

a Brutal Truth world novel

the
awkward
truth

*career climbing just took
the oddest turn*

lee winter



Chapter 1

Focus: Absolute

ON NOVEMBER 23, AT 10:07 a.m., Felicity Simmons seized her boss's tea mug and hurled it against the wall, changing her life forever.

"I am not your assistant, Elena!" Felicity stood ramrod straight and glared. "I'm NOT who you pay to fetch and carry and make drinks and photocopy paperwork. I will *never* get you another fucking chai latte ever again, so don't bother asking. I'm your *chief of staff*. Do you understand that? I'm a trained lawyer, exceptional at what I do, and I deserve to be treated accordingly."

"I see." Elena's pleased little smile took all the wind out of Felicity's sails. "It took you long enough."

Then Elena promptly promoted her.

Astonishing how a career could be advanced with nine pieces of ceramic and a sticky wet spot of chai latte (nonfat milk, extra hot) on the gunmetal gray carpet. No one ever said media mogul Elena Bartell was predictable.

It was now March 10, 8:58 p.m., well over three months later, and Felicity was still trying to get her head around what had happened. She stared out her glass balcony doors at the jutting skyline from the thirty-second floor of her Manhattan apartment. Felicity might even be able to pay her mortgage off this year with the pay hike that came with going from Elena's chief of staff to deputy chief operating officer, soon to be running all of Bartell Corp as acting COO. That did not seem real. None of this did.

A noise made her start, and she peered into the darkness of her balcony, although she had a pretty good idea as to the culprit.

Her building's balconies comprised one long strip of concrete flooring on each level with a glass parapet in front. Each apartment's balcony sides were chest-high, frosted-glass dividers with funky stylish holes to let the wind through. Unfortunately, the little holes were ideal climbing aids if you had paws. As a result, Loki, her next-door neighbor's cat, hopped from balcony to balcony and liked to make herself at home in Felicity's pair of designer topiary trees.

Oh, Felicity might not have caught the creature in the act, but she'd seen plenty of leafy evidence that the beast liked to claw her way up the tree stems, bursting up into the rounded balls on top like something from *Alien*.

This was unacceptable in about fifty ways, of course, from the defiled expensive trees to enduring an animal with trespassing issues. Perhaps the worst part was the fact that it was a cat. Felicity didn't like cats anywhere near her. Dogs, either. It was a boundaries thing. As in they had none.

Felicity knew she was being watched. She rose and slunk over to the wall next to the balcony, then flicked the lock on the sliding glass door. Inching open the door, she pushed it along its track, leaving the thinnest of gaps. Thanks to twenty years of watching her diet with the diligence of an A-list actress, the thinnest of gaps was all she needed.

The rustle sounded again.

Felicity drew in a deep breath and rammed her hand blindly into the foliage.

"Ow! Shit!" She pulled back as little puncture wounds appeared on the back of her hand.

A cream-colored head suddenly burst through the ball of leaves, blue eyes connecting with Felicity's.

They both let out a startled noise before Felicity gathered her wits, lunged forward, and grabbed, a hand clamped on each tiny shoulder.

She stared down at her squirming quarry. Good lord, the thing was like a little pom-pom with eyes. A Siamese kitten! The cuteness overload made her itch.

"Shouldn't you be posing for an Instagram page instead of attacking me and mine?" she asked acidly.

The pom-pom hissed.

A shriek sounded, outraged and piercing, and Felicity turned to see her neighbor gawping at her. The aptly named Karen Henderson was an

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angular forty-something doctor's wife who had a righteous opinion on all things, the pettier the better. How she hadn't wound up on a Karens Hall of Shame on social media yet was something of a mystery.

"Loki!" Mrs. Henderson gasped. Her accusing gaze flicked to Felicity. "You're strangling my kitty! Put her down right now!"

Felicity supposed her hands did look suspiciously like they were around the squirming animal's throat, but that was not the case. She marched over to the barrier separating the balconies.

"Loki should be called *locust*," Felicity noted, thrusting the animal toward its owner.

The woman snatched it off her and made cooing noises as she rocked it back and forth.

Loki eyeballed Felicity over her owner's shoulder as if plotting some nasty vengeance.

Felicity scowled back. That cute act was fur deep, clearly.

Mrs. Henderson spun back to face her. "What sort of a monster attacks a beautiful, helpless kitten?"

Helpless? Felicity had puncture wounds that told another story. "What sort of an idiot fails to keep her pet indoors?" Felicity retorted. "That's an expensive pair of imported lilly pillies she keeps defiling."

"She's a kitten!" Mrs. Henderson protested. "Sometimes she gets out. Have a heart."

Felicity narrowed her eyes. "Look, lady, lock up that devil spawn. I don't want to ever see it on my balcony again or I'll bill you for my gardener's pruning fees, and FYI, they're the high-end kind that cause nose bleeds."

"Monster! Oh, I pity you. The bitter, sad, lonely lawyer with no friends."

Ouch. Felicity had no idea her dubious social life was such common knowledge. "What? I'm not bitter. I'm a dedicated professional with high career goals."

"No, Ms. Simmons, you're a sad case. I know because you hate animals." She didn't wait for an answer, instead turning and taking Loki indoors, slamming her balcony door shut.

Felicity turned to mirror the exit strategy on her side, but her nostrils twitched. She glanced down to discover her feline visitor had left a steaming, smelly calling card in her potted plant's dirt.

Lovely.

Cleanup was a job for daylight and industrial-strength gloves. Sighing, she went inside. After delousing in the bathroom—animal saliva and claw marks could carry diseases, that much she knew—Felicity poured herself a glass of wine. Dropping onto the swanky nine-thousand-dollar couch that was the highlight of her apartment, she stared outside at her now disheveled tree. Damn, Loki. Perfection ruined.

Her eyes drifted to her own image reflected in the glass.

A bitter, sad, lonely lawyer with no friends? That was quite an impressive list Mrs. Henderson had flung at her. Not even remotely true, of course.

What do I have to be bitter about? Felicity was on top of the world professionally. Her mentor, Elena, had finally recognized her worth.

Okay, it was true she hadn't made time for friends, unless you counted her local Starbucks employees, but frankly, their getting her triple-shot espresso right every morning was an absolutely beautiful relationship.

And it was equally true her bed was absent any warm companion these days. But pfft, no loss there. Hardly her fault that her new promotion meant she was now permanently based in New York after ten months in Sydney, nor that Phillip's lack of interest in a transpacific relationship had brought things to an abrupt end.

"You're not worth it," he'd said.

That still stung.

Neither are you. That's what she should have said, of course. Instead, she'd just stood there speechless like a gaping seagull, trying to think of something clever to say while he walked away.

But it was all moot. Relationships, friendships, exes. They could all go toss their emotional deadweights into the Hudson. *Finally* her career was about to hit its peak. Everything she'd ever worked for or sacrificed for was all within touch. That was all that mattered. She plucked a stray cat hair off her designer pants with determination.

No, when it came to her work, her focus would be absolute.

* * *

Elena Bartell leaned back in her austere black leather chair, smug as a cat in a puddle of sun.

Felicity surreptitiously wiped her hands down her tailored navy pants. *Appropriately corporate, not too bland. Elena doesn't like bland.* God, it was

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hard to sit still under the Tiger Shark's scrutiny, but she'd known this was coming. It might be a Friday, but this was day one of her training to take over Elena's job so her boss could then swan off to Australia and edit her international fashion magazines from there. It was the world's most mystifying career pivot, of course, and an even stranger choice of destination, but Felicity wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Your replacement for chief of staff seems adequate enough," Elena said. "Perhaps don't ask Scott to fetch your tea, though. Rumor has it chiefs of staff don't take kindly to being asked to play assistant."

Felicity felt the heat of her instant blush from her collarbone to the tips of her ears. "Erm. No."

Oh, very smooth, Felicity.

Elena smirked, which just made her even more intimidating. Her black hair was slicked back, highlighting her pale skin and razor-sharp high cheekbones and bringing out her palest of blue eyes, which always gave her a lethal quality. That, paired with her pin-striped vest, matching trousers, and white silk shirt, made for an imposing impression.

The curious thing was that Elena was not tall. In fact, Felicity was taller, but next to her boss she often felt like she was shrinking—a turtle retracting its long neck back into its shell. Somehow Elena projected a greater presence than anyone Felicity had ever met.

She couldn't look at Elena's direct, amused stare, so her gaze shifted to everywhere else. It roamed to Elena's desk. Gone was the picture frame that had held a photo of her now ex-husband Richard. *Thank God. Waste of a pulmonary system, that asshole.* Her eye fell to a new frame that hadn't been there a day ago. She craned her neck just a little—subtly—to see who'd been promoted to frame-worthy status. Then she had to force herself not to jerk away.

Good God. What on earth was Elena Bartell doing with a photo of *Maddie Grey* on her desk? The blunt former night-shift reporter from Australia had somehow connected with Elena. Who'd fired her. Then rehired her. And fired her again. Honestly, it was hard to keep up.

Somehow after all that they were now...friends? How had that happened? Felicity had been in Elena's life for years longer and had never been worthy of a framed photo. And if Felicity didn't know for a fact that

the twice-divorced Elena Bartell was entirely heterosexual, she'd side-eye the hell out of that photo.

Felicity swallowed back her surge of jealousy. No, she wasn't doing this again. As part of Felicity's new resolutions to be a better person, she'd promised herself to no longer fixate on all the ways Madeleine Grey kept winning at life, even though she *totally didn't deserve it* and even if she was rather engaging, if you looked past the *totally didn't deserve it* point.

The silence had dragged on far too long, and Felicity realized with a start that she was being watched as she studied the photo.

Elena's expression was neutral, but her eyes were speculative. She waited, eyebrow half-cocked, as if expecting an awkward question.

Since Felicity was in the business of making her boss's life comfortable, not the other way around, she met the look with her usual aloof lack of interest.

Finally, Elena seemed to give up waiting for a response and shuffled some papers. "All right." She took a sip of tea from a mug on her desk that Felicity had bought her to replace the shattered one. "I'm breaking it in," Elena said, "especially since my other one met its untimely demise."

"Oh. Yes. Well, I'm truly sorry about that."

"I'm not. I've been waiting for you to be the woman I knew you could be. To stand up and demand to be treated only as a chief of staff. I was curious how long you'd take, and until recently, I didn't particularly care as I had no urgent need for you to evolve. But that has changed. Your timing was useful, given my new plans."

Felicity stared. "Well" was all she could think to say. That wasn't embarrassing in the least.

Elena chuckled, a low, throaty timbre that Felicity had taught herself several years ago to never find sexy because that would just be weird.

"Felicity," Elena said in a not unkind voice, "I cannot have someone running my company in my absence who has no spine. I need someone I trust, yes, but they have to be strong, too. I've seen you stand up to intimidating and powerful people for years. You do it for me. I need to see you do it for *you*, even if you're worried I won't approve. And that's not all I want to see more of. I have a little assignment for you."

Felicity sat up straight, mentally readying herself for anything.

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“But before I give it to you, I’ve just been on the phone with some very angry lawyers from *The Mornington Herald*. They seem to be of the opinion that you just canceled our mutually beneficial buyout deal.”

“I did.”

“Isn’t that the paper that employs Brad Tolliver? That acerbic columnist with a reader following in the hundreds of thousands? The same columnist *you* suggested could make us a bundle in syndication rights if we acquired the paper he’s contracted with?”

“Yes.” Felicity paused. “I outlined what happened in my management report. I’ve emailed you.”

“I’m still only a third of the way through my inbox. Explain.”

“I terminated the deal after I couldn’t get the editor to confirm that Tolliver was still under contract with them at the time of negotiations.”

Elena frowned. “He has to be. Our deal specifically named his contract as an asset we wish to acquire.”

“I know. So I made some discreet inquiries. Turns out two months ago, when his contract expired, Tolliver found out he was pivotal to the buyout bid with us. He’s been stalling signing a new contract to get more money from his publisher.”

“Surely now that the buyout deal’s at risk his paper will offer him anything to get him signed on. So why wouldn’t you wait for that instead of axing the deal prematurely?”

“I did the sums and looked more closely at the other assets we’d get from acquiring *The Mornington Herald*. It’s not worth it. The independent engineering report showed the aging printing presses have some worsening structural issues and need an overhaul. I know we were hoping to utilize the presses for additional external printing jobs, but that’s out of the question. I concluded it’s more cost-effective for us to kill the deal and sign Tolliver exclusively to a Bartell Corp contract. Tolliver’s syndication potential was the only unique selling point in acquiring his paper at all.”

Elena leaned in. “I see. What happened next?”

“Tolliver said he’d sign exclusively with us for twice his current salary.”

“Which would be far cheaper than more or less buying his masthead just for his contract. It’s a bargain.”

“It is. But I said no.”

Elena’s eyebrows lifted. She waited.

“Instead of a hundred percent salary bump, I offered him five percent more and threw in travel expenses. Capped, of course.”

“He agreed?” Elena asked in surprise.

“Immediately.” Felicity hid her smirk. “He wants to travel America, and he can write on our dime from wherever he roams. That’s his official reason. I also observed he’s an arrogant young man who wants to get laid—often. So once I explained we’d make him famous with a new national syndication column deal, he jumped at it.”

Elena snorted. “That’s excellent reading of your target.”

“Yes. Well.” Felicity fidgeted at the compliment. “I had a hunch. It paid off.”

“Okay, how much did we save killing off *The Mornington Herald* deal, subtracting expenses we’ve invested in it so far?”

“Four point two million dollars.”

Elena’s smile turned wolfish. “Well now, that’ll teach a publisher not to pay their bird in the hand. All right, I’ll tell their lawyers we’re not changing our minds and to get over it. Which Bartell Corp publication will you base Tolliver at?”

“He’s a bit of a pain in the neck and believes his own hype. I’ve chosen Boston National News Publications. Syndications manager Michelle Masterton should keep him filing on deadline, and she’s also agreed to oversee his travel budget.”

Elena gave a small laugh. “Poor man. Michelle could scare the spots off a leopard. Good.” Her eyes became half-lidded “*Very* good. You keep surprising me, Felicity. That’s what I like to see. Which brings me to your special assignment.”

Felicity straightened, pleasure burning at Elena’s approval.

“Last August I heard about a charity called Living Ruff New York, which helps the pets of homeless people. This charity goes out to the streets to the homeless, supplies pet food, offers free access to animal healthcare, neutering, and so on. The story I read about them was compelling, so I decided to make an anonymous donation.” Elena’s blue eyes grew stormy. “A sizable one.”

With a nod, Felicity waited. It was hardly the first time she’d noticed anonymous donations in Elena’s private expenses. She always did take on such odd little charities, though. Like this one, it seemed.

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“The charity should have been flourishing for several years on the money I gave them, but less than twelve months later, I see *this*.” She spun her computer monitor around to face Felicity.

Charity for animals of the homeless facing closure

The story explained the impending closure of the charity due to lack of funds, and the attached photo showed a smiling woman with a natural tan and sandy blond hair pulled into a ponytail who was holding a huge dog. The caption read: “Dr. Sandy Cooper, a vet at Living Ruff NY, with Gladiator, the American Bulldog she is checking up for homeless veteran Martin Ruiz.”

“There is no possible way Living Ruff New York could have gone through the funds I gave them in such a short time,” Elena said firmly. “So I contacted the charity director, Harvey Clifford. Since my donation was anonymous, he had no idea why I’m interested. I hinted I might be considering giving to his charity, but first I wanted to ask whether the story was true. I explained that if the charity is about to call in liquidators, there’s little point in me throwing good money after bad.”

“What did he say?”

Elena’s eyes narrowed. “He claimed the story was just a play for more donations, they’re business as usual, and the charity is not about to close. He welcomed all new donations and called the news story a media beat-up. Christ, the man is a terrible liar.” A look of disdain crossed her face. “He’s trying to tell someone who owns half the world’s newspapers what a media beat-up looks like? They *never* look like that. Sympathetic and with quotes and photos from the staff? This was a management-endorsed story.”

Felicity nodded. “So the director was lying.”

“Yes. I’m just not sure why. Maybe this *is* just a way to drive more donations, maybe not. But I want to know for sure. I want to know where my money went because if it’s been embezzled, I’ll be damned if I’ll be taking that lying down.”

“Understood,” Felicity said, on firm ground now that she understood the problem: assess a charity’s full financial status and work out where Elena’s donation had gone. “We can get Thomas in accounts to—”

“Thomas has lost my faith.”

“What?” Felicity blurted. The man had been with Bartell Corp for sixteen years. He was their most senior accountant.

“When I originally made my donation, I had him check that the charity’s books were sound and all was aboveboard. I asked him to *personally* look into it. I found out today he’d handed that task off to an underling. When I ask someone to handle something themselves, I don’t mean find someone less qualified whom I do not know or trust to...take a stab at it.”

The man was a complete fool. Elena always meant what she said. “Right. Yes, I see.”

“Good,” Elena said, eyes tight. “Now I need someone I trust to investigate what Living Ruff does and how, and determine whether there are any irregularities. Wave around the possibility I might make a donation, should they be less than forthcoming.”

“Charities by law have to disclose to the public their financial status,” Felicity said with a frown. Surely Elena knew that already? “Most post their financial statements on their websites.”

“Of course. And Living Ruff does that, too. It’s also listed on multiple charity-accountability websites as excellent. But you know more than anyone from the deals we do how often a business hides details it doesn’t want disclosed. So it’s simple—go down to that little animal charity and find out where my money went. But I want discretion. I know you can barge in like Rambo to get things done. Can you do *delicate*, Felicity? Nuance? I want to know whether my new acting COO can problem-solve using a softly-softly approach while far outside her comfort zone. So let’s find out. Show me who you are.”

Felicity blinked. She could be subtle, for God’s sake!

“I am not implying you can’t do it,” Elena said carefully. “I’ve just never given you much scope to test yourself in subtleties or come up with outside-the-box ideas. So I need the problem defined, then a solution for it, and my name kept out of all of it. My best-case scenario involves the fewest people possible aware of what you’re up to and how you’ve addressed it.”

What on earth? Since when did Elena tiptoe around anything? “Why?” she blurted out.

“Felicity,” Elena said with a sigh, “if I wanted to get the police involved, I would have simply called them.”

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“You...want to protect the charity?” Felicity asked incredulously. “Even if they’ve misused your donation?”

“Of course not. But good charities can close on the merest hint of investigation. I don’t want that happening if everything *is* aboveboard.”

“Okay. But what if they are straight-up corrupt? Surely we’d get the police involved then?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Felicity sensed Elena was holding something back. Did she know someone involved in that charity or something? Or maybe she thought it would reflect badly on her if it came out that she’d dumped a lot of money on a charity that was corrupt without doing her due diligence first. Curse Thomas for putting her in that position. He was lucky he still had a job.

“It would be easier for my investigation if you would allow me to tell the charity you’ve already donated and have a right to know where your money went.”

“No.”

Felicity didn’t bother pushing it. Elena had long protected her privacy on the causes she chose to donate to. It was smart; she’d be inundated by people with their hands out if they knew how generous she could be.

“So,” Felicity finally said, almost afraid to ask, “how much did you donate exactly?”

“One point four million.”

Holy hell! Felicity’s eyes widened, and she didn’t entirely manage to stop a choking noise from the back of her throat.

“Mm,” Elena said, voice tight. “So now you see my concern. Get to the bottom of this. And don’t take anything that director says at face value. Dealing with that man was like trying to talk to a sheepdog.”

“A...sheepdog?”

“Exuberant, overfamiliar, and somehow clueless. Solve this for me, Felicity. Show me what you can do.”

“Of course, Elena.” Sudden pride swelled in Felicity’s chest. “You can count on me. It shouldn’t take more than a few hours to get to the bottom of this. I’ll just—”

“Felicity,” Elena said, cutting her off, “I expect you to take a lot more time than that. Take a week or weeks, if you have to. I want thoroughness, as if I were doing this investigation myself. Fine-tooth comb.”

“I— Yes, of course, Elena.” Wait— *Weeks?* “How can I learn to be your replacement as COO if I’m off with a charity? I can’t do both.”

“All in good time. And I can always extend my time with you if needed when you return.”

Oh. Well. Felicity wasn’t sure how to take that. “So...where exactly is this place?”

“The Bronx.” A slow smile crossed her boss’s face as she slid her gaze over Felicity’s expensive suit. “Maybe...dress down a little when you head over there next week. I mean, if you have that in your corporate wardrobe.”

Felicity’s throat tightened. *The Bronx? The actual Bronx?* She wondered if she’d start hyperventilating. That did not sound safe. Or clean. Or...nice. Felicity made it her business to only swan around in safe, clean, and nice.

Elena’s eyes were practically gleaming with amusement now. “Good luck.” She took one last sip of her tea and placed the mug on her desk with finality. “We’re done.”

Chapter 2

Roller Derby Amazons

FELICITY SPENT THE WEEKEND RESEARCHING everything she could find on Living Ruff in preparation for her visit on Monday. Apparently, it wasn't a regular charity but rather a foundation set up by a wealthy, clever socialite called Rosalind Stone. Felicity knew her by reputation—a shrewd operator to be dismissed at your own peril—but hadn't ever met the woman.

Rosalind famously loved animals and threw an abundance of parties for her rich friends to raise money for Living Ruff. That explained the charity's annual donations of about \$700,000, a tidy sum for such a small organization that had on staff one director, two full-time vets, several retired vets as on-call temps, a receptionist/vet tech, and a part-time cleaner.

It was still early, the sun barely risen, and Felicity hadn't quite managed to get out of her cozy mellow-gray Lunya pajamas and into something befitting a corporate weekend warrior. She hunkered deeper into the warm blanket cloaking her on her couch and poked around a few more research websites on her phone.

She had determined it was unusual for any foundation to run its own charity hands-on rather than just cut a check to whichever organization did the closest work to what they endorsed. But apparently, Ms. Stone didn't do anything by halves. Or perhaps she liked the power trip. After all, the board was headed by Rosalind and stacked entirely with her family and friends.

The director—the “sheepdog” Elena had mocked—was Rosalind's husband, Harvey Clifford, an unremarkable man on the page with a

background in bookkeeping who had married far above his station. Maybe his appeal would be obvious when Felicity met him, but so far she couldn't see it. Little wonder, perhaps, that Rosalind had kept her own name after marrying the man.

A sound distracted her, and she glanced over to the balcony doors to see Loki creeping past on her way to the nearest lilly pillly.

Felicity's eyes narrowed. "Hiss!" she called out loudly, flapping her arm to shoo her away.

Loki stopped, turned, met her eyes, then sat. And bold as brass began to lick her paws as though she hadn't just been caught in the act of repeated interloping.

Picking up a cream and blue cushion, not even caring that its provenance was a French boutique...from *actual France*...Felicity hurled it at the glass, where it bounced off harmlessly.

Loki shot up the plant's stem and disappeared into the ball of green at the top only to reappear a moment later, her white pom-pom face and huge eyes all that were visible.

"Oh, come on! You couldn't even *pretend* to care I can see you?"

"Mreoow."

"You'd better not use my lilly pillies as a litter box again, or I swear..."

What? What would I actually do?

Felicity sighed. Was it seriously the worst thing in the world if she couldn't contain *every* element in her ordered life? She glanced back at the kitten. "Consider yourself lucky that I'm both solving a mystery and having an existential crisis."

Loki merely ignored her and maintained her treetop vigil.

Giving up, Felicity returned to her work with a huff of annoyance. So far she'd dug up Living Ruff's Form 990PF from last year. Charities had to supply these annual financial summaries to the Internal Revenue Service, which in turn posted the information online. With a final scan of the most recent 990 and still finding nothing obvious amiss, she called Thomas.

"Ms. Simmons?" came a disgruntled voice. "It's six on a Sunday morning."

"So it is. And if I were in Elena's bad books for dropping the ball, I'd be *very* keen to get in her good books again by helping with a question she wants solved."

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That woke him up a little. “What question? What can I do?”

“Look into Living Ruff for me. *Yourself* this time.” She took another deep draft of hot chocolate. Not even close to the buzz her triple-shot espressos gave her, but she was trying to break bad habits. “Find out if they’re hiding anything.”

“What makes you think they are?”

“Elena donated \$1.4 million last September. It’s only March, so too early for this year’s 990 to be submitted, which would show where that money went. But it went *somewhere*, if one news article is to be believed saying the charity’s about to fold. I need you to find out if they’ve been up to any funny business. Go back over all the 990s and anything else publicly available. You accountants know where all the figures are buried.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I need it COB Tuesday at the latest. Call me as soon as you know something.”

“There may be nothing to know. Peter’s preliminary investigation before Ms. Bartell donated found nothing irregular.”

“And Peter’s been in accounting for how long?”

Silence fell.

“Exactly. No wonder Elena is disappointed in you. So can I count on you, Thomas,” Felicity asked, voice silky, “to help Elena?”

“Of course.” Worry filled his voice at the reminder. “Always.”

“Good.” Felicity hung up without further ado.

* * *

“We’re here, ma’am,” Bartell Corp’s senior driver announced.

Felicity’s gaze flicked from her phone to the uninspiring washed-out two-story redbrick building in front of them. Graffiti tags littered the bottom of it. She sighed. Classy joint.

She glanced back at Amir as she gathered her things. It wouldn’t be long now and he’d be taking up Elena’s offer to relocate to Sydney to drive for her there. Quite the adjustment for him. Was it loyalty, Felicity wondered, or simply an opportunity for better weather that made him accept such an enormous lifestyle change?

Loyalty, probably. Elena had that effect on people.

Felicity found it hard to imagine anyone loyally dedicating themselves to her in the same way they did Elena. But honestly, as long as her staff did their jobs, she didn't care whether they loved or hated her. She didn't much think about them at all. It always shocked her that more people didn't share her supremely logical view of the world.

It was still early, and the gleam of metal caught her eye. A grubby man with unwashed hair was shuffling past, pushing a shopping cart loaded with his possessions. He was the third homeless person she'd seen in as many minutes on the drive over. She pursed her lips. Would it kill someone to fix this situation? It was a failure of the system to have the South Bronx's streets strewn with tired and miserable unfulfilled people pushing their worldly goods around. Honestly, how hard could it be to solve?

Next to the redbrick building was a vacant park, which seemed an ironic use of the word, since it had no trees or nature of any kind. Only concrete seating areas and a few square tables. What was its function? She frowned. Surely no one would willingly eat their lunch here to admire the view of—she squinted—three pawn shops, a donut establishment, and an eyewear office with a cracked window.

Illegally parked amidst all that concrete sat a white van half facing the street, marked LIVING RUFF. Well, it made sense they'd have their own vehicle, since outreach to the homeless was part of the charity's mission statement.

She glanced back at the charity's headquarters. A line of windows on the top level yielded no sign of life. The large shuttered window at the front below a worn sign that said LIVING RUFF NY also screamed "shut."

"It's supposed to be open by now," Felicity murmured to Amir, and flicked to her phone. "The website says '7:30 a.m. to late. Our doors are open to all.' Got a funny idea of open."

"Yes, Ms. Simmons," Amir said amiably. "Do you wish to wait for them to open?"

The man deserved a gold medal for sedateness. His unruffled personality was as genial as the way he drove. On that note, he'd probably never had a speeding ticket in his life.

Felicity had always thought life should be accomplished at full speed—God only knew if you'd get everything done otherwise. She never walked

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anywhere. No, she paced and strode and stalked. Far more efficient, if you asked her, than those who sidled about, stopping to smell the roses.

A movement caught her eye, and she swiveled to see a homeless man who had buried most of his body inside the Living Ruff van on the driver's side. The hell? Some passing hobo had just broken in and decided to rummage about looking for something to steal.

With the door blocking Felicity's view, she could only see grubby jeans-clad calves sticking out and boots that looked like they'd worn through every layer of polish and were back to raw leather.

Oh, hell no.

Amir gave her a startled look. "Ms. Simmons?"

Had she said that aloud? Whatever. Her eyes hardened on the thief. What if he were about to make off with goods purchased with Elena's donation? That made it personal, didn't it? She had an obligation here. "I'm going in," she told Amir. "Call the police if things get dicey."

Amir's eyebrows shot up in astonishment. "Ma'am?"

Felicity flung open the car door, leaped out, and headed over to the vagrant at a fast clip. He was still busy rummaging, so she tapped him hard on the back—well, poked, more like—and said, "Excuse me! Just what do you think you're doing?"

The man straightened, bumping his head on the van ceiling as he did and emitting a sharp, high-pitched yelp. He spun to face Felicity, unfurling to full impressive height.

Felicity took a startled step back. Okay, who in the ever-loving Brienne of Tarth was this?

To begin with, *he* was a *she*. And not just any she. The woman was block-out-the-sun tall and solid as a brick wall. She had powerful thighs and broad muscled shoulders that looked like she could probably toss a Shetland pony with ease.

Felicity's breath caught when her gaze slid down. Generous breasts and an unexpectedly rounded stomach softened her imposing form so that she looked a bit like a teddy bear—well, if teddy bears came in Amazon-at-the-roller-derby editions.

Felicity blinked. She'd never encountered anyone like this before. Never, ever, *ever*.

With few exceptions, the professional women in Felicity's circle of media, law, and fashion tended to fit a certain type: delicate and fine-boned TV-ready perfection draped in expensive corporate attire. They were sleek ribbons of femininity who seamlessly melted into spaces and backgrounds. They observed, played clever games from the shadows, and manipulated their worlds one high fake laugh at a time.

This woman took up the space of three such women. Her whole attitude seemed to shout, *Yeah, just try and budge me. And good luck not noticing me!* Probably followed by an amused wink.

Amused wink? Felicity's fried brain was clearly just making up nonsense now.

The woman cleared her throat.

Felicity shifted her gaze higher, skidding briefly over her rumpled shirt that bore the Living Ruff logo.

Oh.

Underneath the logo was an embroidered slogan: THINK PAW-SITIVE. Felicity's eye twitched at the awful pun. At least it wasn't about helping the less fur-tunate.

Right. So she might have made a few faulty assumptions about whether the van was being broken into. But seriously, the woman's jeans and boots were in appalling condition. Did the staff of the charity have no professionalism in their appearance whatsoever? Felicity was about to ask just that when she met startlingly intelligent eyes. Suddenly her usual indifference as to what anyone other than Elena thought of her died abruptly, along with the question.

"Who are you?" The woman asked in a throaty, irritated voice, rubbing her head where she'd hit it on the van. Her eyebrow hiked up. "And why were you jamming your finger into me like that? I'm not your voodoo doll."

"I thought you were a vagrant hunting for drug money from a charity's van." She trusted that would earn her some favor, Good Samaritan Felicity and all.

Instead, the woman frowned. "Ex-cuse me?"

Or not. "I didn't see your logo." Felicity scrambled. She tapped her own blouse to indicate the spot where the woman's Living Ruff badge was. "So I thought—"

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“Yes, I heard you. A vagrant. After drug money. Because all homeless are addicts, right?” Her lips pinched.

Ob. Well, Felicity had said that, hadn't she? She resisted the urge to take another step back to get some distance. *Wait, why does she look familiar?* A memory clicked into place. Okay, they'd styled her up for the photo shoot and attempted to morph her into something safe for mainstream consumption, not to mention cropped the pic at chest level, but Felicity was pretty sure this was the vet from the article declaring the charity was closing. Dr. Sandy Cooper.

It was weird how they'd also magicked away the sheer enormity of her presence.

“Cat got your tongue?” Dr. Cooper's lips twitched. “Heh. Vet joke.”

“Not a very good one,” Felicity shot back without thinking. “I mean, it's a bit unoriginal.”

“True enough.” The woman shrugged, looking completely unfazed by the criticism. Her eyes dragged over Felicity's outfit.

It was a new season Elie Saab pantsuit. Felicity knew she looked good in it. Professional. Something the vet might want to look into.

“Shall we start again? I'm Doctor—”

“Sandy Cooper,” Felicity cut in. And...weird how that had come out like an accusation.

The woman tilted her head in acknowledgment. “Everyone calls me Cooper.” She shut the driver's door, locked it, and eyed Felicity. “It seems you have me at a disadvantage. And you are?”

“Felicity Simmons,” she said before adding her new title, “deputy chief operating officer of Bartell Corp.” Soon to be acting COO, she wanted to add but restrained herself. Felicity rose a little higher on the balls of her feet. It still didn't feel real.

“Proud of that title, I see.”

“Why wouldn't I be?” Felicity snapped.

The other woman sighed. “Care to explain how you know me?”

“There was an article in the paper,” Felicity began. “Living Ruff New York closing?”

“Ah.” Cooper's eyes tightened as if to say *ob that*, and she headed past Felicity to the back of the van, opening its double doors wide.

Felicity stood back transfixed as the woman hauled out two enormous bags stamped *DOG FOOD 20LB* and dumped them on the ground beside her.

“Donations,” Cooper said, noticing her interest. “Close to their expiration date, so I got them for free.” She eyed Felicity up and down as though deciding something, then laughed. “I was about to ask for a hand getting the bags inside. Never mind.”

“Yes. Well. I’m a lawyer, not a Sherpa.” Felicity folded her arms. She was quite sure she wouldn’t be able even to nudge a bag with her toe, let alone lift it. That’s what you hired people with muscles for.

“Lawyer, hmm? Here to sue us or something?” Cooper’s eyes grew sharp. “Because we haven’t got much. Everything goes to the animals and their owners.”

“Of course not. I’m here to look at what you do at Living Ruff and consider making a donation. On behalf of Bartell Corporation.”

Cooper paused and squinted at Felicity. “I see.” She tossed a huge bag over one shoulder. “Big media company, right?”

“The biggest.”

Then as if the first bag were easy, she flung the second over the other shoulder and headed toward the building. “Get the door, can you?” she called back.

Felicity glanced back at the van, nodded, then gave the doors a firm push until they slammed shut.

“Not those doors, although thanks. I meant the office.” She tilted her head toward the redbrick monstrosity.

Oh. Of course. Cheeks scalding at her stupidity, Felicity scurried ahead and went to open the door. It didn’t budge. “It’s locked.”

“Damn it. Our receptionist, Mrs. Brooks, must be held up again. All right...” Cooper studied Felicity until she reached Cooper’s side. “You could start your charitable donations right now.”

Felicity frowned. “How?”

“Reach into my left pocket and grab my keys.” She jutted one dirty jean-clad hip forward.

Into her pocket? Was she for real? That seemed awfully personal. You don’t just ask strangers to...and certainly not when they’re wearing jeans that had quite clearly rolled around in filth recently.

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Even so, Felicity's fingers tingled at the prospect of being that close to those impressive thighs. Entirely without intending to, she slid her hand slowly into the woman's pocket and clasped a metal bundle.

The heat Cooper was giving off was fierce, but that made sense if she'd just been doing physical work. Felicity imagined her in a tank top, her powerful muscles gleaming as she exerted herself in manual labor of some sort. Her arms were probably as strong and muscled as her shoulders. Because they had to be, didn't they?

"Hey, Felicity?"

"Mm?"

"For the keys to work, they have to be outside of my pocket."

Oh God! Felicity yanked them out, her whole face burning. What the hell was wrong with her?

The other woman chuckled. "Okay, it's the big key, second on the left of the ring. Thanks."

With hands shaking for reasons she had absolutely no intention of examining, Felicity managed to get the key into the lock on the first attempt and turned it until it clicked. Then she drew the door open, and Cooper pushed past her, dropping the bags just inside.

"Thanks." She wiped her forehead, which left a huge smear of dirt, then slapped the dust off her oak trees laughably called legs.

Felicity suddenly found the entire picture of dirt-smear'd imperfection the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

"Right." Cooper straightened. She waved at the bags. "I just like to keep any food donations outside the van so they don't get stolen or spoiled by bad weather or whatever."

Felicity didn't answer. Odd how the smear loaned a rakish quality to the woman's face.

"Have I got something on my face?" Cooper asked, catching her gaze. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a man's handkerchief to wipe it. "Gone?"

"Yes." Felicity said faintly, feeling the loss. "All gone."

"Right, then. Come on up. I can offer you tea or coffee while you wait for Harvey, our charity director. He's the one to talk to about the services we offer and how to donate."

“Or I could talk to you first. I’d like to get a feel for the whole organization. Talk to everyone. See all the facets.”

Dr. Cooper shrugged, those mighty shoulders heaving up and down.

Felicity caught herself gaping and slammed her mouth shut. *Seriously inappropriate.*

“Well, it’s up to you,” Cooper said. “I can tell you the practical stuff about my job, sure, but I’m due to go out again soon. Rounds. Gotta feed some good boys”—she grinned—“and good girls.”

Felicity peered at her, utterly lost.

“Dogs, Ms. Simmons. Among other animals. Are you a pet owner? Come on up.” She led the way up some old rust-stained concrete stairs.

“I’m not,” Felicity replied as she followed, studying a substantial muscled ass that should in no way be so fascinating. Except it *really* was.

“Oh? Any reason?”

Had Cooper’s voice lowered a few degrees to chilly?

Suddenly Felicity didn’t want the woman to think she hated animals. That wasn’t it at all. “I think it would be unfair for someone in my position to own an animal. I’ve spent the past few years following my boss around for work. She travels all over the world checking on her business interests. For instance, I’ve just been living in Australia for the past ten months while she overhauled one of her magazines over there.”

“Australia?” Cooper opened the double doors at the top of the stairs, pinning them back on each side with a latch. “Does that explain your un-New York accent? How weird. I thought you might be a bit English.”

So English that Mrs. Allsop’s entirely proper elocution lessons hadn’t been in vain, then? Felicity beamed in satisfaction. “No, I’m American. I’ve never even been to England.”

Cooper gave her an odd look, then swung the office door wide. “All right, come through. Let me just wash up. I probably look a mess. I had to play midwife to a dog that wanted to hide under a dirty building first thing. And then I was heading back to the office when I got the call about the dog food donation.”

Well, that explained her clothes looking like a tramp had died in them.

Felicity studied the office. A battered wooden round table sat in the middle of the room with five mismatched chairs around it. Folders and papers spilled across it. A few desks with old-style fat computer monitors

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sat around it. How eighties. The largest desk had a huge phone on it and a name plate attached to the divider: MRS. BROOKS, RECEPTIONIST/VET TECH.

In one far corner was a locked glass office. A bronze sign reading DIRECTOR HARVEY CLIFFORD was stuck on the door.

Next to it was a second room, this one with enclosed walls, and a sign: PET TREATMENT CLINIC—KNOCK FIRST. A smiling cartoon dog was stuck under that.

Animal posters with motivational sayings lined the walls that didn't have windows. The ones that did looked like they were in desperate need of cleaning.

A kitchenette proved to be Cooper's destination, and Felicity tried very hard not to look as the other woman bent over a small sink and washed thoroughly with two types of soap—one smelling of disinfectant, the other of lemon. As Cooper dried her hands on a paper towel, she called over her shoulder, "Tea or coffee?" Then she slam-dunked the paper towel into a bin near her ankle.

"Neither," Felicity croaked out. "Well, not now. I'm trying to kick my excess caffeine habit. Step one, don't hit the beans too early."

"Suit yourself. Have a seat." She gestured at the round table. "I have to change. Always pays to keep a few spare sets of clothes at work in this line of business."

Felicity nodded as she slowly lowered herself to the closest chair and tried very hard not to think about the fact that changing meant...sliding pants down those impressive legs.

Maybe she *should* have had a coffee. She'd be able to focus entirely on the cup instead of the woman striding away to a room at the back of the office.

Cooper disappeared inside but didn't bother shutting the door.

A moment later came the clang of a belt buckle hitting the floor. A boot went sailing with a thud out the door, followed by, "Oops. That steer got away from me."

"Where are you from," Felicity called back, fascinated, "if you call your boots 'steers.'"

"A bit of here and a bit of there. I'm a military brat. We moved all over." Another thud, but this time the boot stayed out of sight. "What about you?"

Because I'm thinking someone who sounds English but hasn't been there sounds that way on purpose. Am I right?"

There was a slap as a pair of jeans suddenly landed in a puddle within sight, and Felicity swallowed about what that meant. She wanted to shake herself. She was here to do a job—an investigation, actually, into possible embezzlement—not get distracted by an employee at the charity. *Who isn't wearing pants right now.*

"Felicity?" The vet's head poked around the corner. "Was that a touchy topic or something? Sorry if it was."

"Oh. No." *Focus.* "It's not much of a story. I had a terrible accent and took some voice lessons to sound more professional. My teacher was English, so some of her accent and sayings stuck. I've always absorbed voices, though. I'm a little surprised I don't have an Australian twang now. God forbid." She shuddered.

Cooper laughed and disappeared again. "I see." A sock suddenly went flying. "Crap."

What followed the sock were ten glorious seconds of blurred Amazon dressed only in a white T-shirt that strained across ample breasts and sinful ass-hugging black boxers chasing after it. Felicity whimpered softly.

Why in the hell did she find someone like *this* so attractive? Someone so strong? So...soft butch? Who had real meat on their bones? It was at odds with everything she knew about herself. Her head was *always* turned by lawyers. Thin, lean, compact men and women with impeccable fashion and manners and grooming who posed themselves oh so artistically. They were all fussy, neat, clever, and precise, just like her.

She definitely didn't do undulating teddy-bear-like military brats who could double as the Bank of America building. Especially not ones who crawled into dirty, creepy places to play canine midwife. There was no part of any of that description that resonated with who Felicity knew she was attracted to. And yet here she sat, unable to blot out those ten glorious blurred seconds.

Cooper gave a sheepish laugh as she leaped back into her changing room. "Sorry about that. I'm so tired that my coordination's well and truly fried right now."

Like my brain. Apparently.

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"It was a long night," Cooper continued. "Well, morning. I've been going fourteen hours already. I swear I'm usually the height of professional and manage to keep my clothes on a lot of the time!"

"Fourteen hours?" Felicity gasped. She might do that regularly, but she was in upper management and had a desk job. Vets did this, too?

"Don't worry, I only have a few more hours left. Then I'll take a nap." A disembodied hand flung out and pointed.

Felicity followed it and saw a small open door she'd missed before. She could see a makeshift bed.

"Great for catching some Zs when I'm doing a double shift."

"Do you do a double shift often?" Felicity asked, curious.

"Every now and then. Pet emergencies are part of life, and my usual casual replacement is getting his gallstones out." Cooper stepped back into the main office area, knotting a bundle of dirty clothes in a bag. She shoved it under one arm, then tucked her T-shirt into her clean pair of jeans. She did up a solid silver buckle on her belt. "Much better, right?"

Felicity took in the flannel shirt, white T-shirt, and faded blue jeans. "Y-yes," she muttered, feeling her cheeks catch fire. "Very nice. Yes."

What the hell was wrong with her? She was having lustful thoughts, *on the job no less*, about someone who absolutely wasn't her type!

"Two yeses, huh?" Cooper grinned. "Lucky me." Her teeth were white and perfect, and her smile breathtaking.

Felicity wondered if the air had lost some of its oxygenation. *Oh*. So that's where that word came from. *Breathtaking*. Made sense.

"All right, let me get a coffee into me, and I'll answer any questions you like till the boss gets here." She grinned again and headed for the kitchenette.

"Right. Yes."

The woman pressed a button on a wall-mounted urn marked **BOILING WATER** and filled a large mug. Mesmerizing.

Felicity swore at herself. She was being ridiculous. God, she'd dated Phillip for four months and had *never* been this distracted once.

"Cooper? Sorry I'm late!" came an older female voice from the bottom of the stairs accompanied by a rhythmic clacking noise.

"That's Mrs. Brooks and the world's most adorable girl," Cooper said quietly so only Felicity could hear.

“One of the kids got a stomachache, and I had to make sure she—” The voice stopped as its owner reached the top of the stairs and met Felicity’s curious eyes. She was a Black woman with a round, pleasant face, midlength wavy black hair, and a strong Bronx accent. “Oh, hello.” Mrs. Brooks’s eyes flitted over to Cooper, who was carrying her coffee back to the table. “I didn’t realize you had company.”

Suddenly a knee-high caramel-colored dog burst in and rushed over to Cooper. It was an enthusiastic floppy-eared little thing, the exact kind of no-boundaries whirlwind that made Felicity take a step backward in alarm.

“Hey, girl.” Cooper dropped to a crouch, giving the dog a pleased one-armed hug while holding her coffee out of harm’s way. She laughed, pulling her face away as the animal tried to cover her in sloppy licks. “This is my overeager English cocker spaniel, Brittany.”

Yikes. Far too much slobber. Felicity inched away in case Droolius Caesar over there got ideas of sharing the love. Instead, after a few quick sniffs in Felicity’s direction, the animal seemed perfectly content to hug Cooper’s side. Thank all things holy in heaven.

“And this is Felicity Simmons,” Cooper said to both Mrs. Brooks and the excitable canine as she rose from her crouch. She made her way to a chair with the delighted dog doing loops in and out of her stride. “Felicity’s giving us the once-over for Bartell Corporation. To see if they want to donate.”

Mrs. Brooks’s eyebrows lifted at the mention of Bartell Corp.

She should be impressed. It was a Fortune 500 company. *Which I’m going to be in charge of in a month.* Well, assuming she didn’t screw up Elena’s secret mission here.

“And this is Cassandra Brooks, who keeps our entire charity on an even keel,” Cooper said, sliding her coffee onto the table and turning to Felicity. “She also sort of dog shares Brittany with me.”

Dog share? Why? They weren’t a couple, were they? Mrs. Brooks looked at least sixty. And Cooper was, what? Late thirties? Early forties?

Her confusion must have shown because Cooper added, “Britt’s mine during the day and Mrs. B kindly keeps her on nights and weekends because her apartment allows dogs, unlike mine.” She scowled. “A situation I’m trying to fix, but it’d be easier if affordable, dog-friendly buildings weren’t so hard to find in New York.”

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Felicity nodded neutrally, having precisely zero interest in the sleeping arrangements of Brittany, the slobbery dog.

“So,” Mrs. Brooks said as she put her handbag on her desk, “potential donor, you say?”

Felicity nodded.

“Excellent. You’ll be wanting this, then.” She rummaged through her drawers and pulled out a folder, putting it on the table in front of Felicity. “This is the charity overview we supply to all potential donors. If you have any questions, Mr. Clifford will be in soon enough.”

Cooper sipped her coffee and watched them without a word.

Felicity made no move to take it. “If it’s all the same to you, I’m not looking for the information handed out to other donors. I’m looking for the full picture. The *other* financial information, if you follow. The information not often shared.”

The room seemed to get chillier.

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Brooks asked. Her mouth fell open. “What *are* you implying?”

Oh hell. Maybe Felicity really was bad at subtle. Before she could answer, Cooper chimed in.

“This is a *legitimate* charity! We do excellent work here!” Her eyes widened, and she placed her cup carefully on the table. “Mr. Clifford is scrupulous and ethical. He’d never do anything that wasn’t aboveboard. Same goes for everyone here.”

“Then that’s both excellent and easy to prove,” Felicity said quietly, spreading her hands to try and ease the tension. “Yes? Look, it’s simple. My boss is one of the richest women in the media world, and when she makes an investment in a cause, she wants it to be to a charity above reproach. And I’m here to make sure that’s the case. Surely you understand.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Brooks’s hackles seemed to go down.

“Well, fine, but is there some reason you think we wouldn’t be above reproach?” Cooper asked. “Or do you turn up and insult the integrity of every charity she’s interested in? Is this part of your job description?”

Felicity’s lips thinned. Her hands bunched into fists where they sat on the table. *Don’t barge in like Rambo*, Elena had said. And here she was... Ramboing up a storm.

"I'm sure this is just standard procedure," Mrs. Brooks said suddenly, eyes darting to her hands, then to Cooper. Her voice was soothing.

It set Felicity's teeth on edge, as if she needed *managing*. She was making such a mess of this.

"I just want answers and that's it. I'm not accusing anyone of anything," Felicity said tightly. "But if you don't want questions about how you run things, maybe don't feature in stories about how you're about to shut down."

"Oh, that." Cooper said, and all the tension eased from her shoulders. "It's not true."

"Then why put it out there?" Felicity asked.

"Harvey does it every year. A story to get in new donors. It means nothing."

"So you don't need money?" Felicity's eyebrow shot up.

"I didn't say that." Cooper gave her a hard look. "Do you always twist people's words like that? Is that the lawyer in you? Or does working for a media empire rub off? A journalist thing?"

How imposing she looked, directing all that angry energy at Felicity, who glared back, refusing to be intimidated. "Look, this isn't hard. My boss read about you last year and loved Living Ruff's story so much she wanted to donate. Now with this latest article all about how you're three seconds from calling in the liquidators, she's worried that it's not a sound investment. So which is it?"

"Last year?" Cooper snorted. "Oh right. You mean the God's gift to charities article."

Felicity paused. "How do you know which article I mean?"

Mrs. Brooks chuckled. "There's only one that people remember."

Felicity frowned. "I'm not following."

"It went on for pages," Cooper said, jumping in. "It covered a day in the life of me doing my work. The reporter followed me around, then interviewed all the homeless people about what they thought of us, then talked to the local government people as to whether we were good, poked over our finances, interviewed other charities about us, too. It was like getting a journalistic colonoscopy." She shook her head. "I've never seen anything like it. Every other media story has always been a puff piece: three paragraphs, a few feel-good quotes, a photo of a cute dog, and that's it. This one was like the reporter was going for a Pulitzer. We had to prove we

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were worth their endorsement. Then when the story came out, it was”—she shook her head again—“astonishing.”

Mrs. Brooks rose, walked to the table, and flipped open the folder she'd first offered Felicity. She drew out a photocopy of a newspaper article. “Want to read it? It brought us in hundreds of new donors from all over. And we also received the single biggest donation in our charity's history from it.”

Elena's donation. Curious, Felicity slid the article closer, looked down... and drew in a shocked breath.

Suddenly a great many things became clear.

WHEN LOVE HAS NO HOME

By MADDIE GREY

She didn't even need to read it to know that of course the story would be exceptional. Because try as she might to deny it, the Australian was a phenomenal reporter; she had several international scoops and awards to her name these days. Felicity glanced at the publication date. August 29. Maddie had worked on this while she was freelancing in New York before she'd left for Vietnam on a travel-writing assignment.

Felicity scan-read it. Naturally, it was beautifully written. And touching. So *of course* Elena would have wanted to donate to a cause that was apparently so close to Maddie's heart.

Now it all became clear why Elena had been so worried. It wasn't about her missing money, was it? Well, that wouldn't be her primary motivation. No, Elena would be concerned how it would look if her reporter friend had written a multipage love letter to a charity that might turn out to be corrupt. Elena was worried about Maddie's professional reputation taking a dive. No wonder she had stressed to Felicity that she try and find *subtle* solutions.

She sagged. Why did everything come down to Maddie Grey? What did Maddie have that Felicity didn't? Why was Elena so...loyal...to her, so connected? It was a mystery Felicity was no closer to solving.

“What is it?” Cooper asked, sounding curious.

Felicity looked up. “I...know her. The writer.” She waved at the story. “She used to work with me. Now she's”—*in photo frames on my boss's desk*—“a friend of my boss.”

“Maddie? She’s friends with Elena Bartell?”

“Yes. Good friends. So that explains why I’m here.” It really did. Why couldn’t Elena have just confided in her about this?

“Oh wow.” Cooper’s shoulders relaxed. “I get it. Right. Ah, sorry if I was a little hostile before. I didn’t realize y’all were such great friends. Hey, if you speak to Maddie, could you tell her how grateful we are? Her story will keep us in the black for years.”

“So the other article about your imminent closure really is a lie?”

“As I said, it’s just a thing Harvey does once a year to get new donors on our list.” Cooper shrugged. “Talk to him about it if you want to put your mind to rest.”

“I will.” She glanced at her watch. “When’s he due in?”

Mrs. Brooks spoke up. “I texted him a few minutes ago to tell him you were here waiting for him, but he said he has some meetings. He suggested in his absence that you do a ride-along with Cooper to find out what we do here. He apologized that he can’t see you sooner.”

Felicity folded her arms. He’d heard she was here, a big potential donor, and had begged off to go to meetings? Was that likely? She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Mrs. Brooks spoke again. “He thought you’d find it far more informative to see firsthand what we do with Cooper before you and he sit down.”

That did make sense, but Felicity still felt a bit glad-handed. The thought of being forced to do meet and greets with the homeless and their animals hadn’t exactly been high on her to-do list today. She would, of course, cope. Felicity lifted her chin. “Well, it’s not as if I can do much else, is it?”

“I’ve never seen such enthusiasm for time in my company,” Cooper drawled. She grinned, and a matching pair of dimples appeared. “Well? Are you up for it?”

It suddenly occurred to her that these meet and greets with the homeless would also come with a *lot* of Sandy Cooper. That wasn’t unsettling in the least. Not at all. No siree. “Of course. I’m up for any challenge.” As long as she wasn’t expected to crawl under houses with the woman. She’d simply refuse that.

“You say that now,” Cooper teased, “but I do go to some unsavory places.”

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Oh wait, *was* she expected to crawl under things? Worry snaked through her. Followed by horror. Then she remembered she didn't work for Cooper and that "no" was a full sentence. "I'm sure you do," she said neutrally.

Cooper's eyes darted to her outfit. "I'd offer to loan you something more appropriate, but I don't think we're the same size."

Felicity snorted. "An understatement."

"So you can make do with what you have on. Now, just so you know, I expect you to follow my ground rules."

"Which are?"

"I expect you to be polite to the clients—"

"The clients?"

"The homeless," Cooper clarified. "I don't want to hear any of the stuff you said earlier to me. About them being addicts. Yes, some are, obviously. Some have mental health issues. Some have PTSD. And some are just unlucky people, out of money or work, on hard times. The point is, I expect politeness and respect. Can you do that?"

"Of course." Indignation rose. She could be diplomatic. She could!

Cooper seemed to weigh up her answer for sincerity. "And I especially expect you not to comment on all the ways you'd fix their lives if it were you. That's a temptation far too many people have the first time they interact with homeless."

Felicity tilted her head. "I can...observe."

"In silence?"

"Yes." How ridiculous.

"Good." Cooper reached into her pocket and extracted a rubber band with which she corralled her shoulder-length blonde hair into a rough ponytail. "Okay, let's go." She paused and turned to the receptionist. "Mrs. B, I'll be back in a few hours." She clicked her tongue, and Brittany shot to her ankle.

Wait, the floppy excuse for a dog was coming? Felicity sighed. *Lovely.*

"See you soon," Mrs. Brooks said. "Oh, and good luck, Ms. Simmons."

Luck? Was she going to need luck here? Why did Mrs. Brooks sound amused? Felicity swallowed nervously, then followed Cooper to the stairs. And for the second time that day, she found herself in the rather pleasant position of following the shapely ass of Dr. Sandy Cooper. This time, though, her worried mind was fixed on what else lay ahead.

Well. *Mostly.*

Chapter 3

On the Road

THE FIRST THING FELICITY NOTICED about Cooper's vehicle as she strapped herself in was the smell. The van reeked of pet food and animals and something else she couldn't quite place. Decay? Her nose wrinkled.

"I suppose that's an occupational hazard," Felicity said as Cooper slid in beside her.

"What is?"

"The smell."

Cooper put on the radio...some thumpy country music that made Felicity shudder.

Brittany launched herself from the ground outside the van into Cooper's lap, then, tail wagging from side to side like a windshield wiper, squeezed between the two front seats to take position right behind them in some sort of dog hammock seat that put her at close human level.

The dog's warm breath was now against her ear. Felicity drew in a calming gulp of air. *Right*. She'd just ignore that along with the smell.

Then Brittany lay her muzzle on Felicity's shoulder.

Cooper shot her a surprised glance. "Well, that's different. Brittany doesn't warm to anyone new. And in answer to your earlier comment, I can't smell anything. I'm immune."

Felicity inched away from Hairy Houndini until the dog took the hint and flopped her muzzle on Cooper's shoulder instead.

"So fickle, girl." Cooper laughed and started the engine.

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“Can you change the station, please?” Felicity asked as the music twanged through another chorus.

“Not a fan of Billy Ray Cyrus?”

“Is anyone?” Felicity asked. “Breaky isn’t even a word.”

Cooper smiled. “That radio station’s Gabe’s favorite. He’s another vet who works with us. Feel free to pick something else.”

Felicity leaned over and turned it off. “I choose silence.”

“Tough crowd.” Cooper shrugged. “So out of interest, have you ever had much to do with homeless before?”

“No. I don’t think that’s much of a problem where I live.”

Cooper snorted. “If you live in New York, it’s always a problem, no matter where you are. You just haven’t noticed.”

Felicity shook her head. “No, I—”

“Excuse me. Who is the expert on the subject in this vehicle?” Cooper asked. Her tone was light, but she fixed Felicity with a penetrating gaze.

“Well.” Yes, quite right. “You.”

“Good. Can you remember that today? And maybe remember the fact that most people are only two paychecks away from homelessness.”

What a depressing thought.

Cooper’s gaze raked Felicity’s outfit once again. “Well, in your case, maybe ten, although that also depends on the size of your rent.” She paused and added in a slightly taunting tone, “Or is it mortgage?”

Felicity didn’t bite.

“So,” Cooper barreled on, “while I’ve asked you to be quiet and listen, if you decide to ignore me, and you do seem the type”—her lips quirked—“don’t ask anyone *why* they’re homeless. It can happen for any number of reasons, and it’s none of your business.”

“I wouldn’t.” Felicity had no plans to talk to them anyway. “I’m not interested.”

Cooper’s eyes went hard. “I see.”

“I just mean that I have one focus in life, and that’s my career. Anything else is irrelevant. I say *they do them, I’ll do me*, and we’ll get on fine.”

“Well, that’s convenient.”

“Why? You just told me not to interact with them, and now that I say I don’t want to, you’re pissed?”

Cooper shook her head in apparent exasperation. “I never said don’t *interact* with them. I said don’t judge them. Watch and listen. You can smile, make eye contact. Make them feel seen. Tell them your name.”

“Why would I do any of that?” Felicity asked, baffled. “I’m not planning on making friends, just seeing what you do.”

Cooper’s jaw tightened. “You don’t see a need to make a human connection because they’re not real people to you, are they? You don’t think of them as having lives and hopes and dreams just like you.”

Snorting, Felicity said, “That’s absurd. I don’t see a need to make a connection with *anyone* unless it’s career related. If that ever happens accidentally, well, it’s...unexpected, I suppose, and rare. But I don’t seek it out.”

There was a long silence as Cooper digested that, then she laughed. “You’re actually serious, aren’t you?”

“Very.”

“My God, how do you even get by in this world with that hands-off philosophy?”

Felicity shrugged. “It’s just how I am. I don’t see what the issue is. I’m truly uninterested in pretty much everyone. If I had my way, I’d never speak to anyone I’m not forced to deal with.”

Cooper’s brow puckered. “Are you shy? Or an introvert?”

“Neither.” Felicity met her gaze. “I’m simply focused. I’ve been like this since I was twelve. Now, are we ever going to get underway? Charming as this view of Ode to Concrete Park is.” She waved at their surroundings. “What are those weird tables for, anyway?” She squinted.

“They’re for dominoes, which are popular around here with the Hispanic community. You’ll see them full by the time we return.” Cooper paused. “Are you... Do you have empathy for others?” she asked cautiously.

Felicity sighed. “Of course. Yes, I dislike suffering, and I even cry at funerals. But is it truly inconceivable to you that some people don’t like getting into other people’s business *at all*? That I’m perfectly happy as a loner? I just don’t find being sociable uplifting. I truly do prefer my own company.”

“I’ve never met anyone like that before.” Cooper rested her hands on the steering wheel and looked at her. “Well, no one who’s just straight out admitted it.”

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“Me, either,” Felicity said a little mournfully. “Society expects us to all be people who need people. They even sing songs about it. Well, I don’t and never have.” She eyed Cooper ruefully. “You know those questions where they ask who would you take to a desert island? I’d take no one but a good book, and I’d be perfectly happy. And honestly, if the book was very good, I’d even decline a rescue.”

“You know...I think I believe you.” Cooper let out a small chuckle.

It was such an attractive chuckle, much like the rest of the woman, but Felicity was determined not to be derailed further by surface distractions.

“Why would I lie?” Felicity eyed her.

Cooper snorted. “Good point. All right, can we get back to what I was saying about the clients? Maybe you could please make an effort to at least fake it? A few smiles? One hello?”

“I don’t fake anything,” Felicity said honestly, “not unless it’s absolutely essential for my job. This doesn’t sound essential to me.”

“Just great.” Cooper grumbled as she reversed onto the street. “All right, one last thing: don’t be offended if someone reacts badly to you. You don’t know what their week’s been like or what someone did to them just before they met you. If they’re rude, just apologize, move on, and don’t make a fuss.”

“I promise not to be offended if they say any unfortunate things.” Felicity flapped a hand. “*Now* is that it?”

“Yes.” Cooper sighed. “Call me crazy, but I’m guessing you didn’t volunteer for this assignment.” She put her foot down on the gas pedal.

The G force, minor though it was, pinned Felicity back in her seat for a hot minute.

Brittany gave a bark of excitement.

“Do you always drive so fast?” Felicity gasped. Was the universe mocking her for bemoaning Amir’s sedate driving? Surely it wasn’t too much to hope for a speed between placid and space-shuttle launch.

“I’ll add my driving to your list of *does-not-approves*. Along with the van’s music, smell, and our clients.” Cooper gave her a knowing look. “And we’re going fast because I’m late. If I don’t reach Webster Avenue early, my client will have been moved on.”

“Moved on?”

“Some police aren’t charitable about the homeless. They only see an irritation.”

Felicity considered that. “And what do you see?”

“Someone whose animal needs some food, love, and a checkup.” She smiled, and those dimples came out again. “I love Lucille. That’s the animal I’m hoping to visit today. Her owner usually visits a free shower service that runs around this time.” Cooper glanced at her watch. “I’ve got some concerns about a possible growth on Lucille, among other issues, so I’m looking more closely at the case.”

“Growth?”

“You don’t seriously want all the details?” Cooper’s gaze raked her up and down.

“I’m not some delicate petal.” Truly, Felicity wanted no details, but she didn’t appreciate being treated like she’d crumple.

“Aren’t you?” Cooper’s expression was challenging. “Tell me, Ms. Simmons, how much does that outfit you have on retail for?” Her lips quirked.

Felicity glared. None of her damned business.

“That’s what I thought. Look, if you’re back here tomorrow, invest in a pair of jeans, some boots, and a thick long-sleeve shirt at a minimum.”

“No, thank you. I’ll look like a trucker. A butch lesbian trucker,” Felicity sniped.

Suddenly Cooper’s expression shifted from amused to frosty. “And what would be wrong with that?” She met Felicity’s eye. “I had you pegged as some ivory tower liberal. But I swear, if you start quoting Bible passages or redneck shit at me, I *will* kick you out; I don’t care what the net worth of your boss is.”

Surprise flooded Felicity. “You’d toss away a potential large donation due to some perceived political differences?”

“Homophobia is *not* a political difference. It’s a people difference.” Cooper glared at her. “It’s a who-you-are-at-your-core difference. So what’s it going to be? Because even if you don’t care that you just insulted me, I won’t expose you to vulnerable clients, a not insignificant number of whom are on the street because their families found out about their sexuality.”

Insulted me. As in...Cooper was a lesbian?

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“I didn’t realize you were...” Felicity waved her hand. Although come to think of it, she felt a bit stupid not to have at least considered the possibility immediately.

“Well, I am. So if you *are* homophobic, I can pull over right now and we can go our separate ways.”

“Of course I’m not homophobic.” Felicity huffed. “My God, two of my last three lovers were women. So sue me if I don’t want to look like some clichéd bad-butch movie stereotype.” She folded her arms. “I have standards.”

Cooper braked. Hard. “So you’re a butch-hating bi? That’s supposed to be better?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m a bad-fashion-hating bi. I’ve seen butches in sinfully gorgeous suits, and I’ll have you know they’re beautiful. Or handsome. Whichever. It’s the *clothes*, not the person I object to. Would it kill some people to make an actual effort? How limited *is* their imagination? Jeans, boots, tees, and flannels? Every single day?” She let her Midwest accent off the leash. “Are they off to a rodeo? Or to plow a field before climbing into their truck?”

Cooper went completely still.

Suddenly Felicity realized why. Cooper was wearing jeans, boots, a T-shirt, and a flannel shirt. That exact butch-trucker look that Felicity had just run her mouth off at. She swallowed. For some reason—and this really was quite mystifying—she truly didn’t want Sandy Cooper angry at her. Especially since, despite everything Felicity had just said about that fashion combination, Cooper looked fine. *So. Fine.*

“Do I offend your eyeballs, Ms. Simmons?” Cooper asked silkily.

“No!” Felicity said quickly. “Quite the opposite.”

Why had she said that? She groaned inwardly. “Can we just enter it into the record that I’m neither conservative nor homophobic nor butch hating nor whatever else you’re unraveling over and get on with this?”

Cooper’s eyes now held an amused glint.

Great. Felicity’s unfortunate slip had not gone unnoticed, it seemed.

“You *like* my look on me? Even though I’m not...off to a rodeo? Or... plowing fields? Or climbing into my big bad truck?” She punctuated each word as though it belonged to an erotic movie title.

Did she have to do that? Felicity ground her jaw and forced herself not to picture Cooper wrestling things or climbing into trucks with that superb round ass of hers. “Can we just...*drive*?” She pounded that last word with venom.

With a chuckle, Cooper took off again, weaving in and out through traffic, once more hitting a speed Felicity found disconcerting. That wasn’t the only disconcerting thought occupying her.

Felicity *wanted* Dr. Sandy Cooper. Every way there was.

What a fucking disaster.

* * *

Lucille turned out to be a cat. An old thing with tatty ears, eternally pulled-down whiskers, and wide eyes that looked utterly pathetic. And Felicity was in love.

Damn it. It was the real reason she never wanted a pet. She was mad about them. Dogs and cats and anything furry and cute, and she couldn’t stop the grabby hands and ache to cuddle. It was beyond unseemly; it was appalling. And she knew what she was like, what would happen next. She’d get attached—and that would not end well.

It was bad enough riding with Brittany, being two feet away from an animal so beautiful that all she wanted was to pet it and murmur that fact into its floppy brown ears... Well, as long as it kept the slobbering to a minimum.

Cooper had left Brittany guarding the van, its window down a little, and Felicity could still see that brown nose poking out, avidly sniffing the world.

Animals were Felicity’s Achilles’ heel. They had so much power and made her so weak. They sucked you in, made you fall for them, and they could break your heart into bits and pieces. She wasn’t about to put herself through that. Never again. No, she was a focused and professional woman who did not have time for...fluffballs. But that didn’t mean she didn’t still ache to hug the most pathetic-looking puss she’d ever seen in her life.

She forced herself to watch impassively as Cooper inspected the animal, which was curled in her lap, while chatting to the owner. The woman, Norma, according to the name atop Cooper’s notes, was sixty-something

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with tired eyes, missing teeth, a thin gray frizz of hair capping off weathered dark-brown skin, and as many scars as her cat had.

Felicity's heart melted all over again when the cat stretched, offering its belly for a rub. *Christ*. Maybe she should sit on her hands. Or focus on its ugly bits. Felicity bit her lip.

"I'm worried about Lucille," Cooper told the woman. "Gastroenteritis doesn't just affect humans. It's really painful for animals. It can be life-threatening if they become dehydrated."

"I get her plenty to drink," Norma snapped. "You saying I'm neglecting her?"

"Not at all. But even with the best intentions, it's harder for animals on the street to get ideal nutrition."

Norma glowered. "We don't just eat out of trash cans, you know."

"I know." Cooper shot her a worried look. "I really wish you'd let me get her properly looked at. The vomiting could be a sign of something worse."

"And have 'em take her off me? Say I'm a bad owner? I might trust you, but not them. I hear stories."

"We have a little clinic at Living Ruff that should be all that's needed to check her out thoroughly," Cooper said kindly. "No need to involve anyone else at this stage." Her fingers drifted tentatively to the cat's belly, assessing. Lucille immediately pushed a paw against Cooper's hand, not once showing claws, but the message was clear.

Cooper immediately shifted her hand. "Lucille is lovely. I just want her around as long as we can manage it."

"I look after my girl. Not like some of those assholes around here, breeding them and fighting them for money. I'd never do that."

"I know. I can see how much you love her." Cooper smiled gently. "You know how to get in touch if you decide to go ahead with a full checkup."

"I have yer number." Norma waved at a battered iPhone poking out from a haphazard pile of supplies.

"Good. Meanwhile, I have some food for her, if you need spare."

"Like I said, we make do," Norma said, her chin stiff and proud, but her eyes darted to the bag of food next to Cooper's feet. "Not gone broke yet from mah singin'. Secret's to get a good spot, lots of people. 'Sides, soul ain't never goin' out of style."

“Can’t argue with that. So”—Cooper patted the bag—“what about I leave you some? Lucille needs the best she can get right now. I’ve included an electrolyte solution to rehydrate her and get some nutrients back in her. It’s chicken-flavored to make her drink it.”

“All right, then. Thanks.”

Cooper put a bulging plastic bag of pet food and liquids beside her. “Are you both okay for warmth?”

“Yes,” Norma said. This time there was conviction in her eyes.

“Good.” Cooper eased the cat back over to Norma, gave it a scratch behind one ear, then smiled. “You’re adorable, Lucille. Right, Felicity?” She turned to look at her.

Felicity froze, not expecting to be drawn into any kind of conversation. They’d talked about this! “Ah...” Her gaze darted back to the cat with its enormous, beautiful eyes. “It’s a cat. I’m sure all cats are equally valid to their owners.”

What the hell kind of answer was that? Felicity’s cheeks grew warm, and she leaped to her feet. “I’ll, uh, be in the van.”

She felt Norma’s hostility as she bolted and dimly heard Cooper apologize for her.

Why am I making such a mess of this? How hard was it? “Your cat’s lovely, ma’am.”

Idiot! She’d negotiated multimillion-dollar deals for Bartell Corp that didn’t feel this fraught. She leaned against the locked van, waiting for Cooper’s return.

Shortly afterwards, the van beeped, and Cooper opened the back to return supplies to it. She removed her disposable gloves with a snap and cleaned her hands with antibacterial gel.

Felicity climbed into the passenger seat. Moments later, the rear doors slammed closed hard enough for the whole van to reverberate slightly, then the driver’s door opened.

“Okay, what the hell was that?” Cooper asked as she climbed into the front seat and sat heavily.

“What was what?” Felicity asked, voice tight.

“Half the time all these people need is a bit of comfort. A kind word. I wasn’t asking you to marry the cat, just say it was nice so the client would

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feel good. And what did you do? ‘It’s just a cat,’” she mocked. “All cats are equally valid.”

I know! Fuck, I know! Felicity inhaled. “I was caught off guard,” she said instead.

“Felicity,” Cooper said, sounding exasperated, “I wasn’t asking you to lie or fake anything. It was not a difficult task. The cat was obviously adorable, and all you had to do was agree and offer kindness to a woman who has next to nothing. That cat is her life, and you dismissed it like it was a...*thing*.”

“I didn’t mean to!” Felicity said, voice rising. “I wasn’t expecting the question! I thought we’d agreed I’d not say anything.”

“We agreed you wouldn’t judge clients, take offense if they were angry, or ask them intrusive questions. I had no idea you thought ignoring humans extended to their *animals*! Felicity, this is nonnegotiable: if you ride with me, I expect you to be kind about people’s pets, even if you can’t stand to look at them. Got it?”

Felicity gave a tight nod.

“Christ.” Cooper shook her head and started the van. “I just don’t get people who hate animals.”

“I don’t hate them,” Felicity whispered. A flash of a ginger cat bumping under her chin demanding cuddles flashed into mind. She pushed the memory away.

A moment later, as if sensing her misery, Brittany dropped her muzzle back onto Felicity’s shoulder and gave her a hopeful look. Felicity pushed her away, too.

“Could have fooled me.” Cooper stomped her foot on the pedal, and Felicity had another experience of a rocket liftoff.

She couldn’t be bothered arguing. She was too busy trying to keep her breakfast down.

* * *

Felicity was coping well, she thought, with the disease and decay she kept witnessing, courtesy of Sandy Cooper. They stopped for an early lunch with Cooper ordering a meat-filled hero while Felicity opted for a whole wheat, ham, and lettuce sandwich. They ate at a wooden outdoor table so small that they kept knocking knees. Cooper’s fault, of course—she had a lot of leg.

Felicity distracted herself from that thought by surreptitiously sneaking Brittany food every time Cooper looked the other way. She was helpless to refuse those huge sparkling brown eyes gazing up at her like she was the most wonderful creature in the universe. Dogs were so sneaky like that. Playing on your vanity.

Anyway, she was just getting rid of food she wouldn't eat. That's all it was. She'd never been a big eater, and the serving sizes on their sandwiches were enormous. It practically begged people to feed their hungry dogs under the table. Or other people's. Whatever.

Cooper talked a lot about the work she did, and Felicity largely listened. Not to what she said—the topic of various animal ailments was presently ranging from dull to gross—but her voice. It was deep and delighted as she ran through her cases.

"You're not even listening to me, are you?" Cooper asked, scrunching up her paper napkin. "Am I so boring?"

"What? No," Felicity said in surprise.

"What did I just say?"

Caught, Felicity offered a tight smile. "You're pleased that the dog will make a full recovery." It was a stab in the dark.

"Uh-huh. Just for that, I'm not giving you the head's up about our next case."

"Oh no," Felicity said with faint sarcasm. "How *will* I cope?"

"You'll really wish you had had advance warning on this one so you could stay in the van with Brittany. But no, I've decided you can just see for yourself."

That did sound ominous. But how bad could it possibly be? "I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Mm. Let's see what the future brings."

* * *

The future brought with it a rather wretched smell. Daisy the rottweiler had a...back-door issue. One so foul that Cooper was double gloving up and reaching into the dog's...

Felicity's eyes went wide. No, surely she wasn't about to...

Cooper met her horrified gaze, grinned, and turned. "I suppose you'd like to know *all* about what I'm doing." She directed the comment to the

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dog's owner, a small man called Carl with worn sun-browned skin and dark eyes who looked older and more tired than any human being should. He reminded her of a sinewy old farmer broken from working too long in the fields.

"I've seen yer do it before," the man said.

"Ah, but Ms. Simmons here is dying to learn all about my job." Her fingers entered the danger zone.

Felicity and Carl both winced.

"Impacted anal glands are not generally life-threatening but can be very painful and difficult to treat if left too long," Cooper said conversationally. "Anal glands are two little scent glands just inside the anus."

Did she have to say anal quite so often? Devilment danced in Cooper's expression. Felicity narrowed her eyes. *Oh...* She was doing that on purpose.

"The glands release a foul, smelly discharge when the animal defecates. However, sometimes this process doesn't happen properly, and the discharge doesn't release. If it is not treated and left to build up, the glands can swell, become painful, and even infected. So I'm here to determine whether they are full or not. Daisy here has had this problem in the past."

The smell was grotesque. Felicity wished she was back in the van, but there was no way she was letting Cooper win this game.

"If full, you squeeze them. A foul content comes out, and the animal experiences immediate relief." She looked down as the smell intensified... among other things. "Like *that*."

Oh God. Felicity tried not to gag.

"If really full, I'll often suggest the animal is looked at again in a month or so, and we repeat the process." Cooper paused. "Are you okay, Ms. Simmons? You're looking rather green."

"She sure is," Carl agreed. "Like she's gonna puke."

"I am not!" Felicity protested, but even so she backed away to get downwind of certain smells.

"It's okay, love," the man called out with a cackle. "I damn near puked up ma guts the first time Cooper did this to Daisy. It's the smell, I reckon. Like rotten eggs, dontcha think?"

"Oh, for sure," Cooper said, finishing up. She snapped off her gloves and put them in the waste bag she kept with her, then put on a new set.

“Takes a strong stomach for newbies.” She glanced at Felicity and grinned. “How’s your stomach going?”

“You’re loving this way too much,” Felicity grumbled. “And for the record, that was the grossest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. I’m going to leave you to it.” She glanced at the owner and tried to think of something positive to say. “You have a...fine animal,” she announced suddenly.

It came out stilted and weird, mocking almost, and both Carl and Cooper looked at her oddly. One with suspicion, the other with surprise.

“Glad you approve,” Carl said snidely, his bushy brows furrowing.

Felicity gave up, grabbed the van keys Cooper had tossed in a heap on her clipboard earlier, and left them to it.

Brittany gave an enthusiastic bark at her return, doing little circles of delight before flopping her head on Felicity’s shoulder again.

“You do know you saw me less than ten minutes ago, right?”

When Cooper rejoined them, this time there was a little amusement in her eyes. “Well, you tried.”

Cheeks burning up, Felicity stared out the window. “I meant what I said. Daisy is a fine animal.”

“You sure you’re in senior management at some international company? How is talking politely to strangers so hard for you?”

She wished she knew. Felicity could argue circles around the clones in gray suits who thought they were better than her until she proved them wrong. But that part of her life was bloodless and emotionless. In fact, there was no investment of feelings at all, unless you counted vindication when she won. All of that, everything, was about business. It was safe.

But here, now, nothing was centered on doing deals, and everywhere she turned, she was being hit by powerful emotions. Sadness, pity, anger, regret, and loss. It was horrifying. And she was only halfway through the day.

At Felicity’s silence, Cooper continued. “You just don’t seem to do the small-talk side of things well. I thought schmoozing was a prerequisite for those kinds of jobs.”

Sighing, Felicity folded her arms. “It’s insincere. I see no need to indulge in it.” Well, to be accurate, Felicity could distract anyone bothering her with irrelevancies by shifting focus back to work.

“So you’re out of practice?”

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"I don't think I was ever in practice." Funny how she'd never stopped to wonder if that was a bad thing.

"You really aren't like anyone I know." Cooper's gaze was direct and curious. "But Brittany seems to like you, and she's an excellent judge of character."

Brittany's head lifted off Felicity's shoulder and turned to Cooper, ears twitching at the mention of her name.

"Damn, I left my notes behind." Cooper climbed out of the van again. "Try not to look too horrified if my dog licks you or something."

"I make no promises," Felicity sassed back.

Clearly deciding she'd been talked about enough without being petted, Brittany suddenly squeezed into the front seat and curled up on Felicity's lap.

"Excuse me." Felicity eyed her. "I did not give you permission to do that." She kept her hands well above the bundle of warmth in her lap and gave the dog a suspicious look. "What's next? You expecting belly rubs? Never going to happen. Do you hear me? Never."

Brittany gave an adorable little huff of happiness and closed her eyes.

Felicity's hands were still hovering in the air as if she were about to play the piano when Cooper returned.

Cooper glanced at her, then the dog, then back to Felicity again. "That'll teach you to feed her. You're stuck with her now. Brit's anyone's for a bit of ham."

She'd seen that? "Well, *I* wasn't going to eat it all," Felicity muttered. "Seemed wasteful to throw it away. Now I'm stuck with a canine parasite."

"Seems like it." Cooper's gaze was speculative. "You know, you don't have to keep her on your lap if you don't want her there. Just give her a push, and she'll go back to her seat."

"Right." Felicity did as instructed, and Brittany, remarkably, squeezed into the back. And once again, the dog lay her muzzle on Felicity's shoulder.

She sighed inwardly. "Must you?" she muttered to the animal.

"Apparently you're the chosen one now."

"Just my luck," Felicity said under her breath.

Cooper eyed her speculatively. But all she said was, "All right, let's get going." She suddenly laughed as she started the engine. "My God, your face when you realized where my hand was about to go. Priceless."

“Yes, well, for some reason I’m not immune to the sight of someone shoving their hand up a dog’s backside.”

“I suppose. If it makes you feel better, it’s the job vets hate second worst of all.”

Felicity paused. “If that’s only second worst, what’s the worst job?”

“Don’t ask that, Felicity.” Cooper’s expression was grim. She thumped her foot on the gas pedal.

* * *

The rest of their time together blurred as Felicity silently observed Cooper interacting with the homeless and their pets. She was confident, calm, and comforting, even when, as happened at least once, she got cursed at by clients who weren’t in the best of states.

Felicity had a renewed respect for her, and she couldn’t get what had been left unsaid out of her mind. Sometimes, some awful times, Cooper had to put animals down. *That* would be the worst thing for a vet.

Felicity doubted very much she could do that, ever. She could understand the necessity, but she was too weak herself. Just as well she didn’t own a pet, then. She’d be useless at being strong when they needed her most. Why did they have to be so tempting, though? She’d probably only be able to hold out a week more, maybe two, before she completely fell for Loki, the cutest little tree defiler.

Felicity forced that disturbing thought from her head and raised something that had been bothering her.

“Can I ask you something?” Felicity began. “About Norma, the first client we saw today. She’s homeless, yet she also has an iPhone. How can she be begging for money when she has a fancy phone? Is she scamming people?”

Cooper sighed. “I hate that question. Can I ask *you* something? If that phone was given to her by a loved one to keep in touch because they’re worried about her, is that okay with you?”

“I—” Felicity frowned. “Yes?”

“If she got it from her last employer and was then made redundant but allowed to keep it, is *that* okay with you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So why don’t you just assume that’s what happened and move on?”

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“Is it?”

“Why does it matter to you?”

It just did. Felicity wasn't sure why.

“You're focused on it maybe because you think homeless people shouldn't have anything nice or it means they're scamming people. She should sell her phone for food or accommodation if she's so hard up, right? Why is a phone seen as an essential to everyone except the homeless? A phone lets her talk to family for her own mental health and well-being, and it can help her get a job. This is her most precious possession, and yet so many people think she doesn't deserve it. Worse, some people think the poor should be punished for being in their situation, and owning nothing good ever is part of that view.”

“I didn't say that. I don't want anyone punished for being in a bad situation.”

“But they don't deserve a phone, same as everyone else? You know what society's dirtiest secret is? How close we all are to being Norma or Carl.”

“I'd never let myself get into that situation.” Never. The thought turned her stomach.

“You think Norma and Carl didn't think that once, too? Most homeless are homeless because they've experienced major trauma in their lives.” Sadness crossed Cooper's face. “That can include unemployment, mental or physical health crises, addiction, disability, losing their home, being a victim of violence, and family breakdown.” She ticked the items off rapidly as though she had reeled the list off far too many times to far too many ignorant people. “Can you stop trauma happening to you? Are you *that* impressive?”

“You think I'm impressive?” Felicity asked, surprised.

Cooper rolled her eyes. “Talk about missing the point.”

Felicity bit her lip. Oh, she got the point. She just didn't see it as relevant. She'd find a way out, if it was her.

I'd never let that be me.

Besides, Cooper was wrong. The people she'd seen today weren't like her at all. They were mainly older, a few teens, often minorities, many veterans, a lot with disabilities, and basically not her in any way, shape, or form.

The thought was a profound relief.

“Last stop for the day,” Cooper announced, breaking into her thoughts. “A head’s up. This client, Kristie, is a bit...prickly. Try not to bite back, hmm?”

Felicity nodded as she left the van. Prickly she could handle. It wasn’t like she was unfamiliar with that trait herself.

“Most of the homeless here used to be at Fordham Plaza,” Cooper said conversationally as they picked their way across a park. “The Fordham Metro–North station across from the plaza was a good spot to stay out of the cold and use the restrooms. But local businesses complained about the number of homeless sleeping inside. So they padlocked it.”

“Well, I suppose you wouldn’t want a subway station filled up with the homeless every night,” Felicity said. “How could commuters use it as it was intended?”

“That’s the thing. They padlocked it to everyone and for all hours. It’s just empty and stays locked now, servicing no one. It’s a case of even if the homeless aren’t bothering anyone or aren’t in anyone’s way, people don’t want them around. Happens a lot. Have a look at park benches some time. Have they got dividers in the middle to prevent people stretching out? Little random bumps in weird places under freeway overpasses? They’re all anti-homelessness measures. It’s cruel, is what it is. Anyway,” Cooper said, “here’s where a lot of the homeless gather in the northwest Bronx these days. Many won’t go near a shelter because they’re afraid or don’t want their gear stolen. So they’ve formed a little community. Yes, they’ll fight each other sometimes, often over nothing at all, but they’ll have each other’s backs, too. If someone needs help, they’ll be there.”

They stood in a clearing filled with small tents and tarpaulins strung up from trees. Smells of cooking rose from a tiny camp stove with a man crouched over it. Scrambled eggs. Maybe.

Trash seemed to be everywhere, but Felicity soon realized it was mainly recyclables, which seemed to be the stock in trade for the homeless. At the far end, one of the newer tarpaulin constructions had been hung with what seemed to be great care. The front was open like a tepee but could easily be lashed shut at night. A battered suitcase sat open to one side, a handful of clothes spilling from it—a black and red T-shirt, torn black jeans. An old ice-cream container held a knife, fork, and spoon. Next to it sat an enamel mug and a slice of bread on the ice-cream lid. Above, strung like Christmas

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lights, was the owner's laundry: four pairs of battered socks, an old bra, and assorted panties.

In front, a large white and gray dog lay sprawled out, more or less guarding the figure inside. The animal seemed to be some sort of bulldog or a bullmastiff or, hell, something with bull in the name.

A woman sat cross-legged on a mat, bent over a torn, mud-spattered newspaper, pen in hand, doing a crossword puzzle. She was white, lean, midthirties, and sharp-featured.

So this was Kristie.

She glanced up, sized Felicity up, and snorted. "You're new. It shows."

"I'm not anything. I don't work with Dr. Cooper."

Kristie bent her head back down. "That's timing. A six-letter word for exacting and annoying?"

"Felicity Simmons, meet Kristie."

Kristie looked up. "I'm thinking *pedant*."

"Excuse me?" Felicity spluttered.

"I meant the crossword clue. But if the Manolo Blahnik fits..." she smirked.

Felicity blinked. How the hell had some park-dwelling woman correctly identified her shoe brand?

Cooper's eyes shot down to Felicity's feet, mouth falling open. "Oh Jesus, tell me they're not designer."

"Oh, they are." Kristie said helpfully. "That's the Listony navy blue suede pump. Thirty-mil heel. Retail for seven hundred. You know, I had a pair just like them once. Bold wearing suede out here, though, with the mud and all, but I imagine Felicity here didn't plan ahead too well for her slumming-it day." She gave her dog a playful pat and turned to Cooper. "Here for Ruby, then? She's been gassy lately."

Cooper got to work while Felicity observed, disconcerted beyond measure. Every word out of Kristie's mouth turned out to be sharp and biting, which fit, since that's how she would describe Kristie's personality.

Sharp and biting? The woman was a damned cheese.

Kristie apparently didn't mind sharing, unbidden, her story. She'd run her own business before being in a bad car accident. Unable to work, she'd lost her company. No job ended her insurance, which cost Kristie her home, spiraled her into depression, and led to a painkiller addiction. She'd driven her few remaining friends away with an asshole attitude.

Try as she might, Felicity couldn't find any part of her downfall that wasn't just pure chance, not poor decisions. Something that could happen to anyone. Well, maybe not the addiction, but Kristie had already been homeless by then. Random bad luck. That's all it was. Compounding awfulness upon awfulness. Felicity had never felt so disconcerted.

The woman's shrewd, calculating gaze never left her the whole time. That was disconcerting, too.

"Nice dog" was all Felicity said, pointing to the brute of a thing slumbering on Kristie's thigh.

"She stops me getting robbed, bashed, or raped, so yeah," Kristie said, eyes lethal as ever. "Almost lost her last year when a social worker thought she would be better off without me. I told the bitch I'd kill myself if she took her." Steady, even gaze. Her eyes were fixed on Felicity's like points. "Meant it, too. I had to threaten to take my case to the media. Bitch backed down. Benefits of being a former PR expert—I can still talk the talk."

Felicity could believe it. She didn't know what to say to that.

"Pleased to report that Ruby is happy and healthy." Cooper broke the silence, looking up. "And I for one am very glad you're still around, Kristie. Besides, I'm sure Ruby appreciates her nice warm human pillow."

"Thanks, doc," Kristie said, breaking into a rare smile. "You're good people. So that Pets in the Park open day thing still happening on Wednesday?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there. Time Ruby got the wash and pampering of her dreams."

Cooper smiled. "I think she'll enjoy that. You can get some pampering, too, if you want. We're laying on the full works. Mobile showers, haircuts, and so on."

"I won't say no."

"Excellent. I might see you both there."

Cooper rose, said farewell, and headed back to the van.

Felicity found herself frozen under Kristie's assessing gaze.

"Sucks, doesn't it?" Kristie intoned. "Knowing it's not just those *other* people who end up here. Sometimes it's people exactly like you. That must rattle your cage."

"I don't know what you mean." Felicity folded her arms.

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“Oh, fuck off with the defensive crap. Sure you do. Hell, I used to *be* you. I even thought the homeless were to blame for being where they are. Karma fucking sucks, let me tell you. Be grateful you still have it all. It can go just like *that*.” She snapped her fingers. “And you get that now; I know you do or you wouldn’t look so fucking haunted.”

“You don’t know me.” Felicity turned on her heel and left, heart racing.

Back in the van, as Cooper sorted things out in the back, Brittany once again crawled into her lap. Felicity stared down at the bundle of fur and her comforting warmth. She made no move to touch. No point getting attached. Brittany and Cooper would be gone soon enough, after all.

“This is getting habit-forming,” Cooper noted with amusement as she climbed in beside them. “Brit. Back seat!”

Brittany obeyed with some reluctance, resuming her position behind Felicity’s shoulder.

“You know, I remember when she was *my* dog,” Cooper said with a hearty sigh, “not that you seem to appreciate her undying loyalty. Have you even petted her once?”

Felicity pinched her lips. “She’s a slobberer. I don’t want her to get the idea that my outfits and her saliva should mix.”

“I...see.” Cooper eyed her. “How...mercenary.”

Felicity shrugged. “She’ll live.”

“Mm.” Cooper started the van.

“Can’t something be done to help Kristie?” Felicity asked. “Get her back on her feet? Has anyone tried to help her?”

“So you finally cracked.”

“What do you mean?”

“The thing about this job is, you always meet someone you wish you could help more. I did wonder if Kristie might be the one.”

“Why?”

“Ever heard of Bacon Branding?”

“Of course.” Felicity nodded. “It was one of the hottest new publicity companies in Manhattan a few years ago.”

“That used to be Kristie’s company. She was ambitious, young, career focused. Had so much attitude.” Cooper’s eyes crinkled. “Remind you of anyone?”

“You think I only care about Kristie because she reminds me of me?”

“She doesn’t remind you of you?” Cooper lifted an eyebrow.

“Okay, sure. A little.” *A lot.*

“Look, it’s simple: You worry that if it happened to her, it could happen to you. So the human brain goes one of two ways. Either you find ways to blame everything that happened to her on some action she did, not the randomness of the universe, so you feel less afraid. Or you rush around and try to find a way to help remove her from her situation so you can stop worrying about her.”

Felicity frowned, not liking how close to the truth that felt. “It’s... unsettling. None of what happened to her was her fault.” At the flash of irritation on Cooper’s face, Felicity added, “Not that I think anyone deserves to be homeless.”

“How reassuring,” Cooper drawled. “Do you know most people avoid interacting with the homeless because it’s terrifying to think ‘There but for the grace of God go I’? It’s funny, though. You know what else is terrifying?” Cooper slapped the dashboard. “Driving. Going at speed and knowing you’re relying on other motorists to obey the laws and not be too drunk or high or dangerous so you get to point B. And your chances of dying in a car crash are higher than ending up on the street. But we push *that* fear from our mind and carry on daily. It’d be nice if people would deal with their own discomfort about the homeless the same way.”

Felicity mulled that over. “But dealing with cars is a necessity. You can avoid the homeless for years, if you want.”

“And that’s why nothing ever changes. Out of sight, out of mind. And in answer to your question, many people have tried to help Kristie. That’s the problem with addiction. It gets its teeth in you, and it doesn’t matter how rich and successful you were before, you’re still a victim to it. She struggles reintegrating back into society because of her addiction. She doesn’t trust shelters after being robbed in one. But mainly she stays on the street because of Ruby.”

“Why?”

“She tried to check into rehab once but was told it was her or Ruby. They had no facility to house animals, too. She has no friends who could mind her pet. And we’re not set up at Living Ruff to take in a dog for weeks and weeks while she gets clean.”

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“So she’s just...stuck?” How awful must it feel for someone who was at the top of her game to find no other solution than staying where she was—at the bottom.

“For now. She’s looking at her options. The Pets in the Park event might help. It brings a whole lot of government and charity services together to assist the homeless who have pets. She might find something that works for her.”

“That’s good.” But Felicity still felt unsettled.

Cooper smiled. “I can hear your brain churning over. Don’t you remember the first rule I gave you?”

“Politeness and respect.”

“Yes, but also don’t try and work out how to fix their lives for them. Kristie’s not a child. She’s smart and knows her own mind. It’s not for you to fix anything. She’s getting there slowly. The main thing is, she has Ruby. That dog has kept Kristie alive. And not just physically. Kristie’s mental health is much better since Ruby came along. And I’m happy to say I was the proud matchmaker. I rescued Ruby from a bad situation and thought they’d make a good match. I was right.”

“That must be a nice feeling, seeing them so bonded,” Felicity observed.

“It is. It makes me very happy.”

That must be nice, too, Felicity thought. Being very happy. She didn’t feel that emotion often.

Cooper yawned, hiding it behind her hand. “Long day. I better get back to the office. Get a bit of a nap in before round two. The boss’ll be in by now so you can check with him that we’re legit when we get back.” She gave a small smile. “I mean, assuming you’re now satisfied we’re not running our charity as a front for a secret drug operation or something.”

“I don’t think anyone would put their hands up dogs’ bottoms as a front for anything. No one’s that dedicated.”

Cooper chuckled. “I’d have to agree with that.”

Before long, they pulled up outside the charity’s office. There was a knock on the driver’s side window, which set off Brittany into an excited series of barks.

Cooper wound her window down. “Shush, Brit. Down, girl!”

Brittany did exactly that.

Ugh. How could one dog be so adorable?

A kind-looking fifty-something man, his face pink from exertion, was beaming at them. He looked like a milkman from a wholesome fifties sitcom who'd unironically say things like "shucks."

"Dr. Cooper, I just saw you pull in and thought I'd say hello to your guest." He waved at Felicity, an idiotic grin plastered to his face. "Come on upstairs and we'll properly chat. I'm Harvey Clifford, director of Living Ruff New York." He turned his attention back to Cooper. "And as for you"—he frowned—"I've seen your time sheet. Go home. Now."

"I was going to have a nap and get back to it after that."

"No. Absolutely not. You're of no use to anyone if you keel over. What is this? Your seventeenth hour?" He shook his head. "Go home, Dr. Cooper. I've already called in Dr. Mendoza to replace you for the rest of today."

"I—"

"No. No arguing. My concern is for the welfare of my team before anything else. Home."

Cooper sighed. "Fine. Let me just get my things from upstairs and give Brittany back to Mrs. B."

"Of course." He smiled again, then his gaze took in Felicity. "All right, then. Ms. Simmons, wasn't it? Mrs. Brooks says you're very excited to go through our books. So let's make that happen. Come on up." He turned and headed toward the building.

Felicity eyed him in surprise. That was entirely too welcoming.

"Guess I'm off the clock," Cooper said. "Hey, maybe you'll get to ride with Dr. Mendoza later. That'll be hell for you. The man has a *chinchilla* as a riding companion."

Felicity swallowed. "I think not." Her limit for cute animals had been exceeded for the day. She'd probably wind up snuggling the damned thing within two minutes. "Absolutely not," she said more sharply.

"Well, suit yourself." Cooper climbed out of the vehicle, and Brittany bounded out beside her. "Hey, Mitch?" she called to a man lurking in the shadows of the building.

He pulled his hoodie off his head, revealing dark brown skin, unwashed hair, and a full beard. His clothing was as filthy as his smile was wide.

"Watch the van for us for an hour? Gabe'll be here soon to take over rounds."

Mitch widened his lazy grin. "Sure, Coop."

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Cooper thanked him and headed toward the office, Felicity trailing behind as Brittany scooted up ahead of them.

“Mitch is great,” Cooper said conversationally. “He’s the reason we have a van still standing each morning, not a shell without tires on four stacks of bricks.”

“Oh.” Felicity hadn’t thought of that. “Well...good deal for you, I guess.”

“Good deal for him, too. He can sleep in it on the nights he’s watching it, if he wants, and we pay him security guard rates to boot.”

Well, didn’t *that* just explain the weird smell in the back. Felicity wrinkled her nose.

“You’re doing it again,” Cooper said. “Making a face. Which I assume is accompanied by that snooty brain of yours judging people.”

Snooty! “Excuse me, it’s a little hard not to judge. You let your expensive work vehicle be used as a flophouse for some random homeless man!”

“Who says he’s random? Mitch is one of Mrs. B’s boys. Hardly a stranger to us.”

“He’s Mrs. Brooks’s son?” Felicity asked in surprise.

“She fosters kids. Mitch was one of hers a few years back, and he aged out of the system. He got hooked on some stuff and wound up on the street. But he still loves his former foster mom, so he’s never too far away. Likes to keep an eye out for her, make sure she’s okay. He’s really loyal. And it’s mutual. Mrs. B loves knowing he’s around. She’s always trying to get him into jobs and re-engaged in life. It’s a sweet thing, actually.”

Oh. Well, whatever worked.

When she reached the top step, Cooper turned back.

“All right, I’ll leave you to my boss’s charms. He’s really enthusiastic about Living Ruff”—Cooper grinned—“so strap yourself in and prepare to have your ear talked off.”

“Good to know. Thanks, by the way. For taking me on your rounds.”

“I’d say any time, but I suspect you wouldn’t think that’s a good thing.”

“No.” Felicity shuddered. “I’d say better you than me.” She glanced down to find Brittany’s butt parked at her ankles. Her fingers twitched to just lean down and... “Perhaps you should call off your menacing dog, too.” She gave the faintest uptick of a smile.

Cooper chuckled. “You really are something else.”

And for once that didn’t sound exactly like a bad thing.

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THE AWKWARD TRUTH

BY LEE WINTER

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