

Hearts on Fire

Dogs, Love, and Calendar Heroes
(Recipes for Love and Life)

A Novella Excerpt

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1.

A loud ring tone wakes me up from shallow dreaming. I pick up the phone without opening my eyes.

“Olivia! You must come here right now!” My best friend’s voice sounds alarmed.

“Penelope? What’s up?” I yawn and stretch my legs. I must have dozed off on my couch in front of the television. I glance at my watch. It’s half-past midnight.

“The shelter is on fire!”

I jolt up and sit up straight, suddenly wide awake. “Did you call the fire department?”

“Of course. They’re here. Plus, the police and two ambulances, and a bunch of reporters.”

“I’m coming!” I’m still in my day clothes, so I don’t even have to change. While searching for my shoes, I reach for the remote and switch to the local news. “Oh, no,” I groan. The place looks in total disarray. I see flames and firefighters carrying dogs and cats out from the kennels. It’s a total disaster! “Ruffy!” I exclaim as I see a close-up of one of my beloved dogs appear on the screen.

“Ruffy is fine,” Penelope says. “One firefighter saved him.”

“I know! I’m watching the local news. How bad is it?”

“Most animals seem okay. The fire department got here super fast. But we must move the animals away from the smoke. Hold on,” she says, and I hear loud voices in the background.

“What’s going on there?”

“I’ll talk to you later,” she says and disconnects.

I grab my car keys and rush out the door. I can’t believe that the place so dear to my heart is in danger. Those animals have been through so much, suffering pain and misery their entire lives. And now this! I’m not religious, but I pray to God to save them.

There’s no traffic at this hour, so I arrive at the shelter in record time, slowing down only at the intersections to avoid getting stopped

by the police. Although with the fire in the neighborhood, I'd be shocked if cops stopped me for speeding. I imagine they have more important things to do than to chase reckless drivers.

When I arrive at the Kind Heart Animal Shelter, two fire trucks are there, plus three police cars and an ambulance.

The barking and howling of the animals are unbearable. The smoke fills the air, and the fire trucks' lights make the scene surreal, but the situation appears under control.

"Olivia! Over here!" Penelope calls me from a distance. "Thank the heavens that the station is so close; they got here in no time," she says when I approach her. She points to the group of firefighters who are now packing their gear, getting ready to leave.

Then she points in another direction. "That's Ryan Kowalski. He saved Ruffy and the other dogs from section C-1, which suffered the most damage. He's not unpleasant to look at either."

I shoot her an appalled look. How can she be thinking about those things when the situation is so dramatic?

"Aren't you still seeing Mark?" I ask.

"I'm just saying. Maybe you'll be interested."

"Thanks, but no," I reply with a tone of annoyance in my voice. She knows I'm not interested in men, but she keeps trying to set me up for my own good, as she says. "How are the animals?" I ask.

"It looks like the firefighters did a great job. Thanks to them, there was no major damage to the kennels. We should thank them."

I shrug. "Isn't that their job?"

Barbara Johnson, the shelter director, comes up to us, shaking her head in distress. "How could this happen? A fire can't just start by itself. Did someone leave on the toaster? I told you we should have got rid of that thing; it's defective."

"I switched off all the appliances in the lunchroom before I left, so that wasn't it," says Penelope.

"Do the police know what caused the fire?" I ask.

Penelope shakes her head. "They suspect it started somewhere behind the back office building, but they don't know for sure. The dog's kennels closest to the fire got burned, but we took all the animals out just in time. A few of our volunteers are here helping the animals. Some dogs got terrified."

"Who notified the fire department?" Barbara asks.

"I did," says Penelope. "I went back to the office to take the applications of adoption to review tonight. That's when I saw the

smoke and called 911.”

Barbara sighs heavily and shakes her head. “This is a disaster.”
We all nod in agreement.

“As if we didn’t have enough problems already.”

2.

After the night in the shelter, I go home totally exhausted, home being Eric’s two-bedroom apartment. After I broke up with my boyfriend six months ago, I didn’t have a place to go. Thankfully, my friend Eric let me stay with him until I find a new place, which was taking longer than I expected. People may tell you that they love animals, but no one seems to want a tenant with three dogs, two cats, and a bunny.

I really love him for that. Eric is a great guy, and I don’t say it often about men, if ever. He’s also different than most men. For one, he’s gay, so our relationship is purely platonic.

As I collapse on my bed, my three adopted dogs come into the room and start licking my hands, nudging me with their cold, wet noses. I try to hide under the blanket. I only have a few hours to sleep before I go back to the shelter again.

But they don’t go away. I can hear their expectant panting. As I peek from under the cover, Charlie, Oscar, and Coco wave their tails at me.

“Alright, you win. You must be hungry, huh?” I get up with resignation and go to the kitchen to fill their bowls. Then I find the remote and turn on the television. The fire is all over the local channels.

“Officials are trying to determine the cause of the fire that happened last night at the Kind Heart Animal shelter on Harrison Road. Firefighters with the Essex County Fire and Rescue told us that one of the buildings had flames shooting through the roof when they arrived at the scene. Firefighters were joined by the shelter workers, volunteers, and private citizens, trying to rescue as many animals from

the structure as possible. Fire officials tell us they do not have an immediate need to care for the animals, but they may need help soon. The shelter director, Barbara Johnson, noted that a few shelters stepped up, offering help taking animals into their care, including the Essex Animal shelter.”

“Look, it’s Barbara on the news,” I shout out to Eric, who is in the shower. The reporter puts the mike in front of Barbara, who says, “We are very grateful for their generous offer, but we believe we’ll be able to keep all our animals in our shelter, which they regard as their home. Moving them elsewhere would only cause them additional distress. Thanks to the quick reaction of the fire department, most animals are okay, and the kennels didn’t suffer any major damage. We’ll be setting up some tents as temporary adoption office facilities and resume the normal operations shortly.”

All the while, they’re showing the video footage from last night. The imagery is dramatic. The fire, the animals, the firefighters.

Especially one firefighter.

What’s his name? Ryan something. He’s rescuing Ruffy over and over and over again, carrying him in his arms with fire gushing behind him, like an action hero in a Hollywood movie. Then there is a close-up, with Ryan’s face and a big smile.

“Enough already,” I groan and flip the channel.

But there it is again, a close-up of Ryan Kowalski’s smiling face. It isn’t even a proper smile, more like a smirk.

“He’s very photogenic,” Eric says.

“And he knows it.”

I try another channel. And another. It’s the same thing everywhere, as if he were the only one there that night.

“Ryan Kowalski is obviously getting his five minutes of fame,” I say as I flip through the channels. The same clips are playing on all the local news channels. Reporters (mostly female) are going on and on about how the firefighters saved the animals, gushing about how fortunate the poor dogs were to be rescued by such heroic humans.

“Oh, please,” I groan. I can’t help but roll my eyes at all that adoration. “This is so annoying. Can you just tell me some actual news? Like who or what started the fire?” I say to the reporter on the screen.

“Oh, come on,” says Eric. “They deserve it. Don’t you think what they did was admirable?”

“Sure. I’m deeply thankful to them. But, seriously. Enough

already! It's their job for crying out loud. Plus, the fire wasn't even that bad, and they're making it into some sort of super-freaking-hero on a mission-impossible situation. Isn't all that admiration a bit too much?"

Eric nods. "Maybe. They seem to enjoy it, though."

We watch as Ryan Kowalski and his crew are posing for pictures with dogs and cats from the shelter, talking to reporters who treat them as if they're gods. "See? This bothers me," I say.

"What about it?" asks Eric.

I shrug. "It bothers me is that it's just another piece of news that people will forget as soon as another disaster comes around."

"That's the way things are..."

"I know. But the truth is no one cares about the life and death of these animals. Not before and not now. Many of them are going to be killed, maybe even next week or month, because there's just not enough space and no money to keep them alive in the shelter. And not enough people are willing to adopt or donate money."

"Euthanasia is the politically correct term," Eric says.

"Which is really the same thing," I say. "Every day, hundreds of dogs and cats are euthanized in the United States, but no freaking reporters are bringing the story to the public. There's no video coverage about those killings on the news. Volunteers, rescue workers, shelter employees, and other individuals work their butts off every day to find adoptive homes for these animals, struggling to save their lives, but no one congratulates them or treats them as heroes."

"Well..." Eric starts, but I'm not done with my rant.

"Okay, so we don't have to risk their own lives and don't wear cute uniforms, but we make sacrifices too, giving up our time and money to help those animals, often at the expense of our personal lives and careers. No reporter or journalist came to the shelter to write about that, ever."

"Someone is feeling unappreciated," Eric says.

"It's not just about that," I protest.

"Then what?"

"Everyone is so freaking excited about the fact that the firemen saved the animals; only what's going to happen to them now? If nobody wants them, they're going to end up dead anyway." I shake my head in frustration. "They've been saved from a fire only to die—from an injection. And it seems like everyone is okay with that. Is dying in

fire different than being killed by euthanasia?" I ask.

"Less painful probably, but other than that? Death is death."

"Why don't people come and save them themselves? It's easy," I say. "Adopt. Foster. Volunteer. They could be heroes, too."

"That's not newsworthy. Not dramatic enough."

"Okay, I get it. There's no fire gushing in the background. Nothing heroic about it. Just mouths to feed. And poops to scoop."

Eric chuckles. "No one will show you on the prime-time television doing that!"

3.

"You need to get a life beyond the shelter, Olivia. The whole world doesn't revolve just about cats, dogs, pigs, and rabbits," Eric says.

"Tell me something I don't know," I mutter.

Life has to go on after the fire, and things are getting back to normal, which means we're washing off dog poop and pee off the kennel's floors with a stream of cold water from a hose.

"Life is short. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but there you go."

"Wow, aren't you a sage today?" I say sarcastically. "What's come over you?"

"Life is short," Eric repeats. "It creeps up on you like a thief in the night. Things happen you never expected. But every once and a while, the skies open up, and you can see that clear path ahead of you."

I look at him suspiciously. "Are you okay?"

He nods. "You need a relationship with a human. Not a cat, not a dog. A man," he says.

"Look who is talking," I grouch. "You want me to move out, and I will, I promise. Eventually." My dogs and I have overstayed our welcome, which is why I've been looking for a new job that will help me pay for a place that accepts pets while leaving me enough time to volunteer at the shelter.

Eric shakes his head. "It's not about that. I'm just saying life is

short. Way too damn short to spend it alone.”

“Are we still talking about me?” I ask. I know that Eric has broken up with his partner of three years because he found him cheating with a woman. It was over a year ago, and he still can’t get over it.

“Because if we are, then you need to know that I already have a man in my life—” I say, giving Eric a fake grin and pointing the hose at him. “You!”

“Hey! Stop!” he screams, jumping up and down to avoid the stream of ice-cold water. I turn the hose back into the next kennel to wash more poops.

Eric fake-grins back at me. “You know what I mean. A relationship with a straight man, who will sweep you off your feet and carry you into the scorching-red sunset.”

“Scorching red sunset? Oh, please, Eric. Where do you get your metaphors?” I sneer. “You know, I’ve had enough relationships with men, thank you. They didn’t work. And—sorry to say that—they didn’t work for you either.”

Eric shrugs. “Maybe you’re right, but it doesn’t mean that I’m ready to throw in the towel,” he says. “Never give up, never surrender is my philosophy. Can you pass me that towel?” He motions to the towel hanging on the bench.

I pick it up and give it to him. “That whole dating-love-marriage thing isn’t for me. I don’t want to waste any more time. I prefer to spend it doing something useful and meaningful with my life...”

“Like washing off poop?”

“It’s an important job, and somebody has to do it,” I say and stomp my foot in the puddle, splashing the water all over my pants, and we both laugh. “And—I happen to be an excellent poop washer,” I point out, raising my chin high proudly. “Besides, men are liars and cheaters. There may be exceptions, of course, such as you, but those are rare. Animals, on the other hand...”

“I know, I know. Animals won’t cheat or lie to you or laugh at you behind your back, as people do,” Eric says, mocking me. “You should stop being so negative. The fact that your relationship with Christian didn’t work out is not proof that it won’t work with somebody else. It’s not healthy to be bitter and isolate yourself from the whole world,” Eric says.

“If you walked in on your boyfriend cheating on you with a personal trainer, you’d be bitter too,” I say.

Eric falls silent. “I’d probably be mad as hell,” he finally says. “But you should look at the bright side; at least they weren’t having sex.”

“I’m sorry about what happened to you. But what Christian and that Anastasia girl were doing was way worse,” I snap.

“Okay, so Christian hurt your feelings, but you need to get over it. You must go out and meet more people and loosen up a little. Remember, nobody is perfect. Nobody can live up to your high standards. And even if you make a mistake along the way, that’s okay, too. At least you’re giving yourself a chance to find Mr. Right eventually.”

I shrug and open another kennel to wash. What could Eric possibly know about relationships with straight men? Not much.

We finish washing the floors in silence. After we’re done, Eric makes sure all the doors are locked while I put away the hoses. We then walk back to what is left of the office of the Kind Heart animal shelter.

Even though I’m just a volunteer, it feels like the shelter is my second home. Maybe even my first, since I give all my heart to these animals, spending there as much time as I can, to the point some say I practically live there and currently have no apartment or house of my own.

Hmm. If I’m between apartments, does that make me a homeless person? I don’t have any income to speak of either since I’m in-between jobs. Working at the shelter is practically the only thing I do, except eating, sleeping, living off my savings ever since I decided to quit my job at the law office to look for a less soul-drenching career. (If I had to defend another cheating husband or dishonest businessman, I would just have to commit seppuku, which means I’ll kill myself unless I’d go mad first and would have to be committed to a psychiatric institution.)

Penelope is sitting in front of her laptop in the office. She works at one of the top advertising agencies in town and volunteers at the shelter, coming there three times per week to walk the dogs because she loves animals so much. She only has a cat and can’t have a dog because the building association makes the lives of pet owners difficult. (I hate the term pet owner. But is there a better one? The caretaker, perhaps. But that sounds dry.)

“I’m making coffee,” she announces, pouring tap water into the pot. “Does anyone want some?”

“I do.” Eric raises his hand.

“Olivia? How about you?” Penelope asks.

“No, thanks,” I reply. I turn on the television to see any news about the police investigation into the fire. At least that’s a distraction from the topic of my pitiful love life.

They don’t have any new facts and are still replaying the clip of the fireman who rescued Ruffy, praising the firefighters as the major heroes. The footage looks dramatic. Almost like it was photoshopped or whatever software they use to edit video. It certainly doesn’t look like the actual event that I saw.

From what I remembered, it was much less spectacular, mostly a whole lot of smoke. But the presenters are going on and on about how courageous the firefighters are. If it weren’t for them, the poor creatures would have been dead for sure.

I roll my eyes and turn the television sound to mute. I take out a pile of forms to fill out before Barbara gets there. As the aroma of brewing coffee starts to fill the room, I wonder whether I should have some after all. I’ve been trying to kick the caffeine addiction and drink freshly made juices and smoothies in the morning instead, but this is not the time or place to start new habits.

I take out my mug, place it on the table next to Eric’s cup, and wait for the coffee to finish brewing. Caffeine to boost my energy after a sleepless night is just what I need.

4.

“Wow, look at him! Doesn’t he look amazing?” Eric gasps, combing his perfectly manicured fingers through his hair. His fingernails look much better than mine, I notice. I know Eric frequents the “Topsy Tips” manicure place that’s next to the shelter, which I never do. Manicure is such a waste of time and money, in my opinion. Just as a hairstylist. I only go to cut my hair when I absolutely have to.

“Yeah, totally,” Penelope says. “He’s hot! What do you think, Olivia?”

I glance at the television screen, where the pictures of Ryan carrying Ruffy are still in full display. Then the camera closes up on Ruffy, as the presenter keeps recounting the events of last night.

“Of course, he is, totally,” I say. Ruffy is an adorable creature, but I’m surprised by my friends’ reaction. Penelope isn’t that crazy about dogs; she’s more of a cat person.

“And look at those muscles!” Eric says. “I wonder if he’s straight.”

Muscles? Straight? “Are we talking about Ruffy?” I ask disoriented.

Everybody bursts out laughing.

“Hell, no!” Penelope snorts. “We’re talking about Ryan Kowalski. He’s steaming hot.”

“Smoking hot, if you know what I mean.” Eric winks at her emphatically.

“And he’s a hero,” Penelope adds.

I roll my eyes at these two. “So he rescued a dog. Now everybody is gushing about what he did like it’s such a huge deal,” I say, annoyed. “Too bad the shelter wasn’t on the news when we had to euthanize all these animals last month because nobody wanted them.”

They fall silent because what is there to say? They know it’s true. The shelter’s walls aren’t made of rubber; they can’t stretch to accommodate all the animals that people breed and then throw away, like last year’s Christmas presents.

“They talk about the fire like it was some big thing. People don’t care about millions of dogs that have to be killed in shelters because nobody wants to take them home. Where were all those heroes then? All those compassionate humans, good Samaritans? Why don’t they come to our shelter and adopt? And don’t even get me started about farm animals…” I pause my tirade and shake my head in frustration.

“Well, aren’t you cheerful this morning,” Penelope says, pouring coffee into mugs. I notice cute dog pictures on them with the local pet store logo and wonder how they got here.

“You know it’s the truth. Of course, adopting a dog isn’t going to win you the admiration of the masses. Saving a dog or a cat from death by euthanasia is not glamorous. Washing poop and pee off the kennel floors is not exciting. Feeding them, loving them, and cleaning up their messes—there’s nothing newsworthy about it. You don’t have to risk your life, that’s for sure.”

“Wow, he’s even cuter in person, don’t you think?” Eric says, looking out the window.

“Who?” I ask.

“Ryan Kowalski.”

“How am I supposed to know?” I shrug.

“He’s smoking hot,” Eric says. “I wonder if he’s straight.”

“Totally!” Penelope says. “He looked so manly with Ruffy.”

“How could you tell with all the protective gear he had on?” I ask.

“Oh, I can tell. He’s definitely much better looking than that Christian of yours.” Penelope gives me a nudge on the ribs. “If I weren’t getting serious with Peter, I’d totally ask him out. Olivia, you talk to him.”

“I don’t ever intend to meet him.”

“Well, he is coming right here,” Eric replies, pointing at the window.

I glance outside. A tall man is walking in towards the office. Ryan Kowalski. He’s rough around the edges but kind of attractive; if someone is into that tall, muscular, look-at-me, oh-I’m-so-cute-and-fully-aware-of-it type of guy.

Which I’m not. At least, not anymore.

But, damn. He does look good in person. Suddenly I feel panicky and get up quickly. “I have to go to check how the cats are doing. I promised Barbara I’d make sure they’re okay.”

Barbara looks at me, surprised, as if she’s trying to remember when she asked me that. I try to walk unhurriedly. I’m not running away, after all. I’m simply not interested in meeting the hero who rescued Ruffy. The reason being that I’m totally over men. And I don’t intend to meet this one, no matter how many dogs he saved.

“You talk to him and see what he wants,” I say to no one in particular, reaching for the doorknob.

Before I have the time to step outside, the door to the office flings open, and there he is. The hero. Ryan Kowalski, standing right before me, in his firefighter’s glory.

He waits for a few seconds, being a gentleman, but as I just stand there like a clay statue, he decides to enter at the same moment as I try to leave. We both try to fit in through the narrow doorway and end up getting stuck, standing so close I can feel the heat of his body and the scent of his cologne. Whoa! That’s much too close for my liking.

“Excuse me,” I mumble and glance up at him. My eyes meet his for a split second, sending a bolt of electricity down my spine.

Now, what was that about? Is that my inner goddess trying to tell

me something? I think with sarcasm.

Ever since I read the *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which Penelope practically forced me to do, I've been hearing those weird voices inside my head. I finally push through and step outside, and as I turn around to wave goodbye, I almost fall over a pile of burned wood lying on the path. Ryan Kowalski, the hero that he is, steps in fast enough. He catches me, and a broad smile appears on his face. "I got you," he says.

"Sorry," I mumble as I free myself from his arms and quickly walk toward the cat kennel entrance.

5.

The man who rescued Ruffy is good looking; I have to admit that, but so what? Handsome or not, I have to see how the cats are doing after the spay and neuter procedure a couple of days ago. I will not be swept away by some firefighter's charms so easily.

Christian was good looking, too, with the muscular body of the personal trainer at the local Fit & Strong gym, but in the end, it didn't mean a thing.

Even though it has been several months since we broke up, I can still feel the rage and humiliation over what had happened.

It was such a cliché!

I came home early one day and found him with a Zumba instructor from a nearby gym in our bedroom. The very memory of them there, wrapped in my favorite sheets, made me want to scream. I had put them on just the night before for what I thought would be a romantic night. The night turned into an argument, and I asked Christian to sleep on the sofa in the spare bedroom, but it was still not reason enough to do what he did. Talk about betrayal!

I knew something was wrong even before I entered the apartment. Charlie, Oscar, and Coco were outside in the backyard (I asked Christian many times not to let them out when I wasn't there). Charlie and Oscar came from abusive homes and still had issues, and I didn't

want neighbors complaining about the barking. I saw Christian's car parked in the street, which meant that he was home, even though he told me he would be at the gym with clients all day.

Something told me to be very quiet as I entered. Was it a premonition? I prefer to think about it as intuition. I wasn't spying on him, of course, and I didn't have a reason to believe that he was doing anything wrong. I was just checking if everything was okay.

I heard muffled voices coming from the bedroom. That's odd, I thought. Why would Christian take a visitor to our bedroom? Unless ... I didn't finish my thought. I tiptoed through the living room, trying not to make a sound on the hardwood floors. I stopped by the door to the bedroom, which was slightly ajar, but not wide enough for me to see what was going on inside.

I tried to listen to the conversation to see if I could recognize who was inside. I heard Christian's voice. He was with a woman. Something about her voice sounded familiar.

I knew her!

It was that girl from the gym—the Zumba instructor who worked in the same gym as Christian. The two were so preoccupied with each other; they didn't even notice that someone entered the apartment, giving me ample time to come up with a plan.

Christian and I had been together for six months, which was long considering my dating record. We met at the gym, and after just a couple of weeks, we moved in together when my landlord kicked me out because of my dogs. Now I wondered how many other personal training sessions like this he held in our bedroom.

"All she cares about are her dogs. She doesn't even care about me," I heard Christian's voice. He sounded so ... whiny. "Mmm, yes! This is perfect!" he grunted and continued. "Her dogs are so messed up. They always bark at me. I'm afraid to go even to go to the bathroom at night."

"That's the problem if you take dogs from the shelter. You don't know where they came from. It's so much better to buy from a breeder or a pet store. At least you know what you're getting."

A moment of silence followed. What were they doing in there? I hesitated whether I should come in and let them know I was there.

"She works all the time and has no fun. She works at her day job and volunteers at the shelter. We hardly ever go out together," Christian complained.

“How boring! Life should be about being happy and having fun,” the Zumba girl moaned. “I don’t like people who are so serious all the time.”

“And she won’t let me eat any meat. I have to sneak out of the house just to have a burger or a steak,” he groaned.

Since when was this a problem?

I thought he agreed to eat only vegan food at home because he cared about the animals.

“Oh, no! That’s just crazy. It’s your house, and you are a man; you should set the rules.”

“I know, but she insisted. It was important to her, so I thought I’d give it a try. A plant-based meal plan. Many people swear by that.”

“It’s just a fad. How can you build muscle if you don’t eat your protein? A man needs his protein, especially a big, sexy man like you,” she moaned in response. “I like meat, umm, hmm...”

I just stood there, contemplating my next move. All that groaning and moaning made me think they were making out or maybe even having sex. What a dick! I thought.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dick, a.k.a. Christian Fox, which was his real name, didn’t expect me to be home at that time. I was only there because I forgot my laptop and pen drive with documents, which I needed for the meeting I was planning to attend later that day at the city hall about children’s and senior’s programs the city was planning to start in the fall. Children and seniors interacting with the animals from the shelter would be great for both children and animals. The presentation and other files were on my laptop. Both of which were sitting on the night table next to the bed.

“She won’t let me bring any cheese or sausage into the house. There’s nothing for me to eat in the refrigerator. I go to bed hungry on most nights since she moved in,” he said. “And in the morning, she makes me juices and smoothies, no eggs and bacon.”

“Oh, poor Christian! That’s not a way to treat a man. Making him eat rabbit food,” she squealed. “Besides, juicing is so wasteful. Those vegan punks throw away tons of perfectly edible food.”

“I have to eat tofu and fake meats. And drink soy beverage instead of real milk,” he moaned.

“Be careful with soy. It’s not good for a man,” she moaned back. “I’m not sure exactly why, but something about the hormones. I don’t eat soy. Ever.”

“Yeah, I heard about it too. When she makes something with soy, I

pretend to eat it, but make sure I spit it out.”

My mouth practically fell open.

Secretly spitting out food, like a kindergartner? What is he—five?

“How come you two are even together? You seem so different, so... incompatible. She sounds like a real bitch.”

“When I met her, she didn’t have a place to live. She was so miserable; I thought if I’d help her, it’ll cheer her up. So I suggested that she moved in with me and let her stay in my place till she found an apartment of her own.”

“And that’s her gratitude? Trying to convert you to some fad diet? My poor Christian!” she gushes.

So he only was with me out of pity? How interesting! What else was I going to find out?

I keep listening as my ‘poor Christian’ continues. “She cooks beans all the time! They make me gassy like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Uh, hmm,” she growled. “I don’t believe in beans. They are so not Paleo.”

“Yeah, me neither. I love eating like a caveman; that’s the way to go. All-natural, no fake meats or other foods,” he grunted. “Uh-huh... Oh, Anastasia, this was the best idea ever,” he said with a loud sigh. “We should do it more often.”

“With pleasure, Christian,” she purred. “We can do it any time you want.”

So the Zumba girl’s name was Anastasia?

“Oh, my... yeah, like a caveman and a cavewoman,” she moaned. “It’s so sensual and ... sexy. Oh, Christian, you’re so sexy.”

‘Oh my?’ Who did she think she was? Anastasia freaking Steele? Then I realized the coincidence: Anastasia and Christian, go figure. Just like in the Fifty Shades of Grey. I almost burst out laughing. Was Ana’s inner goddess dancing Zumba with Mr. Christian Grey on my bed?

“You are so sexy yourself,” Mr. Christian Grey said slowly in a husky voice.

He never talked in a husky voice to me.

What were they doing in there, anyway? I wondered. And what was that smell? I hadn’t noticed it before. Strong and repugnant. It reminded me of something that I couldn’t quite place.

It didn’t sound like they were having sex, but I couldn’t see for sure without opening the doors wider, which might startle them. The

door had been squeaking for weeks. I asked Christian to do something about it, but he kept forgetting. Funny how he never forgot to wax his sports car. Even the wheels were always spotless and shining.

I glanced at my watch. I needed to get moving. What I didn't need was listen to this Zumba expert lecture on nutrition. And yet, I felt perversely captivated by the spying experience. It was something I expected to happen eventually. It always did.

After all, men are cheaters; that's the universal truth.

I braced myself before I entered the room, not sure what I'd see. Were they naked? On my sheets? I reached for the door but stopped as the conversation continued.

"She even feeds her dogs mostly vegan food," Christian says.

"No! Really? You should report her to animal services," she says. "She certainly sounds like a freak. Did you hear that they feed animals with dog meat at that shelter of hers?"

I gasped in disbelief. What on earth was she talking about?

There's a pause. "That can't be true," Christian said.

"Totally. It was on the news. They're investigating a chain of restaurants, Bamboo Palace, or something like that. Chinese places. Someone got poisoned with salmonella, and they found meat that looked suspicious."

That was all that I could bear.

How dare she say things like that about me and the shelter!

And Christian? He never complained about my food. Or said that he wanted to go out more. Most nights, he preferred just lazing on the sofa watching the sports channel after he was back from the gym.

Lying, cheating, two-faced bastard. Just like the rest of them!

I opened the door wide and entered into the room.

I strode into the center of the bedroom, tripping over the shoes and pieces of clothing scattered on the floor. When I regained my balance and composure, I looked at the two love birds, trying to understand what was happening.

Christian and the Zumba girl were lounging on my bed, almost fully dressed, except for their shoes, with a large tray in the middle of the bed, filled with takeout boxes and napkins with a familiar logo.

So all that moaning and groaning made me suspect that they were having sex, when, in fact, they were eating giant juicy hamburgers and chicken wings from the Best Fried Chicken, the fast-food joint just

around the corner from the Big and Strong Gym.

I used to frequent that place in my former life but stopped after I became vegan because, except for fries and ketchup, there was nothing for me to eat there. And even if there was, all the smells of the fried body parts of birds and pigs made me queasy.

Christian didn't seem to have a problem with us agreeing to eat only vegan food at home until today. Obviously, it all had been an act.

Looking at them, sitting on the bed, their mouths hanging open, I couldn't tell whether they were before or after sex. Or maybe that was it—they were having an orgy in the bedroom—only with food.

It wasn't what I expected to see. I was outraged and felt humiliated, but instead of screaming, I almost burst out laughing.

"Sorry to interrupt. Don't mind me. I just need to get my laptop," I said, trying to keep my composure. There would be time for rage and humiliation, maybe even tears, but at that moment, I needed to keep my cool.

Christian jumped up when he saw me, spilling ketchup and French fries all over my sheets. "Olivia, please, let me explain," he mumbled. He finally found his voice after the awkward moment when both of them were too flabbergasted to say anything.

"Please... don't go... Olivia!"

"We were not doing anything. Just having a bite to eat," the Zumba girl chimed in. "It's not what you think."

"Oh? And how do you know what I think?" I asked. To me, the fact that they weren't having sex wasn't any better; it was worse.

The fact that he brought someone into our bedroom was terrible. But laughing about me behind my back? Making jokes about my ethical choices? Mocking me with another woman? Just like my father did about my mom. It was even worse than him having sex with her.

"Can we talk about it like grownups?" he asked.

"We'll talk tonight."

"Just let me explain," he insisted.

"I'm already late for the meeting," I said, gathering my stuff for the presentation.

Where is that damn pen drive? I thought as I rummaged through the drawers of the bedside table.

"Then let's talk about it tonight, over dinner," he said. "I'll cook something special for you."

"Don't." I turned to him and added, "I'll take care of the food, and

we'll talk. And bring the dogs back into the apartment before you leave," I said as I ran out. He wanted to follow me, but I slammed the door in his face before he could tell me another lie.

It was over—this time for good. I wasn't going to end up like my mother.

I just wanted us to have one last meal together before moving out, and I already had a plan.

6.

Just great. I was broke, jobless, and now—without a boyfriend or a place to live. I had no money for a down-payment because I donated pretty much everything to the shelter and other charitable organizations.

From the apartment, I went straight to the city council meeting. It was a favor for Patricia, an old friend from law school. She was doing some pro-bono work and couldn't attend the meeting herself. They were going to discuss some new bills, and I was supposed to take notes for her. I turned on the audio recorder on my phone, as I couldn't concentrate on the discussion and had no idea what it was about. I kept going back to what had happened, analyzing every word, trying to figure out what to do next.

Breaking up with Christian sounded like an obvious thing to do. The problem was I had to move out but had no place to go. Ever since I quit my job as a lawyer, I had no money to rent my own place. I tried to find a job that would pay the bills, but it wasn't as easy as I hoped it would be. I didn't want to work for peanuts, and that's what most positions that were close to home and the shelter offered. Thankfully, I had some savings, but those were running out fast. They weren't going to last if I didn't have a regular income, and no bank would give me credit with no steady job and thousands of dollars in college debt.

I needed to think.

And vent some of that steam before tonight.

I decided to go to the gym, get a workout, and a shower. My

membership was going to expire soon, so I might as well use it.

The bag with gym clothes was in my trunk all the time, which made such last-minute decisions easy. As I was changing into my baggy pants and a t-shirt, I kept thinking about my situation.

The law school was a giant money pit. My parents talked me into it, and I agreed. I had to finish something. Get a degree. A good education was essential. Since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a lawyer, just like my daddy. To argue in court in defense of innocent individuals unjustly accused of wrongdoing. Of course, later on, things changed between my father and me, he stopped being my hero, but somehow I didn't know what else I could do. For a while, I thought about becoming a veterinarian, but I'm too squeamish about being a doctor (the sight of blood and wounds makes me nauseous), so I went through the motions of getting through law school.

The problem was it put me deeply in debt. With my father mostly cutting us off after the divorce and my mom having trouble finding and keeping a steady job, we were poor. My dad promised me that if I'd go to law school, he'd help me pay for it but ended up paying for only half of it. He claimed that his situation had changed and couldn't afford it anymore. Of course, he had plenty of money; it just wasn't his. He married a daughter of a very successful businessman. Besides, I needed to get back on my feet and earn my way through school, he told me. Nobody ever gave him anything, and look how he turned out; he liked to say. He didn't want me to end up like those rich, entitled brats, who didn't appreciate real work.

After I graduated, I realized I didn't want to pursue a career in law. My friends were getting jobs, on track to becoming partners, while I was getting nowhere. I applied to a couple of firms and even got accepted, but my heart just wasn't in it. It became evident that just as often as arguing to save innocent people, I'd be getting suspicious individuals off the hook.

I also realized that if I wanted to do something for the animals, then getting into law wasn't the best option. The more I looked into the animal legislation, the more apparent it became to me that law wasn't on the side of the animals. As far as animal rights, the law was part of the problem, not part of the solution.

For one thing, the law stated that animals were property, and therefore humans had infinite power over them. The so-called welfare laws were a joke, protecting only certain species and only to some

extent. Farm animals, i.e., the vast majority of animals that exist today, don't have any protection whatsoever. They're treated as property, mere objects, or a means to an end.

The animal laws attorneys dealt mostly with custody disputes over animals when couples were separating or getting divorced or veterinary malpractice suits. Those cases had nothing to do with protecting animals from abuse.

I realized there was little I could do for the animals when working in a comfortable law office.

So I decided to find a rescue organization or an animal sanctuary, and that's how I ended up in the Kind Heart Animal shelter. Then I met Christian, who worked as a personal trainer at the local gym. I never hired him to train me, but he gave me tips on how to use weights and machines, and we somehow ended up living together after a couple of months into my gym membership.

I didn't have a place to stay when my previous landlord kicked me out (neighbors were complaining about dogs being too loud, he told me), and Christian suggested that I could move in with him. My grandmother suggested that I ask my father for help, but I didn't want to do that. Christian and I ended up living together in a sort of relationship that was going nowhere, at least as far as I was concerned. We never really talked about the future, but the fact that we were sleeping together surely meant something. He let me bring my dogs and even agreed that we only kept vegan food in the house, which was nice of him.

Did that mean that I was using him or trying to convert him by force? It was not how I saw it. He seemed to care about me, understand my concern about the animals, and was okay with the changes that I suggested—remembering all that made me feel even angrier.

And now what?

I didn't know where to go since my current home wasn't my home anymore. Penelope would be the obvious choice, but she had a new boyfriend. Eric, on the other hand, lived alone, so I decided to ask him.

I took out my phone and texted him discretely.

Me: 'I need a place to stay for a few nights. It's an emergency.'

Eric wrote me right back: 'Did you break up with Christian???'

His text was followed with a row of emojis showing faces in distress.

Is he a mind reader? Either that, or he knew me far too well.

Me: 'Yes.'

Him: 'You know where to find the key. C U home tonight :-)',

followed by a row of hearts and kisses.

“Thanks!” I wrote back.

There were just two things that I wanted to do before I ended my relationship with Christian.

I needed to pack my things and prepare the ‘last supper,’

It would be the last meal I had with Christian, and I wanted to make it special.

7.

I delayed going home, even though I was sure that neither Christian nor the Zumba girl would be there any longer. The fact that I had to talk to Christian made me feel even more drained. What was I going to tell him? There was really nothing to say.

I didn’t want to relive those moments or have to look at the mess—the evidence of their passionate meal and his betrayal—but I had no choice. The sooner I’d be done with it, the better.

It turned out, at the very least, they had the decency to clean up after themselves. Christian wasn’t very neat and organized, but he even changed the sheets and put the ones they used in the laundry. It was kind of him, although he didn’t have to do it. It wasn’t like that would get him any brownie points. I noticed that he put on my favorite set—animal print, with birds, butterflies, and flowers. It had lovely colors that always cheered me up in the morning. But not this time. I needed to get out of his apartment, and the sooner, the better. I packed my things and carried them to my car.

I opened the refrigerator and considered my options. I was hungry but didn’t feel like cooking. I remembered what Christian had said, that there was never anything for him to eat there.

I disagreed.

The refrigerator was full of food.

To be fair, (I had to admit looking at the content), it wasn’t your typical all-American fridge. The top was filled with various colorful fruits and vegetables, the bottom with leafy greens. The middle and

the door shelves were stacked with plant milks, hummus, a few packets of tofu, containers with cooked beans, and grains—no typical fare, such as egg, meat, or dairy cheeses.

I thought about making a vegetable juice but then remembered what the Zumba girl said about juicing being wasteful. The truth was I felt bad about throwing away the pulp that was left after juicing, even though I knew it was going into the compost pile and back into the earth. There must be a better way to use it. I wondered what the zero waste people would say about it; I'd have to look into that sometime.

Meanwhile, I took my blender and started filling it with greens for a smoothie—a mix of kale, collard greens, and spinach, followed with a couple of bananas and a pint of strawberries. I didn't bother to remove the leaves. I added a cup of water and turned the engine to the highest setting. After about ten seconds, I switched it off, took out an oversized beer glass, poured the green mixture, and took a sip.

So, I'm not the world's greatest chef, but I do know how to make a green smoothie that tastes better than a five-course meal at the poshest restaurant in town.

As I gulped it down slowly, I felt my body filling with goodness. Unwittingly, I let out a moan, "Oh, my. Yummm."

Wait, did I sound like the Zumba girl, who, in turn, sounded like Anastasia Steele in the freaking *Fifty Shades of Gray*?

I snorted, almost choking on a piece of fruit that didn't get blended.

Maybe. Probably. So what?

Anastasia and Christian had already proven that food could be a potent aphrodisiac. And, in some cases, maybe even better than sex.

8.

I QUICKLY SET THE TABLE AND MADE SURE THE FOOD WAS kept warm in the oven. I remembered my mother waiting for my father to come back from work, his late-night meetings with supporters, prominent people in business, and influential politicians.

Mom would prepare elaborate three-course dinners, but he wasn't even hungry. And when she asked about his day, he'd lie. He'd make up some story of why he was late, and my mother would believe him.

And even if she didn't, she wouldn't question him. She never made a scene. Never cried or shouted. Never said an angry word.

But I'm not my mother.

For one, instead of cooking at home, I ordered takeout. And for the other, I was going to break with Christian and tell him I was moving out immediately.

"Uhhmm. It smells yummy-licious," Christian murmured as he entered the kitchen.

Was that the husky voice I heard earlier today? *Don't you try your Mr. Grey's tactics on me*, I thought and said, "I ordered some food for dinner."

"I thought you'd prefer to go out," he said.

"I'm tired and want to stay in. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. There's a game on Channel 23 at seven. Maybe we could watch some."

"Sure," I said. I put food on two plates and placed them on the table, one in front of Christian, the other in front of me.

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened. It didn't mean anything," Christian started.

"So, what else did you do today? Anything exciting?" I cut him off. He seemed taken aback. He expected a fight or an argument, but I was calm as if nothing had happened. I knew how to do that well; I'd seen my mom do it many times when my father came home.

"Oh, nothing much. I had a few private training sessions, the usual stuff. What's that?" he asked, poking his food suspiciously with a chopstick.

"Chicken."

"You ordered chicken for me? That's a first," he says, surprised. When I moved in, I made it clear that I didn't want any dead animals in the house.

"Yes, don't you like chicken?" I asked.

"I do," he said cautiously. "I just thought... Never mind. Thanks. He put a slice in his mouth. Uhm. It's good. Different, but good. Where did you get it?"

"There's this new Chinese place that I wanted to try. Bamboo Palace or something. It's a new chain in town."

“Chinese?” He stopped chewing. “Didn’t you hear what they say?”

“What?” I asked innocently.

“There are rumors.”

“What rumors?”

“About the meat, they’re serving.”

“Oh, the dog meat rumor,” I laughed, but my laughter sounded ominous, not cheerful. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

“No, I don’t. I mean, I don’t know.” He resumed chewing. His forehead was all wrinkled as if he was thinking intensely.

Poor Christian, I could almost hear the wheels spinning in his head as he was trying to figure out what to say. He is good looking and very fit, but his intellect isn’t his forte.

“Are you sure this is a reputable place?” he finally asked. “Have you checked the reviews? What’s this dish even called? Are you sure this is real chicken?”

“You mean the one that has feathers and wings, and feels pain when they hang them upside down before they cut its throat and let it bleed to death?” I said and shook my head. “No. I don’t think that’s that kind of chicken. But it looks good.”

He looked at me, disgusted.

“They didn’t have a menu in English, just Chinese, with pictures alongside the dishes. I asked them to recommend something for a chicken lover. I just looked at the pictures on the menu to order.”

“So you don’t even know what this is?” he spat out chunks of food back on his plate. “It could be... anything.”

“Even if that’s dog meat, which I assure you it’s not, what’s the difference?” I asked, battling my eyelashes innocently.

“What do you mean? Of course, it makes a difference,” he said with anger. “Why are you talking like that to me? You’re acting weird. Are you angry with me or something?”

I crossed my arms on my chest. “Yeah, something.”

“Is it about what happened today, because if it is—”

“Okay. You’re right. It’s about you and that Zumba bimbo having fun in our bedroom today.”

“I told you it was nothing. And Anastasia is not a bimbo. You should have joined us and have some fries with ketchup or something. She’s really nice.”

“Sorry I couldn’t join the party. Maybe another time. Besides, I didn’t want to intrude on your private training session,” I said with

sarcasm.

“We were just having lunch. We didn’t do anything, I swear. We didn’t have sex if that’s what bothers you. We just had a bite to eat.”

“And you think that’s nothing? Ordering from Big Freaking Chicken and laughing about me behind my back,” I hissed.

“Oh, so that’s what this is about? It’s just about the food?”

“No, Christian. It’s not *just about the food*. It’s about you being a liar and a cheater.”

“Okay, fine. You’re such a self-righteous…” he paused and hesitated.

“I’m such a self-righteous what?”

“Never mind. I’m not going to finish that chicken.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “But don’t worry. It’s not dog’s meat. It comes from the Bamboo Veggie Garden; I just remembered the name. It’s one hundred percent vegan, so you didn’t eat a dog or a chicken. So relax. It’s plant-based meat.”

Christian rolled his eyes. “You know what your problem is, Olivia? You don’t care about people. All you care about is those cats, dogs, cows, and chickens. Did you ever even care about me?”

I ignored the question and started getting ready to leave.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“I think I better go now. The dogs won’t bother you anymore. And neither will my strange eating habits,” I said.

It was weird how calm I was. I should be more upset. Crying, screaming, making a scene. Maybe there is something wrong with me and my emotions. Maybe I’m a little bit like my mother, after all.

Another one bites the dust; I sighed as I drove off.

Why do those things always happen to me?

Why don’t they happen to somebody else?

Not that I’d wish that on anybody. But why me—again?

Never again! I’m done with men, I promised myself. It was six months ago. And I was going to keep my promise, no matter what.

So when Ryan Kowalski entered the office, or what was left of it, I had no intention to succumb to his charm.

9.

AFTER MAKING SURE THAT THE CATS ARE OKAY, I go back to the office. I'm curious about what's going on in there. I'm kind of hoping that the fireman is still there. And he is.

Everyone except Penelope and Maria is gone.

"Are you sure you want Ruffy? He may not be ready for adoption. He needs someone who'll know how to handle him," I hear Penelope say. "Olivia is in charge of adoptions. She'll explain everything."

Her phone rings and she steps out to answer the call.

Ryan turns to me.

He wants to adopt Ruffy? Why?

"He came from a puppy mill, which means he may be messed up for life," I say.

Ryan shrugs. "I wouldn't worry about that. I'm great with dogs. They just love me," he says and smiles disarmingly, making Maria, the new volunteer, giggle. Oh my goodness, he's so full of himself. He must know what effect he has on women, no doubt about it.

"The previous owner complained about him being a pain in the neck. Barking, biting, destroying things around the house," I continue.

"Well, what did they expect? It's a dog," he chuckles. "If they wanted something soft and cuddly, they should have gotten a plush toy. Right? Seriously, I don't mind. Like I'm saying, I have experience with dogs, and I think he likes me too."

"You realize that we still have to vet you and that once you're approved and take him home, you won't be able to change your mind and return him."

"Of course!" He scoffs. "I have no intention of doing that. So how long is the procedure, and what should I do?"

"It takes several weeks to a couple of months. You have to visit the dog several times to interact with him. Then, depending on how you do, we'll review your application and give you our decision."

He opens his eyes wide. "You can't be serious. I thought you wanted people to adopt, especially after what happened."

"We have to make sure the animals are in good hands. We can't just give them to anybody."

"I'm not just anybody," he stares at me intensely, piercing me with

his blue eyes.

“You know what I mean,” I mumble. Maybe I didn’t say it right, but who does he think he is, anyway? “It will give you time to think over your decision as well.”

He keeps staring at me, which makes me feel self-conscious. I bite my lip. *Am I blushing? Stop it, Olivia!*

“There’s nothing to think about. I know I want that dog, and if he has issues, he shouldn’t spend another day here. He should be home where someone can take care of him,” he says with that smug expression on his face that’s so irritating.

Why does he want that dog so badly?

“Have you considered other dogs?” I ask. “It might take less time if—”

“No. I want him, and that’s it. I feel we’re meant for each other,” he interrupts me. His phone beeps and he reaches into his pocket. He glances at the display and frowns. “I have to go now, but I’ll be back to see how Ruffy is doing. We can talk more about this then.”

I shoot him an annoyed look. “Well, maybe. But we already have someone interested in him.”

“Is that so?” Ryan raises his eyebrows. “I’m not seeing people flocking to adopt your cats and dogs.” He takes a look around, rotating his head slowly for dramatic effect. He really is super annoying. “I’m the one who saved you, and I’m the one he trusts.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, so? Maybe you’re not the right fit,” I hiss, irritated by his over-confidence. “Look, what you did is admirable, but the coverage was a little bit over the top, don’t you think?”

He looks at me, taken aback. I bet he isn’t used to such treatment.

“How do you mean?” he asks.

“I mean—” I hesitate. “You were all over the front pages and second pages, and all over the Internet, and it’s great, But the fact is no one cares what happens to those animals after they’ve been saved.”

He keeps staring at me, his blue eyes open wide, so I continue. “Plus, if you aren’t vegan, then you contribute to the suffering and violent death of hundreds of animals for your pleasure and amusement. And that’s not okay,” I gush.

Finally, Ryan blinks and asks, “Isn’t that a matter of personal choice what a person eats? Aren’t vegans a bit self-righteous wanting to judge everybody based on their way of living and eating?”

I cross my arms on my chest and frown. “The color of your car is a

personal choice; torturing and killing another being, it's not."

Maria looks up at me from her computer in shock, and I just shrug.

"Fine. Suit yourself. No wonder you're having problems placing these animals in good homes," he says when he's already in the door.

As Ryan is leaving, Barbara and Eric return. Barbara looks after Ryan and asks, "Is that Ryan Kowalski? What did he want?"

"He asked about Ruffy and said he wanted to adopt him," I reply.

"He wants to adopt Ruffy? That's wonderful!" Barbara says with glee. "Did you tell him about his issues?"

"Of course."

"He said he couldn't leave him in the shelter to die. Not after he risked his life to save him," Maria says, looking at me with reproach. I shrug and ignore her stare.

Barbara claps her hands. "I'm so happy Ruffy will have a home."

"Only, I'm not sure if he'll be back because Olivia practically chased him away, scaring him of our adoption procedure," Maria says.

"You did what?" Barbara looks at me, appalled.

I frown. "We still have to vet him. Hero or not, he must go through the whole procedure, just like everybody else," I explain.

The truth was the first owners returned him because he was so ill-behaved. The second said they couldn't take care of him any longer because they had to sell their house, and the apartment they had to move into didn't accept dogs. Then they admitted that the dog was a pain in the neck; he barked and bit them and didn't like to be cuddled. It was something they didn't expect, even though we warned them that he needed special care. And with the third—there were rumors that they were abusing him, so animal services had to step in, and now Ruffy's back where he started.

Barbara nods. "Well, that's something that we need to discuss. Maybe we're too strict."

I look at her, alarmed. "What are you saying? That we should be less rigid? Accept anyone who just wants a pet? Such an irresponsible attitude would do more harm than good."

Barbara sighs heavily. "We're running out of space. People keep bringing us animals, but where are we going to put them all? Who's going to pay for their food and medicines? We're well past our capacity, and we don't have any money left. Insurance will only cover so much."

"Maybe I'll adopt him," I blurt out.

Barbara shakes her head. "You can't adopt every dog that has

issues. Especially since you already have three. You can't save them all."

She's right. I'm already having problems finding a place to live, but another dog won't make a big difference. "I'm just saying that we shouldn't rush through the adoption process. We should be careful not to make a mistake," I insist.

"And I'm saying that maybe we shouldn't be as rigid," Barbara retorts. "If someone comes to us and tells us that they want to adopt, then we should make it super easy for them, especially if it's someone respectable. Someone who has what it takes and really wants to help."

I shrug. "Yeah, sure. Everybody says so, and then the dog is back before you know it. Most people can't be trusted," I mutter. I finish my coffee and get up. "I'll check on Ruffy and see how he's doing."

Barbara raises her hand. "Wait. Before you go, I have something to tell you," she says.

10.

"WE MAY HAVE TO CLOSE DOWN THE SHELTER," Barbara announces, once she has our full attention. "As most of you already know, we don't have the money to rebuild the facilities while caring for all these animals. We need to schedule a meeting of the shelter employees and volunteers so I can tell everybody the news."

"What? When?" We look at each other in shock.

I knew the Kind Heart Animal shelter was struggling, but closing? That was never an option!

At least that's what I thought.

"The building is a total mess, and we're running off supplies. Some animals are still recovering and need medical attention. I know you're doing your best, and I'm grateful to all of you, but we must face the truth," Barbara says.

"Don't we have insurance?" Eric asks.

"The shelter was insured, and we're planning to rebuild, but we may not get enough. There are rumors that we set the fire ourselves to

get the money, and that's insurance fraud."

"That's outrageous!"

"The investigation may take weeks or months, and we just don't have the time. In the meantime, the donations are barely enough to provide treatment for the affected animals, transportation of animals in need of relocation, and replacements for the veterinary supplies that went up in smoke."

I shake my head. "What will happen to the animals if we close?"

"We'll have to move them to other shelters," Barbara says.

"But who will take them? All shelters are overcrowded, and they have to euthanize the animals to make room for new ones," I say. "Meanwhile, the breeders are happily breeding new cats and dogs, selling them online and through the pet stores, making loads of money, and laughing all the way to the bank. They don't care what happens to those animals later. When, in fact, they should be the ones responsible for paying for their care. They are breeding them faster than we can save them. The whole system is a disgrace."

Barbara sighs and slumps heavily on the chair.

"We cannot just close down like that!" I say. "There must be something we can do."

"We're out of money, Olivia, and that's the truth. I don't even know if we can make it till the end of this year," Barbara says grimly.

"We can get more donations," Eric suggests. "Or find new sponsors. Surely we can find someone who'll help us."

"Donations? From whom?" Barbara asks. "Besides, the donations that we've been getting from people are just not enough."

"So we must get more creative. Get new sponsors. Maybe set up a campaign online. People want to help, but you have to ask them. I'll look into that," Penelope offers.

"This is so frustrating. Why do we even have to keep asking?" I say bitterly. "We're trying to convince people to do the right thing by supporting the homeless animals. Meanwhile, the breeders and pet shops are doing great, breeding and selling animals, creating the very problem we have to deal with. Truth is we're cleaning up their messes, but people don't care. Everybody only thinks about themselves."

The room falls silent.

"You don't understand; people have mortgages, kids in college, bills to pay," Barbara replies. "You're young and with no family obligations."

"Right, so who cares what happens to some homeless dogs and

cats? It's not their problem, is that what you mean?" I snarl. I know I'm not being fair. Barbara is the oldest in our group; her kids grown up and gone, she devotes her whole heart to this place. She's the last person I should be shouting at, and yet, I can't help but vent my frustration at her.

"Surely, that's not true. What about those firemen and everybody else who's been helping us in the past few days?" Penelope says. "This means people do care."

"Oh, yeah, let's not forget about Ryan Kowalski, who risked his life to save those animals! Saving dogs and cats from a burning building!" I sneer. "And now thousands of people are watching him on television and sharing the story on social media." I put my hands on my hips and continue, "Sure, people like to watch that kind of thing. And then they pat themselves on the back, thinking, oh, look, if it weren't for humans, that poor creature would perish. When the truth is—if it weren't for humans, that creature wouldn't need to be rescued. All these animals wouldn't be in that situation in the first place. We, humans, are the problem. And I'm not just talking about that poor dog, but billions of animals tortured and killed every year for food and entertainment."

"Olivia, you're not helping," Penelope interrupts me and turns to Barbara, "Don't we have any other options?"

Barbara spreads her arms in a gesture of hopelessness. "I looked into everything, and I don't see how we can continue. We need money to run the shelter. Food, medications, paying the vets—it adds up. And money is something that we just don't have."

Penelope keeps chewing on her pen intently, which she does when she is thinking hard. It's a habit that makes all the pens and pencils in the shelter look disgusting.

"Stop it," I say with frustration.

Suddenly Penelope jumps up and says, "Maybe there is something we can do." Her brain seems to be in overdrive as she keeps on chewing.

We all look at her expectantly, waiting to hear the genius idea.

"But first, Olivia will have to apologize to Ryan and help him with the adoption process," she says.

I turn to her, surprised.

"What? No way!" I gasp.

"Way! I heard about what happened, and you need to fix it. Do you

want to save the shelter or not?”

I nod. Of course, I do.

But why should I be the one apologizing?

What kind of plan is that?

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