

PERFECT PAIRING



THEA LAMBERT

Bonus Story

MOUTHWATERING SERIES, BOOK FOUR

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CHAPTER 1



Artie watched as his friend Willa took a taste of the fondue she ordered. She chewed the melted cheesy goodness thoughtfully before swallowing and sighed. “This dish is definitely going in my notebook.”

“The recipe?” Artie asked.

“No. The experience,” she replied as though the answer were obvious. “The taste of smooth, nutty gruyere, the delicate scent and flavor of the white wine and kirsch, the texture of the chewy bread. It’s truly a feast for the senses.” She turned to Artie’s friend and business partner Cade and said in a soft, come-hither voice, “Care for a taste?”

Her boyfriend returned the intimate voice in kind. “Sure.”

Willa placed a piece of French baguette onto the skewer and dipped it into her individual sized fondue pot. She slowly stirred, eying Cade the whole time as she gathered up the concoction. After twirling the skewer, she held out the piece to his mouth, and as he bent his head to take it, his hand pushed back a strand of her dark hair.

Artie stared at his plate of salmon to avoid making eye contact with the couple. All through the evening, he’d been treated to The Cade and Willa Show, the smiles, the murmuring, touching each other’s hair, stroking each other’s hands.

Worst dinner theater ever.

THEA LAMBERT

He felt like a voyeur. No, Artie thought. It was worse than that. He was an envious voyeur. Ever since Willa and Cade got back together, Artie noticed that it was becoming harder and harder to hang out with the couple. They hadn't tried to shut him out, just the opposite. They invited him to go hiking or cycling or to watch the latest episode of *Ted Lasso* with them. But watching their closeness and companionship was plain...sickening.

Yeah, Artie thought, that was the word.

Later, as the trio left the restaurant, Willa said, "Hey, we thought we'd go to the AFS, catch the late-night feature. You interested?"

"What's the movie?"

Cade shrugged and said, "All you need to know is there will be subtitles."

"Philistine," Willa murmured.

"No. I just happen to know Artie hates watching films with subtitles."

"Why don't you come?" Willa asked. "You can prove Cade wrong. We'd love to have you tag along."

The phrase "tag along" was enough for Artie say, "Thanks, but I'll pass. Have fun."

Willa grabbed his arm. "No, don't go. We can do something else. I've always wanted to try a cigar lounge—"

"We are not going to a cigar lounge," Cade declared.

"It's an adventure."

"I don't consider flirting with blackened lungs an adventure."

"Guys!" Artie interrupted. "I've got a busy day tomorrow."

Cade said, "But it's your day off."

"Which is why I have to be up early and take care of a shitload of errands I couldn't do during the week. Thanks anyway. I'll see ya."

He escaped from the happy couple and stopped at a market for a six pack before heading home. As Artie sat back on his recliner and popped the top of his beer, he went over the rough evening. He hoped that the next time he saw his friends, there would be less PDA and less pity for him. Although he was feeling a lot of self-pity tonight.

PERFECT PAIRING

Lately, life seemed stale. Nothing had changed. He still felt fulfilled with his work as a gym owner and personal trainer; he still enjoyed the attentions of women. But there was something missing.

When he returned to work two days later, Willa and Cade were there. Together. He had a bad feeling that the issue of companionship would be brought up once more and he'd have to grin and bear it. Sure enough Willa did. However, she took an unusual avenue and made a surprising suggestion.

"You need a pet," she said.

"A pet?"

"Yeah, like a dog. Face it. Lately, your love life has been non-existent—"

"And you're proposing bestiality will fix it?"

Willa's lips pursed. "Don't be a sarcastic ass. Just listen. Like I said, your love life is zilch and you want companionship, but you don't want to glom onto anyone out of desperation." She quickly added, "Even though we love having you hang out with us. Anyway, a dog can provide that companionship. You can exercise with it, take it on errands, give it attention and care. You can even talk about your innermost feelings to a creature that will never reveal your secrets. Taking care of living beings does that. Plus, it is a great chick magnet."

"I never imagined you using that term."

"But it is. It really is. You should consider getting one."

"I'm not getting a dog," he said and walked away, refusing to listen to any more of Willa's arguments.

Despite his declaration, Artie found himself returning to Willa's suggestion all morning. But there was a lot to consider. He worried about the time and commitment he'd have to make. He wondered how to pick the best dog for his lifestyle or how to properly train it. Plus, with all his hours at the gym, wouldn't it be cruel to leave a dog alone for so many hours a day? But the yearning continued to creep into his brain. Growing up, he'd always wanted a dog, a loyal companion and buddy. But with a large family of six, his parents never wanted pets. Now, he could finally fulfill that dream.

THEA LAMBERT

He was still considering the idea as he went on his daily afternoon Starbucks run. He opened the entrance door and ran into someone he realized he hadn't seen for a while.

A petite woman sporting dirty blonde hair in a messy bun stood behind the cash register. Her large doe eyes couldn't hide behind colorful cat eyeglasses. She gave him a big toothy grin. "Hey, Artie."

Artie grinned back and felt his spirits rise. "Ophelia, it's great to see you," he said, realizing the truth of his statement.

He ordered his daily afternoon coffee from Ophelia. At the beginning, they exchanged ordinary, banal conversation about the weather or how the Cowboys were doing. It wasn't until he and Cade were about to sever ties as business partners and friends, however, that Ophelia and Artie had their first serious conversation. That day, he had been staring out the store front window for nearly an hour when Ophelia's voice startled him.

"Okay," she declared, "I can't stand it any longer. What are you looking at? Don't tell me nothing because you've been clenching your jaw while doing it."

He pointed toward Cade. "You see the guy out there? Pacing by that car?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's my car and my business partner."

She blew out a breath. "I thought you were about to say it was some carjacker."

"A carjacker might be easier to deal with. I'm trying to avoid Cade. I'm not interested in talking to him for a while."

"Why?"

"We got into a major blowup, and I'm not ready to face him yet. In fact, I don't even know if I want to keep up the partnership."

"What happened?"

"He implied that I don't contribute to our partnership, that I don't pull my weight at the gym we own."

"That's harsh."

"And a lie."

PERFECT PAIRING

“Oh, I was sure of that,” she said, making Artie feel vindicated. “So, he’s either clueless or jealous.”

“No, not that,” he replied, rubbing the back of his neck, “he just doesn’t appreciate all that I do.”

“Well, drop him. You don’t need that.”

“He’s my friend.”

Ophelia snorted. “Some friend.”

“No,” Artie admitted, “He’s actually been a good friend over the years.”

She gave him a piercing stare before saying, “So, you’re just preternaturally a wimp.”

How did he suddenly get in her crosshairs? “What? No?”

“Come on, dude. You’re just going to let him stand by your car while you hide from him? How’s that going to help your partnership? If you haven’t told him how you feel and what needs to change, then you’re giving in. Some people are just ignorant. They don’t see what’s in front of them. You need to make this Cade understand that you aren’t going to take his crap. Set up some boundaries, some rules.”

“You’re right,” Artie muttered before getting lost for a moment in Ophelia’s eyes. They were so big, so astute. Dark pools you could drown in. “You’re right. That’s the only way to fix this, right? Open communication.”

“It might not fix it,” she said. “But at least you stand a chance of improving the situation instead of ignoring the issues, hoping it’ll get better on its own.”

Artie stood taller. “You’re right.” He walked to the door and said, “Thanks, I’m going to talk to him right now. Tell him what I want.”

“Better yet, write it down,” she advised.

A few minutes later, Artie returned to the store with his friend. Cade ordered two Americanos while Artie grabbed a bunch of napkins. Shortly after, the two sat at a table speaking intently and Artie writing on the napkins.

Those napkins were reviewed and signed, he later told Ophelia. And then placed in frames in the gym office.

“Thanks,” he’d told her. “You gave me good advice.”

And she continued to do so ever since. He’d have a problem. She’d give him advice. They often sat together as Ophelia ate her lunch and

THEA LAMBERT

talked about Cade and Artie's struggle to find a second location for their gym, debated the best way to attract more guests to their gyms, spoke about how to make his employees happier.

Funny, Artie now realized, they never talked much about her life.

"You haven't been here for a while," he said. "Where you been?"

"Just got back from visiting my sister in Kentucky. She had a baby and I helped her out for the first two weeks."

It had only been two weeks? It felt longer. He said, "Congratulations. First time auntie?"

"Yes, and he's adorable." She took her phone out from her back pocket and showed him a photo of her new nephew. "See?"

All Artie noticed was a red and scrunched Yoda face along with a little hand doing what appeared to be the Vulcan salute. The baby was mixing up his cinema metaphors.

"Yeah, cute."

"So," Ophelia asked as she put away her phone, "What'll you have? The usual?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Ophelia rang him up and while waiting for his coffee, he sat at a table close by a young, flirtatious couple. Their behavior reminded him of Willa and Cade, and he switched seats to keep from watching the display. But the other chair pointed him toward an elderly pair who, not only were ignoring their cellphones, but also were engaging in animated conversation as they held hands.

He scowled at the geriatric display. What the hell was happening in the world?

Ophelia brought Artie's coffee directly to his table, surprising him.

"Thanks. You didn't have to do that."

"I know, but you seem kind of preoccupied." She hesitated a moment before asking, "Are you okay?"

Artie was about to reply that he was fine, but his brain short-circuited, and he said, "Not really. I've been feeling kind of out of it lately. Especially the last couple of weeks."

"Work?"

PERFECT PAIRING

He shook his head. “Just a little alone. And lonely. A friend says I might need the companionship of a pet.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

Ophelia said, “That’s a great idea. A fur baby is there to bring comfort and be a buddy. You should definitely do it.”

“I’m not sure.”

“There are tons who need help, Artie. Especially in this state. Over a hundred thousand dogs were euthanized in Texas last year. There’s only a fortunate few who are shipped to states like Indiana, Tennessee, and Iowa, that have far more no-kill shelters.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I used to volunteer at a shelter before my boyfriend Scott began working on his Master’s degree in Psychology.”

Artie looked at her in confusion as he wondered what her boyfriend’s attending college had to do with volunteering.

She evidently thought his expression was about her lecture, not her revelation. “Sorry, I wasn’t trying to guilt you into pet adoption. You need to think long and hard on it.” She paused a moment then added, “And if you decide to do it, I’d be happy to help you find a dog.”

“You would?”

“Sure.”

“That would be great. If you have time tomorrow, we could go—”

“Hold up, Flash. You said you only started considering adoption this morning. Give it some more thought for the next few days, better yet a week, and get back to me. I promise if you change your mind, I won’t think less of you. This is about the animals, not my ego.”



Driving home, Ophelia went over her conversation with Artie. She didn’t know why she made the offer to help him find a dog. She was busy enough with work and helping Scott with his studies. But she had taken one look at Artie’s handsomely sad face, and she wanted to help him. Her boyfriend Scott always chastised her for being so gullible and

THEA LAMBERT

lending a helping hand to everyone, but that's what she enjoyed doing. And conversing with Artie all these months, she knew he was a good guy.

Funny how until he walked into the store this afternoon, she hadn't realized how much she'd missed him while she'd been away in Kentucky.

She opened the front door to the sound of SportsCenter on and called out, "I'm home."

"In here," Scott said.

She walked into the bedroom where Scott smiled and said, "I'm glad you're back."

"Me too," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Do you know where my lucky socks are?"

She pulled back to look at him. "What?"

"My lucky socks. The lime green ones with the flying tacos on them? I've got a pick-up game in fifteen."

"I thought you have a midterm tomorrow?"

"I do, but I've been studying all day and need to decompress." He pointed to the unmade bed with one of his textbooks lying on it. "I'll be back in a couple of hours. We'll have dinner and you can test me on the material afterward." He kissed her on the cheek and laughed. "You probably know it better than I do."



A week later, Artie entered Starbucks and spotted Ophelia eating her lunch at one of the tables. He walked up to her and announced, "I've given it a lot of thought and do want to adopt a dog."

"That's great, Artie."

"So, I wondered when you and I could do some investigating at the shelters."

"Wait, there's more to this. You need to tell me what you're looking for as well as your lifestyle so we can determine the type of dog you want. Have a seat."

Artie hesitated. "I don't want to interrupt your break."

"Sit."

PERFECT PAIRING

Artie pulled out a chair across from Ophelia and sat.

“Stay,” she ordered with a chuckle.

Artie said, “You crack yourself up, huh?”

“I’ve always wanted to say that.” She picked up her phone and said, “Let me take some notes. Okay, is there a particular age you are looking for?”

“Um, I’d rather have an adult dog. One that’s already had some basic training. At least two or three years old.”

“Sex?”

“Doesn’t matter to me. I’d want them spayed or neutered anyway.”

“Have you considered the size you want?”

“I wouldn’t want a tiny dog. Medium to large would be better.”

“How active?”

“Very. I’m a physical guy, and I’d like to take it running or hiking, play frisbee.”

“How long would you be gone every day? What’s your home like?”

“I live in a townhouse with a dog park across the street. But I’m at work a lot. It’s a necessity of the job. Cade and I discussed it, and we agreed it could hang out at the gym in the office. What do you think?”

Ophelia put her cell phone down and smiled. “I think that’s a great idea and you will make a very good doggy daddy.”

Artie winced. “Please don’t call me that.”

“Who’s a good doggy daddy? Who’s a good doggy daddy?”

As she laughed, Artie said, “This dog is not going to make me a wuss.”

“We’ll see. So, you up for an excursion to some shelters this Saturday?”

“Yeah, if you have time.”

“I do.”

That Saturday, they met outside Starbucks and took her car to visit the shelters. The first one was located in a building that looked like it was constructed in the fifties, a cinder-block structure painted a dull café au lait. There were assorted flowering shrubs in front, but the building had a depressing look to it. Or maybe it was because of the lonely, depressed animals inside.

Ophelia said with sarcasm, “Gorgeous mid-century modern huh?”

“Not your taste?”

THEA LAMBERT

“No. I prefer older buildings that have character.” Her eyes took on a dreamy look. “Someday, I’d love a home with arched niches or gorgeous Mexican tile in the fireplace surround. And a big backyard. With lots of trees.”

“For all the dogs you’ll adopt.”

“It’s what I grew up with, so I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Artie smiled and said, “Sounds like you had an ideal childhood.”

“I wouldn’t call it ideal. My folks divorced when my sister and I were four. But my stepparents are good people, and we always felt included in both families, even with stepsiblings or when the half-siblings came along. We were all raised to be a team, to help each other out.”

Opening the entrance door for her, Artie said, “That’s a real nice code to live by.”

As they entered the shelter, the commotion of numerous barking dogs assailed their ears. Walking to the cages, the echo from the cement, the scent of disinfectant, and the grayness of the surroundings and of the dogs’ expressions affected Artie more than he thought it would. They stopped at each cage and read the attached biography and talked and petted the animals. There were a few that matched his criteria, but when they met in a meeting room, he enjoyed their company but didn’t feel he’d met the “one.”

They visited two other shelters that day with the same result. As they left the last one, Ophelia observed, “You seem tense.”

“I’m overwhelmed,” Artie said as they sat on a bench. Embarrassed, he added, “I suppose I seem too picky especially considering how many dogs need help.”

“Don’t say that. This will be your first experience having a pet. You need to feel totally confident and comfortable. I’d rather you be very choosy instead of picking any random dog and eventually returning it.”

“I’d adopt a dozen if I had the resources.”

“Me too,” Ophelia said.

Artie stared at her before saying, “I’m surprised you don’t have a pet, not even a foster one. How come?”

PERFECT PAIRING

“Scott and I have too many obligations right now, between my jobs and his education.”

“Jobs? Plural?”

“Yeah. I’ve got the barista gig and then a job helping my downstairs neighbor with her home business. It’s a small side hustle, but every bit helps.”

“So,” Artie said, “Once Scott’s finished with his Masters, he’ll start working and you’ll start on your education.”

“Actually, he’ll then work on his MFT.”

Artie’s face must have expressed his shock because she continued, “He was already a junior in college when we got together. It made sense that we should work toward his completing his degree and licensing first. Then we’ll work on getting my degree.”

“What do you want to major in?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Business maybe? It’s a ways off while working on Scott’s education.”

“So long as you both keep to the plan.”

Clearly irritated, she raised her voice. “We’re a team.”

Artie made no comment to that statement. “It’s been a long day. I’ve kept you long enough.”

“Yeah.” She paused a few moments and added, “When you’re ready for another visit, give me a call.”

Artie felt a rush of relief. She wasn’t too angry at him. “I will. Thanks.”



“I’m home,” Ophelia called out as she entered her apartment. “Scott?”

“Right here,” a voice said from the couch.

Ophelia walked up to see Scott lying on his back, textbook resting on his stomach. She brushed back the hair from his eyes and said, “What’s up, buttercup?”

“I’m taking a rest from reading this chapter. It’s so dry and confusing. I thought you said it was pretty straightforward?”

“I thought it was. I took a lot of notes in the margins. Didn’t they help?”

“Not really. Your scribbling was hard to read.”

THEA LAMBERT

"Sorry. The DSM-5 handbook could've helped you. Where is it?"

Scott shrugged. "It's around here somewhere. I'm starving. What'll we have for dinner? Maybe you could whip us up a couple of your famous tuna melts and we can go over your chapter notes afterward?"

"Sure, Scott."



The next adoption excursion took place the following weekend. As Ophelia got into his car, Artie said, "How do you feel about driving over to Bryan? I know it's a couple of hours away, but there's a dog I saw on their website that I'm interested in."

"Let's do it."

As he opened up the car's sunroof and turned the radio up, Ophelia said, "I'm always in the mood for a road trip."

"Me too. The breeze blowing, your favorite tunes playing. And the best trips are those that have no particular destination."

She twisted her body towards Artie. "Those are my favorites too. Scott isn't into them though. He considers it a waste of valuable time."

"Everyone's different," Artie said diplomatically. "But I am partial to those who can find adventure out of any experience."

"I agree," she said, nodding her head and studying him for several moments. She looked like she wanted to say something more but changed her mind before turning toward the window.

The two-hour drive went by quickly. They discussed their jobs, their plans for the summer, and the dog Artie was interested in. Sooner than he expected, they were at the shelter and about to meet the German Shorthaired Pointer and Lab mix he'd seen online.

"This is Lola," the shelter worker said.

She was a glossy chocolate colored dog except for the ticking on her legs and lower chest that made her look as though she was standing in a perpetual snow flurry. But what really made Lola stand out was two white spots over her eyes.

Ophelia laughed. "Look at those 'eyebrows.' They make her look like some perpetually startled old woman."

But old she wasn't in terms of her enthusiasm and speed as she and Artie began to play.

"She's four," Ophelia observed. "That's a little older than you wanted. Is that a problem?"

"No, she's got the maturity I want but is a speed demon."

"You've got that look," Ophelia said.

"The look?"

"The fond look I've seen before with adopters who've found their fur baby."

Artie smiled. "She's perfect."

He soon filled out the paperwork and the dog was his.

"You're a good girl, Lola," Ophelia said as she petted the dog.

"I can't call her that," Artie said. "Lola's my sister's name."

"What do you plan to call her then?"

He shrugged. "Spot?"

Ophelia shook her head, and the suggestions flew back and forth.

"What else, what else?" Ophelia mused. "Something after her markings, maybe?"

"I suggested Spot earlier, remember?"

"It's got to be more original. Freckles? Speckles? Sprinkles? Whip? You know, as in whipped cream. It would go with those two spots over her eyes." She grabbed Artie's arm. "Oh, I have it. Dot."

He shook his head. "No, I can't do that. Dot's my grandma's name."

"Just how big a family do you have?"

Artie's eye grew round. "Dollop." The dog turned toward Artie as he said it again.

"That's it. It's perfect."

"Dollop. I love it."

"So does she," Artie replied as Dollop laid her head on his shoulder.

The return trip took a little longer as Artie wanted to make sure Dollop didn't get car sick and that there were plenty of bathroom breaks.

When they arrived at Ophelia's apartment building, she said, "Hey, if you need help with supplies, we could hit Target right now. It's close by—"

"Not necessary. I picked up some supplies when I first decided to adopt."

"Oh. Okay." She opened the car door and said, "Would you like to come over for dinner later?"

Artie felt a flutter of excitement but didn't want to assume anything. Instead, he asked, "Won't Scott mind?"

"He's out of town with some of his old high school buddies. They get together for a weekend every couple of months. I'd love your company."

"Well then sure."

"And don't forget to bring Dollop, of course."

Artie wouldn't have left his new pal alone on her first day of adoption. Still, his excitement about the invitation deflated a bit. "How could I forget?"

A few hours later, Artie stood with Dollop outside Ophelia's apartment door. He hesitated to knock. Over the course of the afternoon, he considered cancelling several times but couldn't do it. He wanted to see her again, study her surroundings, try to decipher what made her tick. What made her so interesting to him lately. A few minutes at Starbucks everyday didn't feel like enough.

While he continued to dither, Dollop took matters into her own paws and barked. Artie heard the light clicking of heels and the door opened. Ophelia gave him a smile and said, "Hey, I'm glad you came."

God, Artie thought. He loved her slight overbite.

"Hey, Ophelia. You look great. I've never seen you with your hair down or in a dress before," referring to the lacy white sundress she wore.

"It's not part of my work wardrobe."

He lifted a small baker's box. "I brought dessert. Hope you like lemon bars."

"I love 'em. Come on in. Hey, Dollop."

Walking into the apartment, a smell assailed him, knocking him back. What was it, Artie wondered, taking another sniff. It smelled metallic. He looked at the pots cooking on the stove. Was one of them burning?

Ophelia noticed him staring at the pots and said, "I made chili. Not Texas chili, but the kind with beans."

Artie considered if the stench was the beans or maybe the result of Ophelia eating some beans and shook his head. No, that wasn't it.

She said, "It's almost ready. Have a seat."

The smell became more intense as Artie walked toward the kitchen table.

"You want a beer?"

Artie nodded, not trusting his body's reaction if he opened his mouth to speak. She brought him a bottle and then turned to give one of the pots a stir.

"Everything will be ready in a few minutes."

Now that he was sitting at the table, close to the stove, the smell was even stronger. His throat began to tighten and his mouth started to salivate. He clamped his mouth shut, praying he wouldn't retch. How was he going to get out of eating? Desperate for any reason to make an excuse and leave, his eyes darted to Dollop. Damn dog looked perfectly fine. Some best friend.

Ophelia ladled out the chili into two bowls and placed them on the table.

"Hope you're hungry," she trilled.

He picked up a spoon and stared at the innocuous looking bowl. Beads of sweat formed on the back of his neck as he brought the spoon closer and closer to the fetid meal. Frantic, he said, "I can't—I think I might be allergic to something in the chili."

"What?"

"I don't know. But there's something that—the smell is making me nauseous," he confessed. "It's this awful metallic smell."

Her mouth twitched. "Like copper."

"Yeah, or blood."

She laughed and said, "Artie, that smell is the dog food I'm making for Dollop."

"Dog food?"

She walked over to the stove and removed the cover of another pot. The smell immediately became worse.

Artie said, "You want my dog to eat that?"

"It's got a little beef liver in it. Believe me, she'll love it. Plus, it's good for her. And humans too."

Artie decided there'd be no chance he'd ever find out. "So, there's no liver in the chili?"

She raised her hand like she was being sworn in court. "I promise."

He gave her a weak smile of relief. "Okay, then."

"How about we take our dinner over to the sofa?" Ophelia suggested.

Once they were far from the homemade dog food, the evening improved. The chili and cornbread were delicious, the company fine, and the two ate, drank, and conversed for a long while. Funny how earlier they talked for hours on their road trip yet still had more to say to one another, Artie thought.

Once they finished their meal, they did the dishes together. Ophelia then changed into some walking shoes, and they took Dollop for a long walk while they continued to talk about anything and everything. He was mesmerized by her voice, her eyes, the way her hair glowed like burnished gold under the streetlights. It was almost midnight by the time they returned to her apartment. Ophelia handed Artie several plastic tubs of dog food.

"Normally," she said, "I'd tell someone not to mix the containers up with their own food. But I have a feeling that your superior olfactory sense won't let you make that mistake."

"Me neither," Artie agreed.

"Oh, and here is the recipe," she said, holding out a notecard, "so you can make it for Dollop."

Artie accepted the handwritten recipe and smiled as he took in her delicate cursive writing filled with fat curls and loops. It was happy and fun just like her.

"So, thanks for coming," Ophelia said.

"Thanks for inviting us. I had a great time tonight. The whole day actually."

"Me too. I'm glad you came," she replied.

They stared into each other's eyes and everything but each other melted away. Unconsciously, Artie moved closer to her and leaned in. Ophelia began to do the same when she suddenly faltered, and her doe eyes widened in shock. She backed away and said, "And Dollop too, of course."

Ophelia got down on her knees and gave Dollop a hug and kiss.

Artie watched and wished he was his dog.



Ophelia finished brushing her teeth and turned off the bathroom light. She picked up her phone from its charger, and for the third time since Artie left, made a call to Scott. Scott's line went to voicemail once again and she left another message. She knew he'd probably be busy at the casinos and bars until dawn and then would go straight to sleep without checking his messages. Still, she had to try.

She needed to talk to him, reassure herself that everything was okay between them. She knew she'd not done anything wrong with Artie, but she felt guilty.

Actually, she may not have *done anything*, but she had *felt plenty of things* where Artie was concerned. It was like she had fallen into an emotional affair, and she hated herself for it.

Ophelia got into bed and turned out the light. She normally fell asleep immediately but not this night. She punched her bed pillows, trying to mold them into a comfortable shape. Normally, she enjoyed sleeping alone when Scott was out of town. She could take advantage of the double bed being all to herself and she would lie on it spread eagle, instead of in the corner. Tonight, however, she couldn't get comfortable. Something was wrong. Lying back, she realized she wanted to feel cozy, protected with a warm body lying next to her. Drifting off, she imagined how lovely it would be to have Artie snuggling up to her. Ophelia startled awake, realizing with horror what she'd just thought. She shook her head. She hadn't meant Artie; she'd mixed up the name. She meant to say Scott. She assured herself that she must have meant Scott as she tried to get lost in sleep.



Artie looked at Dollop and, confident that she was still in the zone, he picked up the pace and pushed their run a little farther than usual. He was impressed with how much stamina his dog had. And it was a good thing she did because Artie had taken to increasing the distance on his daily runs ever since Ophelia began to ghost him.

The night of their dinner, Artie knew at once that he'd messed up when he'd almost kissed her. But the evening had been so bewitching, she'd looked so beautiful and so into him, that he'd forgotten himself, forgotten that they only could be friends.

Since then, she was nowhere to be found. He left texts and voicemails apologizing for overstepping the parameters of their relationship, but she never replied. He tried to see her at Starbucks, but her co-workers told him she was taking lunch outside the shop. Or that she was subbing at their other stores. The biggest punch to his gut came a few weeks later. Ophelia no longer worked there.

Artie was crushed. A woman he really liked and felt a connection to, and she was taken. He'd been so stupid. Now, he lost someone he considered a good friend because he couldn't control his desire.

Artie and Dollop headed home. He fed Dollop and then showered. Returning to the kitchen, Artie stopped at his bulletin board where he had pinned the dog food recipe Ophelia had given him. He never intended to make the recipe, but he couldn't throw it out. Having something Ophelia had written, seeing her personality reflected in the penmanship, brought him comfort.

Looking at the recipe, Artie remembered that he still had the containers she put the dog food in. Opening the cabinet where they sat, he recognized with a glimmer of hope that now he had an excuse to go visit her. He grabbed them and headed out the door.

Artie sped to her place and hurried to the building's entrance before slowing and coming to a stop. What was he doing? She made her feelings quite clear. Forcing an encounter wouldn't solve anything, in fact, it would probably make things worse. He cared too much about her to try and bully her into talking to him when she wasn't ready to do so.

Artie began to back away and collided into someone.

"Oh," Ophelia gasped.

Artie turned around and grabbed her arm before she fell on the pavement. The canvas tote bag she held, however, fell to the ground

and an array of books and school supplies spilled out. She bent down to pick them up.

“Damn, I’m sorry. Let me help you,” Artie said as he dropped down by her.

“It’s all right,” she said, avoiding eye contact. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I brought back your containers.”

“There was no need.”

“I thought they might be expensive,” he said lamely as he picked up an open psychology book. He noticed scribble written in the margins in a distinctly feminine hand, a feminine hand he distinctly knew.

“You’re taking college courses now? That’s great.”

“No, these aren’t mine. They’re Scott’s books.”

“Scott’s?” He turned some pages and found the same writing in the margins. He then picked up another book and discovered more of her handwriting in the margins.

“Can I have those back?” she asked.

He ignored her request, instead asking, “Why are you taking notes for Scott?”

“He just needed a little help.”

“A little help?” he scoffed. He flipped through yet another book. “Your writing is everywhere in these. Where are his notes?”

She followed his hands as he pointed at the writing but said, “Everyone studies differently.”

“And Scott’s method is to use you?”

“It’s none of your business if I want to help him out. There’s a lot of coursework and he’s a slow reader.”

“He may be a slow reader, but you’re the one with two jobs. Surely, he’s got enough hours in the day to read and take notes when he has no job.”

“How is this any of your business?”

“You’re my friend, that’s how. At least, I thought you were.”

“So, as a friend, support me.”

“Like Scott does with you.”

“Again, it’s none of your business.”

“No, it’s not. But I’m going to tell you the same thing you told me when Cade and I were having troubles. You need to make Scott understand that you aren’t going to take his crap any longer. You need to set up some boundaries and rules.”

“What we have is fine.”

“So, you’re just preternaturally a wimp.”

Ophelia didn’t like her words being thrown back on her. “I’m not a wimp.”

“You work two jobs to support the both of you while he goes for his degree. But you’re doing his studying for him. And he goes out for a weekend with his boys every two months. Does he ever take you out for a weekend? Just to say thank you?”

“So, I’m a loyal girlfriend who likes to help my stressed-out boyfriend. We have a plan for our future. We’re a team.”

“A team member shares the load. Tell me. How does he reciprocate?”

Ophelia didn’t answer his question. Instead, she replied, “A relationship is never a straight fifty/fifty proposition. It changes. Like sometimes one person takes seventy percent and the other thirty.”

“How often does Scott take the thirty percent? How often do you get to take the seventy?”

She slung the bag over her shoulder. “This conversation is over, Artie. Delete my number. Lose my address. I don’t want to see you again.”



Going into her apartment, Ophelia slammed her tote bag on the table and went to the refrigerator for some Pinot Grigio. She grabbed a wine glass, thought the better of it, and took out a highball glass instead. Ophelia poured most of what was left in the bottle into her glass and took a large gulp of the white wine. It was cool and refreshing and had just enough alcohol to ease her tension and make her feel somewhat lightheaded.

But it didn’t do enough to lighten her mood. How dare he, she thought about her conversation with Artie. He had no right to make

such assumptions. He knew nothing about Scott and her. Knew nothing about what they had.

Despite knowing she should keep away from him given her reaction that night he came to dinner, Ophelia couldn't contain her excitement when she saw Artie outside her building. She wanted to run and hug him. She wanted to spend the afternoon talking with him. But his pronouncement on her relationship with Scott enraged her. How dare he? Like he knew what was good for her.

She finished her wine and walked over the sink, intending to put the glass in it. But the dishes Scott promised to wash that morning still filled it.

"Hey babe," Scott said, coming from behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist.

"Don't babe me. I asked you to do one thing and you didn't."

Bewilderment showed on his face. "What?"

"The dishes."

"I was busy."

Ophelia turned around and pushed him off her. "With what? I worked for eight hours. During lunch, I even stopped by the school bookstore and picked you up that Halbur book your study partner mentioned the other day."

"Look, I appreciate the thought, but I didn't ask for you to get the book." Scott said, "Why would you buy it?"

She now wondered that herself. "Because the book sounded very helpful."

"Ophelia, I'm the one going for the Master's in Psychology. I'm aware of what I need and what I don't. Stick to what you know and do well."

He kissed her head. "Now, I'm off to play some hoops."

As he headed to the door, Ophelia stopped him. "No, Scott, you're off to the living room where we're going to talk about expectations, rules, and boundaries in this relationship. I'll get the pen and paper."



Artie stopped at Starbucks for his afternoon coffee run. Instead of his order's usual two shots of espresso, however, he asked for three, hoping

he could get pepped up. He just finished a personal training session, one he had “phoned in.” The client made her displeasure clear. Apologizing to her, he promised not to charge for the session and would comp her for the next one. She left the gym satisfied, but Artie knew he needed to shake off his funk. The gym couldn’t afford it.

He sank onto one of the chairs as the drink was prepared. He had no energy, felt no joy or enthusiasm since Ophelia told him she didn’t want to see him again.

They were over before they ever began.

“Hey, Artie.”

Artie hesitated a moment before looking up to see Ophelia standing before him. He blinked.

“Mind if I sit down?” she asked.

Artie nodded before finding his voice. “Yeah. Sure.”

Ophelia took a seat and said, “It’s been a while.”

Two months, four days, and twenty-one hours, but who’s counting? he wanted to reply.

Instead, he asked, “What do you want, Ophelia?”

“To apologize. You were right. I was being taken advantage of by Scott. And I laid down what I wanted and didn’t want in our relationship, thanks to you.”

Artie didn’t know how to reply.

She continued, “And it started to get better. Sort of.”

“Maybe you two just need more time.”

Ophelia shook her head. “No, it’s never going to work. Because I realized I don’t love Scott anymore. I love you.

“The times we spent together, sharing our coffee breaks, taking our road trip, laughing over your confusion about the dog food—”

“It really did stink.”

“It made me realize that I got more support from you, had more fun with you, than I ever had with Scott all these years. I know that I’m probably scaring the hell out of you with my declaration, but I want to be open with you, not hide anything like I did with Scott. Like my growing

resentment of being the giver in the relationship all the time. So, if you don't think you can feel the same—"

"Ophelia," he interrupted, "I love you too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

This time as Artie leaned over, he was overjoyed to see Ophelia leaning toward him. They hovered, suddenly shy, until Artie gathered his courage and pressed his lips to hers. She sighed and opened her mouth to him, and he slipped his tongue into her delicious mouth. They only had a few moments of bliss before someone called out, "Hey, we don't need to see your PDA."

Artie and Ophelia pulled back and he noticed the woman who spoke out was part of the elderly affectionate couple he'd seen months ago.

"Let's get out of here. My place isn't that far," Artie whispered.

"With pleasure. And I can't wait to see Dollop," Ophelia replied.

"Later," he rumbled.

And Ophelia did get to see Dollop but not until much, much later. In the meantime, Artie called Cade to say he'd be taking the next few days off but inviting him and Willa out to dinner the next week. When they all met at the restaurant, Artie made the introductions.

"This is my business partner Cade and his girlfriend Willa," he said.
"You two, I want you to meet Ophelia. My best friend."