



Love
NEXT
DOOR

Rachael Sommers



Chapter 1

“CAN WE WATCH THE NEW *Matilda* before I have to go to Dad’s?” Tyler hoisted his skateboard higher on his shoulder as he and Kim waited for the elevator. “It’s on Netflix now.”

Kim would love nothing more. They’d never gotten around to watching it in the cinema, and the original had been one of her favorites as a kid—she hoped sharing the new one with her son would be as meaningful. But...

“It depends. Have you finished your homework?”

Tyler’s heavy sigh as they stepped into the elevator was all the answer Kim needed. Sometimes it sucked having to be a responsible parent to a nine-year-old.

“That’s a no, then?”

“I can do it after.”

“No chance. We can watch the movie after.” Hopefully, they had time before John came to get him—otherwise, they’d have to wait another week.

The elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, where a sea of boxes and furniture greeted them. The apartment next to their own had been empty for a few months since Mrs. Wood had moved into a retirement home closer to her family, and Kim hoped the new tenant would be as nice.

The boxes were marked with generic labels like *kitchen* and *bedroom*. But she did spot a giant box of records among the piles, which piqued her interest. Her own collection was gathering dust at the bottom of her closet; maybe it was time she dug them out.

A bark echoed from inside 4C as she stepped over a box and rooted around in her pocket for her keys.

Oh no.

Tyler's head whipped around, his eyes widening, and Kim smothered a groan. He'd been pestering her for a dog ever since his best friend had gotten a puppy a few months ago. How much worse would he be if he met the one living next door?

"Mom, can we go and say hello?" He turned to her with pleading eyes.

"You have homework." Kim pushed their front door open.

"But—"

Whatever Tyler had been about to say was forgotten as a brown and white dog bounded out of 4C and made a beeline for Tyler, nearly knocking him off-balance. The dog was half his size, and Kim tensed, hoping it was friendly.

She needn't have worried—the dog's tail wagged furiously, and Tyler giggled as it licked his hand.

"Cari!" A voice shouted from inside 4C, followed by hurried footsteps. "Get back here you little—oh." A white woman rushed through the door and skidded to a stop in front of Kim and Tyler. "I'm so sorry. She slipped out." Bending to grab the dog's collar, the woman pulled the animal back from Tyler.

Kim got her first look at her new neighbor. *Wow.*

A red beanie half covered her short, blonde hair. The hat's color matched the flush on her cheeks. She was probably in her mid-twenties, a couple years younger than Kim, and pretty, with gorgeous blue eyes. The woman's tentative smile lingered as she readjusted her grip on the dog's collar.

Her gray tank top revealed toned arms covered in tattoos, and Kim could see more of them on her legs through the wide gaps in her ripped jeans.

“It’s okay,” Tyler said, looking disappointed that the dog had been hauled away. “Can I keep petting her?”

Kim shrugged when the woman glanced toward her. In Kim’s eyes, the damage was already done, and she was resigned to hearing about puppies for the rest of the day.

“Sure. Though I’ll try and make her behave herself this time. Sit, Cari.”

The dog complied, her tail swishing along the wooden floor, and the woman let the collar go. The intensity of her wagging increased as Tyler approached.

“That’s a nice name.” Tyler dropped his skateboard so he could pet the dog with both hands—a high honor. The board might as well be surgically attached to his hip most days. “What breed is she?”

“She’s a mutt,” the woman said. “I rescued her off the streets, so I have no idea. Part lab, part terrier, and part spaniel, if I had to guess. I’ve thought about doing one of those doggy DNA tests to find out for sure, but I’ve never gotten around to it.”

“Well, whatever she is, she’s cute,” Tyler said, falling to his knees so he didn’t have to keep bending over.

“And she knows it.” The woman smiled. “I’m Riley,” she said to Kim, extending a hand toward her. “As you’ve probably guessed, I’m your new neighbor.”

“Really? You’re moving in?” Kim raised an eyebrow as she shook the woman’s hand. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Riley grinned. “Observation not one of your special skills?”

“I’ve been told it could use some work. I’m Kim. And seeing as he’s too busy playing with the dog to introduce himself, this is Tyler. Welcome to the building.”

“Thanks.” Riley glanced at Cari, who was lying on her back with all four legs in the air as Tyler scratched her stomach. “I think she feels at home already.”

“It certainly looks like it.”

As Riley’s fond gaze settled on Cari, Kim appraised her new neighbor and wondered what she’d be like. Kim had to admit the tattoos were cool. She’d always admired them but was too much of a wimp to get any herself. She knew some people would find so much ink intimidating, but Riley’s face was kind, her expression a little shy, and Kim had a feeling they were going to become fast friends.

Not least because Tyler would be asking to pet her dog whenever they crossed paths.

Did Riley live alone? There was no ring on her finger, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything.

Riley’s mouth opened. “I—”

“Hey!” Another person stepped out of 4C behind Riley. “When we offered to help you move in, it wasn’t so we could do all the work while you chat up pretty women in the hall.”

Kim’s cheeks warmed. Well, she supposed that answered the question about whether Riley was single.

Riley seemed unperturbed. “It wasn’t? Isn’t that what little sisters are for?”

Kim could’ve guessed they were sisters. While Riley’s sister had a mop of red curls, they had the same lanky frame, pale white skin, and bright blue eyes.

Riley’s sister stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes at Riley before disappearing back into the apartment.

“I’d better go”—Riley turned back toward Kim— “start clearing away the tripping hazard.” She waved toward the things strewn all over the floor.

“Mm. I’d get to it before Ms. Watkins sees.”

A puzzled look crossed Riley’s face. “Ms. Watkins?”

“4A.” Tyler pointed to the door across the hall. “She’s scary,” he whispered.

“How scary are we talking, kid?”

“Oh, you’ll find out for yourself soon enough.” Kim laughed when Riley’s face turned alarmed. “Don’t worry, she’s harmless. Just has a tendency to get involved in other people’s business.”

“Ah. I had one of those at my last place. He used to steal people’s parcels.”

“She’s not too bad. She’ll just tell you off for stepping too loudly.”

Riley snorted.

“Riley,” another white woman poked her head out of 4C’s door, her dark hair buzzed short and a vine of tattooed flowers snaking across her wrist, “if you don’t come back soon, Bea’s going to start unpacking for you. And you know she’s going to put things in the most random places to annoy you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m coming, Ash.” Riley lifted the box of records onto her hip and whistled.

Cari scrambled to her feet.

“Say goodbye to Tyler, Cari.”

“Bye,” Tyler said, already looking glum as he gave the dog one last pat.

“I’ll see you both around. Come on, Cari.”

Cari followed Riley back into her apartment.

As Kim stepped into her own, Tyler’s gaze bored into her back. She dropped her purse onto the couch, steeling herself for what she knew was coming.

“Mom, can we get a dog?”

Kicking off her shoes, Kim sighed. It was going to take her ages to get Tyler to start his homework. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because we live in an apartment—”

“So does Riley,” Tyler said, “and she has one.”

“And no one would be home with it all day, which wouldn’t be fair to the poor thing.”

Tyler looked crestfallen, but he’d get over it. It wasn’t the first time they’d had this argument. Now, thanks to Riley and Cari’s close proximity, Kim suspected it wouldn’t be the last.

“What about a cat?” Tyler tried, following Kim into the kitchen.

“How about a goldfish?”

“Goldfish are boring.”

“Mm, but they’re much less work, and we both know I’d be the one doing the bulk of it.” Kim kissed him atop his head.

“I bet Dad would let me have a dog.”

“Well, why don’t you ask him when he picks you up later?” Kim glanced at her watch. “Speaking of...if you want to squeeze in *Matilda* before you go, you’d better get started on your homework.”

With another huge sigh—Kim already wasn’t looking forward to his teenage years—he trudged off to his room.

* * *

Riley hauled the last of her boxes in from the hall and set them beside the rest inside her new apartment.

“Please tell me we’re done,” Bea said from her spot on the floor, flopped onto her back with her head in Ash’s lap. “I can’t take anymore.”

“You’re so dramatic.” Riley poked her sister’s thigh with a socked foot. “There weren’t that many boxes.”

Bea lifted her head to glare. “Are you kidding? Look around, Riley. You have way too much shit.”

“And you don’t?” Riley knew full well Bea had as much stuff as Riley did—she’d seen the inside of her closet.

“No.”

“Please. Besides, this is all your fault for kicking me out of our apartment.”

Bea’s jaw dropped. “I did not kick you out! You wanted to leave!”

“Cause I was sick of you two lovebirds.” Riley couldn’t pretend to be upset about it. She was glad Bea was happy—and that they both finally had a space to call their own, though it would take some getting used to. Riley had never lived on her own before.

“Please,” Ash retorted, a grin on her face. “You love us.”

“I do,” Riley said. “But you don’t have to stay. You should go. Enjoy having the place to yourselves.”

Bea and Ash shared a glance.

“You don’t want us to stay?” Ash said. “Grab a pizza or something?”

Riley shook her head. “Seriously, go. I need to start unpacking anyway.” The floor was more cardboard than wood. It was only a matter of time before Cari would start to barrel into boxes instead of going around them.

“We can help you,” Bea said.

“Nah. I’d rather do it myself—at least I’ll know where everything is.”

Still, Bea and Ash were reluctant to leave.

“We don’t want you to be lonely,” Bea said, a small frown between her eyebrows.

“I’ll be fine, okay? I’m a big girl. And I’ve got Cari.”

Not that Cari was currently being much company. She was curled up, taking a nap on her favorite armchair, snoring.

“Okay.” Bea climbed to her feet. “But we’re meeting for lunch tomorrow, right?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Riley hugged them both goodbye.

Once they were gone, she tried not to think about how quiet everything was.

Taking a deep breath, Riley reminded herself this was something she’d been working toward for years. She looked around the apartment, barely believing it was all hers. She’d fallen in love with it on her first viewing, with its open-plan kitchen and living room and the large bay windows that looked out over the city. She was on the fourth floor, but it was still a beautiful view, with the rays of the weak winter sun filtering through the glass.

It had two bedrooms, one of which she’d be using for storage. The only thing in her own bedroom was the bed she’d lugged over from Bea and Ash’s that they’d spent half an hour rebuilding.

At least if she didn’t get much else done, she’d have somewhere to sleep.

Her first priority was setting up her record player in the corner of the living room. Her favorite thrift store find, Riley was looking forward to utilizing it more than she'd been able to when living with Bea and Ash. It was safe to say they didn't share the same taste in music, as much as Riley had tried over the years.

Once it was set up, Riley carefully loaded one of her favorites—*Nevermind*—and cranked up the volume—though not too loud. She didn't want to annoy her new neighbors too much. Having Cari escape her apartment to bother them had been bad enough, though at least Tyler hadn't minded.

She stood with her hands on her hips in the middle of the room with no clue where to start. How had she managed to accumulate so much stuff over the years? And where was she going to put it all?

* * *

Riley had barely gotten through three boxes before Cari woke from her nap full of energy, bounding to a stop in front of Riley and staring at her with big brown eyes.

With a sigh, Riley abandoned unpacking. She grabbed her jacket and Cari's leash, clipping it onto the dog's collar and letting herself be pulled into the hall.

The early-evening Seattle air was chilly. It was the second week of January—winter was well and truly underway—and her Doc Martens splashed through puddles as she took Cari to the park around the corner from their new home. The air smelled of rain, and the stormy gray clouds in the sky suggested more was on the way.

"I hope you like it here," she said as Cari sniffed the base of a tree, probably trying to find the trail of a squirrel.

The new apartment was a big change for Cari, too; she had never lived anywhere else, and Riley hoped Cari wouldn't miss Bea and Ash too much.

At least their old place was close enough to visit. Riley had still wanted to be able to walk with Cari to work, so she had only moved a few blocks over.

It meant they were still close to her favorite pizza place, and once Cari had done her business, Riley swung by on their way home to pick up a pie.

In the elevator heading back up to the fourth floor, Riley's stomach rumbled at the smell of pepperoni wafting from the pizza box. From the hopeful look in her eyes when she glanced at Riley, Cari was clearly hungry, too.

"There's no way in hell you're getting a slice of this," Riley told her. "You know Bea was always your best bet for table scraps."

Despite knowing dogs couldn't pout, Riley swore she could see the beginning of one on Cari's face.

When the doors opened, Kim was standing in her open doorway talking to a tall white man with dark hair. An overnight bag was tucked under his arm.

Tyler leaned against the wall next to the man, his green eyes lighting up when he saw them enter. "Cari!"

Cari hurried toward him, yanking Riley down the hall with her, and Tyler dropped to his knees to fuss over her, his curly brown hair falling into his eyes.

The man looked at Tyler in disapproval. "Tyler, don't bother this nice lady and her dog."

"Oh, it's fine," Riley said. "I think he might be her new favorite person."

Usually, Cari hated strangers fussing over her, but Tyler was an exception. And the boy appeared to be smitten, too.

"She's my favorite dog."

"Be that as it may, we'd better get going, Tyler," the man said.

Tyler sighed, slowly getting to his feet.

"Don't forget about his soccer practice on Wednesday," Kim said.

"You mean the same after-school soccer practice he's been going to for the last three weeks?" His voice was tinged with equal parts ex-

asperation and amusement. “Honestly, Kim, sometimes I’m sure you think I’m an imbecile.”

“I won’t make the obvious comment,” Kim said. “You be good for your dad, Tyler.”

“I always am.”

“Can I have a hug goodbye?”

“I guess so,” Tyler said, his grin cheeky. “Bye, Mom. I’ll see you next weekend.” He turned back to give Cari one last pat before following his dad to the elevators. “Bye, Cari! And Riley.”

“See ya, kiddo.” Riley dug her left hand into her back pocket for her keys—they proved elusive—while her right balanced the pizza box.

“Need some help there?”

Riley turned to find Kim watching her, an amused look on her face.

“No, I got this.” Hooking her thumb around her key ring, Riley crowed in victory. “See? Not a problem.”

“No, it looked easy. Very smooth.” Kim’s voice was dry, a twinkle in her green eyes.

Riley grinned.

Her new neighbor was gorgeous—a couple of inches shorter than Riley and with curves to die for. Her brown hair fell past her shoulders in soft curls, and her white skin glowed even under the hallway’s fluorescent lighting. Riley had to look away before she was caught staring.

The last thing she wanted was to make Kim think she was rude.

Or have her notice Riley checking her out.

Which was inappropriate. They’d just met, and as much as Bea had teased Riley about flirting in the hall, Riley wasn’t about to make a habit of it.

“What can I say? Smooth’s my middle name.” As if the universe were out to get her, the pizza nearly toppled to the floor as Riley attempted to unlock her door.

Kim stepped forward to grab the box's other side, stopping Cari from having an all-she-could-eat buffet drop on top of her head. "Smooth, huh?"

"Usually more than that." With the door unlocked, Riley nudged it open with her foot and unclipped Cari's leash to let her bound inside. "Thanks for saving this," Riley said, waving the pizza box. "Want to come in for a thank-you slice?"

"I've already eaten."

Riley tried not to be disappointed. "Maybe next time."

"Maybe." Kim stepped back toward her door. "Have a good night, Riley."

"You, too."

Riley glanced back at Kim one last time before she shut the door to her apartment. She was going to like it here.

Chapter 2

THE NEXT DAY, RILEY WAS back at work. She wielded the tattoo gun with practiced ease, its noise a comforting buzz ringing in her ears.

Her client's face was screwed tight in pain.

Riley patted their thigh with her free hand. "Not much longer now," Riley said. "Do you need a break?"

Sam shook their head. "No, thank you. I think I'd rather get it over with."

"I'll be as quick as I can."

Riley poked her tongue between her teeth as she finished coloring the butterfly on Sam's forearm. Yellow, white, purple, and black—it was meant to represent the nonbinary flag. As Riley leaned back in her seat to admire the ink, she couldn't help but smile.

"All done." Riley set the tattoo gun aside and leaned back in her chair. "I'll clean it up for you, and you can take a look." Gently, Riley swiped Sam's arm with her trusty soap solution, wiping away any excess ink and leaving the butterfly shining brightly beneath her tattoo studio's lighting. "There you go," Riley said, tossing the wipe into the trash and snapping off a pair of black disposable gloves.

Sam's eyes widened as they took in the tattoo, lightly touching their fingertips to the newly inked skin.

This was the moment Riley loved—and feared—the most in her job. Because as much as she could pore over designs with her clients before marking their skin, it would never look exactly like it did on paper. But seeing Sam’s expression, Riley knew she’d done a good job.

Sam’s bottom lip wobbled. “It’s amazing. Thank you so much.”

“Worth the pain?”

“Yep. Though I don’t think I’ll be coming back in a hurry—no offense.”

Riley chuckled. “None taken. Do you mind if I take a picture of it for my portfolio? And then I’ll wrap it for you, and we’ll go over the aftercare instructions again.”

“Sure. Could you take one on my phone, too? Based on these”—Sam waved a hand at the photographs lining the walls of Riley’s room in the studio—“you’ll take a much better one than I will.”

Riley obliged, and, once she’d bandaged Sam and sent them on their way, she headed to the break room for a much-needed drink before her next client. Caffeine was in order. Her Monday-morning exhaustion was worse than usual, thanks to spending the whole week-end settling into her new place.

Her boss, Stephen, was already sitting at the table, and he waved when she stepped inside. “Hello, trouble. Another satisfied customer?”

“Uh-huh.” The air smelled of coffee, but Riley grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator, feeling like something fizzy. She dropped into the seat beside him. “How about you? You finish your sleeve?”

Stephen’d been working on the same client for weeks, doing a full sleeve that had been months in the making.

“I did! Wanna see?”

“Obviously.”

He took out his phone and showed her the finished artwork, and Riley admired the smooth lines and the bright color. Stephen might have taught Riley everything he knew, but that didn’t mean she was anywhere near as good as him. He did have an extra fifteen years of experience on her, though.

He'd been the one she'd trusted to do most of her own ink, after they'd spent hours agonizing over the designs together.

"It's gorgeous."

"Just like me," Stephen said.

Riley snorted, rolling her eyes.

Stephen wasn't short on confidence—but as a six-foot-four Black man who spent a healthy amount of time lifting weights, Riley supposed he shouldn't be. Much to his husband's despair, Stephen definitely had more than his fair share of admirers.

"I employ you, you know," he said. "You should be nicer to me."

"Like you'd ever get rid of me. You like having me around too much."

The door opened, and one of the other tattoo artists, Tess, stepped inside and waved at them both. Her bright blue hair stood out starkly against her white skin, drawing the eye.

"Do I?" Stephen continued. "Or do I tolerate you?"

"I think I'm the one who does the tolerating around here," Tess said with a grin.

Riley looked at Tess in disbelief. "Are you kidding me? You are so the most annoying."

"How rude. You love me." Tess leaned over the back of Riley's chair to pull her into a hug.

"Sure," Riley said, heavy on the sarcasm, but she didn't shrug off the embrace. Tess was like another sister to Riley—one that, unlike Bea, enjoyed playing the same sports as her. Bea liked watching soccer more than playing it, and Riley had never been able to get into softball, no matter how many times Bea had tried to lure her into enjoying it. "How's your knee?" Riley said when Tess pulled away to make a drink. "It looked like you fell on it awkwardly last night."

"Don't tell me you two were tackling one another again," Stephen said. "I thought players on the same team were supposed to be nice to each other."

"I was nowhere near Tess at the time, thank you."

"It's true. For once, it wasn't her fault."

“I caught you one time. One!” Riley exclaimed.

“Need I remind you I had to wear an ankle brace for three weeks afterward?”

“And you’ve never let me forget it since,” Riley said.

Stephen grinned. “There’s never a dull day with the two of you, is there?”

* * *

Beginning her workday over forty minutes late wasn’t the start to the week Kim had hoped for. Nor was the downpour.

Bursting through the doors of Cake My Day, she shook off her umbrella and breathed in two of her favorite aromas—coffee and pastries.

Thankfully, the bakery was quiet—though from the tired look on Tina’s face, Kim had missed the worst of the morning rush. Flour was smudged across her cheek, standing out against her Black skin.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Kim said. “You’ve got a little flour...” she motioned to her cheek.

“When don’t we?” Tina smiled as she wiped it away. “Is everything okay? You’re not usually late when you don’t have Tyler.”

“No, but it is his fault. John called to tell me Tyler had forgotten his history homework—I swear that boy would forget his own head if it weren’t attached to his body—and I got cornered by a few members of the PTA when I dropped it off for him.”

Tina shuddered. “I do not miss those days. One of the few perks of having teenagers is no longer having to deal with that. My two would die if I ever dared involve myself in their high school. Although maybe I could use that threat as leverage the next time they refuse to clean their rooms.”

Chuckling, Kim shoved her bag and coat into the back room and grabbed her usual apron. “Is the use of threats a good parenting technique?”

“Oh, just you wait until Tyler hits puberty, Kim. Just you wait. Though maybe boys are easier than girls. And at least you only have one.”

“I don’t think I could’ve coped with another one. Especially not a year apart; I don’t know how you and Nathan did it.”

“Honestly? Neither do I. Though sometimes—after a particularly big argument—I wish I could go back to when they were babies and they couldn’t talk back.” Tina let out a wistful sigh. “Did I tell you Sophia has a boyfriend now?”

Kim could remember when Sophia was a wide-eyed six-year-old standing on a footstool and “helping” Tina and Kim bake. “They grow so fast.”

“Tyler will be next.”

“I don’t think so. He still thinks girls have cooties.”

Tina snorted. “Yeah, hold on to that for as long as you can.”

Kim intended to. “How busy was it this morning?”

“So-so. Nothing I couldn’t handle. By the way, I’ll have to leave early on Thursday—Sophia has a game.”

The system she and Tina had come up with when they’d opened Cake My Day two years ago had been arranged with both their families in mind: Tina opened so that on Kim’s weeks with Tyler she could take him to school, and Kim closed so that Tina could ferry Sophia and Brianna to their various after-school activities.

“That’s fine. Soccer or hockey?” How Tina and Nathan kept on top of their girls’ schedules, Kim would never know.

“Soccer. Silly me, thinking having two girls would mean I wouldn’t have to suffer through things like that.”

“Like you don’t love watching them.”

“I do, but ninety minutes of soccer on a Thursday? You come and sit through a few of those and tell me you wouldn’t complain.”

“I think that might be in my future.”

“Tyler’s enjoying soccer practice at school?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t think it’ll be long before he’ll want to join a team.”

“And then it’s game over for you,” Tina said. “Hey, if you want to get a head start, you’re more than welcome to come to Sophia’s game with me tonight.”

“What a shame, but someone has to stay here and close...”

“How convenient.” Tina whipped a towel toward Kim, who leaped out of the way.

Kim’s phone buzzed four times in quick succession.

Tina raised her eyebrows. “Someone’s popular this morning.”

“It’s the dating app.” Kim glanced at her screen. “This guy is the type to send four messages at once.”

Tina held out her hand. “Ooh, let me see.”

Kim hadn’t had the best of luck in the dating department, so she handed it over—a second opinion from her best friend wouldn’t be unwelcome.

Getting back into the dating scene had been a struggle. Kim and John had met in college, so she had never needed to use dating apps. It was only recently that Kim had felt ready to dip her toe back into the water—five years after the divorce.

“He’s cute. When are you going out?”

“We haven’t arranged anything yet; we’ve only been speaking for a couple of days.”

“Looks like he has a lot to say,” Tina said, scrolling back through the messages.

Kim snatched her phone back before Tina started criticizing her conversation technique. “We’ll see how it goes.”

“He can’t be any worse than the last one.”

“Don’t jinx it!” Her luck was bad enough without Tina saying things like that.

Tina held out her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’m going to go and start the next set of bakes before our first interviewee gets here—are you okay manning the counter?”

“No problem.”

As the clock struck nine fifteen, only a few customers sat quietly with their books and laptops. Kim leaned against the counter and lis-

tened to the clanging of bowls from the kitchen, observing the bakery she and Tina had poured so much blood, sweat, and tears into over the last two years.

It was small—with eight wooden tables dotted around in front of the large glass counters showcasing their cakes and bakes—but since most of their business was takeout, the size had never been a problem.

And it was much more manageable that way. Kim didn't know how they'd cope if the place were much bigger.

She'd never expected to have a job she loved. The bakery had been a dream for so long—most of her life—that sometimes, even when Kim was standing inside it, she felt as if she had to pinch herself to believe it was real.

That it was really hers.

That they'd done it.

The bell above the door jingled, and Kim climbed off her stool, greeting the customer with a smile, ready to take on the rest of the day.

Chapter 3

PAUSING OUTSIDE THE LOBBY DOORS of her apartment building after work the next Thursday, Kim raised an eyebrow at the sight of a person halfway down the street, staggering beneath the weight of a wooden desk, perilously close to knocking over everyone else on the sidewalk.

Wait a minute...

Kim recognized those tattooed arms.

What the hell was Riley doing?

Deciding it would be cruel to let the woman continue to struggle, Kim hurried toward her; Riley smiled when Kim reached her.

“Let me give you a hand,” Kim said.

To her amazement, Riley shook her head. “No, thanks. I’m all good.”

“Are you serious?”

Breathing heavily, sweat beaded at Riley’s brow, and her arms were visibly shaking. “Uh-huh. I’ve made it this far. What’s half a block?” She took another few teetering steps.

When she nearly took out an elderly lady with a Zimmer frame, Kim had to intervene. “Okay, you clearly aren’t all good.”

Kim grabbed the other side of the desk before Riley could argue, and together they managed to wrangle it into the building’s lobby. “You don’t like accepting help, do you?” Kim accused. She pressed the button for the elevator.

Riley looked sheepish as the doors opened and they lifted the desk inside. “It’s not in my nature.”

“How far have you carried this thing?” Kim rapped her knuckles on the desk’s solid surface.

“Ten blocks.”

“Ten blocks? On your own?!”

No wonder Riley looked exhausted. The thing was *heavy*.

“The guy I bought it off did offer to carry it,” Riley said, “but he implied it would be impossible for me to do it myself, and I couldn’t let that slide.”

“So you’re stubborn, too?”

“When it comes to proving I don’t need a man for anything? Hell, yeah.”

“Is it worth putting your back out for?”

“Ask me again in the morning.”

When they reached the fourth floor, Kim ignored Riley’s protests and helped her carry the desk out of the elevator.

“I can handle it from here,” Riley said when they reached her front door.

“I may as well help you finish the job.”

Riley unlocked the door, and Cari nearly leaped into her arms, tail wagging with such enthusiasm, it was a wonder she didn’t take off. “Oh, I know,” Riley said, giving the dog a fond pat. “I had the audacity to leave you here all on your own. The nerve.”

Cari whined, and Kim reached out a hand for her to sniff when the dog approached, tickling Cari under the chin. Her fur was soft beneath Kim’s fingertips.

“Huh.” Riley looked at Kim thoughtfully. “She’s usually wary of strangers.”

“Didn’t seem like it when she met Tyler.”

“No. That surprised me, too.”

“I wish she’d been wary of him—he hasn’t shut up about getting a dog since he met her.”

Riley gently moved Cari out of the way with her foot and grabbed the edge of the desk once more. “It’s not my fault she’s so damn cute.”

Kim followed Riley’s lead as to where she wanted the desk. The two of them set it beside the window that looked out onto the street.

“Thanks for your help,” Riley said. “You didn’t have to.”

“I know, but I couldn’t have lived with myself if I’d seen you barely able to walk tomorrow morning.”

Riley grinned, her eyes bright in the afternoon sunlight.

Not wanting to be caught staring, Kim blinked and seized the opportunity to take in the apartment around her. It was a mirror image of her own, but that was where the similarities ended: Riley’s place was sparse compared to Kim’s—which reflected the presence of a messy nine-year-old— and Riley’s decor was a mishmash of different styles.

Noticing Kim eyeing the mismatched three-piece suite, Riley folded her arms across her chest. “It’s a little eccentric, but it’s all mine.”

She sounded defensive, and Kim was quick to reassure her. “Hey, I’m not judging. I kind of like it—it works, in an odd way. Is this your first place?”

“First of my own.” Riley leaned against the arm of a blue leather armchair, scratching behind Cari’s ears when she jumped to put her front paws on Riley’s thighs, begging for attention. “I used to live with my little sister.”

Kim remembered the redhead she’d seen in the hall. “She was one of the people helping you move in, right?”

“Uh-huh. Bea.” A fond look crossed Riley’s face. “The only time we didn’t live together was when I went to college. It feels weird without her. Too quiet.”

“I can empathize with that,” Kim said. “Tyler’s at his father’s this week—and every other week. It took some time to get used to not having him around.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We divorced years ago. And it’s the best thing for all three of us.”

“Would you like to stay for a beer?” There was a note of hesitancy in Riley’s voice. “Or a glass of wine? As a thank-you for your help.”

The hopeful look on Riley’s face reminded Kim of the silence of those awful nights when Tyler had stayed somewhere else for the first time.

The lemon-orange cupcake frosting she needed to make could wait.

“That sounds lovely,” she said.

* * *

Riley made her way toward her refrigerator, ignoring the burn in her arm muscles. She was going to be sore tomorrow, but at least her new desk looked nice, nestled into the corner of her living room. And it had led to her spending some more time getting to know her cute new neighbor.

“Wine or beer?”

“Beer, please. I can’t stand the taste of wine.”

“A woman after my own heart.” Riley grabbed two bottles from the top shelf. The only reason she had any wine at all was in case Bea and Ash dropped by and forgot to bring their own. “Here you go.” Riley passed Kim one of the ice-cold bottles, and they settled onto either end of Riley’s gray couch.

Cari took the opportunity to launch herself into the space between them.

“Sorry,” Riley said. “I can get her down—”

“It’s fine.” Kim settled a hand on Cari’s back, her fingers combing through the short fur. “I don’t mind. Besides—it’s her home.”

“And, boy, does she know it,” Riley muttered because Cari had settled in immediately.

“How long have you had her? You said you rescued her off the streets?”

“Nearly three years.” The anniversary was approaching—Riley would have to get her a new toy as a present. “I was working late one night when I heard a commotion in the alley out behind the shop.

When I went to investigate—usually nothing good happens out there after eleven p.m.—I found a scrawny puppy digging through the trash. Persuaded her to come inside with a few pieces of ham, and I’ve been stuck with her ever since.”

“I don’t know how people can abandon their animals.”

“Me either.” Riley had been furious when she’d taken Cari to the vet and found out how bad her condition was. “She was so skinny, she wouldn’t have survived much longer if I hadn’t found her.”

“What kind of shop do you work in that’s open so late?”

Stretching one inked arm along the back of the couch, Riley grinned. “I’ll give you one guess.”

Kim’s expression turned puzzled before a spark of realization flashed across her face. “Tattoo artist?”

“Yup.”

“That’s cool.” Kim nodded toward Riley’s arm. “Did you do those yourself?”

“Nah. Tattooing yourself isn’t the easiest thing in the world. I did design them all, though.”

“I’ve always thought about getting one, but I don’t think I have the nerve.”

Riley had heard that one before. “A lot of people say that to me. But if you ever change your mind, hit me up. I’ll give you a good deal.”

“How many do you have?”

“It’d be quicker to list the places I don’t have them,” Riley said. “I don’t have much skin to spare.”

“Masochist.”

Riley laughed. “Yeah, probably. My ribs were the worst.” She pressed her fingers to where the phoenix rising from the ashes was inked on her skin, wincing even now as she remembered the hours spent in the chair. “But I think that one is my favorite.”

“Can I see?”

“If you want to.” Riley lifted her shirt, grateful she’d put on one of her nicer sports bras that morning. She was under no illusions—

Kim was most likely straight, and Riley shouldn't be flirting with her neighbor anyway—but still. It would be a shame for Kim to see one of the ratty, holey ones kicking around the bottom of her drawers for when she hadn't done laundry in a while.

“Wow, that's beautiful. Does it have any special meaning?”

“It's for my sister.” Riley dropped her shirt and took a sip of her beer. “She went through a shitty situation, but she came out the other side stronger than ever.”

“You really care about her.”

It didn't sound like a question, but Riley nodded anyway. “She's my everything. And we're the only family we've got.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be,” Riley said, her voice more venomous than she intended. Kim's eyes widened in alarm.

“Sorry, it's just...” Riley sighed. “It's a touchy subject.”

“I get it. You don't have to talk about it.”

“No, I don't mind. My parents kicked Bea out when she came out at fourteen.” Riley kept the details deliberately vague—Kim didn't need to know Bea was trans, and it wasn't Riley's secret to share. “She always was braver than me. I never had the guts to come out to my parents, but I guess that's a good thing. Anyway, Bea didn't have anywhere to go, so I dropped out of college, found a crappy apartment for us to rent, and moved her out here with me. No one in my family was interested in helping us—or cared we were struggling—so I cut them all off and haven't spoken to any of them since.”

“Jesus, Riley. I'm so sorry. How old were you?”

“Eighteen. Five months into my freshman year.”

Kim drew in a sharp breath.

It was a reaction Riley was used to, and she shrugged. “It's okay. We got through it, and now Bea's happier than ever.”

“And you? Are you happy?” Kim met Riley's gaze.

Kim's irises had specks of gray in the green, and Riley tried not to drown in them. “Yeah,” she said, meaning it more than she had in a

long time. She was proud of how far she'd come in the last few years. "I am."

"Good. Are you—"

Whatever Kim had been about to say was cut off by the sound of the lock clicking. Riley glanced at her watch. She hadn't realized the time.

"Yo!" Bea's voice called out.

Cari scrambled off the couch to go and greet her.

"I brought food and beer ready for the gam—oh." Bea's eyes widened when she saw Kim sitting beside Riley on the couch.

"You're supposed to knock now that I have my own place," Riley said, watching Kim gulp the last of her beer before setting the bottle carefully on a coaster on Riley's coffee table.

"Then why'd you give me a key?" Bea said. "But sorry. Didn't realize I'd be interrupting anything."

"You're not."

Bea glanced between Riley and Kim, eyebrows twitching, and Riley rolled her eyes.

"I'll leave you to it," Kim said, climbing to her feet.

"You don't have to go." Riley was enjoying getting to know Kim—she didn't want the time to be cut short. "You can stay and watch the game with us if you like. As long as you're a Sounders fan, anyway."

"Sorry, I don't watch baseball."

Riley grinned. "That's all right, seeing as it's soccer."

"They're all the same to me," Kim said with a wave of her hand.

"Okay. Well, then, thanks for your help."

"Thanks for the beer."

Kim let herself out, and Bea whistled as soon as she was gone, throwing herself onto the seat Kim had vacated. Cari, not wanting to be left out, leapt onto Riley's knee, and Riley winced when a sharp elbow dug into her ribs as Cari made herself comfortable.

"I was kidding when I accused you of flirting with her the other day, but now I see you're already making moves," Bea said.

"I am not making moves."

“Then what was that?”

“She helped me drag that desk in here,” Riley gestured to the item of furniture in question, “so I offered her a drink as a thank-you.”

“A likely story.” Bea reached for the TV remote and turned on the pregame commentary. “She’s cute.”

“Yeah, cute and probably straight. Not that I’d go there anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Because she lives next door? It’s bad enough when I run into an ex at a random bar somewhere. Can you imagine in the elevator each morning?” Riley shuddered at the thought. “Plus, she’s got a kid.”

“And? You love kids,” Bea said.

“Yeah, but I’ve never dated a woman who has them.”

“Fair enough.” Bea shrugged. “So, speaking of dating”—the segue was smoother than Bea normally managed—“when are you going to get back out there? It’s been months since you and Lizzy broke up.”

“I don’t know.”

Truthfully, Riley hadn’t thought about it. She was fine being single—had needed to be, considering her disastrous dating history—and she had more important things to focus on. Like work. And Cari. And saving enough to buy matching furniture.

“I’m not in a rush. And I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” she said as Bea opened her mouth to argue further.

“Fine, fine.”

Riley shook her head as Bea shoved six chips into her mouth at once. “You eat like an animal.”

Bea shot Riley a pointed look. “Where do you think I learned it from?”

Riley stole the bag of chips before Bea could grab another handful. “I thought Ash was coming too?”

“She was supposed to be, but she ended up having to do some last-minute prep for her lessons this week. She’s being evaluated.”

Unable to think of anything worse than being observed—and judged—while at work, Riley felt a stab of sympathy. “I don’t envy her.”

“Me either. She sends her love, though.”

As much as Riley adored Ash, it was nice to spend some one-on-one time with her sister. They'd bonded over soccer when they were little, and watching the Sounders had become tradition—even during those brief months when they'd been apart, they'd watched matches together over Skype every week.

“How are you settling in?” Bea said.

“Okay. The peace and quiet is nice.” Riley ducked when Bea threw a pillow in her direction. “Just kidding. I'd be lying if I didn't say that it's taking a bit of getting used to.”

“Yeah. I feel the same way. Like, it's nice for me and Ash to have our own place, but...sometimes I miss having my big sister around.”

When Bea leaned closer into her side, Riley wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “I know what you mean.”

“You know, I never...I've never really thanked you for everything you've done for me.”

Riley tensed. “You don't have to thank me, Bea. I did what any decent person would have done.”

Bea leaned back and captured Riley's gaze. “No, they wouldn't. You basically gave up your life for me. And I know you wouldn't have it any other way, but, still, you didn't have to quit college. You didn't have to work two jobs. You didn't have to put your own dreams on hold until I was in college. And I just...I want you to know that I appreciate it so fucking much, Riley. And I'm so proud that you've managed to achieve everything you wanted in spite of it all.”

“Stop it,” Riley said, her throat tight with tears. They'd never been a particularly emotional family. “You're going to make me cry, and I haven't done that since Lizzy and I broke up.”

Bea chuckled. “Okay, okay. I'll stop. As long as you know it.”

“I do.” Riley rested her head on top of Bea's. “Thank you.” Reaching for another handful of chips, Riley turned back to the TV screen where the teams' lineups were shown on the screen and groaned. “Why are we going with that defense again? We're screwed.”

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LOVE NEXT DOOR

BY RACHAEL SOMMERS

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