a long sigh. Abby gave him a sarcastic grin. “Well, Scully, up for round two? It’s not nearly as scientific. More loquacious and psychological, which I believe is your department, Mr. Psychology Minor.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. One night, he and Abby had started talking about college and he’d let slip that he’d taken a minor in psychology. He’d made a quick recovery, telling her that the classes had just happened to line up with his schedule. He’d never told her that he’d taken the classes because he wanted to understand what was different about him. He didn’t regret it. It had led to his anxiety diagnosis and given him the tools to live with it. But it wasn’t something he’d ever confessed to anyone. Not even Abby. She was his best friend, but the thing that gave him more nightmares and kept him up later than anything else was the thought of how Abby would look at him differently or act differently around him if she knew what a mess he was inside his head. Sometimes when she did something so thoughtful like suggesting they watch one of his favorite movies after a bad day, even if they’d watched it the night before, he’d relax but later that night as he lay in bed, he’d start to sweat, wondering if she somehow knew his secret.

“Well, first things first,” Abby said, tugging the zipper on her coat all the way to her chin and

glancing up at him. “We better go return Dean Martin to Mr. Elton’s so we don’t incur his ballistic wrath. And or Mrs. Shiner’s ‘told you so dance’. I can only imagine what that would look like.”

Aaron chuckled. “I don’t know. Mrs. Shiner is kind of an enigma. She both seemed to hate having Dean Martin around, but also wanted him back in one piece.”

Abby snorted. “Probably the same sentiment shared by Dean’s wives in real life.”

They turned down the sidewalk, side-stepping tourists posing with the giant and terrifying Frosty statue outside of the Hope Away From Home Inn, and the holiday wreath display outside the Red, White & Flower Shop.

“Well, where do you think we should start on our dirt digging in our motive scavenger hunt?” Abby muttered as a tourist jostled her sideways to bounce off of Aaron’s hip. Instinctively he reached out to steady her and immediately lost his train of thought.

“Uh, well, we could start asking all the other teachers at the school. Maybe some of them are ... were closer with Fred and they might have heard if he ever had a beef with anyone.”

“Angela,” Abby paused and looked up at Aaron, her eyes wide. “Darren mentioned that Angela and Fred had dated and that they still had lunch together.”

Aaron nodded. “Ok. We definitely need to talk to her.” He pushed aside the memory of the flicker of annoyance he’d felt when Greta had mentioned it, but he needed to ask. “Oh, and didn’t you meet Fred’s roommate? Eric something?”

“Simmons,” Abby said, nodding. She didn’t meet his gaze. She started chewing on her bottom lip as she thought. “Yeah, we should talk to him too. And what about other members of your basketball team? And do we know if Fred had any other hobbies?”

“I’ll bet Eric will know,” Aaron tried to keep his voice neutral, and he might have been too successful at it.

“True.” Abby paused and looked up at him, the light of a forming plan dancing in her eyes. “Ok. So this will be much faster if we divide and conquer. How about you start with Angela and I’ll start with Eric, then we’ll meet up tonight and compare notes and go from there?”

Aaron hesitated. Deep in the traitorous depths of his heart he didn’t like the idea of Abby being alone with Eric again. He hadn’t missed the way the redhead had smiled at Abby and laughed at her jokes at the brunch.

“Sure,” Aaron said, feeling his voice crack, and hoping that Abby wouldn’t notice. He nodded and coughed trying to cover the moment. Abby held his gaze for a second, but her expression was unreadable. They rounded the corner of shops that included Excavation and Sugar Rush and paused at the mouth of the alley.

“Uh,” Abby said into the silence. “Where’s Dean Martin?”

Aaron scanned the alley. It was empty. The table where they’d left the dummy was swept clean. He bent to look under it, in and behind the dumpster, and in the open bags of trash piled up next to it.

Aaron turned to see Abby standing in the middle of the alley, hands on hips. “Who the hell would

run off with Dean Martin?”

ABBY

The day had already been incredibly too long for it to be a winter break Thursday. They'd both acquired and lost a Dean Martin look-a-like dummy, proven by experimentation that Fred was likely murdered, and had a confrontation with the law. And Aaron ... no. She wasn't going to let herself relive that roller coaster ride. She was afraid if she did, it might become a repeat of the ill-fated Six Flags trip with her sister, post-fried food, and every roller coaster in the park.

They needed to find a motive for why someone would want to kill Fred, and they needed to find it fast. Already, there was a good chance that the killer had disappeared and might never be caught, which would mean no justice for Fred Goss. *Of course, a niggling voice at the back of her mind said, there's also the possibility that the killer is still on the island, and might start getting that murder-urge again if they aren't going to stop at Fred.*

Ok. Her imagination was starting to run away with her. It happened from time to time. She could admit that. She sighed, turning back to look at Aaron. "Ok, we don't have time to do a separate man-dummy hunt. I say we just avoid Mr. Elton, Mrs. Shiner, and the dance academy until we find Dean." She didn't miss Aaron's doubtful look and she crossed her arms. "I know it probably won't be

for long. They'll hunt us down. But, at the moment, finding out who killed Fred is a much bigger dumpster fire. Missing CPR and dance dummy is a shopping cart fire, tops." Aaron nodded. "Ok. I'm going to go try to find Eric and get whatever I can out of him. You ok to call Angela, and uh do the same?" A part of Abby winced. She could just picture Aaron sitting on a couch with Angela in front of a fire, asking questions about Fred and then holding her while she cried. Then kissing her through the tears ... With a mental record scratch, she yanked her attention back to the present. Was ... was Aaron blushing? But he was frowning, his lips pressed together as he nodded.

"Right. I'll give her a call. But whatever we find out, we meet up afterward. Tonight. And then we plan our next move, right?" Aaron asked, his eyes boring into hers.

Abby nodded, a thin thread of relief winding through her. At least he wouldn't be staying the night over there. Not when they had notes to compare. An a-hole part of her brain whispered, *What are you, two years old? There's plenty that can happen between people without staying the night with them.* Abby mentally grit her teeth and told that part of her brain to take a hike.

"I'll text you when I'm headed home?" Abby asked, keeping her face neutral but hoping Aaron would say the same.

He nodded. "Ok."

That was it? Ok?

He had his phone in his hand and he turned to head out of the alley. Abby followed him and when he lifted his phone to his ear, she squared her shoulders, waved to him, and headed off toward

the center of town. She hadn't thought to get Eric's cell phone number. He had hers, but he hadn't even texted her so she didn't have his number to call. The beacon that was the De-Floured Bakery loomed ahead of her and she made a beeline for it. She needed coffee. And, she reminded herself, there was also the possibility that Eric might be there. Now that he knew where the good coffee was, there was a pretty good chance that he'd find his way there between shifts if it was open.

She held her breath as she drew even with the bakery windows. Being a Thursday evening and just after five, the bakery was full of early bird diners, bored and cold tourists, townsfolk looking for a late afternoon caffeine fix, and ... Eric Simmons, sitting by himself at a two-person cafe table in the corner by the last window. Abby breathed a sigh of relief. At least *something* was going her way today. She glanced around before she headed inside, just in case she caught a glimpse of someone carrying around Dean Martin.

Inside, she joined the short line at the counter, collected a coffee and two cupcakes from Bart and strolled over to Eric's table. As she drew closer, she studied his profile. Even from a distance, she could see his gaze was distant. He'd been staring down at a folded newspaper, but she could tell he wasn't really seeing it.

"Hey," Abby said, trying to keep her voice bright, "Anyone sitting here?" she asked, nudging the empty chair across from him. He jerked his eyes up from the table surface and the distant, haunted look came into focus as recognition rolled across his features and he smiled.

"You are. Have a seat."

She settled herself and held out the cupcakes to him. “Serious question. How do you feel about fondant nipple barbells? It looks like Bart’s been improving his air-brushing skills because this one seems to have either a heart or a smaller set of boobs ‘tattooed’ on it.”

“I’ll take the nipple barbell one,” Eric muttered, his ears turning pink as he gratefully took the cupcake from Abby and started peeling the wrapper. “Thanks, I ... I think I forgot to eat today. Because even this terrifyingly anatomically correct cupcake looks delicious.”

Abby’s heart ached for Eric. She could only imagine what she’d be like if something happened to Aaron ... “Do you ... do you have to work tonight?” she asked, taking a sip of her coffee.

Eric shook his head. “They gave me tonight off too.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I mean, I haven’t exactly been slipping at work, but I know I’ve been distracted and ...” he trailed off, staring out the window.

“I’m glad you’ve got the night off,” Abby said, trying to regain his attention. Maybe if she could keep him talking, it would help with whatever was going through his head and get her to some information about a possible motive at the same time. Win-win.

Eric nodded and took a bite of his cupcake, chewing slowly. It didn’t seem likely that he was going to start the conversation, so Abby took a deep breath and decided to just jump in with both feet.

“Hey, Eric. You’ve known ... you knew Fred for a long time. Can you think of any ... enemies Fred might have had?”

To her surprise, Eric snorted. “Enemies? Are you kidding? Fred once forgot to thank a bag boy at the store because a friend had called him while he was getting his groceries and as soon as he hung up with them, he walked *back* to the store just to thank the kid. Fred is . . .,” he sighed, “Fred was the nicest guy in the world. He’d give you the shirt off his back and apologize if the size wasn’t perfect or you didn’t like the color.”

Abby inwardly sighed. That’s what she was afraid of. Without a motive, how was she supposed to get the sheriff to reopen the investigation? A chilling thought rolled over her. What if it was random? What if Fred was just in the wrong place at the wrong time and there was no rhyme or reason as to why they targeted and killed him?

“Fred was such a go-with-the-flow guy,” Eric was saying, “Well, I mean there was that one time with Alex, our next-door neighbor.”

Abby sat up straighter in her chair, her gaze laser-focused on Eric. “What happened with your neighbor?”

Eric sighed. “It was nothing. Very, very occasionally, Fred’s calm nature and approach to things rubbed a certain *personality type* the wrong way. Fred was always about fairness. I think that’s why he loved teaching gym so much. He liked sports because sports have rules and consequences for breaking them. Our neighbor, Jim Donahue. He has this little yappy dog, I think it’s a chihuahua, named Buster. Well, Buster likes to come to our side yard to take his daily, sometimes *twice* daily dump. Eric asked Jim to take care of it when Buster did his business on our lawn and Jim said he would, but he never did, so Eric would take a shovel and throw Buster’s business back in Jim’s yard before he’d mow. Soon, there was this row of little Buster

mines lining the edge of Jim's yard and Fred would just whistle while he mowed down the property line, leaving the lined up poop for Jim to deal with. When Jim got mad about it, Fred just smiled in that easy reassuring way of his, but ..."

"It just made Jim *more* angry, right?" Abby asked.

Eric nodded. "Like I said, Fred was always calm. So hot-headed people *really* didn't like him. He would just smile, firmly state what was fair, and they'd just get angrier. But, I mean, it was just dog crap. So, I mean, who cares?" Eric chuckled. "Now, after everything that's happened, it just ... sounds so ridiculous, you know?"

Abby chuckled too and nodded, thinking. *I guess it's possible that Jim killed Fred. But over dog poop?* She'd met Jim Donahue. He was a retired C.P.A. who'd moved out to the island after thirty-five years in Seattle. He was short-tempered, but she'd never seen or heard of Jim being *violent*.

Eric sighed. "Yeah, I mean, besides Jim, the only time he ever mentioned being at odds with anyone was when he got a couple of angry emails from this guy in his Fantasy Football league."

For the second time, Abby's brain sniffed the air, hoping that she might have stumbled onto something useful. "Fantasy Football league?" she repeated.

Eric nodded. "Yeah. He was really into it. He had a bunch of guys from the mainland and one or two on the island that were all in the league with him. Apparently, this one guy was pretty angry. Even threatened him once."

"Why?" Abby asked.

“I don’t know exactly,” Eric said, frowning. “I’ve never played in a fantasy league so I have no idea how bad what Fred did was. He said he ‘blocked a trade’ and it pissed this guy off.” Eric shrugged. “It doesn’t sound like it’s earth-shattering though, right? I mean, it’s a game. They just do math and analyze injuries, stats, that kind of thing. It’s all just on paper ... or a spreadsheet. I mean, how could someone get mad about that?”

Abby shrugged. “I know people usually have money riding on leagues like that.”

Eric’s eyebrows shot up his forehead in surprise. “You play?”

Abby shook her head quickly, “No. I’ve just heard.” She *was not* about to tell him that in college she and her friends had taken the rules for fantasy sports leagues and built an *actual* Fantasy league where they drafted gods, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, fairy tale characters, pro wrestlers, politicians, and superheroes to fight to the death in imagined scenarios.

“So,” Abby said, trying to forge ahead and distract Eric from her knowledge of fantasy leagues, “did Fred ever show you those messages? Like the one with the threat?”

Eric nodded. “Yeah, he did. The guy kind of ... sounded unhinged.” He frowned at Abby. “Why are you asking if Fred had enemies?”

Abby took a deep breath. If she wanted to get everything Eric might know or any ideas he might have on who could have killed Fred, she was going to have to tell him everything. She leaned forward and lowered her voice and was grateful when she saw Eric lean forward in his seat so their heads were closer together and she could whisper,

significantly lowering the chances of someone at the next table overhearing her explanation.

“We think Fred’s death wasn’t an accident. We think he was murdered.”

“Murdered?” Eric asked, jerking back, his voice too loud.

Abby put a finger to her lips and Eric nodded, leaning back in.

“What makes you think Fred was,” he glanced around and then lowered his voice to more breath than whisper, “murdered.”

In a low voice, Abby reeled off the evidence they’d found, the experiment they’d run, and how they’d taken it all to the cops.

“But the sheriff doesn’t believe us without a motive. So, we’re trying to figure out *why* someone would want to kill Fred, and who that person could be.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Eric asked.

“Me and Aaron,” Abby said quickly.

“Aaron?” Eric frowned. “Was that the guy you were at the Christmas Sweater thing with?”

Abby shook her head. “No, that was Darren.”

Eric leaned back and grinned at her. “Fred had no chance with you, did he?”

Abby jerked back in her seat and blinked at him. “What are you talking about?”

Eric shook his head. “Fred was shy and it sounds like you’re pretty outgoing. Probably much better at dating than he was.”

Abby actually laughed. “You’re kidding me, right? Darren was a set-up date from this Santa’s

Singles thing, just like Fred and I were supposed to be.” She pushed away the reoccurring wave of guilt trying to lap at her heels. “And Aaron is my best friend. He played on the basketball team at school with Fred. They were friends too.”

“So you’re not dating either of them?” Eric asked, a half-smile tugging at the side of his mouth.

Abby shook her head. “Nope.”

Eric looked down and crumpled his cupcake wrapper. “I really, really appreciate what you’re doing for Fred, looking into all of this. I just ...” he shook his head and raised his blue eyes to meet her gaze. “It’s just hard to believe ... Fred was *murdered*.” He shook his head and then paused when he saw the look on Abby’s face. “Don’t get me wrong!” he said quickly, holding his hands up. “I believe you. Science doesn’t lie. Patients do, but the facts are the facts. And your experiment sounds like it was as well planned out and executed as any experiment could be with the resources you had. So, sign me up. I believe you. I just can’t believe *it*.”

“Do you think this fantasy football guy could have followed through on his threat?” Abby asked. No point in beating around the bush anymore.

Eric hesitated, thinking. Then, he shrugged. “Maybe? It just seems like such a stupid thing to kill someone over.”

Abby shook her head. “People shoot each other over parking spaces on the mainland. I think the only reason we don’t have any of that here is that there are *no* parking spaces. It’s a pedestrian town. Cars stay in driveways or garages until they get on the ferry to go to the mainland and go right back into their garages or driveways when they come back.”

“Fair enough,” Eric nodded.

Abby had a thought. “Can I see these messages Fred got? Maybe with the context we have now, *knowing* Fred was murdered, maybe we could pick up on some clues that would get the sheriff off his keister.”

Eric smiled. “I’ve never heard anyone say ‘keister’ in real life. I thought that was something reserved for old western movies.”

“Well now you have,” Abby said, grinning and standing up.

Eric got to his feet. “Well, if you have time, and don’t mind the walk, I can show them to you now.”

“Sure.”

Eric and Fred’s house was a little blue bungalow on the corner of 4th and Seaside. She felt herself smiling as they approached. “Is your mailbox a Stormtrooper helmet?”

“Yep,” Eric said, reaching over to unlatch the front gate leading up the walkway. “In homage to our newspaper guy who can’t ever seem to hit our front porch.” Abby chuckled and Eric grinned. “Most people don’t get the reference when I make that joke. You seem to be an admirable adversary, Abby Locke.”

The inside of the house was a mismatch of sports paraphernalia and *Star Wars*.

“I had no idea Fred was such a *Star Wars* fan,” Abby said, looking around.

“He was. It was one of the things we really bonded over. But all the *Star Wars* decor is mine,” Eric said. He paused as he unzipped his coat. “I told you I was a messy, terrible roommate, right?”

Abby nodded. “That you did tell me. You *didn’t* mention, however, to me that you had a mint-in-box Luke Skywalker lightsaber.” She moved across the room to look at it on display. “This is like number sixty-seven or sixty-eight on my ‘must get before I die’ list.”

“Wow,” Eric chuckled. “If it’s that far down your list, I’m not sure we can be friends. Just out of curiosity, what could possibly be on your list sixty-seven times *before* the greatest nerd artifact known to man?”

“The ‘greatest nerd artifact?’” Abby scoffed. “Not even the top fifty. There are Bluetooth communicator badges, a bat’leth *actually* used on set by Michael Dorn, a working Borg cube replica ...”

Eric groaned. “Don’t tell me you’re a *Trekkie*.”

Abby grinned. “And proud of it. What? You don’t like *Star Trek*?”

Eric pretended to check the room for eavesdroppers. “Ok, I think if we’re quiet my dad in New York won’t hear me say this, but I was raised in a very, very religious household.”

“So strictly *Star Wars*?”

He nodded and tapped his nose. “We followed the way of the Jedi and the United Federation of Planets was considered the ultimate swear word. So, I didn’t have a chance to ... experiment ... until I went to college. I got to see the remakes in theaters when I told my dad I was at study groups and, well, I was kind of hooked. I’ve been jonesing to watch some of the older movies, but I can only find the theatrical versions in the movie rental place here on the island.”

“Oh, I’ve got a stash you’re going to love then,” Abby grinned. “Director’s cuts, Blu-rays ...”

“Stop! There’s only so much a man can take. How much?”

Abby shrugged, “First watch is free, man. When we’re done here, if you don’t mind another walk across town, you can take them home with you tonight to watch.” At that, Abby was treated to the first full smile she’d ever seen on Eric’s face.

“That would be awesome. To tell you the truth, I was *not* looking forward to a night off tonight, sitting home by myself in this place.” The smile was gone now as he looked around the room. “I’m going to have to move. This place ... it was Fred’s for so long before I moved in. It ... it almost feels like it’s ...”

“Haunted?” Abby asked quietly, her gaze falling on a framed photo of the teacher’s basketball team from the prior year. She could see Fred, standing in the front row with Aaron behind him. Both men were smiling out at the room, Aaron looking slightly embarrassed and Fred looking proud and happy. “They’d just won the island adult league championship,” she said, more to herself than Eric. She wasn’t a sports person, but she hadn’t missed a game. It was in the best friends handbook: you don’t miss a game when your ride-or-die is playing.

“Oh yeah?” Eric asked.

Abby nodded. “Last year. It was a real nail biter. They were up against the Baskin Construction team. Just before the buzzer, Jamie Baskin missed a pass, Fred caught it, shot from the three-point line, and made it.”

Eric joined her to look at the photo. “He looks happy.” Abby glanced at Eric and saw the glassy tears in his eyes. “I’m glad he at least got to have that.”

Abby didn’t know what to do. She didn’t really know Eric well enough to hug him ... hand on the shoulder? It all seemed too weird.

“I’m so sorry,” Abby whispered.

“Why are you sorry?” Eric said, swiping at his face with his hand. “You’re *actually* trying to figure out what happened to him. Which is more than I can say for anyone else. Thank you, by the way.” He caught her gaze and smiled then he sniffed hard and looked past her. “Now, let’s see what we can find out from angry fantasy league guy’s messages.”

He led the way to a laptop buried under several scrub tops and some paperwork Abby recognized as the matrices elementary teachers fill out for students in art, music, and gym classes.

“Ok,” Eric said, swiping at his eyes again with his coat sleeve as he sat down and opened the laptop. “Lucky for us, Fred always said his memory for passwords was on the same level as a toll booth worker’s memory for cars. So, he always wrote them down.” He pointed at a piece of paper, taped to the laptop next to the touchpad. In a few seconds, they’d logged into Fred’s email and Eric was hesitating at the search bar.

“What?” Abby asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m debating. If I search Fred’s email for ‘fantasy’ we may learn things we don’t want to know and then spend the rest of our lives wishing we *didn’t* know.”

“Good point,” Abby said. “Maybe just search ‘football’ or ‘league’?”

Unfortunately, as Fred was also a gym teacher, a little league coach in the summertime, and an avid football fan, it took some time to find the messages.

“Here he is, Dustin Gregory. Whoa. And here’s the one with the threat. ‘Fred, that was bullshit, blocking that trade. If you ever do something like that again, I’m going to put my fist through that thick head of yours.’” Eric looked up at Abby, his face pale. “I mean, wasn’t Fred ...”

“Blows to the head from the dumpster,” Abby said quietly. Yeah, Dustin Gregory was starting to look like a pretty good candidate.

“You’re from here, right?” Eric asked. Abby nodded. “Do you know this Dustin guy?”

She shook her head. “No, but I don’t know everyone that moves here unless we cross paths on a regular basis.”

Eric opened a search window and brought up Facebook. After some digging, he found Dustin Gregory’s profile. “Well, he was Facebook friends with Fred. I don’t know if that’s good or bad, but at least you can see what he looks like.” Dustin Gregory was a tall man with pale skin, blue eyes, a shaved head, and a long scar on one cheek. *Honestly, Abby thought, all he needs is an eye patch and he would be a Scooby-Doo villain.*

“I don’t recognize him,” Abby said. “Did he list where he works?”

“Um, it looks like Scelero Plumbing?” Eric asked, looking over at her.

Abby nodded. “Yeah, I don’t frequent the plumbing store, so it could be why we haven’t

crossed paths.”

Eric looked worried. “You’re not planning on going to his house tonight or something, are you?”

Abby shook her head. “Nah, tomorrow is Friday. I’ll go by the plumbing store in the daylight with lots of witnesses to interrogate him.” She was only half-joking. Dustin Gregory looked like a scary guy. And if that face, angry and vicious was the last thing that Fred had seen ... and over something as pathetic as a fantasy sports league?

“It still seems so ridiculous,” Abby muttered, pacing the room. “If this guy *killed* Fred over a football league played out *on paper!*?”

“Parking spaces, remember?” Eric said, zipping up his coat. “You were the one who said it.”

Abby nodded. “I know, but,” she could feel her throat starting to close and her eyes burning. “But it’s not supposed to happen in *Hope*. This place is usually so safe.”

Eric shrugged. “Seattle isn’t unsafe all the time. Just when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object, i.e. two people of differing personalities reach a disagreement.”

Abby shook her head. “It shouldn’t be that way.”

Eric nodded. “I know. Life would be so much better if we lived in Jean-Luc Picard’s world.”

She cut her eyes to him, nodding approvingly. “The force is strong with this one.”

He rolled his eyes. “Ok, now you’re genre-mashing and I just felt a great disturbance in the Force, as if a million *Star Wars* fans all groaned at once and then suddenly fell silent in shame.”

She sighed. “Are all *Star Wars* fans this dramatic?”

“We can’t all be Vulcans,” Eric muttered, following her to the front door. “Speaking of, is it still ok if I walk you home and borrow from your Blu-ray, director’s cut stash?”

“Of course,” Abby said. “I won’t even report you to the Emperor. That is, as long as you bring them back.”

Abby could hear fifty children singing Christmas carols as they walked around the edge of the town square towards The Spark Theatre.

“So, thanks for introducing me to Angela at that brunch thing,” Eric said. “She told me about this Santa’s Singles thing you’re all doing and when I mentioned I’d be interested in joining it, she got me connected with Greta so I’m officially back in the game.”

Abby wasn’t sure what the weird barrage of feelings this new information was giving her was all about. She chuckled. “Oh, were you *out* of the game?”

Eric’s smile fell. “Yeah, I’ve been out since I moved here. Bad breakup in Seattle. But I don’t know,” he grinned at Abby, “I’m kind of fascinated by the island’s charm and I think the people here have a lot to do with it. I’m starting to think that maybe those stories about pirates and sirens on islands dragging them to the depths to eat them, had something to them.”

“Well with smooth talk like that, you should have no problem,” Abby said, rolling her eyes. “Please ask your next date if they’re actually sirens planning to drag you to the depths and eat you.

And don't forget to get the face-slap on camera for me. It'll be an awesome GIF."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I'm not clever, but I hope I'm not that bad. Besides, with people like you and Angela in this Singles thing, I'm going to have to up my game. She wants to go ziplining somewhere on the mainland after Christmas."

"Yeah? Are you excited?" Abby asked.

"I'm terrified," Eric muttered. "I've never ziplined before. Have you?"

She shook her head and they were quiet for a moment. Seriously, what was it with Angela and guys? *Duh, Abby, the voice in her head said, it's because she looks like a woman, not some kind of cartoon character. When was the last time you saw her in paint-spattered overalls with a ponytail? Never. Because she dresses and acts like an adult. She dresses like Greta. Those are the kind of women men that Aaron wanted.*

"Home sweet home," Abby said, nodding at her half of the duplex. She glanced at Aaron's side and saw the soft light in his front window. She breathed an inner sigh of relief. He was home. As she climbed the steps, that mean part of her brain whispered, *Greta could be in there with him.* If she was good for him, she told that part of her brain, ruthlessly.

"What an ... interesting duplex," Eric said, studying the a-frame house.

Abby sighed. "Yeah, the landlord is a regular comedian. He just split the place right down the middle. The bathrooms are weird, the bedrooms are weird. I have the original front door, but Aaron's is two inches higher so we both trip almost every time coming and going. I have a closet door

that opens onto literally nothing but a blank wall because the back of *Aaron's* closet comes all the way to the door of mine. But, I got my revenge. I have towel storage in the bathroom and he doesn't, so ...”

“Oh,” Eric said, glancing over to Aaron's half, “your friend Aaron lives on the other side.”

“Yep,” Abby said, fumbling with her keys as she climbed the front steps. The comforting “whoosh” sound of the *Star Trek* doors motion sensor made her smile.

“Nice,” Eric said approvingly behind her. She dropped her keys into her Klingon bloodwine chalice and realized that Eric wasn't right behind her anymore. She turned to look at him, gaping around at her decorations. “By the power of Grayskull,” he whispered.

She grinned. “Thank you. Skeletor was my decorator.” She left Eric inspecting her action figure collection and headed to the cabinet where she kept all her DVDs.

“So how long do you think it'll be?” Eric asked.

“How long for what?” Abby asked, thumbing through the cases. She really needed to take the time to reorganize.

“How long until the Santa's Singles thing matches you and me up?”

Abby jerked her head up and bashed it on the underside of the shelf above her. She rubbed her scalp and for a second, she thought she'd scrambled something because she kept hearing the loud thump from her head making contact with the shelf. It was a few seconds before she realized the sound was coming from the door between her apartment and Aaron's.

“I think someone’s knocking,” Eric said, moving away from the door and looking at Abby.

“Oh, it’s just Aaron,” Abby said. She moved to the door and opened it.

“Hey, I kept a lookout, but I didn’t see Dean Martin anywhere around town,” she said to Aaron. He filled the doorway. His arms were crossed and he was frowning. Abby heaved a mental sigh. Chances were he’d had about as much or maybe less luck than she had in the motive hunt.

“Odd greeting,” Eric said from behind her. “Is a Dean Martin sighting out here like an Elvis sighting in Vegas?”

“Long story,” Aaron and Abby said together. Eric grinned. Abby could feel a weird tension in the atmosphere around her.

“Aaron, this is Eric Simmons, Fred’s roommate. Eric, this is Aaron Burns, my best friend and as you can see, next-door neighbor. Literally.” She chuckled but neither of the men did. They were looking each other over and the weird atmosphere was getting thicker. “Oh, Eric. I found most of them. I think I’m still missing one or two, but here’s *First Contact*, *Generations*, *Insurrection*, and *Nemesis*. I think Dana still has my box set of the first six. I’ll get them back from her so after you’re done with those, you can complete your training, young Padawan.”

Eric turned and smiled at her. “You’ve got to stop mixing franchises.”

“She does that,” Aaron said, leaning on the doorframe, still keeping his arms crossed and towering over Eric.

Eric took the DVDs from Abby and she didn’t miss the brush of his warm hand against hers.

“Thanks for the contraband,” he winked at her, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Aaron shift in the doorway.

Eric turned and paused, his gaze falling on Mr. Burns’ aquarium. “Oh wow. Is that a bearded dragon?”

“Mr. Burns,” Abby said, nodding. Eric glanced at her and then at Aaron. “After Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*. Not ... after Aaron. I already had him when Aaron moved here ...” she trailed off, realizing she was babbling.

Eric nodded, putting a finger on the glass where Mr. Burns had one claw resting, watching them all, disapprovingly. “I’ll bet he hates this cold weather.”

“It’s not his favorite,” Abby said with a sigh, “but as long as he has his heat lamp, he’s pretty happy, well, as happy as a billionaire plotting world domination from inside a glass aquarium can be.”

“He’s a billionaire too, just like his namesake?” Eric asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Uh, he’s a dragon, so horde-wealth. Strong portfolio, all that,” Abby said, waving her hand dismissively.

“Well, maybe one day he’ll tell me how he did it,” Eric said. He glanced from Aaron back to Abby.

“Well, have a good night. And Abby, thanks. For everything.”

Abby nodded. “You too. Have a good night. Enjoy. I recommend watching them in order. GFIN.”

“G-what?” Eric asked, pausing with his hand on the front door.

“Generations, First Contact, Insurrection, Nemesis,” Abby and Aaron said together.

Eric nodded. “Got it. Good night!”

And then he was gone and Aaron and Abby stood awkwardly, listening to her screen door snap closed and Mr. Burns scratching himself. She glanced over at the aquarium in time to see him roll his eyes.

AARON

“So,” Aaron said, finally breaking the awkward silence that had settled around them. It was a shell-shocked awkwardness like the time her niece had announced to the whole family that she’d used her diaper to “paint” in the bathroom. Well, maybe not that bad. “So, that’s Eric?”

Abby nodded. “Yep.” She turned to look at him and he didn’t miss the frown he was giving her. “I’m sorry. I thought you two had met before, but I forgot that I lost track of you and Greta at the brunch and I didn’t see you again.”

Maybe not, Aaron thought, but I saw you and Eric.

Aaron shrugged. “No biggie. So he’s a *Star Trek* fan? Or a ... *Star Wars* fan? You were mixing franchises so much, I had a hard time being sure.”

“Double agent. Raised *Star Wars*, but I think he’s thinking of converting to *Star Trek*.” She breezed past him and pulled her fridge door open. She’d kicked off her shoes and socks and Aaron could see her bare feet under the edge of the fridge door. “How do you feel about pizza tonight? It’s either that or some rice with a side of ... condiments.”

“Let’s get pizza.”

She placed their regular order with Dante's and he slumped down on the couch. He was being ridiculous. When did everything with Abby start getting so weird? How had they made it through three years of normal, easy friendship and ended up here in this weird, tense atmosphere where he felt like he was suffocating but also couldn't stop thinking about her? He felt sweat beginning to prick his forehead as he took several deep breaths through his nose. He was *not* going to have an anxiety attack on her couch.

She flopped down beside him and let out a deep sigh. "Well, I have a possible lead, but you go first. I want to stave off how thin my lead is for as long as possible."

Aaron snorted. "At least you *have* a lead. Angela burst into tears when I stopped by to talk to her."

"Oh, you had to go by her house?" Abby asked.

Aaron frowned. "Well, yeah. It's Thursday night. And she was home. So, that's where I went. I wanted to talk over the phone but I couldn't understand her. She ... she was crying pretty hard. I guess she and Fred had stayed close friends after their break up."

"Well at least we know it *wasn't* Angela, Abby said."

Was it Aaron's imagination, or did her voice sound just a little more clipped than usual?

"Right," Aaron said nodding, "because she was at The Alhorn with me when it happened."

"Right," Abby said, getting to her feet and moving over to feed Mr. Burns. "And Angela had no ideas about who might have wanted to hurt Fred?"

“None,” Aaron said, groaning and closing his eyes. “She was horrified at the very idea that someone had murdered him, and she just cried harder when I told her and kept saying what a good guy Fred was.”

“Poor Angela,” Abby said softly. “Well, maybe looking forward to her next date with Eric will keep her going.”

“Oh,” Aaron asked, feeling his eyebrows raise, “are she and Eric dating?” He studied the outline of Abby’s shoulder blades under her shirt as she shrugged.

“He mentioned they’re going ziplining after Christmas. And they did seem to hit it off at the brunch.”

Aaron started to breathe again. It was like being on a tilt-a-whirl that was finally slowing down as the ride came to an end. Everything was going to be ok.

“I guess he joined the Santa’s Singles thing, so I think he might be secretly bananas.”

Now Eric was in the Santa’s Singles? What, they let people join late? Did he have to fill out the stupid questionnaire? What if he was matched with Abby? Did that mean he might be asking *her* out if he and Angela weren’t exclusive?

“Eric told me about their neighbor having issues with Fred because of chihuahua poop.”

“Ok,” Aaron said, and then what she said fully hit him. “Wait, what?”

Abby sighed. “Apparently the next-door neighbor’s chihuahua liked to poop on Eric and Fred’s lawn, so Fred would move the poop back onto the neighbor’s lawn so he could mow, and

apparently how calm Fred was about the whole thing pissed the neighbor off.”

“Well that’s weird, but to think that someone would bash Fred’s head in because of chihuahua poop?”

Abby nodded. “I know, right? Now maybe bullmastiff poop, but ...”

“Anyway,” Aaron said, grinning and motioning for her to get to the point.

“*Anyway,*” she continued, “Eric told me about this fantasy football league that Fred was in with a couple of guys from here and some guys from the mainland. So we went over to their house, and ...”

“Wait, you went to his *house*?” Aaron asked.

Abby blinked at him. “Yeah, to look at the threatening messages Fred had gotten.”

“You had to go to his house for that?” Aaron asked. *What is wrong with you, he screamed internally at himself. You sound like a jerk.*

“Well, that’s where the computer with the messages lives,” Abby said, grinning at him. Aaron tried to force his face into a playful smile.

“Oh, right. So you went and looked at these messages, and?” Aaron asked, holding his breath and watching her.

She shrugged. “Dustin Gregory. He works over at Scelero Plumbing. He was mad about Fred blocking some kind of trade, so he threatened to ‘put his fist through Fred’s thick head’ if he ever did something like that again. Feels pretty thin.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Aaron said, frowning. “We should talk to him.”

Abby nodded. "Tomorrow's Friday, so I thought we could go over there in the morning. Or I can go if you already have plans."

Aaron shook his head. "No, I'm free. Let's go."

Abby nodded and he didn't miss the way her features relaxed. She'd obviously been dreading the prospect of questioning someone like Dustin Gregory on her own.

He watched her as she wearily dragged a hand down her face. "Do you mind terribly if we just unplug for the rest of the night? Just pizza and an old *MST3K* episode and not talk about anything for a couple of hours?"

Aaron smiled, feeling every tense muscle in his shoulders and chest begin to loosen. "Yes."

* * *

The morning felt like it both came too early and too late. Too early because Aaron had just drifted off when the sunshine poured in, telling him to get up, and too late because he'd spent so much of the night, waiting for the sun to come up.

He'd been lying awake for hours, berating himself for whatever the hell was going on with him and his hormones. "Just bury it, Burns," he muttered aloud to himself. "She's your best friend. So what if she starts dating Eric? If it makes her happy, it should make me happy for her."

He did his best to keep these thoughts at the front of his mind when he met Abby outside on the porch.

"Ready?" she asked, looking up at him. Instead of being pulled back, her hair was soft, curling around her shoulders and over one ear. At that moment, he almost lost his grip on the mantra

he'd been repeating to himself all morning. He couldn't speak, so he just nodded.

Scelero Plumbing was a small monument to time on Hope Island. If the sign on the door was to be believed, it had been established seventy-five years ago. The man behind the counter looked like he might have been the one to originally affix that sign, all those years earlier. The name embroidered on his work shirt said he was Mike. Abby headed to the counter with Aaron right behind her.

"Hi Mike," Abby said. "We were wondering if Dustin Gregory was in today?"

Mike squinted down at Abby and then over at Aaron. Aaron held his breath. He could tell from the way she was rubbing the back of one leg with the toe of her other shoe that she was nervous. *You have to help her. Say something.* But before Aaron could work out what kind of statement might help them, Mike jerked his head at the rows of bins and parts behind him. "He's in the back."

Dustin Gregory was a big guy. He was only an inch or two shorter than Aaron but his shoulders were twice as wide. He might have just been playing in a fantasy football league now, but he looked like he might have played football in high school.

"Yeah, I knew Fred Goss," Dustin muttered, not looking at them as he counted out rubber o-rings. "So what?"

Aaron could feel Abby's nervous energy vibrating off her. He saw the hesitation on her face.

"So, we know you had a beef with him about a trade? In an email you threatened to put your fist through his head," Aaron said. That got his attention. He turned his head and met Aaron's

eyes. Aaron did his best to stare straight through him, breathing through his nose and not giving anything away.

Finally, Dustin looked away. “Yeah. He screwed me on a trade in our league. I was mad.” He jerked his head up and glared from Aaron to Abby. “You had no right to read those emails. That was between me and Fred.”

“And Fred’s dead,” Aaron growled. “Someone killed him. Where were you last Sunday night?”

Dustin snorted. “You’re not cops. I don’t have to talk to you.”

“Maybe not,” Abby said. “Of course, we can just tell the cops what we found out, and then they can come down here to your place of work and ask you about it in their uniforms, in front of everyone ...”

Dustin glared at her and something in Aaron made him take a step toward Dustin. The movement made Dustin pause.

“Fine,” he muttered. “I was home last Sunday night. All night. I was on a forum ... arguing about standard fantasy league rules.” He glared at Aaron. “And before you ask, I live alone, so there isn’t anyone else you can badger or sic the sheriffs on.”

With a final grunt of disgust, Dustin moved away down another aisle.

“Well,” Abby said, lowering her voice. “What do you think? He has an alibi.”

“Not much of one,” Aaron muttered. Abby was staring at something behind Aaron and he turned to see what she was looking at.

“Sasha?” Abby asked.

There was a petite brunette standing in the aisle behind them, looking at a rack of faucet hose

adapters.

“Abby,” the woman said, with a smile. “What’s a dame like you doing in a place like this?”

“Oh, just ... shopping,” Abby said. Aaron quickly turned his chuckle into a cough. “What about you?”

Sasha shrugged. “I’m just killing time, waiting for the gingerbread town model thing to open. I swear, every day there’s something new to go see in this place.”

Abby nodded. “That’s fair. Oh, Sasha, this is my friend, Aaron.” She turned to him and put a hand on his arm, before motioning to Sasha. “Aaron, this is Sasha. We met a couple of times ...”

“Under both surprising and accidentally intimate circumstances,” Sasha said, winking at Abby.

“How ... confusing,” Aaron said, grinning.

“Don’t worry,” Sasha said, smiling at Aaron. “I’m not her type.”

“So this must be like your third or fourth time to the island,” Abby said, raising an eyebrow.

Sasha nodded. “I’m actually looking for a place to rent so I can finally make the move out here. I *love* this place. I mean, where else can you find boob cupcakes, the aftermath of a fruitcake fight, Santa’s Grotto entirely made out of balloons, a gingerbread town model, *and* carolers that strike like assassins.”

“Ah yes,” Abby said, nodding. “The Confounding Carolers. Thankfully, A Hope-indigenous and thankfully limited-population species.”

Aaron grinned. "And oftentimes 'endangered' species."

Sasha chuckled. "I know Abby's from here, but how did she reel you out to the island? Did you fall in love with the town too, as well as her?"

"Uh, I ..." Aaron met Abby's wide-eyed gaze.

"We're not ..."

"Together," Aaron finished.

"Just best friends," Abby added, dropping her gaze from Aaron's. She cleared her throat and turned her smile back to Sasha. "So, any rental prospects yet?"

Sasha nodded. "A couple. I just wish I knew the best neighborhoods for someone like me to live in."

"Oh," Abby said. "Our neighborhood is a pretty good place for people our age. Several of our coworkers live just down the road from us. From our ... the duplex that we share ... where we each live in one half of ... it." Aaron would have been a little stung by Abby's need to over-explain their living situation if it wasn't so funny.

"Oh! Where's that? I'll have to check it out."

"Over on Oceanview. In fact," she turned to look at Aaron. "Maryanne Butler just moved out of that triplex across the street from us, didn't she?"

Aaron nodded, straining his memory for the details. "She got a job in Seattle or something?"

Abby nodded and turned back to Sasha. "Yeah. So that might be somewhere to check out. I've seen that triplex. It's pretty nice."

"Awesome," Sasha said. "Thank you!" The watch on her wrist beeped and she looked down at

the screen. She glanced up at Abby and grinned. "Show time! Town Hall is open and I'm going to be the first one inside." With a wave and a wink, she was gone.

"Bye, Sasha," Abby chuckled as the front door of the store closed behind the retreating woman.

"She's a force of nature," Aaron muttered.

Abby nodded. "You don't know the half of it. I'm glad she's thinking of moving here. I need to introduce her to Dana. Then, *she* could sign up for these ridiculous Santa's Singles type things with her instead of roping me into them."

Aaron felt a warmth spreading through his chest. Abby wasn't thrilled with the Santa's Singles either. For a bit, he'd been worried she was starting to not mind the forced dating.

"Well, shall we go somewhere and regroup?" Abby muttered.

Aaron nodded. "Home. For sustenance and to figure out what to do next."

The temperature had dropped since they entered Scelero Plumbing. Abby tugged her knit cap lower on her head and Aaron saw her starting to shiver in the cold breeze.

"Uh, here," Aaron said, awkwardly moving to open his jacket and help shield her from the wind.

"Oh thanks," Abby breathed, pulling the side of his coat around her. "It's like the north pole is mooning us."

Aaron chuckled. "You're the scientist. So I bow to your expert opinion."

She narrowed her eyes at him, but then grinned before pulling his coat closer around her. At that moment, Aaron's heart was so full. *I should tell her.*

Let the chips fall where they may, and just tell her. Tell her what, exactly? That you ... No. Friend zone. Do. Not. Ruin. This.

Abby sighed. "How long do you think it'll be?"

Aaron frowned. "How long do I think *what* will be?"

"How long do you think it will be before Mr. Elton stops screaming at us when he finds out we lost Dean Martin?"

Aaron groaned. "Too long. I don't do great when people are screaming at me for losing their dance dummies."

Abby raised an eyebrow and looked up at him. "Happen to you before?"

"No, but I know myself well enough to know I won't do very well while it's happening," Aaron sighed.

"You? I'll be trying to crawl under Mrs. Shiner's piano. She'll be sitting at it of course. And she'll probably get a broom and try to kill me with it like that spider last year when all the ballerinas came streaming out, screaming that Mrs. Shiner was trying to kill Charlotte. It took twenty minutes to get them to calm down from their hysteria to tell us that Charlotte was a spider."

Aaron snorted. "Why were you there?"

"Flora was in the class and I was babysitting," Abby said with a sigh. "I'm starving."

Aaron grinned. "Well, at least there's cold pizza at home. That will curb the depression caused by a lost dummy and a worthless lead."

"Like you said, it's not a great alibi. Dustin *could* still be the one who killed Fred."

Aaron shrugged, turning them down Oceanview and still keeping a hand on Abby's shoulder. *It's innocent. She's cold. I'm just doing what she'd be doing ... if she was taller ... and I got colder than she did ...* He tried to get his mind off of Abby and back onto Dustin Gregory.

"Well, if he is lying about his alibi, he would have the opportunity and the motive to do it. He's got a short fuse. But how are we going to prove it? We can't search his house for evidence."

"But," Abby stopped walking and Aaron stopped short, trying to keep her wrapped in his jacket. "Did you notice his shoes?"

Aaron frowned. "His shoes?"

"Yeah, I noticed something brown, speckled across them. Almost like ..."

"Blood?" Aaron asked.

Abby nodded. "I'm not a hundred percent sure, but that's what it looked like to me."

"We should tell Maggie what we found out," Aaron said, following Abby to her front door.

"Deal," Abby said. "After lunch. And maybe a nap. I don't know about you, but I didn't sleep very well last night."

Oh, if she only knew.

ABBY

Abby was warm, comfortable, and surrounded by familiar, calming smells. Without opening her eyes, she swept her hand across her pillowcase.

It groaned.

Abby's eyes snapped open. It wasn't a pillowcase. She sat up too quickly and almost toppled off the couch. Aaron's arm fell off her back and he blinked his eyes open, squinting around the room.

"What time is it?" he murmured.

Abby couldn't answer him. That ... groan. And the feel of what was under his shirt ... The room was too warm. She must have turned up the thermostat for Mr. Burns and forgotten about it.

"Abs? You ok?" Aaron asked, shifting on the couch to sit up and fold over with his elbows on his knees. His open flannel shirt over his black t-shirt fell forward with him, hiding the outline of ... no, that wasn't. *And you shouldn't be looking anyway!*

Abby closed her eyes and swallowed hard, trying to drag her mind back to where it was supposed to be.

“Uh,” she picked her phone up off the coffee table and tapped the screen. Now she groaned, and it definitely didn’t have the same effect as the one that had come out of Aaron. She cleared her throat, trying to banish that sound from her memory. “Oh man, it’s four. How did we sleep so long?”

Aaron blinked at her. “We slept for three hours?”

Abby nodded. “We must have been pretty tired.” *Or really comfortable*, the traitorous part of her brain added. “Well, if we hurry,” Abby said, getting to her feet, “we can still catch Maggie before she leaves for the day.”

Abby forced her gaze away from Aaron while they pulled on jackets and scarves and headed out her front door.

“Sorry,” Aaron muttered under his breath.

“For what?” Abby asked, turning to look at him.

The cold air was turning Aaron’s exposed cheeks pink. “Falling asleep.”

Abby frowned. “So did I.”

It wasn’t just the cold air turning Aaron’s cheeks red now. Abby felt something trying to bloom in her chest and she did her best to quickly squash it. *That groan from Aaron wasn’t for you. For all you know he was dreaming about Greta and ...*

Abby turned her gaze back to the wet sidewalk and they walked in silence the rest of the way to the Sheriff’s Office.

“I never thought I’d be spending so much of my winter break in the Sheriff’s Office,” Abby muttered as they paused in the doorway to wipe their feet before bellying up to the counter.

Aaron chuckled. "Maybe there's some 'sonnet fodder' somewhere in here I can use. At the very least, the Whorley brothers should be impressed." Abby turned and raised an eyebrow at him. Aaron sighed. "I gave my class a winter break assignment to compose their own sonnet. But because Turk Whorley is in my class, I now have to write one too."

Abby shook her head slowly. "My friend, you and I are the rabbits that walked under the box and the Whorley brothers pulled the stick out. The same thing happened in my class. Scientific Method. They all have to apply it to some kind of situation over Christmas break and document the steps, data, and outcome."

"And you have to do it too, now?" Aaron asked, not bothering to hide his grin.

"Yep. Game. Set. Match," Abby muttered.

"You used it to figure out what happened to Fred," Aaron said softly.

Abby shook her head. "I can't ... bring myself to talk about Fred like he was an *assignment*."

Aaron nodded and before he could stop himself, he'd put a hand to her back. "You wouldn't be my ... the Abby I know, if you could."

Abby felt the heat creeping through her chest and up to her face. *Had he been about to say ...*

"Hey!" Maggie's voice dragged her away from her thoughts. She grinned at Abby and Aaron and then glanced around the squad room before hustling over to the counter and lowering her voice. "Anything?"

"A couple of things," Abby said, noticing Aaron's hand wasn't on her back anymore. "We talked to a couple people who knew Fred pretty

well, including Eric Simmons, his roommate.” She felt Aaron shift his weight behind her. “Apparently there were two people who had beef with Fred.” She told Maggie about Jim Donahue. “But my money is on Dustin Gregory. He actually *threatened* Fred in an email. And when we went and saw him this morning, he told us he was just home by himself the night Fred ... and I swear I saw something on his shoes that might have been dried blood spatter.”

Maggie had been taking notes on a legal pad next to her on the counter, but when Abby finished, Maggie looked up and Abby felt her adrenaline start to dissipate.

“He’s definitely someone we can follow up with ...”

“But?” Abby asked, doing her best to keep the bite out of her voice.

Maggie sighed. “Abs, are we really thinking some guy banged Fred’s head against a dumpster because of a made up sports league?”

Abby sighed. “It’s the best lead we’ve found. And Dean Martin died to help us find the truth.”

“Come again?” Maggie asked, blinking at her.

“Well, hopefully not *died*. No one’s turned in a CPR mannequin dummy with added arms and legs, have they?” Abby asked. At least if they could take Dean Martin back to Mr. Elton’s, one thing eating her alive from the inside might end.

“Oh my god,” Maggie gaped at her in horror. “What were you doing with Mr. Elton’s dummy?” Abby didn’t miss her gaze shift to Aaron and then back to her.

“The experiment,” Abby reminded her. “We hurried over here to tell you all what we found and

we left Dean Martin in the alley, thinking no one would bother him for the half hour we were gone, but someone took him.”

Maggie shook her head slowly. “It’s the holidays, Abby. People get ... lonely?” She couldn’t keep a straight face. “But don’t worry. I’ll put out an APB to the whole Hope Island force to be on the lookout for ... Dean Martin.”

“Hurray,” Abby muttered. “You might want to add Dustin Gregory to that APB. He ... I just have a bad feeling about him.”

Maggie nodded. “And he has a weak alibi. I promise I’ll check it out. Until then, you two should relax a little. It’s your winter break. Is ... do you know if the school is planning a memorial for Fred?”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah. We all got an email. It’ll be after the new year when the students are back. We all agreed that we wanted to wait so they could be there.”

A memorial service for Fred Goss. Not a phrase she ever thought would pass through her mind. At least not for another sixty or seventy years. Provided they were all still teaching together at Hope or had retired together and stayed on the island. The thought felt warm and comforting. While she was daydreaming about things that would never happen, she saw in her mind’s eye, herself and Aaron, in their seventies, playing his board games at a table she re-finished, chasing their grandkids ... *Nope. Don’t do it, Abby. Daydreaming is fine, but don’t get attached to that image. More likely it’ll be Aaron and Greta’s grandkids. But maybe you’ll still get to be friends with him.* That was a much happier thought.

“Thanks Maggie,” Aaron was saying. “We’ll let you know if we turn up anything else.”

Maggie nodded. “And I’ll keep an eye out for that dummy. With any luck, maybe we can get Dean Martin home in time for Christmas.”

Abby thanked Maggie and led the way back outside, pausing on the sidewalk to re-zip her coat.

“You’re quiet,” Aaron said.

Abby nodded. “I just ... it’s so fucking surreal.” She could feel her frustrations and anger and guilt and sadness threatening to overpower her.

“Come on,” Aaron said softly, brushing his hand over his back. “Let’s get some coffee and unload on the universe. You have first dibs, then I’ll finish it off.” His voice was calm but laced with the suppressed emotion that she could always feel was there, bubbling under his surface. But even after three years of friendship, he’d never told her about it. What was it? She’d never pushed before, and she wouldn’t now, but she knew there was something there.

The Sheriff’s Office doors behind them flew open and all four deputies on duty streamed past them. In the shuffle, Aaron moved, shielding Abby. As she ran past them, she saw Maggie clip a walkie-talkie to her belt.

“What’s happening?” Abby called after her. But Maggie was already giving Bernard instructions and climbing into one of the sheriff’s golf carts. The flashing Kojack light on the roof lit up and everyone on the street stopped to watch the cart as it buzzed by them, around the corner, and down a side street.

Abby looked up at Aaron, wide-eyed. “What the hell was that about?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron said, frowning and staring down at the street after them. “But let’s find out.”

Abby couldn’t hide her surprise. “Really?”

Aaron glanced at her. “You don’t think we should?”

Abby blinked. “I *absolutely* think we should, I’m just surprised you agree.”

Aaron grinned. “Well, what can I say? You’re a bad influence on me, Nessie.”

They walked as quickly as they could, trying to not draw any extra attention to themselves as they headed up the side street. The further they got away from the downtown crowds and holiday tourists, the more they picked up their speed. At every intersection, they craned their necks, trying to spot the flashing Kojack light. It would have been impossible to find, but Bernard sped past them on the six-wheeler with Doc Brewer in tow, confirming they were going in the right direction.

“Doc Brewer,” Aaron muttered, nodding at Bernard’s passenger.

“Not a good sign,” Abby whispered.

The house was a little white bungalow in a row of identical pastel-painted bungalows.

“Oh my god,” Aaron muttered.

Abby turned to look at him. “What?”

“I ... it’s ... Angela’s house.”

“Angela Gold?!” Abby felt her heart stutter in her chest. Without thinking, her cold fingers found Aaron’s bare hand. His fingers were warm and strong. A reassuring anchor in the storm of cops and tension that was swirling around them. She

silently pleaded with the universe for it to be something like a break-in, and for Angela to be safely zip-lining on the mainland. The house's front door opened and Abby tugged Aaron forward. "Maggie!"

"Abs," Aaron's voice sounded far away. "We can't. We have to wait."

She wanted to protest, but the feel of the pad of Aaron's thumb rubbing lightly over her knuckles made her voice catch in her chest. She saw Maggie glance around and the expression on her face knocked Abby back on her heels. Sorrow and pain. Her gaze fell on Abby and Aaron and with a final glance behind her, she hurried over to them.

"What are you two doing here?" Maggie asked. Abby could tell she was trying to keep her voice calm, but was struggling.

"Mags, what is it?" Abby asked. "What happened?"

Maggie looked behind her, as if asking the house for permission before she lowered her voice and met Abby's gaze. "It's Angela. She's ... she's dead."

"What?" Abby sputtered

"How?" Aaron asked, lowering his voice and leaning toward Maggie.

Maggie shook her head. "Accident. It looks like a 'slip and fall'."

Abby heard the words, but she couldn't make them stick to their meaning in her head. *Angela Gold ... was dead? The ziplining, mainland adrenaline junkie died from a slip and fall in her own house? It didn't make sense.*

“How did she slip?” Abby asked, her mouth moving automatically while her brain tried to square up what she was hearing to equal a plausible explanation.

“It looks like she slipped in the shower. B-Bashed her head on the side of the tub.”

“Wright,” Bernard, called to Maggie. Maggie turned and hustled back to look at something he was holding out to her on a clipboard.

Abby suddenly remembered she was still holding Aaron’s hand. She quickly dropped his fingers and used both hands to tuck her loose hair behind her ears, turning to look at him. She didn’t miss the flash of embarrassment on his face.

Great, Abby. One thoughtless action when you took his hand and you managed to make things awkward with him. Maybe, in light of what happened, he’d just chalk it up to fear.

“Another accident,” Abby whispered.

“Another ‘slip and fall’ accident,” Aaron murmured, keeping his voice low.

Abby blew out a long breath and squared her shoulders. “We need to see ... where it happened. See if we can spot any of the same stuff we found when Fred ...”

Aaron frowned. “Abby, Maggie says it was a slip and fall. Why ...”

“The sheriffs said *Fred’s* was a slip and fall,” Abby said, feeling an itch of annoyance at the back of her neck. “Now *Angela?*”

Aaron opened his mouth to argue, but Abby was already moving. Maggie was standing alone now, next to Angela’s front door as the rest of the deputies climbed back onto the six-wheeler and

into golf carts before heading down the street. She didn't see Doc Brewer or anything that looked like a body.

"Maggie," Abby said quickly. Maggie looked up and Abby barreled ahead before she could second-guess herself. "Can you let us into the house?" Maggie opened her mouth, the look on her face already telling Abby "no". "Please," Abby continued. "Five minutes. And we won't touch anything. Please?"

Maggie blew out a sigh. "Why?"

"It's hard to explain right now," Abby said. "Just, trust me, please? Goat oath."

Maggie rolled her eyes, and the faintest ghost of a smile touched her lips. "Fine." She looked up and down the street, turned on her heel and led the way up to Angela's front door.

"Goat oath?" Aaron whispered to Abby.

Abby nodded. "The most sacred oath Hope High Schoolers can invoke of a teammate, current or former. It's not used much these days by the younglings. But all of us pre-2010 graduates know it."

"And it's the *only* thing that would make me risk my job to let you see a crime scene," Maggie muttered.

"Probably not the *only* thing," Abby said, following Maggie through the front door. "Seven-Layer Sin chocolate cake might convince you too."

Maggie sighed. "Only when your *mom* makes it."

Abby paused inside the front door to look around. Angela's house was decorated like a seashore-themed AirBnB. There were a few framed

black and white photos of Angela with other people that Abby didn't recognize. A heavy weight settled in her stomach and legs. She was so young. In the photos she was smiling. Did a part of her know that she would be still so young when she died?

"We found her back here," Maggie murmured, leading the way through a small living room to a hallway with a bedroom and a bathroom. Even from the hallway, Abby could see the room was a mess. The curtain rod over the heavy cast iron tub had fallen, the curtain was ripped and shampoo bottles were scattered across the floor. "Apparently, she'd been in the shower when ..."

Abby squeezed her eyes shut, trying to stem the stinging tears, rushing to the corners of her eyes. *Damn. What a terrible way to go.* She took a deep breath and felt a hand settle on her shoulder. Aaron. She peeled her eyes open and gave herself a mental pep talk. *Ok. Think. Scientific method. Experiment. Data. You can't make bricks without clay.* There was a puddle of water on the floor next to the tub and a bloodstain on its lip.

"She hit her head?" Abby asked, her voice sounding hollow even to her.

"That's what Doc says. Right across the forehead."

Abby frowned. "So she slipped getting *into* the shower?" Maggie and Aaron were quiet. Abby turned to look at them.

"He ... Doc didn't say. Why?"

Abby shrugged. "Well, if she was inside the tub when she fell, and she hit her head *there*, it would have been really hard to hit her *straight across* the forehead. She would have had to be bent over at a strange angle."

Maggie nodded. “Her hair was wet, so she must have gotten out of the shower for something and slipped on her way back in.”

“The water was still on?” Abby asked.

Maggie nodded. “Yeah, the neighbor called us. Mrs. Friedman. Ears like a bat. Called to complain that Angela had her shower running for hours. Gave me a ten-minute sermon on the environment.”

Abby nodded. “Sounds like Mrs. Friedman.”

The vanity lights blinked on and then off, followed by the hum of an exhaust fan before it was silenced. She turned to see Aaron flicking light switches with his elbow before moving around the bathroom, frowning. When he turned to look at her, he just shrugged and shook his head.

“Thanks, Maggie,” Abby said.

Maggie nodded. “I know you two worked with Angela. I didn’t know her that well, but from what I knew about her, I know she was a nice person.”

“She was,” Abby said softly.

They said goodbye to Maggie and they were at the end of the street before they spoke.

Abby sighed. “I guess you were right. I’m sorry I just ... jumped to conclusions. This one does look like an accident.”

Aaron was quiet for a moment. Abby hesitated. *Was he mad? Annoyed that she’d pushed for them to see the scene? Was it about her holding his hand?* Despite the cold, Abby started to sweat.

“Do you open your bathroom window when you shower?” Aaron asked. The look on his face told Abby that he was so deep in thought he hadn’t realized what he’d asked.

Abby grinned. “Well, no, but I have an exhaust fan in my bathroom. Don’t you?”

Aaron nodded slowly as they turned the corner, heading for home. “So did Angela. And her fan worked.”

“Ok ... “ Abby started, trying to squint ahead to see where he was going with this.

He raised a hand to scratch the back of his neck. “So why was Angela’s bathroom window cracked open?”

AARON

The walk home had a different feel after being in Angela's house. The normally friendly streets of Hope felt more sinister. The new feeling of unease was temporarily interrupted when they passed the town gazebo where another one of the children's Christmas concerts was underway. Abby paused and Aaron stopped beside her. There was something soothing about the voices singing *Up on the Rooftop*. The children were smiling and dancing and Abby was smiling. And for just a moment, Aaron had a flash of a fantasy cross his mind. He and Abby, standing on that very spot, years down the road, and listening to a little one with Abby's hair and eyes, and probably Aaron's gawky height, sing their hearts out. He felt himself smile at the private thought, even though he knew it was just a fantasy, and it would never be anything more.

"Look," Abby muttered, nudging him. She nodded at the stage and he squinted, trying to see what she was looking at, besides a sea of children in red and green sweaters and Santa hats. He saw Billy Timmons at the end of one row. Unfortunately, Billy saw him at the same time. He forgot what he was singing for a moment and waved at Aaron. Aaron sighed and raised his hand to wave back.

“Not Billy,” Abby whispered, and Aaron bent down to hear her better. He couldn’t stifle the shiver that ran through him at the feel of her warm breath on his ear and neck. “Look who’s sitting on the folding chair next to the stage.”

It took Aaron a minute to realize what she was talking about. He’d been dressed in a Santa suit, but his beard was slipping off his chin. “Is that Dean Martin?”

Abby nodded. “At least we know he didn’t catch the ferry back to the mainland.”

“So it was foul play. Dummy-napping,” Aaron muttered. “Well, we can’t grab him right now.”

Abby sighed. “I’m sure someone will return him to Mr. Elton’s after the concert.” She shivered.

“It’s cold,” Aaron said, seeing her pull her coat closer around her. “Let’s head home.”

As soon as they turned down the street beyond the town square and the singing voices faded into the night, the dark neighborhoods broke the spell and his thoughts returned to Angela. Of course, Angela’s death could be what it appeared to be, just another accident. But there was always the possibility that it wasn’t.

“There were non-slip strips,” Abby muttered as they turned down their street.

“What?” Aaron asked.

“In her tub. She had non-slip strips. Just like the ones in my tub.”

Aaron looked at her as they passed a lamp post and he saw the small smile on her face as she nodded. “I know you guys are probably too cool for non-slip, but to a woman, you slip once and smack your chest on the slippery wall or fall on your butt

and you're ordering those babies off the internet or heading to the store to pick some up before your hair is even dry."

Aaron did his best to vanish the visuals that his dude brain was conjuring. "So," he said, trying to redirect his attention, "She shouldn't have slipped."

Abby nodded. "At least not *in* the tub. It's possible she slipped on her way to getting back *in* the tub."

"And what about the open window," Aaron asked.

Abby nodded. "If she had a fan, why would she shower with her window open in December? Do you think the sheriffs will fingerprint it?" They were quiet for a moment as they reached their porch stairs. "What about Angela? Did she tell you anything on your date? Anyone ... who might have had a problem with *her*?" Abby motioned Aaron to follow her into her half of the duplex.

Aaron shook his head, "She loves ... loved *The Bachelor* and zip-lining, surfing. Her mom died three years ago. Cancer. She said her dad left when she was little. She had some friends on the mainland. The ones she went and did stuff with when she was there. And the teachers here, I guess." They hung up their coats and scarves and kicked off their shoes in silence. They moved to the couch and as one, collapsed back into the cushions. They both sighed.

"Do ... do we think it might be murder?" Abby asked, and Aaron didn't miss how small her voice sounded.

"Murder made to look like an accident?" Aaron asked.

“Sound familiar?” Abby turned to look at him.

Aaron swallowed hard. “If ... if that’s the case. Does that mean that there’s ... a *serial* killer in Hope?” He saw Abby shiver.

“Who could have possibly wanted to kill an elementary school secretary in a little island school?” Abby asked, squeezing her eyes shut. He’d known her long enough to know when she was on the verge of tears. Without thinking, he raised an arm and put it around her, pulling her into his side. There was something so heart-breaking about the sound of Abby crying. Like a small animal in a trap, crying quietly for its fate. It stirred a protectiveness in Aaron. She was not going to be trapped, or in danger. He’d never let it happen. It took a minute, but he saw Abby scraping together her self-control before clearing her throat. “Well, it may be premature, but I don’t think there’s much chance that Fred’s Fantasy Football guy had anything to do with Angela’s death, but if our hypothesis is correct, the scientific odds of two people killing two *other* people, just a few days apart, and making both deaths look like similar accidents has to be pretty low.”

“Especially in a place as small as Hope,” Aaron added. He felt Abby nod, her face turning to rest on his chest. His nose was full of her water lilies scent. He felt her shudder and he knew she was crying. Before he could talk himself out of it, he lowered her head and pressed his lips to her hair. “Oh Abs.”

“I’m so-sorry,” Abby said, sniffing and trying to get control. “It’s just ...”

“I know,” Aaron breathed. Abby raised her head and Aaron’s hand moved on its own, swiping at the tears on her cheeks. She was so beautiful at that

moment. Her eyes were bright and ... there was something in their depths that he'd never seen before. He felt himself leaning toward her before his brain could object. Abby's eyes fluttered closed.

No turning back now.

It was as if her couch was a time machine and *Princess Bride* was playing on the TV as he felt her lips move against his. His heart was pounding in his chest and he was shifting on the couch, turning to hold her small face in his hands, turning to face her. It was over too soon. Abby had pulled back and his hands dropped from her face as soon as his brain started screaming at him to *stop kissing his best friend*. The silence that fell around them was deafening. He stared at Abby, taking in the bright surprise in her eyes and the rosy tint in her lips. What he wouldn't give to kiss them again. *Stop! Remember what Barb told you! What are you doing Aaron?!* But another voice inside Aaron had roared to life. *He wasn't Derek. He wasn't going to abandon Abby. He ... he was in love with her.* Another voice was trying to remind him of how Abby had told him to forget about their kiss the last time. She ... she wouldn't do that again, would she?

"Wow," Abby whispered.

"Yeah," Aaron breathed.

Abby cleared her throat and looked down. "Sorry about that. I ... you know, adrenaline, and fear, and all that. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," Aaron said automatically. *Wait? He was sorry? Yes. You're sorry because she seems embarrassed. And if it was just adrenaline and fear for her and she doesn't feel the same way about you ...* Suddenly, Aaron felt very, very stupid. But Abby was still watching him. Was that ... sadness around her eyes? *She doesn't feel the same about you.*

He opened his mouth, but to say what, he didn't know. Not only did he just kiss his best friend ... again. But ...what if she didn't want to be friends after this? One time might be forgivable, but twice? And they hadn't been drinking this time.

There was a knock on the front door. Abby frowned, turning her head to look at it.

"I'll-I'll get it," Aaron said. He wasn't sure why, but he suspected it had something to do with needing to hide his embarrassment at the moment. He was such an idiot. She'd been drunk the first time and running on adrenaline, not thinking straight the second time. And he'd thought ... well, it didn't matter what he thought. It wasn't true. He climbed off the couch and padded to the front door.

"Surprise!" It was Greta. Aaron was literally speechless. She smiled at him. "I knocked on your door first, but when you didn't answer, I thought I'd take a chance and see if you were hanging out with your *bestie*." Was it his imagination or had Greta hissed the word? "I decided to be spontaneous tonight and ask you to join me for a second date." She held up a wicker basket and a dark glass bottle. "I've got dinner and wine. What do you say?"

Aaron opened his mouth, but he was still so surprised by the events of the last five minutes that his brain was having a hard time keeping up and forming something that resembled a coherent response.

"Oh! How nice," Abby said behind him. He jumped and looked back at her. She'd gotten to her feet and padded into her kitchen. She picked up her kettle from the stove and smiled at Greta and then at Aaron. Her smile was wide, but Aaron recognized it. It was the one she wore at parent-

teacher conferences when a parent was trying to tell her that they knew how their kids acted in class better than she did. “You should go, Aaron. We can hang out some other time.”

Now Aaron was really confused. He’d been on the verge of telling Greta that he had no interest in a second date with her, but Abby’s response ... Did she want him to leave?

“So, what do you say?” Greta leaned forward, smiling and biting her lip at him.

“You should go,” Abby said again.

“Uh, ok,” Aaron mumbled. He pulled on his shoes while Greta started chatting a million miles a minute in front of him, but his ears were listening to Abby moving behind him. He could hear her filling her kettle and turning on the stove. Was she embarrassed too? Was she mad at him? *Disgusted* by him? He pulled on his jacket and turned to look back at her. “I’ll call you later?” he asked Abby, keeping his voice low. Abby had her back to him, standing at the sink. She just raised her hand, giving him a thumbs up.

“Come on,” Greta thrust her arm through his again and he was acutely aware of how awkward it felt. “I know the perfect place.”

No, you don’t, he thought as she pulled him out the front door. *Because the perfect place is the one I just left.*

ABBY

Abby hadn't really slept. She'd closed her eyes and fallen unconscious for a few moments at a time during the night, but as soon as dreams reached her, they were of the "history repeating itself" variety. She'd been in her purple prom dress, Derek's favorite color, the week after they'd kissed. She'd imagined finally being seen by him as something more than his friend. She'd pushed through the door into the gym, draped in orange and red streamers ... and there, standing in the middle of the floor, kissing like they were the only ones in the room, were Derek and Carly Howell.

But as they turned on the spot, Derek and Carly turned into Aaron and Greta. And she'd fled, jerking awake to stare at the ceiling above her. She rolled over in bed and put her hand on the wall, separating her room from Aaron's. She squeezed her eyes shut. It was happening all over again. Derek 2.0, Derek II. But even worse, because she loved ... *really liked* ... She took a deep breath. *You're in your room, by yourself, and the thought will be completely in your head. Safe space. Or at least, as safe as your brain will let it be. You know it can be a jerk sometimes. But, you can say it.* She loved Aaron. Really, truly loved him. He was more of a best friend than Derek had ever been. But he was so much more than just her best friend. And now,

what? Would he move? Would she have to? A hard knot formed in her stomach. She hadn't heard the familiar sounds of Aaron moving around in his half of the duplex. Had he even come home? The knot got tighter. Had he been thinking about Greta when he kissed her? Was she just a Greta stand-in?

She got to her feet and stomped down the stairs, feeling every ounce of her bad mood weighing down her steps and suffocating every positive thought that tried to raise its hand. She guessed she should be glad he left when he did. She hadn't been able to stop the tears. She'd kept her back to him while he'd put on his shoes and coat. He'd told her he'd call. All she could muster was a thumbs-up and a prayer that he hadn't seen her shoulders shaking. She was so pathetic. Why would she ever think that Aaron would want to have something more with her? The lesson her mom had drilled into her harshly, but with good intention after Derek came rushing back to her. *"Abby, you can have a best friend, and you can have a loving partner, but they can't be the same person. It just doesn't work. You have to protect yourself and keep them on different shelves or you'll end up broken and alone."*

She mechanically went through her morning routine, cleaning Mr. Burns' aquarium and feeding him, and then sitting down on the couch and pulling her laptop toward her to check her email. She was on break, she supposed she didn't need to, but maybe a student had a question, or maybe her sister had emailed her, or ... maybe she just needed something to distract her from what had happened on her couch the night before.

She had a new email from Santa's Singles. She sighed but clicked on it. No point in delaying the inevitable. One more date and she'd be in the clear. Well, unless the server didn't count the almost-

date with Fred. Her newest match was with Jack Bingham, the middle school math teacher. Abby racked her brain trying to think of any interactions she'd had with him. Maybe once at a teacher's meeting? She frowned, trying to remember.

A light knock on the door separating her apartment and Aaron's made her freeze.

"Abs?" Aaron's voice. "You up?"

She blinked. He didn't sound any different. Maybe ... a little more hesitant? Was he embarrassed? Or, did he want to just forget it had happened? He hadn't brought up the last time they'd kissed. She'd told him he could forget it and it seemed like he had. Maybe he'd want to do the same thing this time. A little glimmer of hope rose in her chest. Maybe it *was* just adrenaline and fear and he just wanted to move on and pretend it had never happened. This thought wasn't entirely happy for her, but she told the part of her brain that was disappointed with it to shut up, and reached for the doorknob. Still having her best friend was worth pretending the second unforgettable kiss they'd had, had never happened. Or at least, never saying anything about it. She used the few seconds as it swung open to rearrange her face into what she hoped was pleasant nonchalance.

"Morning," she said, forcing her face to smile at the pajama-clad, scruffy faced Aaron, leaning in the doorway. "Want some cereal?"

He raised a hand, shaking a full milk carton at her. "I've brought dairy barter. I'm hoping you still have some Honeycomb left?"

She grinned. "It's all yours. I've got Cinnamon Toast Crunch."

“Oh man, can I change my order?” Aaron asked, following her over to the cabinet where she kept the cereal bowls. Abby felt herself relax. They were on familiar ground again. Ok. She could do this. She could pretend that she didn’t know how soft yet firm his lips were. That feeling of his lips on hers had sent an electric shock through her like a bolt of lightning, striking the same place twice. In scientific terms, it was probable it would happen again. In best friend terms, the odds for a third strike were, unfortunately, fairly low. And ungrounded, as she felt, a third strike might be deadly. She’d thought it had *meant* something. Both times. But it apparently hadn’t ... and that was ok. She was ok. And based on how he was acting, maybe everything with Aaron was ok too. She pulled the boxes of cereal out of a second cabinet, casting around in her mind for something to talk about.

“So, I got another email. I’ve got a date with Jack Bingham. He wants to go on the holiday lights tour on Sunday night.” Aaron was quiet behind her. She turned and held out the cereal boxes to him. “So, Honeycomb or Cinnamon Toast Crunch?”

“Cinnamon,” Aaron said, grinning at her when she handed him the box. He turned to pour them both a bowl. “Jack, huh? Well, I guess it’ll be a party of four. Greta told me last night that she’d bought us tickets to that too.”

Abby tried to swallow the stinging sensation in her chest. “Oh really? How was your date last night, by the way?” She did her best to downplay her question, but she caught herself pausing and staring at him in earnest.

Aaron shrugged. “Fine.” He added milk to their bowls and smiled when he handed her one. Abby

thanked him and led the way to the couch. She wanted to ask more about his date, but she knew it was none of her business. *Friends, remember? Possibly still your best friend. Don't screw this up.*

“So, Jack.” Aaron said. Was ... was she imagining that harsh edge to his voice?

“Yeah. I don't really know him,” Abby said, digging into her cereal. She'd been careful to sit slightly further away from Aaron than she usually did.

“Oh, I'm sure he'll change that,” Aaron muttered. “You know, I think I saw him with Angela the other day. At Miss Mandie's.”

Abby paused and looked at him. “You think he had a date with Angela before she died?” Aaron shrugged. “Maybe he knows something.”

“It's possible,” Aaron mumbled.

Abby stared at him. “What's with you?”

Aaron glanced up at her and for a second, she saw a flash of something in his eyes. Want? Hate? Annoyance? Something else? He frowned at her. “Are we really just going to pretend that last night didn't happen?”

Abby swallowed hard, but dug her nails into her nonchalant facade and held on. She shrugged. “You had a date with Greta.”

He sighed. “Before that. You know what I mean.”

“We'd both been through something terrifying and sad. Our adrenaline was pumping. Hell, we just realized that there was a pretty good chance that a serial killer was running around town. It's no big ...”

“Deal? It's no big deal?” Aaron asked. “Really?”

Something about Aaron's tone sent a wave of anger through her. Her mouth was moving before her brain could think through her response. "What? So, we had a moment of ... you know. And then you went on a date with Greta." She wasn't entirely convinced that she'd managed to keep the hurt out of her voice.

"A date you told me to go on," Aaron said, setting down his bowl on the table. "You practically shoved me out the door."

"No I didn't," Abby said, getting to her feet.

"Oh, you didn't? All the 'you should go' stuff. What, did I just *imagine* you saying that?"

"No, but you obviously *wanted* to go," Abby felt her voice cracking as it raised in volume. She pushed past Aaron, taking her bowl to the sink.

"How can you say that, after everything that happened yesterday?" Aaron was on his feet now, raising his voice.

Abby's cell phone rang and she pounced on it, not really sure what her comeback would have been. His words cut her and at the moment, she didn't want to look at the blood. Of course, it had meant something to her. But she wasn't going to *say it*. She didn't want a repeat of having her best friend laugh at her and ask if she was joking. Or of having him just muss her hair, call her "Squirt" and remind her that he didn't think of her that way. And then have that be the last conversation they ever had.

Besides, the kiss must not have meant that much to him, since he *immediately* went off with Greta. She had a sneaking suspicion that he wanted to talk about it so he could reaffirm with her that it

meant nothing. And ... she wasn't sure she could hold onto her facade if he did.

"Hello?" Abby said, answering her phone.

"Oh thank god you're up," Dana said. "I need help. I've got a brunch date. Can you get over here?"

Half-annoyed, half-relieved, she turned her back on the fuming Aaron. "Yeah. Give me ten minutes and I'll be right there." She heard a door snap closed behind her, harder than necessary. She turned and saw that Aaron was gone.

* * *

"What about this one?" Dana asked, holding up another, nearly *identical* skirt.

"Sure," Abby repeated.

Dana sighed. "Come on Abs, I know you're not really into girly stuff, but I'm freaking out over here."

Abby tried again to pull her attention away from the sick feeling in her stomach. She and Aaron had never fought before. He was mad at her. He'd stormed out. She was mad at him. *But for what? A moment of insanity, and then trying to talk it out and restore their friendship? Trying to smooth over that moment and not just let Aaron be another Derek that disappeared on her.* Though, he probably would now. She squeezed her eyes closed and she felt the bed dip next to her as Dana sat down.

"Abby, what is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I've got a stomach ache." She wasn't sure why, but she wasn't ready to tell Dana what had happened.

There's only one person she would have told about what had happened ... and that was Aaron.

Dana took Abby's hand and squeezed it. "Are you nervous about tomorrow night? Jack's a nice guy. He loves to read. And he's really into old sci-fi novels. Big Asimov fan." She winked at Abby. "And he's pretty good-looking." Abby rolled her eyes as Dana got to her feet and stood in front of her mirror again, frowning.

"And who are you going on a date with?" Abby asked, trying to focus on her friend and not the pain in her gut.

"Joe Mitchell. He teaches third grade."

Abby nodded. "He's nice. *Really* into political biographies."

Dana groaned. "Oh yay. Politics. My favorite topic."

Abby shrugged. "There'll be food involved. Just keep the topics light."

"Yeah, I guess," she sighed. Then she smiled at Abby. "At least it's almost Christmas. So far, no fireworks on these dates, but it's hard to be disappointed with so much going on for the season. You know, while I was making small talk at that craft fair, I couldn't help thinking that maybe being alone is the best way to go. At least when I take myself out on dates, I don't have to make benign conversation with myself and if I want to stop at the carved wooden clocks booth for twenty minutes and talk to Theo Harding about how he built them, I can, without some guy huffing and checking his watch. Of course, if I had what you have, I could have it both ways. No annoying conversation *and* being able to do what I want. Maybe I don't need a partner. I need a best friend."

Sometimes, Dana, it's not all it's cracked up to be.

“Seriously. I need someone like Aaron. A neighbor that I can be friends with and hang out with and go do stuff with. No expectations, just someone who’s always there,” Dana continued.

Abby felt a lump forming in her throat. She glanced around the room, trying to find something to distract Dana from talking about Aaron. It just hurt too much right now. Her gaze fell on Dana’s alarm clock. “Are you gonna be late?”

“Shit!” Dana muttered, glancing at the clock. She hustled into her bathroom. “Can you check the back of my hair while I fix the front?”

Abby sighed and dragged her feet across the room to Dana’s en suite. Dana had a mouth full of bobby pins and was attempting to tame her wavy hair. There was a cold, bright light sifting in through the window. She had it propped open. Abby frowned.

“Hey Dana, do you always leave your window open when you shower?”

Dana paused and frowned at Abby and then glanced at her window before taking the pins out of her mouth. “Not when I shower. I have a fan. But if the steam isn’t gone when I start doing my hair, I’ll usually prop the window and turn the fan off. I use so much hair spray, I’m always afraid it’ll get sucked up into the fan and gum up the motor over time.”

Abby grinned. “I doubt you use *that* much hairspray.” Though, ten minutes later, still coughing as she waved goodbye to Dana, Abby wasn’t so sure.

Instead of heading home, Abby dug her hands deep into her pockets and buried her mouth behind

her scarf as she turned into the wind, heading for the town square. She wasn't ready for another confrontation with Aaron.

She'd only made it a few blocks when her phone dinged. Her heart leapt. Maybe it was Aaron, messaging her, asking her to come home and talk. Or that he was sorry or that he ... *Not going to happen. Give it up, Locke.* It didn't matter anyway. The text was from Marge Burrows, a fellow Santa's Grotto elf. She groaned, remembering that she and Aaron were scheduled to be elves tonight. Hooray, five hours of awkward silence while wearing ridiculous outfits with zero levity to look forward to. Awesome. The text message was followed by a second. And then a third. Marge liked to type and send a few words at a time. Abby sighed and paused, waiting for the telegram-style text to end.

Abby, can you and Grumpy switch nights with me and Roberta? We'll cover tonight if you'll take Monday and Tuesday next week. Family is coming in early. For Christmas.

Abby nodded up at the universe. "Thanks for doing me a solid today," she muttered. At least she and Aaron wouldn't have to work together when they weren't talking to each other. She quickly texted Marge back, agreeing. Then, she texted Aaron to let him know they were off the hook for the evening. She didn't know if he'd text back while he was mad at her. Or if he'd call her and they'd make up over the phone and then decide to hang out tonight and go back to the way things were before the fight. But, that felt like a long shot to her. She took a deep breath and just kept putting one foot in front of the other.

For some reason, just walking around and looking at all the holiday magic of Hope sounded like good therapy to her at the moment. Maybe it

was the way the little kids' concert the night before had lifted her spirits. It was the magic of Hope. No matter where you're coming from, all the goofy traditions, events, and celebrations were sure to make you smile and feel some joy for the season. It was impossible to frown when the Confounding Carolers burst into song around you, or you walked by the tent housing the Baby Jesus Bazaar. Heck, today, even hearing the whale-fart alphorn might be enough to put a smile on her face. She just wanted to feel happy even for a moment. Anything to not be focused on the reality that she may have lost her best friend today.

Bright-eyed and laughing tourists surrounded her, milling in and out of shops, town hall, and over to the gazebo. As she took in the sight, a small pang of sadness hit her. Angela and Fred would never get to see this again. What had happened to them? Who would have wanted to hurt them, let alone *kill* them? She was letting her gaze drift from window display to window display. She was in front of the Hope Chest thrift store when she paused. There was a Christmas tree, decorated with pairs of Christmas socks in their front window. Ugly sweater-style Christmas socks. Abby smiled. Maybe he wasn't her best friend anymore. Maybe the damage there was done. But it didn't mean he didn't deserve a Christmas present.

Ten minutes later she was back on the street, the small package tucked into her pocket. She turned the corner and paused. Across the street, standing in front of the Bait and Swish Tackle Shop was Eric.

"Hey," she called to him as she crossed the street.

He turned on the spot and when he recognized her, he smiled. "Hey, Abby. How are you doing?"

She smiled. "I'm ok. You?"

Eric studied her face. "Are you? You look like something's wrong?"

Abby shook her head. "Just tired. You know?"

Eric's face fell. "I ... I heard about Angela. I barely knew her, but I know you two were probably good friends."

"More like friendly acquaintances," Abby said, shaking her head. "But she was a good person."

He nodded. "I at least knew *that* about her."

She glanced up at the bait shop. "So, thinking about going fishing?"

He turned to look back at the storefront and then looked down at the package in his hand. "No. I bought a new reel for Fred for Christmas. I was thinking maybe I should return it, but ... I just can't seem to bring myself to do it. It feels like ... forgetting about him." Abby touched the small package in her pocket.

"I think I know what you mean."

"You know, even when I barely had time for Fred ... I was working all those weird hours and barely returning his phone calls, but Fred still sent me a Christmas package every year. Without fail. I'd try to send him one." He grinned. "Always late. He was just ... a really good guy."

Angela was a good person. Fred was a good person.

"Did you know that Fred and Angela ..."

Eric nodded. "I know they dated a while ago. I thought of that too. At first, I felt really weird, taking her on dates when she was Fred's ex." He paused. "Why? Do you know something?"

Abby shook her head. "I don't know it, but I have a hunch."

"Well, what is it?" Eric asked, his eyes widening.

"I think Fred and Angela's deaths are linked. I think they have something or someone in their life in common. And that thing or person may be the answer to finding out what happened to them."

Eric just blinked at her. "What are you saying?" He paused. "Wait, do you think because Fred and I were roommates and Angela and I went on a few dates, that I'm ..."

Abby was confused. "No, I was just ..."

"About to accuse me?"

"Of course not," Abby said.

"I need to go," Eric muttered. "Nice seeing you."

Abby watched him go. "Wow, I'm just pissing everyone off today," she muttered. She started walking again, slower now. Why had Eric gotten so mad? Was he feeling guilty? *Was* there something there? He was an obvious link between Fred and Angela. Was it possible that he'd done it?

Her feet automatically turned her in the direction of home. Her scientist's brain was starting to take over. She had some new theories and information. Maybe she could get Aaron to think through them with her. Maybe he'd ... forgive her, or ... something and they could move on. That thought imploded as she emerged around the trees separating their duplex from their neighbors. The sight on their front porch was almost enough to make Abby turn around and walk away.

Greta was standing on the porch, kissing Aaron.

But where was she going to run to? Mr. Burns and all of her stuff, including the bed she wanted to hide under were in her apartment, past the two of them. *Just move fast. Get inside and never come out again.* Luckily, she was able to sneak past both of them and get to her door. She focused on her keys and the lock and it wasn't until she was inside that she realized something was wrong.

The apartment was freezing. The sheers in her windows were floating on the frigid breeze coming in through the open windows, like ghosts haunting the dark kitchen and living room. Her heart froze when she realized that the warm glow from Mr. Burns' tank was off. She felt the scream leave her chest and she was across the room, pulling the lid off his aquarium before she realized what she was doing. She had his cold little body pressed against her chest when she heard her front door bang open.

AARON

That was not how Aaron hoped his morning would go.

Before going over for breakfast, he'd paced, no *strided*, across his living room, rehearsing what he'd say to Abby in his head. He wanted to tell her that that kiss had meant something to him. And he wanted ... What did he want? Selfishly, he knew what he wanted. But what if that wasn't what Abby wanted? He'd apologize and ask her if they could just pretend it never happened. Just like she'd done the first time. It had worked. Their friendship had survived the first time. And then maybe they could just continue on like they always had.

But none of that had happened. Aaron sighed and put his head in his hands. How did everything get so messed up? What he hoped might be the start of something good with Abby, had seemed to be the end of their friendship. They'd never fought before. And this ... this had ended with ... well, him leaving. He should have stayed. But by the time he realized he had to go back in and apologize, Abby was already gone. She'd gotten a phone call from someone and told them she'd be there in ten minutes. Had it ... was it one of her dates? Jack, calling her already? Or ... Aaron squeezed his eyes shut. What if it was Eric? He hadn't missed the way he looked at Abby. And Abby had lent him her *Star*

Trek Blu-rays. That was pretty high praise in Abby-speak. His phone beeped. He lunged for it and paused, his heart in his throat when he saw it was a text from Abby. He tapped it open, holding his breath.

Marge and Roberta are covering tonight at the Grotto for us in exchange for us covering on Monday and Tuesday. They have family coming in early. I told them yes. I hope it's ok. If you have plans already for Monday and Tuesday, I can cover them on my own.

His heart sank. Her tone. It didn't sound like his Abby. It sounded like the Abby who talked to strangers. He tossed his phone back down on his couch and went back to striding across his living room, trying to think.

His phone rang. He snatched it and answered without looking at the screen. "Abby?"

There was a pause. "No ... it's Greta."

He slumped down to sit on the couch. "Oh, hi."

"You sound like something's wrong. Did something happen with Abby?"

His mouth was moving before he realized what he was saying. "We had a fight."

"Oh! I'm so sorry," she said, not sounding sorry at all. "Wanna go do something to take your mind off of it?"

"Not right now, I've got some things I need to take care of. I'll talk to you later." And he hung up. He had an idea. Something about Greta's voice had triggered a memory. Something he'd seen in a store window downtown while they were on their awkward small talk walk after the brunch. Something that was perfect for Abby. A peace offering, and maybe something that would show her that nothing had to change ... if she didn't want

it to. Maybe it would be enough to undo the mess he'd managed to make of their friendship in the last twenty-four hours.

He had a plan. He got dressed in a hurry, and headed down the porch steps, trying to remember which store it had been.

“Aaron?”

He squinted across the street and saw a familiar woman waving at him. Sasha, the woman Abby had introduced him to in the plumbing store. The one that was thinking of moving to Hope.

“Hey Sasha, how are you doing?”

She grinned at him and glanced back at Abby's half of the duplex. “Great today! Where's Abby?”

“Oh, she had to help someone this morning.”
Yeah, probably Eric, or some other guy who was pretending to be friendly but really hoping ... Stop it, Aaron.

“Aw, that's too bad. I really wanted to tell her too!”

“Tell her what?” Aaron asked, trying to keep his tone friendly. He didn't want to be rude to Sasha, but he really wanted to head downtown.

“Oh, that I'm checking out the vacancies on your street just like she suggested! The apartment I just looked at was amazing. Maybe it's *the one.*” She grinned at Aaron. “Oh well, I'll try to catch up with her later. It'll be more fun to come over and surprise her anyway.”

Mr. Stanholtz, the property manager, called to her. “Ms. Miller, we just have one more property here to view.”

“Coming,” she called back to him. She smiled at Aaron. “Well, tell Abby hi for me. Gotta go!”

They waved goodbye and Aaron hustled down the street towards the town square. It had only taken him fifteen minutes of retracing the route he and Greta had taken to find what he was looking for. The real conundrum had been choosing *which one*. But when he found it, he knew. *Kind of like Abby*, he thought. The more he thought about his plan, the more excited he was, imagining the look on her face, her smile, them either going back to what they had been before or ... and his heart pounded in his chest, maybe, if he was very lucky, something more?

The excitement he was feeling dissipated instantly when he turned down their street and saw who was standing on his front porch.

“Hey,” Greta called, giving him a little finger wave. “I tried calling you again, but you didn’t answer.”

“I must have left my phone at home.” Aaron could hear the growl in his voice. He tried to smooth it out. It wasn’t Greta’s fault that everything had happened. *But she’d almost crowed when she’d heard he and Abby had had a fight*. Maybe that was why seeing her was annoying him. Or the fact that she was on his porch, uninvited. “I can’t stay long,” Greta said, turning up the wattage on her smile. “I just wanted to drop by to confirm what time you’re coming to pick me up for the walking tour of the Christmas lights tomorrow.”

Oh, that’s right. Damn. Just one more date and all the Santa’s Singles crap would be over. He stomped up the porch stairs and leaned on the railing. “Why don’t we just meet at the park where the tour begins at six?”

Greta looked hurt for a moment but then bit her lip and nodded, still smiling. "That sounds fine." She took a step closer and Aaron felt her moving into his personal space. His anxiety flared and he felt himself starting to sweat. He could hear footsteps on the sidewalk and the familiar jangle of keys. He turned his head to look and Greta's hands were on his face, pressing her lips against his. He froze. Greta moved her lips against his. He started to panic as she made little humming happy sounds against his mouth. The stairs squeaked and he heard the sound of Abby's door opening. Finally, Aaron's brain connected with his limbs and he pushed Greta back.

"What are you doing?" His voice was harsh as he stared at her. Instead of looking embarrassed or apologetic, Greta was beaming.

"Better than I ever imagined. Sorry, Aaron, but a girl could wait forever, waiting on you to make a move. I just thought one of us needed to move us to the next level."

Aaron opened his mouth to argue with her, but then he heard a sound that made the blood run cold in his veins. It was a scream. Abby was screaming.

"Abby," Aaron called. He didn't miss Greta rolling her eyes as he pushed past her, running for Abby's door.

"See you tomorrow at six," Greta called behind him.

He heard her but it didn't register over the pounding blood in his ears. He felt Abby's door connect with his shoulder as he barreled inside her apartment. The first thing he noticed was that the apartment was dark. Darker than it should have been. And cold. All the windows were open, her

curtains stirring in the breeze. Abby was sobbing, standing in her living room ... in front of Mr. Burns' aquarium.

"Oh my god," Aaron breathed. Abby turned to look at him and he saw Mr. Burns' little body pressed against her chest. *Get them warm*, his brain screamed. He snatched the heavy comforter off the back of her couch and wrapped Abby and Mr. Burns in it, holding it tightly around them. "Abby, is he?"

Abby shook her head. She was crying so hard she couldn't speak. Aaron coaxed her back to sit down on the couch.

"Just sit for a minute, I'll get the windows closed."

"No," she croaked. "The sheriffs ..."

She was right. Someone had *done this to her*.

"Come on, my apartment," Aaron said softly, wrapping his arm around her and leading her to the door between their apartments. He didn't know if Mr. Burns' was still alive. *Please universe, let the little guy be ok. Let Abby be ok. Even if Abby never wants to talk to me again after today. Please let them both be ok.*

The heat wasn't off in his apartment. Just Abby's, so the chance that it was a mechanical failure was slim. And then, of course, there were the windows. This was intentional. And it made something fierce burn in Aaron's chest. If he found out who did this ...

He got Abby settled on the couch and tucked the blanket around them. She was shivering so violently, that she was almost convulsing. He sat down beside her and pulled her and Mr. Burns into his lap. She didn't protest and he rubbed his hands

over the blanket where it covered her arms, trying to use friction to warm her up.

“How-how could someone do something so hateful?” Abby whispered.

And Aaron’s heart broke. What kind of a monster could do something like this to a helpless animal? To someone like Abby who never did anything to hurt anyone? The fierce burning in his chest blazed again. He kept one arm around her and reached into the crack of his couch for his phone to call the sheriffs.

* * *

Maggie was the deputy that appeared on Aaron’s doormat twenty minutes later.

“What happened?” she asked him, her eyes looking past him to Abby who was still bundled on the couch, clutching Mr. Burns. The little dragon hadn’t died, but he was in severe shock. He was sluggish and he’d crawled inside Abby’s shirt for warmth. They’d decided not to touch his aquarium until the sheriffs had had a chance to dust it for prints.

“Someone broke into my apartment, opened all the windows, turned off my heat, and turned off Mr. Burns’ ... my bearded dragon’s heat lamp,” Abby’s voice was shaky but firm.

Maggie’s eyes were wide. “Oh, Abby.”

“It was obviously foul play,” Aaron said. “We thought you might want to ...”

“Investigate,” Maggie said, her cop face sliding into place. She nodded. “Definitely.”

They kept the door between their apartments open in case Maggie had questions and Aaron

joined Abby on the couch again. They didn't talk for a moment. Both of them were lost in thought.

"Do you think . . .," Abby started. "Do you have any idea as to who could have done this?"

Aaron shook his head. "No, Abs. Who *could* do this?" Abby leaned her head against his shoulder and he looked down to see Mr. Burns' head resting against Abby's collarbone, his eyes closed. Without stopping to consider the consequences, he wrapped his arm tighter around her again, holding him to her. *To keep her warm*, he told himself. *To keep her safe*.

A half-hour later, Maggie stood in the doorway between their apartments, bagging the last of her print cards. "Ok. I've printed the windows, your thermostat, the switch on the aquarium light, and the aquarium itself. I'm taking these to the office. Do either of you happen to have any ideas about who could have done this and why?"

"No," Aaron said. Beside him, Abby just shook her head. Maggie gently hugged Abby, and then Aaron.

"I'll call as soon as I know anything. For now, just try to relax. And be careful. I'll get these prints into the system and if we're lucky, maybe we'll get a match." Aaron didn't miss the doubtful look on her face. They all knew it would be a long shot.

Maggie said her goodbyes and Abby and Aaron were left alone with the silence that stretched between them.

"Do you want to try to put Mr. Burns back under his heat lamp and on his heating pad?" Aaron asked softly.

Abby nodded. "Yeah. I know it'll get him warmed up faster than I can. And it'll probably

help him settle down. Being back in familiar surroundings.” There was a hard edge to her voice as she stood and led the way back into her apartment. Aaron trailed behind her, not sure what to say. She turned on the heat lamp and pad and gently placed Mr. Burns on his little hammock bed. He saw the tears in her eyes as she looked at him. Feeling helpless, Aaron rummaged in the box next to his aquarium and came up with Mr. Burns’ “Excellent” shirt. Abby chuckled and nodded, helping the little lizard into his shirt. She slipped a few mealworms onto the hammock next to him and after a moment, his pink tongue shot out and they disappeared.

“I think he’s going to be ok,” she whispered, smiling down at him. “When he feels warm enough to move around, he’ll get down on his heating pad.”

Aaron felt like his heart had just started to beat again. As if he’d been holding his breath from the moment he heard her scream until that very second.

Abby cleared her throat and turned to look at him. “Ok. Now, let’s figure out who did this.”

Aaron blinked at her. “That’s ... that’s what Maggie’s doing. She’s running the prints. How are we supposed to ...”

“We can form our own hypotheses based on what we know.” She was back in science teacher mode, but he didn’t miss the defiant notice in her voice. “I think this might have something to do with Fred and Angela’s deaths.”

“How?” Aaron asked, frowning. “It didn’t look like an accident and it wasn’t someone trying to kill you.”

Abby nodded. “True. So, if it doesn’t have something to do with Fred and Angela, then what?”

They were quiet as they considered the possibilities. As one, they collapsed back onto Abby’s couch and sighed. Despite the situation, Aaron felt himself smile. For the next hour, they tried to think of possible suspects and motives for who would do something like this, but they didn’t have much luck. Every few minutes, Abby got to her feet to check on Mr. Burns. He tried to reassure her, but it was almost like she couldn’t hear him. She was either in shock, or so deeply into her scientific mind, calculating data, running mental experiments, and examining possible outcomes that she wasn’t aware of auditory inputs. She didn’t speak, so he sat quietly, watching her.

Finally, she sat back down next to him and cried. He wrapped an arm around her and picked up the remote. Tonight, they both needed the comfort of a favorite movie. He turned on the *Mystery Science Theater 3000 Movie*, and he held her, dividing his attention between her breathing as it evened out and Mr. Burns in his aquarium, listening for the sound of his hammock squeaking or the scrabble of his claws on fabric as he got up to roll around on his heating pad and drink. When he was sure the little dragon was going to be ok, he finally closed his eyes and joined Abby in a fitful sleep of open windows, blood, and the feel of her small hand in his.

* * *

It was mid-morning when he finally opened his eyes. He could tell by the high sun outside the windows. Somehow in the night, they’d shifted so that he was reclining and Abby was asleep on his

chest. For a moment, he stayed as still as possible, watching her sleep. And even though his butt and both legs were asleep, there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

"Aaron," she whispered.

He blinked down at her. "You're awake?"

She nodded, keeping her eyes closed. "I'm so sorry."

He frowned. "For what?"

"For our fight," she breathed. He saw her face crease and he recognized her expression. She was trying not to cry.

"Just forget it happened, Abs," he whispered. "Don't worry about it." He wanted to say more, but he knew this wasn't the moment.

She nuzzled her face against him and slowly blinked her eyes open. He watched realization wash over her as her eyes widened. Then she jerked up to a sitting position so fast it startled Aaron and pins and needles shot up his legs and into his butt as he tried to sit up straighter on the couch.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed. Glancing at him, her eyes wide before tossing off her comforter and stumbling across the room to Mr. Burns' aquarium. The startled lizard hissed at her as she approached and she started to laugh.

"That is the most beautiful sound I've ever heard." She was crying again as she moved the lid and reached in to stroke his head. Aaron was on his feet, shaking his legs out and trying to get enough feeling back into them so he wouldn't face plant on her carpet.

"How's he doing?" he murmured, coming to stand next to her.

She took a shaky breath and beamed up at him, unshed tears making her eyes shine. “Well, I think he’s going to petition for us to move to a warmer climate. And he might have a newfound hatred of open windows, but I think he might pull through.”

Aaron hugged her. “Of course, he will. You can’t kill Mr. Burns. Even Maggie Simpson couldn’t.”

She chuckled and let out a tired sigh.

“You should get some sleep,” he said. “Some *real* sleep. Like in a bed.”

He felt her shaking her head and he let her go. “No, I need to call Todd. I want to get a deadbolt installed on the door.”

“I can call Todd,” Aaron said quickly.

She shook her head again and gave him a once over. “You need sleep too.”

“I’m ok,” he said. But he had a hard time stifling his yawn.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “You sound so convincing.”

“I’ll at least wait with you until Todd comes. Then when he’s done, we’ll *both* take a nap. Deal?” She nodded and while she went to call Todd, he poured them both a bowl of cereal. He knew he might be getting his hopes up, but there was still a ray of hope that he was willing to cling to that just might mean they could still be friends. Even after everything that had happened. The stupid Santa’s Singles thing would end. There was still the possibility, however small, that things *could* go back to the way they had been before. Maybe. Right?

They ate cereal and made small talk with Todd while he installed a deadbolt on Abby’s door. It was

a solemn act. In Hope, most people didn't even lock their doors during the day. Some houses, especially the older ones didn't even have deadbolts from what Aaron had seen. He'd thought it was strange when he'd first moved to town, but the longer he was in Hope, the more he realized that they weren't needed. Hope was a trusting place. But the town had been bitten three times now.

When Todd was done, they thanked him and once he'd left, Abby turned to Aaron. "Now your turn. I promise Mr. Burns and I are fine. But you look dead on your feet." She glanced at her watch. "I say we sleep until four and then reconvene here for pizza. What do you say, soldier?"

He grinned and snapped her a salute.

She rolled her eyes. "My sass salutes are way better than that."

He chuckled. "Something for me to work on." He was smiling when his head hit the pillow. He rested a hand against the wall, separating his room from Abby's, and he let himself hope and dream, and fantasize, imagining him telling her how he felt over pizza and then credits rolling while the theme from *Princess Bride* played softly in the background. He knew it would never happen. But imagining it helped him fall asleep.

The smell of Dante's woke him. He stumbled out of bed, trying to remember what century it was, let alone what day. The sun was setting and he had a moment of panic that he'd slept through a whole day. His phone beeped and he smiled when he saw the text message from Abby. *The third ring of the inferno was delivered hot and fiery to my door. Interested?*

He was on his feet and moving down the stairs. There was no time for messing around when Dante's pizza was involved. The door between their apartments was ajar which accounted for why he'd been able to smell the pizza and when he tapped on it, Abby pulled it open.

"Hey," she said, keeping her gaze at his chest level. "Pizza's on the counter. I got the usual. Hope it's ok."

He tried not to frown. She sounded so ... formal. *Maybe she's still in shock after what happened to Mr. Burns. Maybe she's just preoccupied. Maybe she's just ...* Trying to find a way to gently tell him she didn't think they should even be friends anymore. She handed him a plate and waited until he'd taken a slice before she helped herself and then stood back, against the counter behind her.

Aaron cast around for something safe to talk about. "How-how's Mr. Burns?" He turned his head to look at the dragon in his aquarium. He could see a foot and a tail sticking out of the loose sand on top of his heating pad.

"He's back to sleeping with one leg outside of his covers," Abby said, nodding at him, "so I think he's going to be ok."

"That's great," Aaron said. He could hear how pathetic the words sounded. A silence fell between them and it felt like a split in a glacier had formed between them, with each of them standing on opposite sides of the chasm. He had to figure out how to fix this.

"So, how's Greta?" Abby asked, staring down at the pizza on her plate.

Aaron's chest tightened. "Fine, I think."

“Good.” Abby’s voice was short and oddly formal. She glanced up at him and met his gaze for a moment before returning it to her plate. “Well, I think we should both get ready for our dates tonight.”

“What?” Aaron asked. “After everything that just happened in the last day? Why?”

“Because I don’t think we’re going to be able to figure out who did this and why by just sitting at home. And don’t forget,” Abby held his gaze this time. “There’s still a killer on the loose.”

Aaron didn’t like the idea, but he’d known Abby long enough to know that when she made up her mind about something, it was next to impossible to change it.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah.” She glanced over at Mr. Burns’ tank. “Do you ... do you think Mr. Burns could hang out in your apartment tonight, just in case? I know there’s a new deadbolt on my front door, but ...”

“Of course,” Aaron said quickly. She smiled at him and nodded.

“Ok. Then let’s kick this date night in the ass.” She’d set down her plate and hurried around the counter. Aaron hesitated until he heard her feet on the stairs. He heard her bedroom door close and he got to his feet.

That was it? Date night? That’s what she was thinking about now? He knew she was in proactive mode, but she actually sounded like she was ... looking forward to her date. He sighed and pulled the door between their apartments closed as he headed up his set of stairs to his bedroom.

He could hear Abby through the dividing wall, opening drawers and pushing hangers around in her closet. Her yoga mix was on. The soothing sounds reached Aaron and he slid down to sit on the edge of his bed. The playlist was Abby's poker tell. She might have been dishing out bravado downstairs, but if she was seeking the comfort of the familiar songs at five in the afternoon, she wasn't feeling indestructible.

He closed his eyes and put his head in his hands. He had to find out who did this to her. And why. How had he not noticed her windows were open and the absent glow of Mr. Burns' heating lamp immediately when he'd come home? It was something he always noticed. But not this time. He gritted his teeth. Because Greta had been waiting for him on the porch.

He jerked his head up. Greta. Had she? No. There was no way, was there? He knew she didn't *like* Abby, but he couldn't see Greta doing something like this.

Aaron knocked gently on their dividing door when he was ready. Abby opened it and together they moved Mr. Burns' tank into his living room. They got him situated on Aaron's coffee table with his lamp plugged into the wall and Aaron turned on a playlist of *Simpsons* episodes for him on his TV.

"Does he need anything else? Fresh water, more meal worms? Maybe a blanket wrapped around the tank?" Aaron asked. He knew he was babbling, but he couldn't stop. He was so glad the little guy was ok that it took him a minute to realize there was a small, warm hand squeezing his.

"He's ok," Abby whispered. She moved back into her apartment and secured the door. He met her out on the porch. "You should hurry," she said

with that tight smile again. "It's almost six. You'll be late to meet Greta."

Aaron paused. He didn't know how to tell her that he'd rather blow off Greta and stay home with her. But, he was starting to feel like that might not be a possibility anymore. She was pulling away from him. He could feel it. She looked so beautiful, standing in front of him in a green knit dress under her winter coat with a red scarf around her neck.

"I better go too, or I'll be late to meet Jack," she said, rolling her eyes before grinning at him.

"I'll walk with you," Aaron said.

"I think I can find my way to the park," she said, still smiling. "After all, if we show up together, Greta might get the wrong idea."

"I don't care," Aaron muttered.

Abby blinked at him, but after a moment, she ducked her head, nodded, and they headed down the driveway toward the town square. More than anything, he wished he could rewind time, tell Greta to get lost the night he and Abby had kissed for the second time. He'd slam the door in her face and stay with Abby all night. Maybe kiss her again, maybe ... *But that's not what she wants. If it was, she wouldn't be pulling away.* Still. She was his best friend. At least ... he *hoped* she was still his best friend. He had to tell her what was really going on with Greta.

"Abby, about Greta," Aaron started.

"Aaron, it's ok. I know. And we don't need to talk about it," she said softly.

But we do, Aaron wanted to say. *I love you.* But what if she didn't want to talk about that either? Somehow, in only a few days, he'd lost his best friend and all the possibilities for happiness along

with her. And he was staring down three hours of Greta Simpson and Hope holiday shenanigans. This time though, without his Stumpy by his side.

ABBY

She was doing a pretty good job, keeping the gaping hole in her chest to herself. *Not too bad for bleeding internally*, she thought. The shock of someone breaking into her apartment, and what had almost happened to Mr. Burns ... the pain in her chest tightened. Especially after seeing Aaron kissing Greta on the front porch. *Their* front porch. It was prom, all over again. But then, the way Aaron had held her, tried to keep her and Mr. Burns warm ... She took a deep breath. It was salt in an open wound. She almost wished he'd just ghosted her. It would have been less painful. She and Aaron walked to the park, physically feet apart and she was guessing miles apart mentally. What she would give to have the last few days erased. Go back to the beginning of winter break, back when they were making chili and cinnamon rolls, watching *MST3K*, and cracking jokes about how ridiculous this Santa's Singles farce was.

"Hey! Abby! Aaron!" She looked up in time to see Dana and her date moving toward them.

"David Tomlin?" Aaron muttered beside her. "The elementary school music teacher?"

"Didn't see that one coming," Abby muttered. Aaron chuckled, and she felt the strain in her chest ease a little. But, the feeling didn't last.

“There you are,” Greta hurried over and linked arms with Aaron. She was talking about the tour and everything they were going to see and Abby drifted away to talk to Dana.

“Hey, Dana. Hi, David,” she said. In response David grunted, keeping his attention on his phone.

“He’s trying to beat a level of Candy Crush he’s been stuck on for days,” Dana muttered. She turned to face Abby and frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Abby shook her head. “I’ll tell you later. I don’t want to distract from the delightful evening that awaits us.” She grinned and Dana rolled her eyes.

“Oh, so much fun. Esther’s house, then the Montesano’s garden of light-up plastic Christmas cliches, then row after row of houses competing with blaring Mannheim Steamroller songs and chasing lights, and then to finish the whole thing off with a big bang, we all get to freeze our butts off while gazing at Hope Island spelled out on the Hoffnung hillside.” Abby raised her eyebrows at Dana. She sighed. “This wasn’t my idea.”

“I can tell,” Abby said with a grin.

“Abby.” She and Dana turned to see Jack Bingham standing a few feet away, holding out a cup of coffee to her. “It’s uh, called ‘Christmas Chaos’. It’s from Miss Mandie’s, and she swears it’s your favorite?”

“You win this round of ‘Who has the good date’,” Dana muttered, raising her eyebrows at Abby.

“I’ll take it,” she whispered.

“Miss Mandie does not lie,” Abby said, moving over to stand with Jack. She thanked him and took the proffered cup. While she sipped it, she scanned the crowd around them. On the far side of the park,

she saw Greta and Aaron, her arm still tucked into his. She pushed down the stinging feeling in her chest and turned her back on them. She needed to focus on Jack. She didn't have time to think about Aaron and Greta at the moment, she had a light interrogation to conduct.

* * *

"Oh, I don't know what I can tell you about Angela," Jack said, frowning as they shuffled along behind the other couples. They'd just made it through the twenty-minute speech belted out by Esther about her lights, which was only cut off when the guide, muttering darkly, started walking away, gesturing for the rest of them to follow him. "We only had one date. She was ... nice. We had a nice conversation. She liked to surf and I'm from California originally. I spent my summers trying to figure out how to *not* fall off my board."

"So she never said anything to you, maybe about someone giving her trouble?"

Jack frowned. "No." He paused and looked at Abby. "Why? What's this about?"

She shook her head. "Just ... a rumor I heard." It was a terrible excuse but she didn't really know Jack and she didn't want to tell him everything, especially when it seemed like he didn't have anything to tell *her*. They drew even with Dana and David. David was still trying to pass the stubborn game level on his phone and Dana was trying valiantly to keep up some semblance of conversation with him.

"So, do you like any of the classics, Herman Melville, Jack London ..."

"Did you say, Jack London?" Jack asked.

Dana turned and grinned at him. “Yeah.”

“Oh, man. My mom was an English teacher. She actually *named* me after Jack London. *White Fang* was the first classic I ever read.”

And they were off. Abby just smiled, listening to Jack and Dana getting more and more enthusiastic about Jack London’s books as they trudged past the seemingly endless line of decorated houses. She sipped her coffee and decided to take advantage of the quiet to think. Well, semi-quiet. She’d fallen in line next to David who was swearing under his breath. But that, combined with the electronic beeps, was almost hypnotizing. She stared around at the other couples. Where was the killer now? Were they here, hiding in plain sight? *Was* it the same person who’d tried to kill Mr. Burns? The scientific data wasn’t there to support that hypothesis, but Abby had a gut feeling that the murder (possibly murders) and Mr. Burns’ attempted murder were connected.

The couples around her were all walking at different speeds, stretching the tour out over several blocks. She couldn’t see Aaron and Greta now. *Probably off somewhere with Greta’s tongue down his throat*, she thought bitterly.

“Keep up,” the guide called. “Last stop is the pride of the tour! The Hope Island lights sign.”

“We definitely don’t want to miss that, do we,” she muttered. “Eighth wonder of the world, some say.”

“Hey,” the voice behind her made Abby turn.

“Eric,” she said. She blinked at him and looked around. “I didn’t see you earlier. Have-have you been on the tour this whole time?”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t actually *mean* to be on the tour. I was out for a walk and just ...”

“Got sucked into the tour’s wake?” she asked. “That can happen.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess so.” His grin slipped and he studied her face. “I- I wanted to apologize to you.”

“Why?” Abby asked.

He sighed. “I was short with you the other day. It’s just ... the sheriffs have been over to question me a couple of times. It’s ... it’s starting to sound like the sheriffs believe you and they’re investigating Fred’s death like it wasn’t an accident. I just ... I can’t believe this is happening again.”

“What is?” Abby asked.

He sighed. “In Seattle, where I lived before, I was questioned by the sheriffs when a woman I was dating, Anita, started getting these cryptic notes, supposedly from me, saying that I was going to kill her.”

Abby felt her jaw drop. Eric nodded grimly.

“Yeah, that was my reaction. We’d already gone our separate ways, and Anita thought I was a stalker or something. So they brought me in, and of course, my handwriting didn’t match the notes, so I was eliminated as a suspect, but I started getting these horrible flashbacks when the cops came to question me about Fred ... and then Angela.” He shook his head.

“Did ... did they ever figure out who wrote the letters?” Abby asked, keeping her voice low and slowing her steps so she and Eric wouldn’t be overheard by the others.

He matched her stride and shook his head. “No. At the time, I thought maybe it was this controlling ex I had before dating Anita, but it was so nutty, I just ... couldn’t believe anyone would do something like that. I think it’s more likely that either Anita had a stalker, which would be horrible enough, or maybe one of her other exes wanted to scare her.” He paused and Abby glanced at him. He scratched the back of his head and looked at the ground. “Either way ... uh, she moved and ... the letters stopped.”

Abby nodded, thinking about what he’d said.

An electronic beep interrupted her train of thought and she saw Eric check his watch and groan. “Sorry, I gotta go. My shift starts in twenty minutes. I just ...” He paused and smiled at Abby. “I wanted to make sure we were still ok. And I wanted to tell you why I’d acted the way I did.”

“Thanks,” she said, smiling at him. “We’ll catch up sometime. Have a good shift.”

He grinned. “Have a good rest of your tour. Try not to faint in excitement when you get to the ... Hope Island light sign.”

She shook her head. “They couldn’t even bother to come up with an exciting name for it. Talk about cutting corners. I’m thinking of asking for a refund.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “How are you planning to word your complaint?”

“As mundanely as possible. See how they like it.”

He chuckled. “Well, it sounds like you’ve got a full night ahead of you.”

“You as well,” she said with a wave. “We’ll have to compare notes and see which one of us had

more fun tonight.”

With a final wave, he turned and headed back toward the town square. A minute later, she wished she'd cut and run with him. Dana and Jack were *still* talking animatedly, Aaron and Greta were *still* nowhere in sight, and she was *still* paired up with David and his noisy Candy Crushin' phone.

“This is unacceptable,” she heard the mayor muttering as they all came to a stop next to the carefully placed lines of lights on the hill. “I want to know who did this.”

Abby choked on the last of her cold coffee when she realized what the mayor was mad about. Someone had unscrewed the bulbs in the P and E, spelling out Hope Island. Now the sign read, “Welcome to Ho Island.”

“Damn skippy,” Dana muttered, nodding approvingly at the sign as she came to stand beside Abby and bumped her with her hip.

Abby chuckled. “My money's on the Whorley brothers,”

“No bet,” Dana muttered.

There was a figure laying inside the O of Hope. It looked like an oddly shaped man, wearing Santa-print boxers, sunglasses, and a Santa hat. His ankles were crossed and both arms were behind his head as if he was trying to catch a few non-existent rays. Even from a distance, Abby could see that it was Dean Martin.

AARON

Greta was talking, but Aaron was becoming more proficient at tuning her out. Sometimes being tall had its advantages. When they paused to “ooh and ahh” over light displays, he’d been able to catch sight of Abby, several blocks back. At first, he was relieved to see Jack hitting it off with Dana instead of Abby. She looked relieved too, so he didn’t feel like a *completely* selfish jerk.

But then, Eric arrived. *Seriously, what was it with that guy and Abby?* Greta was still talking. *God, I wish none of this had ever happened. I wish I was in PJ’s and those Scooby slippers Abby got me, watching MST3K with her and eating s’mores on her couch. And he probably would have been if Santa’s Singles had never crossed their path.*

“So, I was thinking, since school gets out in June, we could leave right after the twenty-third. You’re going to love the Bahamas. It’s so beautiful and ...”

“What?” Aaron asked, turning to look at her. “The Bahamas?”

“Yeah,” Greta said. “This summer. We talked about this.”

“You talked about it,” Aaron muttered.

“And speaking of talking about something, what do you think we should tell people about us when school starts up again? I mean, there will be a lot of questions, and I know it sounds a little juvenile, but I really like the sound of boyfriend-girlfriend.”

And that was when Aaron’s nice guy politeness melted down. “No, Greta.”

“You like ‘special friends’, better? Or ... maybe something *more* serious?” She asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

He sighed. “No, we’re going to tell them nothing.”

She frowned. “But it’s going to come out.”

“No, we’re not going to tell anyone, anything. Because there’s nothing to tell, Greta. We’re *not* dating. I’m sorry. I really am. But ...” The hard look on Greta’s face made him change direction. “Did you break into Abby’s house and try to kill Mr. Burns?”

She blinked at him. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said, keeping his voice conversational, but firm.

“No. Why would you think that?”

“You were at our house when both of us were gone. You were on our porch.”

She was glaring now. “Oh, ‘our house’ is it? ‘Our porch’? It’s not healthy, Aaron. How are you supposed to have a relationship, *either one of you*, when you’re only separated by a wall from a woman who is completely head over heels in love with you? How would *you* feel if I was living somewhere like that? You can hardly blame me for

thinking that if there's ever going to be anything real between us, you have to move."

"What are you talking about?"

Greta rolled her eyes. "Oh don't pretend you don't know. Seriously, Aaron. Playing coy is beneath you. If we're going to get serious about each other, you *have to move*."

"Did you say that Abby is ... Why do you think Abby is head over heels ... for me?"

Greta crossed her arms. "Have you *met* her? You don't see her glancing your way whenever we're together? The way her face lights up whenever you give her *any* attention? I'll bet she's at your house or you're at hers every night."

"We're friends," Aaron said, feeling his heart starting to race.

"You're not going to give me the 'just friends' speech, are you? I'm in *love* with you, Aaron. I have been ever since I saw you playing basketball in the teacher's league this fall. At the championship tournament in November, I sat through *the whole* game, next to that neurotic roommate of Fred's, just for the chance that you *might* look my way. I was so enamored with you that I could barely hear him babbling away. That's the kind of power you have over me."

Aaron frowned. "Wait, Fred's roommate? Eric?"

She paused. "Yeah?"

"You were with him at the championship game? Were you two dating?"

She shook her head. "No, I just had the misfortune to sit down beside him on a day he decided to verbally unload on whoever was around him. He would not shut up about some ex stalking

him and that he had to move to the island just to get away from her.”

Pieces were moving around in Aaron’s head. “What else did he say?”

She looked annoyed, but she continued. “He said she was attacking and harassing this other woman he was dating and ...”

“Attacking?”

“He said it started with these letters and then the ex ended up breaking the woman’s arm and putting her in the hospital. But the sheriffs didn’t have enough to arrest her because she attacked the woman in the dark, so the woman couldn’t identify her and there wasn’t any physical evidence on her. But Eric swore it was her. Seriously, I thought the guy was completely deranged. I’d considered dating Fred, but his roommate was pretty much the giant red flag that made me move on.”

“Does this ex *know* that Eric is in Hope?” Aaron asked, looking around at the crowd. When Greta was quiet, he looked back down at her. She was giving him a strange look.

“How would I know?”

He turned his attention back to the crowd. He had to find Abby. He had to tell her what Greta had just told him. This might be the answer they’d been looking for. He spotted David standing alone, but he couldn’t see Dana, Jack, or Abby.

“Look, Greta. I think you are ... or you *can be* a nice person, but this isn’t going to work out between us. I have to find Abby.” And he took off. The group was spread all over the hillside, some sitting down on the grass to watch the stars over the ocean, some milling around talking, and others just standing still, dark silhouettes against the

night sky. He started moving methodically through the groups, trying to find her. He worked his way back toward the streets and the path they'd followed to the hill. And that's when he spotted Eric, walking by himself, almost jogging. Where was he going in such a hurry?

ABBY

Damn it, where was six-foot-six Aaron Burns when she needed him? Everyone was spread out on the hill, still giggling about “Ho Island” and watching the stars. Under any other circumstance, she would have been happy to sit and enjoy the night, preferably beside someone she clicked with better than Jack, Darren, or ... David. She grinned to herself. Oh, David. If she didn't know better, she'd think his mom had forced him to go out on a date. She was thankful that Jack and Dana had found each other. She would have felt bad for Dana if she'd been stuck with David all night. She picked her way through the couples and groups. Still no Aaron. Now that she had something she had to tell him, he was nowhere to be found. She went by Miss Mandie's table where she and Mrs. Thompson were handing out plastic stem glasses of wine to the tour attendees.

“Need a little let-you-down?” Miss Mandie asked, holding a glass out to her.

“Nah. I get the feeling there have been enough let-downs tonight,” Abby muttered, her gaze falling on Greta. The usual starlet quality of Greta's hair and outfit was currently being eclipsed by the “behind the scenes” view of her chugging directly out of a wine bottle.

“Yeah,” Miss Mandie sighed, following Abby’s gaze. “I poured her a glass and she took the bottle. Muttering something that sounded like, ‘fucking best friends’.”

Abby felt her eyebrows raise. “Did you see Aaron around here?”

Miss Mandie grinned. “Nope. I heard him though. They had some kind of fight behind me, then Miss Straight-Lace over there snatched my wine. I think he left.”

“Did he happen to say where he was going?” she asked, looking around.

“Sorry, Abs.”

Abby thanked them and approached Greta. She did it slowly, like someone trying not to spook a wild animal. “Hey, Greta.”

Greta turned to face Abby and sighed. “You win.”

Abby blinked at her. “What?”

“You win, ok?” She chuckled ruefully, taking another swig out of the bottle. “That’s what I get for screwing with the math.” She snorted. “And I don’t mean Darren.” She started giggling, somewhat hysterically and took another slug out of the bottle.

“Screwing with the math?”

Greta rolled her eyes. “Yeah. I fudged the match numbers on the questionnaire so you two wouldn’t be matched. It wasn’t easy. I swear you two are almost the same person. Ninety-seven percent match. Who the hell has ever had a *ninety-seven percent* match before? That doesn’t happen.” She sighed again and took another drink. Abby was too stunned to move or speak. Greta shook her head. “I

just wanted a fighting chance to see if he and I could be together. It's not fair." Her tone had turned bitter now. "You have Aaron all to yourself and you won't even *date* him. What, are you two supposed to just grow old together, side by side in that duplex? No room for either of you to have a relationship or grow?"

"Where's Aaron?" Abby asked, putting much of what Greta was saying down to the half-empty bottle in her hand.

"I don't know. He went looking for you."

"Thanks, Greta. I'm ... sorry."

Greta shrugged and took another drink from the bottle before stumbling over to sit down on a bench. Abby hurried on, not letting herself stop to think about what Greta had just said. Aaron ... was it possible? *Not now, Abby. Find him first, tell him what Eric told you, and then after you find the killer, talk to him about what Greta said.*

"Abby." She looked up to see David approaching her. His phone wasn't in his hands anymore.

"You finally beat that level?" she asked, grinning at him.

He sighed. "No. My phone died. I just want to find something to drink. Did you happen to see where Dana went? And hey, where's Jack? Weren't you here on a date with him?"

"Oh, David. I think Dana and Jack are better suited to each other than to you or me. So, it's probably best if we just move on." Her gaze fell on Greta. "But there's a really nice gal over there, by the name of Greta who has a bottle and might be willing to share it if you can find something to talk about *besides* Candy Crush."

His eyes widened. "Greta Simpson?"

She nodded. “Go get her. Worst that can happen, she’ll share her wine and you two will have a nice chat. But who knows where that could lead. Just keep your Candy Crush in your pants, ok, Romeo?”

David grinned nervously at Abby and then with a quick nod, he headed off to go join Greta.

With a chuckle, Abby turned back toward town, her heart feeling lighter than it had since the whole disastrous Santa’s Singles thing had started. She knew part of it was the realization that she’d now gone on her three dates and she was finally done with the goofy ritual. The other part ... sent an electric shock through her body. When this was all over, she had a lot to talk through with Aaron Burns.

She jogged down the sidewalk, picking up speed as she thought about everything Greta had said to her. And she’d never admit it to the woman, but Greta had some good points. She started rehearsing in her head everything she wanted to say to him. She rephrased, rearranged, and mentally edited the order over and over on her way home. She had so much she wanted to say, it might take weeks to get it all out. But before that, she’d tell him what Eric said, they’d go to the sheriffs with their new information, the serial killer would be caught, and then they could put on their sweats, order a pizza, watch *MST3K*, and ... a thrill ran through her stomach thinking of their kiss. The thought of continuing that kiss, letting it go where it took them, and no one knocking on her door, interrupting, was sending heat to places Abby hadn’t felt in years beyond the late-night fantasies her brain dabbled in without her permission.

The walk home was almost too short. She could feel her nerves starting to frazzle as she

approached their driveway. The lights were still off inside both halves of their duplex. Maybe he wasn't home yet. She frowned. But then where was he? Her gaze fell on the little garage. She smiled when she saw the warm glow through the window. *Out there painting new game pieces no doubt.* They really were almost the same person in some respects. If she'd beat him home, she would have probably headed to the garage too, just to have something to do with the nervous energy pulsing through her. She smiled, took a deep breath, and pushed the door open.

“Hey, you. I heard you'd had enough of 'Ho Island' and by the way, did you happen to see Dean Martin was there?” She scanned the room in front of her and frowned. No Aaron.

Something cold and hard pressed against the back of her skull.

And then the last voice she expected to hear said, “If you make a sound, I'll blow your head off.”

AARON

Aaron's feet couldn't move fast enough. Where was Eric going?

"Hey, Eric," he called. The man paused and looked behind him.

"Aaron, hey, how are you doing?" He didn't think it was his imagination, but was Eric looking a little annoyed?

"Hey, have you seen Abby?" he asked, watching Eric's face.

For a moment, Eric looked confused. "Uh, I saw her a little bit ago, over at the walking lights tour. She was still there when I left. I have to get to work. My shift starts in a few minutes." Oh. Maybe *that* was why he seemed annoyed and why he was walking so fast. "You mind if we keep walking while we talk? I really don't want to be late."

Aaron nodded and slowed his longer stride to fall in step with Eric.

"Hey," Eric said. "It's ok. I just ... want you to know that I get it."

"Get it?" Aaron asked.

"You and Abby."

Aaron just looked at him.

“You’re lucky. Both of you. Not all of us get that lucky in our relationships. Man, my ex ...” He shook his head. “Just, hold on to each other, ok? Both of you.”

Well, that wasn’t what Aaron had been expecting to hear.

“Did she say anything to you about leaving the tour?” Aaron asked.

Eric shook his head. “No. But I wouldn’t be surprised if she blew the rest of it off. She didn’t seem like she was having much of a good time. She probably headed home.”

He thanked Eric, said goodbye, and they parted ways in the town square. He headed for the Spark Theater and the side street that would take him home. Maybe Eric was right and when Abby gave up on the tour, she’d headed that way.

He paused when he saw Jack and Dana in line at Miss Mandie’s. He squinted at the crowd around them. Bart was behind the counter and looked like he was having a hard time keeping up with his late-night crowd. Luckily, island life moved slower than life on the mainland so the waiting line had just turned their delay into a social gathering.

“Hey, Dana,” Aaron called from the bakery doorway. She looked up.

“Aaron!”

“Have you seen Abby?”

She shook her head. “No, but Greta said Abby was going to find you. Have you checked home yet?”

“Heading there now,” Aaron said, unable to stop the smile from crossing his face. Home. Abby might be waiting for him at home. The thought

made a hard lump form in his throat. “Home” was something he’d said all his life. It was just the physical location where he lived. But when Abby was there, waiting for him ...

“Aaron!” He turned in time to see Maggie running across the square toward him. The serious expression on the woman’s face made his heart stutter in his chest.

“Maggie? What is it?” Aaron’s panic was rising with every step she took toward him.

“Where’s Abby?” She glanced over at De-Floured. “Is she in there?”

“No, I think she’s at home.”

“You don’t know where she is?” Maggie’s face was pale.

“What happened?”

“I ran those prints from Abby’s house. They came back to a match in the system. I need Abby to come back to the office.”

Aaron’s anxiety was starting to choke him. “Maggie, whose prints are they?”

ABBY

“Sasha?” Abby was too scared to move. She felt the barrel leave the back of her head.

“Turn around.” Sasha’s voice wasn’t the bubbly, happy soprano she was used to. When she saw the woman, holding a gun on her, she almost didn’t recognize her.

“What are you doing?” Abby asked. And she could hear the fear in her own voice. In her college education classes, they’d trained about what to do when someone had a gun aimed at you. A terrible necessity of the times. But this was Hope. This was *her home*. She wasn’t a criminal, she hadn’t done anything that she could think of to warrant someone wanting to kill her.

“You know why I’m here,” Sasha spat. “You just couldn’t leave him alone, could you?”

“Leave who alone?” Abby asked, but her voice came out in a whisper.

“He’s mine. You knew that.”

“Who?” Abby breathed.

“Don’t play dumb. You know, I’m pretty good at making things look like accidents.” She glanced around the garage. “There are *plenty* of power tools in here. And the odds of fatal accidents with things like ... saws, are so high. And I gave you more than

enough fair warnings. That pretty little blonde didn't listen. Neither did Fred. My god, even his *roommate* was trying to keep us apart."

Abby blinked. "Eric?"

"We're soulmates," she spat. "And he threw it all away. He wrecked my happiness, so now, I'm wrecking his."

"You were the one who broke into my apartment? You tried to kill ..."

"I told you. I tried to warn you. But you just couldn't leave him alone."

"And you ... you killed Fred?"

Sasha snorted. "That asshole. I texted him. I *told* him I needed to see Eric. I told him that I needed to talk to him, reason with him. He just kept texting me, telling me that Eric didn't want to see me or talk to me. Fred was keeping us apart. So, I came out here and found him. We argued, and I shoved him. He fell, but he was still alive. He was bleeding from the head, but he was still vowing to keep me and Eric apart. So, I bashed his head against the dumpster until he couldn't anymore."

Abby swallowed hard. God. Poor Fred. "What about Angela?"

Sasha chuckled darkly. "It was too easy. Her window wasn't latched. I'd sent her a note, telling her to leave him alone. But she didn't read it. I found it, still on her porch where I'd left it. She was *ignoring* me. So, I had to stop her. Because she was stopping me. She was trying to take my place. Just like *you* are."

Abby looked into the face of the woman in front of her, and she thought about the pangs of jealousy she'd been fighting, seeing Aaron with Greta and before her, Aaron with Angela. If he hadn't been

her best friend and her desire to see him happy hadn't been strong enough to keep the jealous thoughts just in her head, there was, in the theory of infinite dimensions, one where she and Sasha could have changed places.

"Sasha, I know what it feels like when one guy is kind of your world. But, if you really love him, you want him to be happy, right?"

Sasha's hand was shaking on the gun. "Yes. But ... he's supposed to be happy with *me!*"

"I know. It sucks," Abby said softly.

"No! You *don't* know. I love him."

"Do you love *Star Wars*?" Abby asked, casting around for something to distract her.

Sasha paused and Abby didn't miss the annoyance that flashed across her face. "Well, no. Those movies are terrible."

"Especially episodes I, II, and III, right?" Abby asked, smiling.

Sasha nodded, the gun bouncing in time with her head, but still resolutely trained on Abby. "They're *so boring*."

"Yeah," Abby said, enthusiastically. "And Eric *loves Star Wars*. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life *watching Star Wars*?"

"Well, no," Sasha muttered.

"What's your favorite show, Sasha?" Abby asked.

"I ... I really like *Lost*," Sasha said, smiling, tears forming in her eyes.

"Oh... yeah," Abby said, not quite sure what to say to that. "I saw the first season. F-fun show."

And she saw an opening. “And very different from *Star Wars*. Did ... Did Eric like *Lost* too?”

She sighed. “No. He hated it.”

“See?” Abby said softly. “Don’t you want to be with someone who loves *Lost* the way you do? Don’t you think you *deserve* that?” There was a creak outside. Abby heard it, but Sasha was sniffing and didn’t react.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Why couldn’t he just like *Lost*? It’s a good show.”

The door behind her slammed open and Sasha swung around. Aaron was framed in the doorway, his eyes wild.

“Aaron, look out!” Abby screamed. Without pausing to think about what she was doing, she leaped on Sasha. Her only thought was *Save Aaron. Whatever it takes.*

The gun went off and Abby’s heart froze in her chest. They were on the ground and Abby looked up in time to see Maggie come through the door. She barreled past Aaron and kicked the gun out of Sasha’s hand. She was pulling her cuffs off the belt of her uniform when Bill Benton hustled through the door to help her get Sasha on her feet. Aaron stumbled inside and pulled Abby off Sasha and up to stand on shaky legs. She leaned on him for a moment, but when she realized who she was leaning against and that he was warm and still alive, a sense of urgency seemed to possess her. She mentally kicked the door closed on logical thought. She wrapped her arms around his neck and she didn’t have to pull him down to kiss her. She felt his hands under her as he lifted her up and kissed her ... hard. She wrapped one arm around his shoulders and knocked his ski cap off with the other as she ran her hand through his hair and

tried to put a lot of things into the kiss, deepening it. And at that moment, Abby was home.

AARON

She was alive. And in his arms. And she was kissing him. He moaned against her lips and she pulled back. It was too much. He should have known. How did he mess this up already?

“You’re hurt,” Abby breathed, looking at his arm. He glanced down to see the blood on his jacket sleeve.

“Old nail on the doorway,” he breathed. “Must have snagged on it when Maggie knocked me out of the way.” He chuckled. “We should have put Todd’s hammer to some good use.” To be honest, he hadn’t even felt it. But Abby’s eyes were shining as she looked at the blood. He could tell she was trying not to cry. “Abs,” he said softly. “I’m ok. I really am.” He sighed and looked over at the dresser she’d been working on next to the door. “Which, sadly, is more than I can say for ole ‘dick loser’ over there.” The bullet had drilled a pretty sizable hole through the penis drawn on the side. Abby was going to have a tough time patching the hole with wood putty. His anxiety gripped him and he tightened his hold around her. If he’d been just a second later, that hole ... could have been in Abby.

“We should take care of that cut,” Abby sniffed. “I don’t want you to get tetanus and lockjaw or gangrene.”

“It would make for a pretty busy Christmas though,” he said. “That’s a lot to contract in a short amount of time. Especially from a scrape.” She rolled her eyes and he chuckled.

After that, Abby took charge of the situation, in her Abby way. Her sisters and her mom called Abby, “bossy” when it came to health emergencies. But he knew when she took control like this, he knew she was scared, and making the decisions was how she coped. Aaron felt himself smile as she led him past Maggie and the departing cops with Sasha in tow. They paused to talk to Maggie who promised to call in the morning with the details and fill them both in on everything. Aaron was barely listening. He was focusing on Abby’s small hand, gripping his, their fingers intertwined. And he just breathed. He realized something as he stood there, listening to her talk to Maggie. When Abby took control in stressful situations like this, he relaxed. His anxiety went to sleep.

When Maggie had told him who the prints had belonged to, he didn’t think he’d ever run so fast. He’d seen Sasha in the neighborhood yesterday. She’d been there when he’d left. She was the one who ... If he’d known ... He shivered. What would have happened if he hadn’t gotten to the garage in time?

“No need. I’ve got him, Maggie,” he heard Abby say. “I’ll take care of him.” He didn’t miss the smile on Maggie’s face.

“Happy Holidays, you two,” Maggie said with a smile. “I’m so glad this nightmare is over. And we never would have put all of this together without you two. Thank you.”

And then Abby was leading him across their gravel driveway, away from the terror that had tainted their garage.

“Ok, first, let’s get that coat off and see how bad it is,” Abby said once they were inside her apartment. She paused and bit her lip. “If ... it’s not too painful..”

“Yeah, it ... it doesn’t feel too bad. To be honest, I didn’t notice, until you said something,” Aaron said.

She helped him peel off his coat. The nail had torn the sleeve of his long-sleeved shirt and blood soaked the fabric.

“I think you might have to lose the shirt too,” Abby said. And he didn’t miss the red tinge in her cheeks and ears. She straightened her shoulders and turned to go to the kitchen. She bent down in front of the sink and he knew she was looking for her first aid kit. He hesitated for a minute, but then he remembered. He’d promised himself to not hold back anymore with her. He was going to tell her how he felt and hope and pray she didn’t hate him for it. He felt slightly more confident after the way she’d kissed him in the garage. His blood was on fire as it rushed through him, settling in his crotch. She’d first pulled him down to kiss her but when he’d lifted her up, she’d wrapped her legs around ...

“Hmmm,” Abby said, jerking him out of his thoughts. He looked up at her. “Now, I guess I could be seeing things, but it looks to me like that shirt is still on.”

Aaron met Abby’s gaze and for a moment, they just looked at each other.

“I- I can go get another shirt from my apartment,” he murmured.

Abby held his gaze. “If- if you want to. I just ... I just don’t want you to die from something that’s preventable.”

“You’re very thoughtful that way,” Aaron said with a smile. “You sure?”

“Take it off,” Abby said, biting her lip. Aaron took a deep breath and bit down on his tongue, just to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. With Abby’s help, he was able to get the shirt over his head and peeled away from his injured arm. He didn’t miss the surveying look Abby gave him as she raked her gaze across his chest and abs. He saw her physically redirect her attention to his arm, so he did his best to keep his thoughts away from what her hands would feel like moving over more than just his arm. The wound looked a lot worse than it actually was.

“It’s really not too bad,” she said softly. She was so gentle as she cleaned his wound. “I think I have a band-aid that might cover it,” Abby said, grinning at him. Aaron feigned outrage.

“A *band-aid*? I’ve been injured in the line of ride-or-die duty and it’s so small it can be covered by a *band-aid*?”

“Them’s the breaks, partner,” Abby chuckled. She leaned forward and touched her lips to his shoulder, just above the wound. Her eyes moved up to meet his. “Better?” Her voice was a whisper and even though her posture was sure, he didn’t miss the vulnerability in her eyes.

Something about the moment, maybe it was feeling her warm breath on his bare skin, or how gentle she was being as she put the bandage on, or maybe it was just how close they were, but Aaron’s mouth opened and what he’d wanted to tell her for three years came out.

“Abby, I need to tell you something.” She’d been smoothing down the edges of the wide band-aid on his arm. She paused, that same vulnerable look in her eyes, and Aaron held his breath.

“I love you, Aaron,” Abby’s voice was barely more than a whisper. “I’ve been in love with you for a long time.”

“Three years,” Aaron said softly. Abby moved in front of him, to meet his gaze. “That’s how long I’ve been in love with you, Abby Locke.” They just stared at each other for a moment. And then, Abby laughed. Aaron blinked at her. “What’s so funny?”

“We’re idiots,” Abby chuckled, shaking her head. Aaron frowned and she sighed. “I ... when I was in high school, I had a guy as my best friend, and ...” she hesitated, and Aaron saw the pain cross her face.

“I know,” Aaron said. Abby looked up at him, surprised. “Barb told me about Derek.” Abby looked slightly relieved. She cleared her throat.

“I- More than anything, Aaron, I didn’t want to do anything that would mean I’d lose you in my life. You’re not *just* my best friend. You are *the* best friend I’ve ever had. And I didn’t want what happened with Derek to happen with you. So, I pushed down ...”

“What you were feeling?” Aaron whispered. Abby nodded. He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Oh Abby, if I’d known.” She sniffed and he opened his eyes in time to see a tear escape her eyes, but she was smiling. He reached over and wiped the tear off her cheek with his thumb. “I was too scared of losing you to bring up how crazy you’ve been making me for the last three years. I’ve ... Abby, I ...” He took a deep breath. “Abby, I have anxiety.” She just nodded as if she was

expecting him to say more. No surprise, no judgment. He paused. Maybe she didn't understand. "I mean, I have *bad* anxiety. I always have. It's crippling sometimes. Well, not as much now as it used to be before I moved to Hope. And I ... I don't know how to be ... normal." He paused again and Abby smiled.

"You think *I* do? Besides, the good Professor Elemental said it best, 'There's no such thing as normal. Everybody's weird.'" She looked like she wanted to say more but he cut her off. He needed to tell her everything now. If he stopped, he knew he'd chicken out, and then she wouldn't *see* what she was getting herself into. "You know my mom died when I was a kid. And my dad, well, he was gone. And ..." he paused and took another deep breath. "I was basically raised by my grandma."

"And she did a hell of a good job," Abby said, beaming, even though the tears were shining in her eyes. "Aaron, you don't have to prove anything to me. You don't have to make any point or read me some kind of warning label you think is stamped across your forehead. You're my best friend, and I love you." She squeezed her eyes shut. "God, I love you so deeply it scares the shit of me. And I have for so long, I'm root bound. I've been afraid that when you found out you'd move, rip yourself out of this house and my life, and take so much of me with you that I wouldn't recover. And ..." she shook her head and laughed. "You carried *and* delivered dragon poop for me. Who does that?"

He shrugged, smiling at her. "A best friend?" She chuckled, but he didn't miss the flicker of vulnerability on her face, so he continued. "I've never even imagined feeling about someone, the way I feel about you. You really are my best friend," he paused and saw her gaze drop, "and

I'm in love with you. Can ... am I asking for too much to have you as both?"

She was on his lap as soon as he finished the question. Her lips were on his and he couldn't think straight. She ran her tongue along his bottom lip and he felt himself growl as a dam burst somewhere in his chest. His hands were moving on their own and he wasn't about to stop them. Abby was ... panting. For a split second, he panicked, feeling his cock harden against his leg. But then Abby moaned and started ... grinding against him and he was a goner.

* * *

ABBY

This was really happening. Was she dreaming? If she was, her imagination had gotten an upgrade because it had never been this hot. God, Aaron's body ... Abby was feeling every second of her dry spell, but she couldn't stop kissing him. Those lips that had given her so many half-smiles, snarky comments, inside jokes, and tonight the words, "I love you". For the first time in her life, she wasn't the pining best friend, all by herself, wishing for what she knew she'd never had.

She had to taste him. Before she could weigh the pros and cons, her tongue flicked out and she ran it along his lower lip. The growl that rumbled out of him sent a wave of electricity through her, sending a burning heat to pool between her legs. She was on his lap but couldn't remember exactly how she got there. It didn't matter though. When he growled, she felt something hard move beneath her and her hips bucked, her mind going blank. Wow. This was actually happening. Her breath

caught in her throat when she felt his hands moving down her sides. His thumbs slipped under the edge of her shirt and he paused. She was in a haze of ecstasy when he pulled back from their kiss and met her gaze. “Abby, we don’t have to,” he said, softly.

“I know,” Abby said, “but I want this. Do-do you?”

“So much,” Aaron breathed, “for so long.”

Abby smiled and held his gaze while she tugged her shirt off. She didn’t miss the look of awe on his face as he looked her over. Then, they were skin to skin, and Abby stopped thinking. All she could do was feel. Feel her best friend’s heartbeat, thumping against her chest, matching her own. It had been so long for both of them, that she didn’t expect either of them to last. All of the questions she’d chastised herself for wondering about Aaron’s body, under the layers of sweatshirts or tweed or basketball shorts were answered. And the answers did *not* disappoint.

“God, Abby. I can’t believe this is actually happening,” he groaned, pausing with his lips pressed against her nipple. Her body was a Tesla coil, humming with the current rolling in waves as he moved inside her.

“We know little of the things for which we pray,” she moaned, feeling him stroking her deeper.

“Did-” he paused, panting, “Did you just quote Chaucer? In the middle of sex?”

Horror rolled over Abby. Had she screwed this up already? But he wasn’t pulling away. Not yet. She was afraid to meet his gaze but finally, she

forced herself to look. The intense heat in his eyes took her breath away.

“That. Is. The. Sexiest. Thing. I’ve. Ever. Heard,” he growled, stroking hard into her with each word. She was teetering on the brink of ecstasy.

“Next time,” she whimpered, “I’ll say it in Middle English.”

“Abby,” he moaned. Heat filled her and she toppled over the edge, clinging to him and his release.

Aaron turned, so Abby was lying on top of him on the couch, and then he pulled the big comforter off the back of the couch to cover them.

“That was ...” Aaron breathed, his chest still rising and falling in more of a pant.

“Yeah,” Abby agreed. She turned her face down and kissed his chest, running her tongue over his nipple. He shuddered below her.

“Whoa there, Nessie. It’s been a while. I think I need a minute to recover before ...”

Abby looked up and met his dark gaze and lazy smile with one of her own. “You mean, we could do it again?”

“Well, yeah,” Aaron said, and Abby didn’t miss the color rising in his cheeks.

“Awesome,” Abby whispered. She moved her lips to the underside of his jaw. “Because we have three years to make up for.”

“I don’t know,” Aaron said softly. She paused and looked up at him. “Maybe we needed those three years so we could end up here.”

Abby turned her head and rested her cheek on his bare chest, listening to his heartbeat and feeling him combing his fingers through her hair. She closed her eyes and thought. If this had happened three years sooner, would they have still been friends? Or would they have ever *become* friends? Would things have been too awkward? And if they'd broken up, would they have ever been more than just acquaintances after that? Her heart ached at the closeness they would have missed. The inside jokes, the memories, the laughter. Aaron *was* right. They had needed those three years as friends to end up here.

Later, when they were worn out, they stumbled into their pajamas. Aaron had carried Mr. Burns' aquarium back into her living room and she'd crawled around on the floor, getting all his accessories plugged back in. Then they collapsed onto the couch again. Closer than before.

"MST3K?" Abby asked, reaching for the remote.

"Yes, please," Aaron sighed. She turned to look at him. He was smiling with his eyes closed.

"You look so relaxed right now," Abby said softly, "More than I've ever seen you relax before."

Aaron opened his eyes and studied her face. After a moment, he said, "It's because I'm not hiding anything from my best friend anymore. You know it all. Well, almost all." She raised an eyebrow at him. "You don't know what I got you for Christmas, but," he reached over the side of the couch and pulled his coat into his lap. From the pocket, he pulled out a little wrapped bundle, the size of the palm of his hand. "We could remedy that now."

Abby smiled. "As it just so happens, that is a secret of mine that you don't know yet, either."

She got to her feet, found her coat, and pulled out the bundle she'd bought for him.

They traded packages and she sat down beside him. He nudged her with his shoulder and she looked up at him. She was fairly certain the smile on her face might be permanent at this point. "Open them at the same time?"

"No way," they both chorused when they opened identical pairs of the ugly Christmas sweater socks.

"Socks with the power to repel," Aaron laughed. "They're perfect."

"And surprisingly soft," Abby said, pulling them on.

"Would it be ... forward of me," he said, his voice playfully formal, "to say that I'd like to see you wearing nothing *but* those hideous socks."

"Only if we can match, *and* you promise to do something about us wearing nothing but these socks," she teased.

"I promise," Aaron growled, leaning over to nip at her neck. She let out a squeal of laughter, jumped off the couch, and started peeling off her PJ's. "Oh-oh right now?"

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Oh, is this a little Chicken-Too-Far for you, Burney?" She chuckled at the look on his face and with a growl, he tackled her. They took their time, stretched out on the soft living room rug, under the soft glow of the lights from her Christmas tree. Afterward, Aaron tugged the comforter back over them, their legs tangled together and both still pulsing from their releases.

"You know, I could get used to this," Abby said, feeling the hum in her voice.

Aaron was still and she froze, holding her breath. He turned to look at her and their faces were so close that she was sure she could see every thought as it moved through Aaron's mind.

"How ... how about doing this for the foreseeable future? I mean, can we ... do we get to count any of the last three years so it doesn't feel like things are happening as fast as they are? I ... I don't want to waste another day not telling you and showing you how I feel."

"I ..." Abby's heart was so full that she was having trouble stringing words together. "Yeah ... yes. I'm ... so on board. Warp speed ahead, Mr. Sulu." He chuckled and pulled her to him, planting a kiss on her forehead. She closed her eyes and sighed, trying to remember if there was a moment when she'd been happier. No. This was the new reigning champion, heavyweight moment. Her voice was soft when she opened her eyes and met Aaron's gaze. "I think it's true, what you said. We needed to be where we were, to get where we are now."

Aaron smiled and whispered. "Best friends make the best lovers."

"Ride or die besties," she whispered, a naughty grin crossing her face as she kissed him just below his ear. "And right now, I feel like riding."

Aaron growled and scooped her into his arms, rolling over onto his back so she was on top of him. "I'm your huckleberry." His voice was muffled, his lips vibrating against the skin on her neck.

Mr. Burns hissed at them from his aquarium. They paused and looked up in time to see him roll his eyes at them.

“Just maybe with a bed this time ... out of the view of judgmental dragons,” Abby whispered.

Aaron got to his feet and scooped her into his arms. “A bed creates a whole new set of variables for us to test out,” he growled, in her ear.

God, she loved this man. “My room,” she panted. “It’s closer.”

She felt his lips curl into a smile against her skin as he whispered, “As you wish.”

EPILOGUE

ABBY

“So, when I analyzed the results, after testing my hypothesis, the conclusion I came to was ...” Abby paused, staring at her class. A few looked interested, but most were staring at her, the post-break depression evident on their faces. She drummed her hands on her desk counter and a few of the ones in the back that had been dozing sat up straight. “The scientific method helped me solve the mystery,” she pulled Dean Martin out from under her desk and hefted his sand-filled legs over the edge of her counter so he could rest against the tall faucet of her sink, “Of who stole Mr. Elton’s dummy and where they’d hidden it.”

The class clapped, though not as enthusiastically as Abby felt her big reveal deserved. Oh well. Mr. Elton wasn’t going to yell at her, she’d found something non-traumatizing to do her scientific method example about, and she could see Aaron across the hall, pause to give her two thumbs up. She made a mental note to get the rising ovation she felt her clever tracking of the Whorley brothers’ movements and likely hiding places deserved when she and Aaron got home that night.

And speaking of the Whorley brothers. “Jake, why don’t you stand and take a bow since you were such an integral part of my experiment.” Jake got to his feet as dramatically as possible and blew

kisses, turning on the spot and bowing to everyone. “And while you’re already on your feet, come on up and tell us about your winter break scientific experiment.” That sobered him up. She moved to the side and perched on her stool while Jake took a full minute, clearing his throat and shuffling the two pieces of paper he held in front of him. Abby used the time to sneak a second glance at the classroom across the hall. Aaron’s shirtsleeves were rolled, his tweed jacket was hanging over the back of his chair, and as he sat on the edge of his desk, she could see his ugly Christmas sweater socks, peeking out under his pant leg. She smiled, wiggling her toes in her own pair and remembering in vivid detail all the angles she’d seen *both* of their pairs of socks, while unimpeded by other clothing over the past week and a half. She was just thankful that she and Aaron were immune to the socks’ power to repel, at least from each other. When it came to everyone else, she’d hang one of those bad boys on her doorknob and hope the rest of the world took the hint. They had so much time to make up for, and she was loving every minute of it. Forget thunderstorms. It was monsoon season.

* * *

AARON

“A useless dummy you are not to be, For dancing and pranking the whole town to see.” Aaron finished, grinning at Turk Whorley who’d been slowly turning pink for the last two stanzas. Abby had Dean Martin in her classroom, but with a flourish, Aaron moved behind his desk and flipped around the piece of poster board that had been resting in his whiteboard marker tray. It didn’t

matter how many times he saw the candid photo. It always made him smile. Abby had taken it with her phone when they'd tracked the Whorleys trying to sneak Dean Martin into the Santa Ball and Crawl. They looked like feral possums exposed in the sudden light, carrying his heavy body between them.

The class was laughing and clapping and Aaron could see Turk was trying not to smile.

"It also serves as a nice segue," Aaron said. "So come on up, Turk. Let's hear your sonnet." Aaron moved the poster board and his chair to the side of his desk so he could sit and listen. He glanced across the hallway in time to see Abby send him a chef's kiss. He grinned. He could have written a book of sonnets about her, but it wasn't something he thought would be a good idea to share with his students. But, he'd had fun "doing homework" with her the night before. He'd recited sonnets to her ... when his mouth wasn't otherwise busy. And he had to say, the scientific method had never been so riveting for him as when Abby, naked and panting, would say, "I'd like to propose an experiment. I have this hypothesis ..." After that, he was a goner.

The day seemed to drag on and when the bell rang, he was right behind his students as they headed out the door. Of course, he still had to wait for Abby's students to wander out of her classroom. They hadn't told anyone at the school about them yet and they were happily enjoying the grace period they'd bought themselves as friends for three years. No one would suspect anything if they saw them together, but it was only a matter of time before the truth got out. He wasn't hiding anything anymore and neither was she.

Finally, when the last student waved to him and disappeared down the hall, he leaned on her classroom door frame and watched as she stretched, her back to him as she looked out the window at the sliver of town square she could see where decorations for Christmas were slowly being replaced by streamers for the new year. As he watched her, unnoticed, he smiled.

“You know,” he said, feeling the deep rumble of his voice in his chest. “Now, I can imagine you doing that ...” he paused and glanced out at the deserted hallway. “but naked.”

She’d turned at the sound of his voice and smiled, coming over to lean against her counter. “Oh yeah. What about when I do this?” And she started doing her “told you so” dance. It was as uncoordinated and embarrassing as ever.

“So sexy,” he whispered, closing the distance between them. He pulled her into his arms and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. “I’d really like to kiss you right now.” He sighed dramatically. “But I just don’t know. We might corrupt innocent Dean Martin here.”

Abby huffed. “Seriously, this guy is more trouble than he’s worth.” She grabbed her lap coat off the corner of her counter and threw it over the dummy’s head. And then with a foot on the bottom rung of her stool, she raised herself enough to kiss him. He could feel it getting too heated for being in public, but she wasn’t stopping. He felt his lips curl into a smile. He knew what she was doing.

“Oh, is this a new round of Chicken-Too-Far, Nessie?” he growled, moving his lips down to nip at her neck. She moaned and he automatically pulled back to listen for the sound of footsteps.

There was silence. When he glanced back at her, he saw her evil grin.

“Point to me, I think,” she said, winking at him. “I think I win this round. Do you concede?”

He rolled his eyes and then an idea struck him. In a low, growling whisper, he put his lips right next to her ear and started listing off what he’d like to do with her right at her desk counter because it was the perfect height for *so many* things.” He could hear her starting to pant as her fingers dug into his shoulder. When he pulled back, he was smiling.

“You know,” she said, smiling at him, “the bar in my kitchen is the same height.”

With a growl, he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder. She was laughing hysterically and kicking her feet by the time they made it to the door. “Seriously,” he said with a smile, setting her down. “Add in some *MST3K* and a pizza, and it’s the perfect night.”

She grinned. “I know, right? It seems we’ve had the ‘perfect night’ for almost two weeks now.” He saw her take a deep breath. “Any regrets?”

“None. Never. Zilch. Nada. Nay. Here’s some Klingon for you. I’ve been practicing.” He cleared his throat. “Ghobe’!”

“You have never been sexier,” she said. He watched her zip up her jacket and pull on her backpack, and as they headed down the hall, he felt her slip her hand into the crook of his arm. With a smile, he covered her hand with his free one, and they walked through the cold misting rain, toward home.

For access to a bonus epilogue in which we catch up with Abby and Aaron one year later, head here and join Teagan's Hopeful Romantics mailing list:
<https://tinyurl.com/SleighRideOrDieBonus>

Teagan Hart
SPIGY. SNARKY.
SMALL TOWN SHENANIGANS.

A Christmas for Carol Preview

CAROL

“She ran her hands over his hard baguette ...” Carol muttered, “and . . .,” she glanced at her notes and then squinted at the screen, “and commented that his dough felt like it had been overworked.” She chuckled. “Aren’t they always?” She fixed the sentence’s punctuation and slumped back in her chair. This article *sucked*. She sighed and turned her head to stare out the open window at the rain-drenched Seattle. Normally, she found the soft sound and the smell of the of falling rain against the gray sky soothing, but this morning, the view was staring back at her in the form of Mrs. Birkenstock’s black cat. He’d paused momentarily to listen to her, but the article hadn’t hooked his attention either and he’d quickly returned to his previous activity of going to town on himself, legs splayed.

“I know the article sucks, Wiener. What do you want from me? I just edit this crap, I don’t write it.” The cat’s name had been “Werner” when Mrs. Birkenstock’s granddaughter had brought him over, but when the older woman almost broke her leg tripping over him, she’d screamed “Wiener” so loudly that the whole building and probably the whole city block had gone momentarily silent. And

now “Wiener” was the only name the cat answered to.

Wiener got to his feet and headed for the fire escape, showing her his butt hole.

“Yep, that about sums it up,” she sighed, pushing back from her computer. The leg of her chair snagged on the cover of one of the paperbacks that had spilled out of the cardboard boxes stacked on the floor next to her. The sound of paper ripping made her glance down at the carnage. The torn glossy cover featured a muscled Fabio look-alike in a kilt, holding a swooning woman under the title *Putting the ‘Tart’ in Tartan* and below that, “by Rose Fielding”. She let out a sigh of relief. “Thank god. Just one of mine.” She heard the familiar scratching sounds of Wiener’s claws on her couch, which was also stacked with boxes, on his thrice daily quest to beg her for a treat. She yawned and stretched before getting to her feet and bending over to stuff the scattered paperbacks back into their box.

“Yeay,” she muttered, glancing over the covers of the mass produced paperbacks. “This whole box is just my crap. Well, Wiener, if the heat goes out this winter, I’ll at least have some fuel to donate to the rooftop trash barrel fire.” He rubbed against her ankles and meowed. Straightening up, Carol rolled her eyes as she stepped around more boxes to get to the cabinet and the packet of kitty treats she’d bought by mistake.

“You know, Wiener, you’re just lucky that your kitty treats and my fruit snacks have nearly identical packaging and some incredibly inconsiderate asshole left them on the shelf in the fruit snack aisle.” She shook a few into her hand and paused, staring down at the little fish shapes. She glanced at the cat. “How many people do you

think tossed back these kitty treats thinking they were a fruity treat, choked when they realized their mistake, and then died?”

Wiener blinked at her and meowed.

Carol nodded. “Right. Not your problem.” She held the treats out to him. “So, Wiener, when are you going to meet a nice girl named ‘Gonads’ and settle down?” The cat didn’t have any reply to that. But after a minute, Wiener started licking himself again.

“Sorry I asked,” she muttered, returning to her seat. “I think you’ve got the right idea though, for what it’s worth. It’s not so bad being alone, right? You don’t have to share your snacks and you don’t have to explain to anyone else how to pleasure you.”

The loose knob on her apartment’s front door rattled and Carol leaned her head back to look at her entryway upside down.

“Son-of-a ...”

“Gotta use your foot, Jeb,” Carol called, returning her gaze to her computer screen.

With a crash, the door banged open and Jeb Reese marched in, the look of disdain on his face matching those of the squashed-faced pink bunny slippers he wore.

“Carol, my dear, as much as I love you, one of these days, you’re going to have to unpack your coffee machine. And buy coffee. And find your mugs.” He thrust a steaming mug of coffee at Carol with a weary sigh.

“Why would I want to do a thing like that?” Carol asked, taking the mug, “Then what excuse would I have for your glorious company every morning?”

“You’re just lucky that my machine’s lowest setting is two cups of coffee and I break out in hives if I have a second cup.”

She didn’t miss the pink skin on his hand gripping the mug’s handle. Most likely the result of the spillage that had just occurred at the door. “As always, thank you my dear, sweet friend. And I’m so sorry about your hand.” Carol took a deep drink from the mug and sighed.

“Don’t try to distract me with sweet talk, woman. I’m trying to get my ‘mad’ on. Your front door is just like my ex. Hulking, loose with its knob, and best when kicked.” Jeb shoved another box of books off the only other and plopped down. Unfortunately, when Jeb dislodged the box on the chair, it knocked over a taller box leaning against the wall. Carol and Jeb were frozen in place, watching the slow domino-effect of boxes along her wall. When the last one fell, the muffled sound of breaking glass made them both suck in some air.

“Sorry?” Jeb asked.

Carol narrowed her eyes to him. “You don’t sound like you are.”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure that I should be. I mean, at this point, I think I might be doing you a favor by destroying some of this crap.”

“Fair,” she muttered, picking her way across the living room to assess the damage. The last box to fall had been another tall one, full of framed artwork. It was dusty and looked like she’d opened it long enough to see what was inside before moving on to find something more essential to dig through. She tugged on the frame stacked in the middle, hearing the broken glass shift and fall back into the box as she pulled it out.

“What was in there?” Jeb asked, coming to stand next to her. “Is ... is that you?”

She nodded, studying the old show poster. She couldn't speak. The memory held in stasis on the poster had kicked her right in the mental solar plexus. She was young in the photo with the rest of the cast of *The Taming of the Shrew*. She was sitting on Rex's lap and they were both laughing despite the crack in the glass, cutting them both off at their necks.

“I've lived next door to you for almost three years and I'm just now finding out you used to do theatre?” Jeb asked.

She snorted. “It was just a college production. Seventh-hand props, safety-pinned costumes, and set pieces left over from the big production of Camelot that none of us were cast in.” The pain in her chest was trying to spread. She shoved the frame back into the box and leaned it against the wall. Jeb cleared his throat and she felt herself smile. If there was one thing Jeb Reese could not abide, it was awkward silences. Under different circumstances, she'd be doing everything she could to extend it, maybe start crying or whistling softly until he cracked and started talking about whatever bizarre topic had crept into his thoughts during the uncomfortable silence. These were always her favorite conversations with Jeb.

“I know it's largely a moot question,” he said finally, “since at this point the boxes as well as their contents are more likely to just decompose, but when are you going to unpack?”

Carol shrugged. “I guess when I need something.” She led the way back to the table, thankful for an excuse to not meet his gaze.

“Like coffee mugs, and a coffee machine?” he muttered, taking his seat.

“Nah, when I *really* need something. Like coasters and crocheted toilet paper cozies.” She dropped back into her chair and heard two more paper backs fall out of the box behind her chair.

Jeb sighed and Carol could feel the speech coming. “It’s been three years, Car. Three years of you living out of boxes, not writing a word ...”

“Hey! I’ve written words. I mean, look at what I wrote today.”

Jeb leaned over to read her computer screen. “Sizzling Hot Buns ... Oh! Are you finally writing again? Another sexy romance?”

“Well, I guess ‘writing’ isn’t exactly accurate. I’m copy-editing ... and it’s an article about ... bread.”

He shook his head. “Carol, you have to start writing again. You’ve moped for almost half a decade.”

She rolled her eyes. “All hail the Emperor of Exaggeration.”

“Seriously,” Jeb continued. “I was a kid the last time a Rose Fielding novel came out.”

“What’s that, your majesty?” she asked, trying to ignore how old that comment made her feel. “It’s past your nap time and you’re feeling cranky?”

“Rose Fielding needs to strap on her fishnets, zip up her leather cat suit, and sharpen her man-killer nails.”

Carol cut her eyes to him. “You’ve clearly never read *any* of my books.”

He shrugged. "I read romance. I know what goes on."

"Apparently man-clawing and zippered leather cosplay."

He crossed his arms and glared at her. "You know what I mean. You were a New York Times Best Seller for gods' sake."

Carol snorted. "Five years ago."

"You have to start writing again."

"I am writing again," she said, gesturing at the screen.

"And you need to unpack these boxes."

"I've unpacked some. I needed a mixing bowl the other day."

"For what?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

"The roof started leaking," she said, gesturing to the floor in the corner of her living room where the tell-tale plink of dripping water from the ceiling interrupted the quiet that fell between them while they sized each other up.

"Carol, this place is a dump." Jeb said. "And that's coming from someone who has lived in this building twice as long as you have."

She shrugged. "I've lived in worse. When Rex and I were first married, we were so poor, we lived in a renovated utility closet, listed as a 'studio apartment', in New York." The familiar pain was down to a dull ache, like a toe stub now. That was progress after three years, wasn't it?

"Honey, he's Rex the Ex. Or Rexus Doucheus. Or He-Who-Must-Be-Maimed," Jeb growled. "He has no other name."

“Right,” Carol muttered.

“Anyway,” he sighed, “I had another reason for coming over this morning.”

Carol fell still; prey, sensing a predator approaching.

“I can’t think of anything more depressing than spending the holidays in this dump, by yourself, surrounded by your ghosts of depression past,” he muttered, kicking the box at his feet.

“What are you saying,” Carol asked, turning her attention back to her mug ... or *Jeb’s* mug, she guessed. She had to admit, he *could* brew a pretty damn good cup of coffee.

“That you should at least come over to my apartment for Christmas.”

“Thanks, Jeb, but I have to work.” On a cue that Carol couldn’t have wedged in more conveniently for a character in one of her books, the phone rang.

“Carol?”

“It’s Emily, the blog editor,” she mouthed at Jeb. He sighed, waved goodbye, and a moment later, Carol heard her apartment door close behind him.

“Hi Emily, I’m just finishing edits to the ‘Sizzling Hot Buns’ piece.”

“That’s great,” Emily said, dismissively. “I’m just calling because I need the last of the Christmas articles you’re editing. I’m programming the auto-deliver function before we all break for the holidays.”

“Oh, Emily, about that. I’m not going anywhere for the holidays. And I know how the delivery system works, so I could stay online with it and

make sure everything gets posted like it's supposed to."

There was silence at the other end of the line. "Carol, that's not part of the 'Spicy 'n' Sassy' Food Blog mission statement. We want staff to take the holidays off."

"Oh, well, I can get started on the post-holiday stuff."

"Carol, you've already copy edited everything post-post-holiday that's been sent to you. Which was why I was curious about the holiday stuff not being turned in."

Carol didn't know how to tell her young and Hallmark-movie-heroine of an editor that she'd been putting off copy editing the holiday-heavy articles because she hated Christmas and everything it entailed.

Christmas, three years ago, was when she found out Rex had been having an affair with his secretary, Pam. At that point, Pam was already seven months pregnant. The next Christmas, she'd found out Pam was pregnant *again*, and then last year on Christmas, Pam had spammed everyone's Instagram feeds with pictures of two matching stockings and the announcement that for the *third* time they were pregnant and this time, it was twins. Seriously, what was with their doinking schedule and Christmas? Carol did her best to mentally turn her back on the dark mental chasm she was looking over the edge of.

"Take some time off, Carol," Emily said with the air of Santa, pulling out an extra-large, steaming pile of "present" and dropping it in her lap. When she'd said goodbye to Emily, Carol tossed the phone on the table and put her chin in her hand as she surveyed the room around her. The

first year, she'd told herself the apartment was temporary. She and Rex would work out their differences and get back together. She'd been in denial. "*The baby couldn't be his. That would mean she was the one who couldn't ...*"

The second year of no unpacking, was all down to depression. Pam was pregnant again. The one thing Carol would never be. And Rex was overjoyed. The third year of unpacking could be summed up with "why bother?" She made sure there weren't mice and the apartment wasn't really a mess. It just ... looked more like a storage locker more than an apartment.

"But, I have a good feeling about year four," she said to the stacks of boxes around her. "Maybe for Christmas this year, I'll open all of you like three-year old 'presents' that have just been lying around here."

She squared her shoulders and turned back to the "Sizzlin' Buns" article. "This sucks," she muttered after rereading the first few lines again.

With a sigh, she opened a new tab and mindlessly scrolled through her Facebook news feed. She knew on a logical level that she should have purged her friend list after the divorce, but every time she went to do it, she convinced herself it was too much work. Besides, what about all the photos with friends that she wouldn't be tagged in any more, and all the memories? So she hadn't. And as painful as it was, she still took a small measure of comfort from seeing posts from Rex's sisters or mom and knowing that they were still ok, wherever they were in the world. Well, *usually* it gave her comfort. She'd been scrolling for less than a minute when she came across a re-shared post from Rex's sister Linda's feed. It was one of those sparkly videos, with hearts and flashing lights

intense enough to give someone a seizure. When the digital dust settled, she found herself staring a picture of Rex and Pam, surrounded by their four kids, dressed as reindeer. Pam was looking rather round and her ugly Christmas sweater said, “Guess who’s coming down the chimney?” The text on the bottom of the video glimmered as it announced, “Santa pulled something extra special out of his sack for the Fannar family this Christmas.”

“Phrasing,” Carol muttered. And then she realized what she was looking at. Four kids in the picture, and a fifth on the way. “My god, she’s pregnant again.” Rex was dressed as Santa with his arm around her. “Someone needs to roast his chestnuts,” Carol muttered before slamming the lid closed on her laptop.

Continue the adventure with all of the wonderful denizens of Hope Island with [A Christmas for Carol on Kindle Unlimited!](#)



A CHRISTMAS FOR CAROL



A HOPE ISLAND
ROMANTIC
COMEDY



TEAGAN HART



About the Author

Spicy, snarky, small town shenanigans. “Like a spicy Hallmark movie.”

Teagan Hart is a Kansas farm kid, transplanted to Oregon. She is irreverent, incorrigible, and loves a good steamy scene. Hart writes small town romantic comedy with a side of snark, building fun and outlandish places for her characters to fall in love. Her work has been described as “spicy Hallmark movies in book form” and that not only is very accurate, but made her smile.

You can connect with me on:

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The Hope Island Holiday Romances are your passport to small town holiday romantic comedy hijinks spanning six spicy, snarky, hilarious love stories.

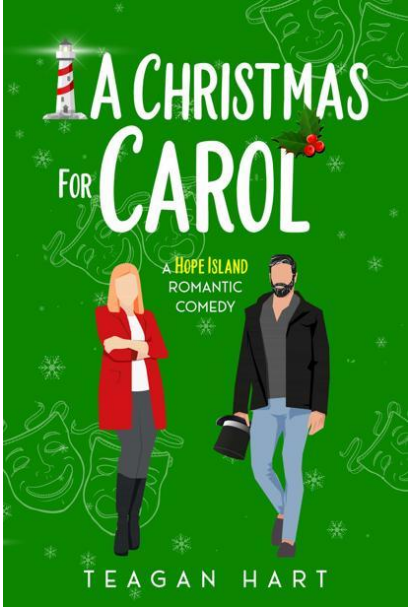


Deck The Headlines

<https://tinyurl.com/DeckTheHeadlines>

She swore she'd never go back to her hometown.
He can't get enough of its wacky charm.

Thrown together chasing headlines, will the sparks
flying between them turn into love?

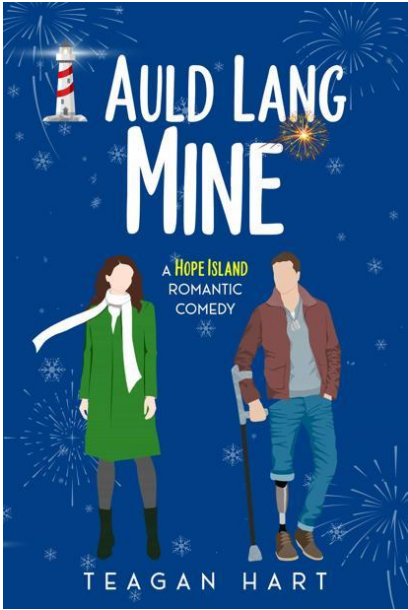


A Christmas For Carol

<https://tinyurl.com/AChristmasForCarol>

She was sure she'd missed the boat, until she caught the ferry. He's the sole survivor of a shipwrecked relationship.

Will working together to save a beloved theater be enough to keep their heads above water?

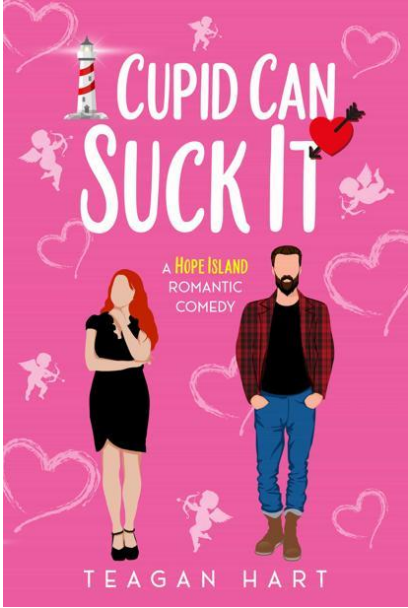


Auld Lang Mine

<https://tinyurl.com/AuldLangMine>

You never forget your first love. Especially when your first is a wounded warrior. When some good-natured meddling from their hometown ropes them into a support group that more closely resembles an obstacle course, they're forced together to confront their past and try to build a future.

Will the new year give them both a second chance at love?

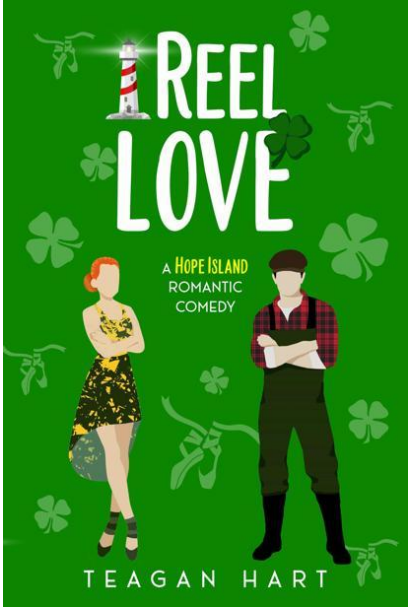


Cupid Can Suck It

<https://tinyurl.com/CupidCanSuckIt>

Love sucks. Or so two coworkers think when they look out at all the sickening hearts and naked baby cupids stuck to everything that stands still on Hope Island. So, they decide to burn it down. The whole holiday.

But when their pranks start to backfire on them, will the growing heat between them leave them both burned?



Reel Love

<https://tinyurl.com/ReelLoveTH>

All Cara's ever wanted is to be accepted into Julliard and fulfill her dream of becoming a professional ballerina. There are only two things Ian wants since leaving Ireland; the sea and music. Well, until he meets Cara.

Can they work out a rhythm that will keep them moving to the beat? Or will the beats that move them around and towards each other end up being the beats of their hearts?