

# FLIPPING *Hearts* & *Homes*

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# Chapter 1

## BROWNIE OR FRUIT?

Maia twisted the ring on her left hand as she studied her choices. It always came down to the same decision: short-term satisfaction or long-term plans?

With a sigh, she put an apple on her tray between her plate of chicken breast with steamed vegetables and the bottle of water.

In line for the checkout, Maia studied the groups of employees, patients, and visitors at the tables. It was the first day of her senior year in high school all over again. No familiar faces, and even if she had spent the previous years learning to navigate the sharks at her home beach, she was now on unfamiliar turf.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. Scott.

Maia grinned; maybe she would have a friendly face to welcome her. As a self-proclaimed people person, he'd always helped her feel at ease in social situations. Having him at her side today would shift the focus to him and take a lot of pressure off her. She swiped to open the message.

*Can't do lunch. See you @ home. Takeout or restaurant?*

Okay. It wasn't unexpected. He had warned her that they would rarely see each other at work. They'd have most evenings together instead of less than a handful of stolen weekends like in the past two years. No need to be disappointed. So why did her stomach lurch?

*Takeout is good. I still have to unpack boxes. See you later. Love you.*

Maia pushed her tray forward with one hand and checked her message app. No dots to indicate that Scott was writing an answer.

“How would you like to pay?” The cashier spoke loudly and slowly, overenunciating every word. It seemed not the first time she’d repeated herself to Maia.

“ID, please.” Maia stuffed her phone into her pocket and unclipped her hospital ID from her lab coat.

The woman pointed at the ID reader, still frowning.

Maia swiped her card. “I’m sorry. I was just...” She swallowed the rest. As if texting with her fiancé would make it okay that she’d held up the line during the lunch rush. Her ID plummeted to the tray as she gathered everything. “Have a nice day.”

The cashier acknowledged her apology with a curt nod and a half smile before she quickly began adding up the lunch of the next person in line.

With her head held high, Maia strode toward one of the few empty tables. She didn’t need company; she had enough manuals and SOPs to read.

“Hey, Doc.” A white woman in dark burgundy scrubs waved at her from a few rows down.

They’d been introduced this morning as she’d toured the radiology department, Maia’s new home. The woman was an MRI tech, that much she remembered. Something with S—Susan? No. Beach-blond hair, golden tan, sunny smile. Sandy?

“Hi. Summer, right?”

“Right, Dr. Fenton.” Summer beamed up at her. “Take a seat.”

Finally, the mnemonic skills she’d learned during med school had paid off in real life. “Call me Maia.”

“And this is Kayla. She works in the cath lab.” Summer pointed to the Black woman sitting next to her.

“Nice to meet you.” Maia slid into the seat opposite. Heart-shaped face, cardiology, cath lab—Kayla.

“Summer was telling me about the new doc in her department. So you moved all the way from New York City to Seattle? Special

reason?” Kayla speared a few salad leaves on her fork but seemed to wait for her answer instead of eating.

Oh, great. She’d been invited to gossip central. Every hospital had one—like every high school, college, and university she’d attended.

Maia nodded but cut her chicken breast before answering. “I moved to be with my fiancé.” She took a bite and chewed deliberately, so that she wouldn’t have to add anything.

“Oh, how romantic.” Summer pressed one hand to her heart and pointed at Maia’s left hand with her other. “That’s huge! When’s the wedding? Soon?”

“Mhm.” Maia nodded. She was still too busy with the not-so-tender meat to elaborate. Why had Scott chosen such a flashy ring? She’d been surprised by it on New Year’s Eve, and six months later, she still hadn’t gotten over it. It wasn’t as if they had to prove anything to anyone, and the money could have been much better invested in paying off student loans or in savings for a house. She swallowed and followed up with a big sip of water. No need to dwell on it again. It was one of the little differences that made up their relationship. Like wanting pets or not. Or preferring to go out to parties instead of meeting with small friend groups. Nothing she couldn’t live with.

“Moving for the love of your life. That’s the stuff romance movies are made of.” Kayla sighed. “Not like the staff drama we see here at work every day.”

*Love of her life* was a big assumption; Maia wasn’t even sure she believed in the concept. Relationships were more about compatibility of life goals and less about the romantic notion of finding “The One,” but the hospital cafeteria wasn’t the place to discuss this, especially not with two women she had only just met. She needed to redirect.

“Drama?” she responded in an overdone tone of conspiracy. “Ooh, what’s the best story here?” If they told their own stories, they wouldn’t ask more nosy questions.

Kayla exchanged a glance with Summer. “The rock star romance?”

“That’s a good one but old news.” Summer gestured with her fork. “How about the birth on the park bench?”

“Nah, let’s not talk about Jess.” Kayla shook her head. “She’s a friend. What about the love triangle?”

“Yeah, the love triangle.” Summer snickered and put down her fork. “Last year, one of the cardiology fellows sneaked off with an ER resident to the on-call room. Nothing special, a bit of fun, right?” She leaned closer and winked.

“Right. Happens all the time.” Maia shrugged. Not to her, but she’d heard plenty of tales. And there was probably more to the story from the way Summer and Kayla almost vibrated with glee.

“Yeah, but this time...” Kayla waggled her eyebrows and bit down with a crunch on her salad.

“This time, they were caught.” Summer took up the narration as if they’d practiced their lines.

“No!” Maia played along and let them have their fun in the retelling. “By whom?”

“His girlfriend,” Kayla answered. “She’s a floor nurse and wanted to surprise him with a romantic get-together during her break. She opened the door and...guess what?”

“Made a scene? Kicked him where it hurts the most?” Maia could empathize. Cheating was the worst. She never understood why someone did it instead of keeping their hormones in check or breaking up. It had ripped her mom’s world apart—over and over again until she had finally left Maia’s dad for good.

“That’s the spirit!” Summer laughed. “Her reaction was even better. She grabbed both their clothes and locked them into the room from the outside.”

“They had nothing, no phone, no underwear. They pounded on that door until someone heard them.” Kayla wiped tears from the corners of her eyes. “I wish I’d seen Scott’s face when they found him. Guess he lost his smug grin for once.”

Scott? Maia’s fork screeched along the plate. Pieces of carrots bounced all over the table.

*Get a grip. There are probably half a dozen Scotts on staff here.*

*Really? In the cardiology department?*

Maia tried to swallow, but her mouth was drier than the chicken on her plate. *How?*

She wasn't as clueless as her mom had been with her dad. If Scott had been cheating on her, she'd have noticed the signs, right? And another girlfriend plus an affair on the side? This wasn't possible.

This couldn't be happening to her.

Carefully, she picked up the fugitive vegetables and placed them on her tray, then cleaned her fingers with her napkin. A fleck of orange marred the shine of the diamond on her ring.

With years of practice, she put on her neutral doctor mask. "And who is Scott?"

"Scott Dawson. Cardiology fellow. Tall, dark hair, blue eyes, thinks he's God's gift to women." Kayla rolled her eyes. "Stay away if he hits on you—and he will. You're his type. All the other women were brunettes too."

Summer added something, but her voice faded into the background. Dozens of people were talking around Maia, laughing. Cutlery clinked, telephones beeped, and chairs scratched over the floor.

Then, for a moment, everything was muted. Maia's vision swam, and she thought she might faint.

*He'd never do that to me.*

*This is just mindless gossip.*

*Then: Mom was right.*

The cacophony rushed back all at once, and she saw more clearly than before.

She wouldn't blindly believe everything the rumor mill churned out. But she wouldn't stick her head in the sand either. There was only one way to find out the truth. Tonight, she'd ask Scott. Bile rose at the thought of confronting him, but she swallowed it down. This was neither the place nor time to show her fears.

Maia stood up and grabbed her tray. The hard plastic dug into her palms as she tried to keep her hands from shaking. "Thank you for your story, but I'd better get back to work. You know, first day." She intended to soften her words with a smile, but the tightness in her jaw wouldn't let her.

Without waiting for their response, she turned and left. She was sure that Summer's and Kayla's stares followed her all the way to the

tray collection. She squared her shoulders. They were the least of her worries.

\* \* \*

The phone rang and rang while Maia paced in the tiny space between her suitcases, stacks of boxes, and the queen-sized bed in her hotel room. Her best friend wasn't answering. Not surprising; she'd started her sabbatical trip around the world last week.

She hung up, let herself fall onto the bed, and scrolled through her contact list again. The number of people she wanted to talk to was at an all-time low. How had she missed most of her friends fading out of her life? Friendships had taken a back seat between her residency and the long-distance relationship she'd devoted her last two years to. And too many of her current friendships had been Scott's friends first. That had been one of his most attractive qualities—his effortless way of connecting with people.

She groaned. She should have known better. Her dad had been the same kind of charming extrovert. Oh no—had she fallen for Scott because he reminded her of her dad? What a cliché.

Maia rubbed her temple. She couldn't think of her dad, much less talk to him right now, not about that. And her mom?

Nausea rose at the thought of confessing how gullible she'd been. She'd always believed Scott when he couldn't video chat because he was working overtime or spontaneously hanging out with "the guys" to watch a game. And whenever the tiniest twinge of doubt had crept up, she'd squashed the feeling immediately because she hadn't wanted to be like her mom—always mistrusting, always checking after her partner.

Her mom would almost certainly go on one of her endless tirades about the root of all evil—cheaters. She had softened some in the sixteen years since her divorce, but that particular topic always brought back the bitterness. Only Aunt Ann had been able to draw her mom out of her post-divorce funk.

*Ann.* Why hadn't she thought of her first?

Maia looked at the clock and converted it to Eastern time. This kind of mental gymnastics didn't even flex her brain muscles anymore after years of late-night phone calls with Scott. Eleven wasn't too bad for a night owl like Ann.

Ann answered immediately and, as Maia had hoped, listened patiently through her rambling summary of today's lunch, her talk with Scott, and her late-evening move to a hotel.

"What? The nerve of that guy!" Ann growled. "Do you want me to come for a visit and bring my neutering equipment? I'll leave the anesthesia at home."

Maia laughed for the first time since lunch. "Thank you, but I'll pass."

A dog barked twice. Ann made a hushing sound. "It's okay, Jasper. Everything is fine. I'm angry but not at you. You're a good boy."

Jasper. The name was new. He was probably one of the many foster pets Ann and her wife picked up as veterinarians with a part-time rescue shelter.

Maia put the phone on speaker and listened to her aunt soothing the dog as she stared at the city lights out the hotel window. So many people going about their own business, and she sat here, alone in her room, without knowing a soul. She grabbed a pillow to hold tight against her chest.

Jasper seemed mollified by Ann's tone as Maia couldn't hear him anymore. Her aunt's melodious voice had the same effect on her.

"So what do you need right now, Bunny?" Ann sounded as if she'd immediately take care of every need.

Maia let out a long breath. That nickname brought back memories of long evening talks on the porch, hot chocolate, and the best hugs a frustrated teenager could wish for. It gave her the strength to answer honestly. "I have no idea."

"That's okay. We'll work it out together."

"I'll need a new job, a place to live." Maia wasn't sure she could face going to work tomorrow, but her student loans didn't leave her much choice. "I need a plan."



“I meant emotionally, but we can certainly start there. Did you only have one job offer in Seattle? Can you change to another radiology practice?”

“No. Working at the same hospital as Scott wouldn’t have been my first choice, but I couldn’t find anything else nearby that was a good fit. If I were to look somewhere outside of the city, I would surely find something, but I didn’t move here to commute for hours every day. My other good offer was an online practice. I could work from home anywhere I lived.” Maia massaged her left shoulder with her right hand. It was like kneading steel.

“From home? Would you video chat with patients? Am I sounding old?” Ann laughed. “I have no idea how that would work.”

“I’d get the X-ray, CT, and MRI files online to review them and send my reports to the practice or hospital that ordered them. They’d communicate with the patients, and I’d do only the office part.”

“Well, if that’s something you’d like to do. I can’t imagine not seeing my patients.”

“Your patients are all cute and cuddly.” Some days, Maia regretted studying human instead of veterinary medicine. “But you’re right. It wouldn’t be my dream job. The main draw would be that I could do it from anywhere. This leads me directly to problem number two: finding someplace affordable to live on short notice. I don’t know if I want to stay here anyway. Or go back to New York or... I don’t know.”

Neither option appealed to her right now, and her empty brain couldn’t come up with her usual pro/con lists.

Studying both the big picture and every minute detail and analyzing all possibilities was her superpower that had led to her career in radiology. But whenever she tried to look at her own situation right now, it was as if emotion-infused blobs of color blurred her vision.

“Maybe you don’t need to decide immediately. If you worked online, you could always live with us. You’d have time to heal, regroup, and find a new home base. We have fresh air and lots of animal cuddles.”

Only Ann could make living in the middle of nowhere sound appealing.

“No, I can’t come and live with you. What would Gabby say? Don’t you have to talk to her first?”

Sixteen years ago, when they'd moved there after Maia's parents' divorce, Ann's introverted wife had had a hard time getting used to Maia and her mom sharing her space.

"She'll welcome you with open arms. She loves you as much as I do." The conviction in Ann's voice was absolute.

"True, but..." Maia had to admit that once Gabby had gotten to know her better, she'd been a great support during the worst year of her life.

"You're family, and we've barely seen you these past few years." Ann sighed. "That wasn't your fault, but we still missed you."

Another reminder of what she'd sacrificed for that stupid long-distance relationship. Maia buried her face into her pillow to stifle her groan of frustration. Why had she ever thought this would be a good idea? Just because he'd been handsome, charming, and fantastic with both her parents was no reason to ignore her family. When Scott had asked her to marry him, he'd described their Seattle future in vivid colors and with so much passion that she'd thrown over her own plans in New York for him.

Maybe a few weeks with her aunts was what she needed right now. Working from home, she could apply for other jobs as soon as she decided where she wanted to live. But was she ready to stay in a tiny town in the middle of upstate New York, far from any big-city amenities? Her aunts were the only reason she even knew about the speck on the map.

Yes, she could do it if she knew she could leave anytime. She wasn't a moody teenager anymore, dragged away from the vibrant city by her even moodier post-divorce mom.

The dog barked again, this time more softly.

"And Jasper is all for it too," Ann said. "He needs more cuddles in his life. He's a new rescue and starved for affection and attention."

Cuddles, support, and family. Slowly the swirling colors in Maia's mind formed a coherent picture of herself, walking a dog through the woods next to Ann's house. It was exactly what she needed right now.

"Okay. I'll do it." As soon as she said the words, the knots in her shoulders seemed to loosen for the first time in hours.

## Chapter 2

CAREFULLY, ROWAN SLID HER RIGHT hand deeper into the darkness.

*Where's the spot?* The wetness clinging to her fingertips told her she was searching in the right direction.

"Ah, here!" With a sigh of relief, she pressed a finger to the spot to mark the location. With her other hand, she grabbed blindly for the duct tape. This would finish quickly now.

A short burst of beeps signaled a text, and her phone vibrated loudly on the metal toolbox.

Rowan groaned. *Please don't let it be another job.* Whoever it was, they'd have to wait until she finished this one.

"Do you need your phone? I think that was your mom." Mrs. Wood's frail voice was barely audible beneath the sink.

"What?" Rowan tried to turn without letting go of the pipe, but all she managed was to hit her head on the top of the cabinet. "Ouch!"

"Did you hurt yourself? Do you need anything?" Her footsteps shuffled closer.

"No, no. Everything's okay." Rowan rubbed her hair. No warm wetness; she was fine. A little bump wouldn't kill her. "What did you say about my mom?"

"A text from your mother showed up on your phone. Do you want to read it now?"

“No, thanks. She’s probably just checking in.” The last thing Rowan needed now was another text from her mom. It would be either about another job or a reminder to check on one of the million business aspects of their store. Why couldn’t she understand that Rowan was much better suited to working with her hands? She reached for the wrench. Hopefully, the old steel pipes weren’t corroded too badly. “I’ll finish up first.”

“Is she still on vacation? Florida, right?”

“Yes. She’s visiting her sister. My uncle recently died.” Groaning, Rowan pushed the wrench another half-turn, and the nut finally loosened.

“I’m sorry. But it’s good she has your mom’s support. Widows should stick together.” Mrs. Wood sighed.

Her phone beeped and vibrated again. Ugh. What if it was a text that wasn’t as harmless as her mom’s?

*Yeah, right, as if you have anything spicy to hide!* Rowan rolled her eyes at herself and continued with her work of removing and replacing the damaged part. As most of the town had never bothered to upgrade and had fixtures older than her parents, she could do this job in her sleep.

Ten minutes later, she emerged from under the sink and let the water run while she packed up her tools and the rusty remains.

After she’d cleaned up, Rowan knelt to trace her fingers over the new joint. No traces of water. She closed the tap. “That should do the job.”

“Oh, you’re a lifesaver. Thank you for coming over on short notice on a Friday afternoon. I hope I didn’t make you late for your evening plans?”

*Here we go again.* Rowan had wondered why it took Mrs. Wood so long to ask after her love life. She chuckled. “No plans.”

“But a young lady like yourself shouldn’t think of her job all the time. Girls don’t like it.” She smoothed her faded blue apron over her dress even though it was wrinkle-free.

Rowan raised her eyebrows. “True. I’ll keep it in mind.” Of course, if she had a girl—or, rather, a woman—to spend her evening with,

Rowan might have a different attitude toward her job. But options were slim in Ashlake, North of Nowhere, New York.

"I'll wash my hands, if that's okay." Rowan carried the toolbox to the hallway and went to the bathroom.

When she returned, Mrs. Wood had set a plate of cookies on the table.

*Yum, chocolate-chip.*

"Do you want tea or milk?" Mrs. Wood opened her fridge.

"Tea, please." Her homemade iced tea was the best. Rowan glanced through the kitchen window to the front porch. Usually, they'd sit outside and chat, but it was still too hot. "Summer doesn't seem to be letting up yet." She missed the time when summer heat had been all about fun and allowed her more time to spend by the lake instead of at work.

"Yes, I can only get to my garden in the early morning or at night." Mrs. Wood poured a glass of tea from a glass pitcher.

"Thanks." Rowan took a large sip of her cold drink and picked up a cookie. It was still warm, perfectly soft, and full of gooey chocolate. "The flowers look great. I could water them for you before I leave."

"Ah, no. It's too early. I have to wait until it cools down tonight. It's something to do instead of watching the news at night. Much better for my blood pressure."

Rowan laughed. "I know what you mean." She finished her glass and shook her head when Mrs. Wood offered another.

"Have you heard that Ann's niece is back in town? She was such a studious girl. Always inside, very pale. What was her name? May?" Mrs. Wood broke a piece of her cookie and a drop of dark chocolate fell onto her plate.

"Maia, not May." Dark eyes, almost like chocolate, nearly hidden behind bangs a shade lighter, framed by round silver-rimmed glasses. She'd been distant, aloof, and the most beautiful girl Rowan had seen so far in her seventeen years. She couldn't remember a single conversation between them.

That had been ages ago, why was Mrs. Wood bringing her up? She'd better go before this conversation circled back to her nonexistent love life. "Anything else I can help you with?"

“I’m not sure. I heard something crashing on the roof last night. Maybe one of the trees lost a branch? I’m afraid it might have broken through the shingles. I don’t want to discover a leak during our next thunderstorm.”

*Roof. Great.* Rowan suppressed a grimace. Of all the jobs, she liked this one the least. Heights weren’t her friend. But maybe she could see the problem from the dormer window, which was close to the biggest and oldest oak on Mrs. Wood’s property—too close for Rowan’s liking. “I wish you’d let me cut those trees for you. One day they’ll fall into the house.”

“But they are the best way to cool the house in summer, and I can watch the birds in winter.”

Rowan sighed. “That’s what Mom says about our trees too.” This wasn’t a fight she’d win anytime soon. It didn’t mean she’d give up, though. “Was the crash close to your bedroom or on the other side?”

“I’m not sure. I was, um, downstairs. Must have fallen asleep on the sofa. But I think it was the other side. Andy’s room.” A shadow passed over her face. It had been well over fifty years since her son and husband had died in a car crash, long before Rowan’s birth, but she never mentioned their names lightly.

Rowan squeezed Mrs. Wood’s arm. “No need to get up. I’ll have a look from the window.”

With each step on the creaking wooden staircase, dust billowed up. Rowan sneezed. That wasn’t like Mrs. Wood at all. Usually, everything was cleaned meticulously. Didn’t she use the second floor anymore? But where did she sleep?

Her son’s room was empty, save for a wooden dresser and a bed made up with a handmade quilt. The blue squares had faded to almost gray. A fine coat of dust covered everything here as well. Whenever she’d get the chance, Rowan had to think of a pretense to clean. Maybe some sort of repair she would have to clean up afterward? Without charge, of course.

She pushed the curtain aside and unlatched the dormer window. It opened on the second attempt, screeching like a fighting cat. Rowan added lubricant to her mental to-do list.

Clutching the sill with both hands, Rowan stuck her head outside, gaze fixed to the side. No need to look down. The problem was up, not down.

Today was her lucky day. A large branch rested directly next to the window. It was twisted and nearly as thick as her arm, with a few stubs of smaller branches sticking out but without any characteristic oak leaves. It had slid down the slanted roof until it had been stopped by the gutter.

By the trail of bark, she could quickly identify where it had hit and see the undamaged shingles. She wouldn't have to climb out to inspect the roof. Instead, she could remove the branch from the safety of the house.

Rowan slowly extended one arm as far as it would go, but she couldn't reach it.

She ducked back into the room and sank onto the bed as her knees gave way. Shit. A drop of sweat ran down her brow. She wiped it away with her hand, which was almost as damp.

Should she get a ladder and climb up from outside? Her stomach plummeted as if she were already falling. Or should she call Daniel or Nick?

No. No need to involve her friends. She had to get over her stupid fear of heights.

Maybe she could reach it if she stood on her toes. *Or if you didn't cling to the windowsill like a baby. Get over yourself.*

She wiped her hands again, then got up and walked to the window as if it were a dentist's chair. With the way she was clenching her jaw, she'd need a visit there soon.

When she reached the window, she pressed herself closer to the windowsill than before. Very carefully, she leaned out again. But this time, she rose on her tiptoes and pushed herself all the way to the left. The wooden frame dug into her side. *Better pain than vertigo.* Only a few inches more...

When she finally grabbed the branch, she let out a long sigh.

Slowly, she pulled it over. The last thing she needed was for it to break. When she was sure nothing was stuck, she threw the whole thing into the garden.

Ten minutes later, the branch was safely broken down and settled on the firewood pile. Rowan had lost half her body weight in sweat. She'd like to blame the late July heat, but she knew the truth. She was a coward.

Mrs. Wood waited on the porch with another glass of tea. "Thank you. I'll sleep much better knowing the roof is safe."

"You're welcome. I didn't have to do much, so you don't need to worry about repairs tonight." Rowan pressed the ice-cold glass of tea to her flaming cheeks and leaned against the wall. "But we need to talk about the trees. Soon, before storm season starts."

"Maybe. When you come the next time, you can attempt to convince me again." Her grin told Rowan not to try. They'd had this discussion countless times.

"I'll bring my chainsaw with your groceries." Rowan winked. "Do you need anything special from the supermarket this weekend?"

"No, the usual. Don't forget raspberry ice cream."

Rowan nodded. As if she could ever forget ice cream. "See you Sunday."

Mrs. Wood waved goodbye from the front porch shade as Rowan stored her toolbox in the back of her truck.

The stench of her own anxiety-induced sweat hit her as she lifted her arm to wave back. She suppressed a grimace.

Luckily, this had been the last stop on her list for today. Now she was free to start her evening and wash away the day's stress in the lake.

Fresh water and a good long swim would do wonders to drive the kinks from her back and stretch her tense muscles. And to clear her mind from the list of things she needed to discuss with her mom.



## Chapter 3

THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR stopped Maia from opening her next file. “Come in.”

“Oh, sorry, are you still working?” Aunt Ann leaned in the doorway and smiled. “Dinner will be ready in half an hour if you want to join us.”

Maia glanced at her watch. *Oops, already seven.* “Dinner would be great, thanks. I’m done with my last case.”

“They make you work long hours. You’re much too pale.” The lines around Ann’s eyes deepened as she studied Maia as she would one of her patients.

“Um, yeah.” Maia looked at her hands with the visible blue veins. It was true, compared to Ann’s natural light tan, she looked like a ghost.

“Have you left your room today? Did you even take a lunch break?” Ann sighed as if she knew the answer.

Maia shrugged. “A short one.” She’d taken the time to get a sandwich from downstairs to eat while working. That counted as a break, right?

Her aunt’s nagging came from a good place. Maia wouldn’t tell her that she’d finished her shift hours ago and was picking up overtime now. Work was fun, helped her pay off her medical school debt, and, most importantly, kept her thoughts from running in unproductive

circles. While she focused on analyzing the minute detail of the black-and-white X-rays or CTs in every shade of gray, she couldn't replay every conversation she'd ever had with Scott or browse impossibly pricey apartment listings in New York City.

Excited barks announced Jasper.

Her aunt grabbed the brown-and-white Jack Russell terrier before he managed to sprint into Maia's room. "No, boy, you'll topple over her boxes and die in the avalanche. We'll go out in a minute."

Maia frowned at the exaggeration, but there was a bit of truth in it. Moving boxes were stacked along every wall, towering precariously over the narrow passage from the door to her twin-sized bed. "I should have put them in storage in Seattle until I have my own place again. I'm sorry; I wasn't thinking straight."

"No need to apologize. You couldn't have known that we had turned the house into even more of an animal shelter since the last time you visited. I must admit, I didn't realize how many cat trees and dog beds we have, never mind all the toys, the crates everywhere, and the animal food storage in the basement." Ann chuckled. "And you know...thinking straight is overrated." She waggled her eyebrows.

"True." Maia laughed at the memory of the first time Ann had said this to her as a teenager. She'd come out as a rambling and confused mess of a baby bisexual, and Ann's playful acceptance had gone a long way to help her sort through her emotions.

Maia stretched her arms over her head, and her spine popped. She had been sitting for much too long. "If you don't mind, I could take Jasper for a quick walk before dinner."

"That would be great. And don't worry if it's a long walk. Dinner will keep. Gabby isn't home yet anyway. See you later, Bunny."

Her old nickname made her smile as she quickly logged out of the main network. Maybe she could catch a few hours of extra work after dinner if the queue was backlogged again.

Jasper waited next to the back door for her and calmly accepted the leash.

The patio opened to a small yard that morphed seamlessly into the woods. The fence and gate were well hidden from the house, among old trees.

Maia closed the gate behind her, checking twice that the latch was secure. Only once in her life had she forgotten it, and it still haunted her. Just because she had been seventeen and had stormed off into the woods after yet another fight with her mom was no reason to risk the dogs roaming her aunts' yard. Funnily enough, she couldn't for the life of her say what the fight had been about, but she remembered every minute she spent searching until she'd found the fugitive dog. It had been the longest three hours of her life.

She followed the small but well-trodden path between tall oaks, maples, and ashes. The leaves shaded her from the evening sun that still held surprising strength, and the ground had stored enough heat during the day that it was pleasantly warm. The herbal scent of wood mixed with the earthy dust that flew up with every step.

"Whoa!" Maia almost stumbled over the leash as Jasper criss-crossed her path.

Behind her back, he crossed to the other side again, encircling her legs.

Laughing, Maia stepped out of the trap. She should let him explore alone, but they were still too close to the road for her liking. "Better safe than sorry. What do you think, Jasper?"

He answered with a series of short barks. He'd probably only reacted to his name, but she took it as confirmation.

Together, they danced along the path to the lake, repeating the circling and stepping routine over and over until they squeezed between two large boulders.

The narrow passageway opened to a small clearing with a half-sandy, half-stony beach maybe thirty feet long. Stone slabs the size of small cars were partially submerged in the dark blue, almost green water and enclosed the space from both sides. Here, she could let Jasper run, as the entrance to the secluded cove was behind her.

As if he'd never been here before, he darted from the water to the stones to the sparse tufts of grass, taking it all in.

Maia scrambled up one of the larger rocks to soak up the evening sun while Jasper depleted his energy. She stretched out her legs and rested her back on her elbows. The stone's smooth surface was warm against her skin, and the air smelled so clean and fresh, like

pine, water, and peace. Ann had been right; this was exactly what she needed right now.

Lake Ash gently curved to her right with trees and bushes reaching to the shore on both sides as far as she could see. It continued around the bend, stretching a few miles until it reached the next town, creatively called Ashgrove. Her high school had been there, and it was larger than tiny Ashlake, hosting chain stores, fast food restaurants, and even a hospital—if it was still operational. Many country hospitals had closed in the sixteen years since she'd lived here due to financial constraints and lack of qualified personnel. No wonder; who would want to work here? She rubbed the bridge of her nose. Why was she thinking about work? She was here to relax.

The lake's surface was still, creating a perfect mirror for the light gray stones, trees in a million shades of green, and the bright blue sky with two fluffy clouds. A line sliced through the mirror image, cutting the sky in half and sending ripples through the mirror trees.

Maia squinted to focus on the tiny, dark dot gliding through the water. A bird?

But then an arm broke the surface, quickly followed by the other, the white skin contrasting with the dark blue. The swimmer switched from serenely slicing through the lake to racing through the water toward her, as if they were in a competition. Faster than Maia expected, they reached the other side of her little cove, where an almost three-foot ledge jutted out above the water.

As the swimmer rose from the water, no bikini or swimsuit straps were visible on the tanned back. A guy, then. The muscles in his arms first stretched, then bunched as he reached above his head and pulled himself up to the ledge.

*Stop staring!* She couldn't help herself; she'd always been a sucker for well-toned musculature. That's why she'd preferred anatomical sketches to real-life pictures during her studies. Too distracting.

*Oops, no swimming trunks.* Maia quickly averted her gaze. She wasn't here to ogle some skinny-dipping guy. Where was Jasper? They'd better leave before the swimmer noticed them.

Too late. Jasper raced to the other side of the cove, happily barking to get the newcomer's attention.

“Jasper? Hey there. Where are your mommies?” The voice coming from the top of the stones was decidedly not male.

A woman lay on her stomach, letting her arms dangle down to where Jasper tried to jump up and reach her. Water dripped from her short blond hair and ran down her arms. Drops glistened on her hands like tiny diamonds before they fell onto Jasper.

But wow, those strong hands and muscular arms didn't belong to a diamond-jewelry kind of woman. More like braided leather and stainless steel.

*Stereotyping much?* Maia ripped her gaze and her thoughts from the woman's hands. “Jasper, come!”

The little traitor was still staring up at the naked woman, wagging his tail as if she'd come down any second to play with him. Naked.

Heat shot up from her chest. She needed to get going before she made a fool of herself in front of the stranger. The naked stranger.

*Get a grip, you're a doctor. You've seen hundreds of naked people without them ever affecting you.*

“Jasper!” Okay, maybe that tone had been a bit harsh.

But it worked. He trotted to her and let her clasp the leash to his collar.

“Good boy.” She quickly rubbed his back and promised to make it up to him—as soon as they were safely back home and she wasn't acting like a teenager anymore.

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# FLIPPING HEARTS AND HOMES

BY CHRIS ZETT

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