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Felicity's BOOKWORM SANCTUARY

by Norsebard
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DISCLAIMERS:

This easy-going, romantic ensemble story belongs in the Uber category. All characters are created by me though a few of them may remind you of someone.

This story depicts romantic relationships between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

There is some profanity in this story. Readers who are easily offended by bad language may wish to read something other than this story.

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NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

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- Thank you for your assistance, Ixnay :)

As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

Description: Living, loving, laughing, and perhaps a little bit of crying - that's life in a
nutshell at Felicity's Bookworm Sanctuary, the friendliest second-hand LGBTQ bookstore you could ever hope to find. Through tireless work, it has become the number one hangout for women of all ages who spend their time mingling, chatting and reading books from days gone by. There's always room for one more on the Kozy Korner sofa, so come on in and have a look around!

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**EPISODE 1 - FELICITY**

A series of hurried, hard footsteps on the linoleum floor in the hallway acted as the first indication of Felicity LaMarre's imminent arrival. The multi-colored door to the second-hand bookstore was soon flung open, and the forty-six year old administrator of one of the most important hangouts in the community center's Rainbow Family project stepped inside.

The tall - though somewhat rotund - dark-skinned half-Latina, half-African American still wore her dripping wet, pale-blue denim jacket over her head like she hadn't had time to notice she was already out of the downpour. Her smartphone was glued to her ear as she strode across the smooth floor headed for her office to the left of the entrance. The long stride made her quaint bell-bottom jeans flap around, reminding the world of her standard reply to anyone who dared to comment on the retro garb: "I look fabulous. Deal with it."

At present, she listened rather than spoke, but it didn't stop her from not paying attention to where she walked. Two steps later, she nearly bumped into one of her long-time regulars, Lisa-May Farrington, who had been in early to help open the store since Felicity had been late, and it was only the latter's agility that prevented a head-on collision.

Felicity offered the other woman a smile as an apology before she continued along the hallway past the stack of new *Out & Around* magazines and the row of posters offering help and tips on how to reach the spousal abuse prevention line, the rape victims support hotline, the AIDS research foundation, the animal shelter and the new all-purpose hotline set up by the city council that was called *I Refuse To Look Away*.

Arriving at the door to the office, she dug into her jeans pocket to find the bundle of keys that would enable her to get inside. She preferred an open door policy, but understood - with some gnashing of teeth - that the insurance company didn't.

Once inside, Felicity kept the door open as she strode over to the gray metal desk that greeted her with piles of paperwork, a calendar that was literally out of date, and a filthy mug that she had forgotten to clean the day before.
She rolled her eyes as she took in the unpleasant sight of old coffee stains at the bottom of the mug. The person at the other end of the line kept on talking, so she had plenty of time to shed her denim jacket and throw it onto a hallstand that already sported several other jackets and vests.

The office wasn't all that large, only fifteen by fifteen feet, but it was just the right size for running a second-hand bookstore that had branched out to also buy and sell other used home-entertainment products like graphic novels, vinyl records, CDs and DVDs.

Apart from the hallstand, the desk and a no-frills swivel-chair, the office was equipped with an even more uncomfortable spare chair, a small wash basin and an intricate system of shelves that laid claim to two of the four walls. Felicity had a sneaking suspicion the color-coded binders were up to no good during the nights since they seemed to multiply on a near-daily basis, but she had created a clever indexing system that enabled her to stay on top of the paperwork.

One of the two walls that didn't sport shelves offered a look out onto the gray parking lot instead, but the reams of rain that splashed down the window made her close the blinds.

Walking around the desk, she fluffed out her burgundy shirt that clung to her ample curves; it needed a little more to look fully fabulous, so she loosened the top two buttons to offer a further glimpse of her necklace and her dark-caramel-colored skin.

The swivel-chair was pulled out in a hurry so she could sit down without missing a beat in the one-sided conversation. As she continued to listen to the man at the other end of the line, she ran a hand through her shoulder-length, dark-brown hair and began to toy with the two women's symbols that were attached to her leather necklace.

"No, I understand that perfectly, Mr. Bloom," she finally said in a voice that dripped with honey. It was a voice she had perfected for the situations where she had to deal with people - men, typically - that she was trying to sweet-talk into coughing up a donation for the bookstore.

Her own voice, a dark, silky-smooth timbre that reached a lower register than many other women, worked wonders with those who knew her well, but seemed to confuse those who didn't. She had often been asked why a woman of her coloring and Hispanic-African American background didn't speak in a stereotypical Latin accent, and her reply was always a scathing "Maybe 'cos I was born in Cincinnati?"

Pushing all that aside, she leaned back in her swivel-chair and looked up at the ceiling while she listened to the man's voice on the telephone. "Yes, Mr. Bloom, we would appreciate any donation you can offer. Our bookshelves are getting old and rickety… it often happens that one collapses in a- I'm sorry? Yes, we do have a large volume of second-hand books here, but we also have- Oh, yes, the bookstore is quite popular so we have a pretty quick turnaround when it comes to- Oh, that would be so wonderful, Mr. Bloom."
The extent of Felicity's gushing caused another of the bookstore's regulars to stick her head into the office. Kristen Laneau - the twenty-two-year-old resident poet, singer-songwriter, sketch artist and much more - mocked Felicity by moving her hand like a sock puppet while making funny faces and jiggling her hips like a go-go girl of yore.

The antics clashed with her tattooed arms, her facial piercings, her jet black, slick possum hairstyle and her regular outfit which consisted of low-riding, khaki cargo pants and a black, sleeveless T-shirt that said WHY? on the front and WHY NOT? on the back, but the broad grin that spread over her face proved it was all made in jest.

Felicity narrowed her eyes while she listened to Chuck Bloom droning on at the other end of the line, but she found enough time to throw a ball of scrap paper at Kristen that made the young woman vamoose in a hurry, giggling out loud all the way down the hallway.

"Yes, Mr. Bloom," Felicity continued, shifting the telephone to her other ear, "we know how much the digital revolution has impacted the bricks-and-mortar bookstores… well, killed them, to be honest… but our situation is different. The bricks themselves are owned by the community center which in turn is funded by the city council. The first batch of books were donated by users of the community center, and we've regularly bought new stock at trade fairs, swap meets, neighborhood jamborees, et cetera, over the years. The staff? Well, the staffers are all volunteers and therefore unpaid. Yep."

Felicity leaned forward and looked into the filthy mug from the day before. Grimacing at the ugly, pale-brown stain at the bottom, she pushed the mug away and rose from the chair to get another mug from the small table underneath the window.

Mr. Bloom kept talking in Felicity's ear, and she kept nodding at what he had to say. "That's true, Sir. However, the official funding has grown less over the past few years and that's why we're looking for private donations. That's an unfortunate fact, yes."

Standing at the percolator, Felicity pinned down her phone between her ear and her shoulder while she measured a spoonful of grated coffee beans and poured it into the coffee maker. With that part done, she took the pot and shuffled over to the wash basin where she filled it with cold water. "Yes, Mr. Bloom," she continued while she operated the tap, "but the main difference is that we also have a social function in our little community. We host various events like poetry jams, arts and craft get-togethers and debates on current environmental and political topics, and we organize guided tours to get some of our lonely citizens out and about. Mingle with like-minded people, you know… yes, that's right, Mr. Bloom."

With the pot full, she turned off the tap and shuffled back to the percolator. After filling the water tank, she put the lid on the pot before she shoved it into the machine and turned it on. "Well, that's true. We obviously welcome all, and we have books et cetera for all tastes, but we're primarily a Gay and Lesbian bookstore. Or to be precise, Lesbian and Gay," Felicity said with a grin.
The news that filtered through the telephone was encouraging, so she grinned broadly on her way back to the swivel-chair. "Yes, I had a hunch that sponsoring such a bookstore would give ZenTech World Business Solutions some cred on your published financial reports. You'll send someone over to check out the sights? Oh, the site. Right. No, I follow you, Mr. Bloom. I'll be looking forward to meeting your representative."

Felicity glanced at the piles of paperwork on the desk. The smile faded from her face, and she leaned forward on the swivel-chair to begin sorting the mess. "All right. Good bye, Mr. Bloom. We'll talk later, I'm sure. Yes. Bye-bye."

Finally giving her ear a rest, she put down the phone on the desk and rubbed her weary face. "Step one complete," she mumbled, looking at the piles that would give her plenty to do until the moment where the representative for the company she had just spoken to would step into the bookstore. "Forty steps to go to make the place presentable… damn, I need some coffee first."

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Five minutes later, Felicity sat down on the swivel-chair with a mug of coffee and tried to come up with a plan that would work. Crossing her legs at the knee, she picked at a loose thread on the embroidery at the foot of her bell-bottom jeans. It, and a matching one on the right rear pocket, depicted a rose with swirling leaves, and although it was cheesy and quaint, she loved the design.

It always reminded her of her maternal Nan's astonishing skills when it came to cross-stitch needlework, a skill that - much to her disappointment - she hadn't inherited. The old lady could create magic with her steady hands that would blow the minds of anyone looking at it. Appropriately enough, the old lady had drawn her final breath while working on another colorful embroidery.

"Anyway," Felicity said and took a long swig of the coffee. Leaving Memory Lane behind, she got up and put the empty mug down on the desk next to the one from the day before. Continuing to put off the inevitable wouldn't make it any easier, so she grabbed an armful of the color-coded binders and began to file the endless reams of paperwork to give the office a less scrappy appearance.

"Author index in alphabetical order here, detailed data sheets on their works in chronological order here, cross-reference sheets here…" she mumbled while she went through the piles of multi-colored papers that matched the colors of the binders, "title index in alphabetical order there, detailed data sheets on the corresponding authors there, cross-reference sheets there… man, I should have done this yesterday! Or the day before yesterday… or last week. Damn."

Felicity looked up from filing the paperwork and let out a long sigh. Crinkling her nose, she tried to think positive thoughts but nothing would come to her. She returned to the
tedious work with a shrug and another sigh.

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It took Felicity twenty-five minutes to get through most of the paperwork, and by then, she was ready to go home. Since she had only been at work for less than an hour, she obviously couldn't; instead, she got up from the chair and stretched her back this way and that to get all the kinks out. "Ohhhhh," she groaned, putting her hands behind her head to get the full effect, "my body was made for easy lovin', not rock-hard swivel-chairs."

Thoroughly stretched and feeling satisfied with finishing off the piles of paperwork, she shuffled out of the office and into the bookstore itself. She'd held several successful jobs on a managerial level over the years, but the accomplishment that gave her the most pride and satisfaction was nurturing the second-hand bookstore into an entity that seemed to have an organic life all of its own.

There were twelve aisles in total, all lined by shelf systems five storeys tall. Every shelf on every aisle was crammed full to - or beyond - its breaking point with books in every conceivable category that appealed to all ages from seven to ninety-seven. The adult-themed and explicit erotic novels were placed on the top shelf in an aisle of their own so innocent souls wouldn't by accident get an eyeful of something they weren't ready for yet.

Beyond the books, there were several crates with CDs, DVDs, old-fashioned vinyl records and even sheet music. All items were for sale for reasonable prices that started at fifty cents for threadbare pulp novels and ended at three hundred dollars for a rare, pristine first edition of Rachel V. Baxley's debut novel *Amazons Attack At Dawn*.

The walls were white - apart from the colorful posters - and the floor was covered in cream linoleum from wall to wall; not only was it far easier to mop up spilled coffee from the smooth linoleum, the risk of anyone contracting dust allergies and thus suing the city council was far less.

The section of the room to the right of the main entrance was devoted to the special events held at the bookstore, like the poetry jams and the debate meetings, and three portable fiber glass walls that could be wheeled into place in case the members of the meeting needed privacy were ready to be used.

An unmistakable scent of old books permeated the air. Some just called it dust, but to Felicity, that special scent of paper, ink and glue touched her very soul. The best memories of her childhood came from the days she had spent with her paternal grandparents. They had a amassed a large library of books that perhaps weren't expensive or exclusive, but they were boundlessly exciting to a six-year old who was just learning to read - the best part was that she was allowed to read as many books as she wanted to. The scent had stayed with her, and the moment she entered the community center's bookstore for the first time on a pure whim, her future was sealed. She had never left.
To give everything a warm, cozy feel, Felicity had decorated the top of the shelf systems lining the aisles with old things from her home, like ceramic mugs, flags, little teddy bears and globes in garish colors. The bright purple Kozy Korner sofa with the large, fluffy cushions - which was indeed in the far corner of the room - added to the homeliness and had evolved into the favorite spot for the bookstore regulars.

Felicity shuffled along the first aisle which contained paperback romance novels of the girl-girl kind, stopping here and there to even the lines by pulling some books out and pushing others in. A piece of neatly folded white paper lying on top of the second shelf from the top caught her eye, and she unfolded it to see what it said. "To the pretty blonde," Felicity mumbled, reading from the note, "who looked at this book last Wednesday. Remember the brunette who helped you pick up your bag that had tipped over? I would dearly like to talk to you again. Call 555-5225 if you're interested."

Looking at the note that was written in the hand of a teen - and decorated with plenty of little hearts - Felicity laughed out loud and made sure it was placed back on top of the book the 'pretty blonde' had looked at. "Wow… go for it, girls," she mumbled as she carried on along the aisle.

The Kozy Korner at the end of the aisle was occupied by two people though only one of them used it in the way the designers had intended. Kristen Laneau sat on the floor, sprawled out wide on one of the soft cushions while she bobbed along to a beat provided by a pair of white earphones. The heavily gelled possum hairstyle that rested atop her otherwise shaved head looked like it was painted onto her skull - not a hair moved even though she bobbed her head around with great vigor.

The filtered strip lights in the ceiling created a mini-lightshow by being reflected in the many shiny piercings Kristen had in her ears and her eyebrows. Devotees of body art nearly always had studs in their lips, nose and tongue as well, but she had found they hindered her singing so she kept to the basics. She was busy reading from a sheet of music and didn't notice Felicity shuffling up to the sofa.

The other woman did, however. Lisa-May Farrington looked up from the book she was reading to offer Felicity a sad, wan smile. The thirty-four-year old woman was dressed in gray from top to toe as she invariably was. Sensible shoes and long socks that reached halfway up her calves; a pleated skirt and a neatly designed cardigan over an O-neck blouse, all held in shades of gray. The only things on her being that weren't gray - her lips and eyes included - were her dusty-blond hair and the gold pendant of a pierced heart she wore on a chain necklace. "Hello, Felicity," she said in a listless voice as she put the book across her lap. Unlike her young companion on the floor whose legs went every which way, she sat with her legs prim and proper together as the most natural thing in the world.

"Hiya, Lisa-May. Listen, I'm sorry I nearly bowled you over before. I was in a hurry," Felicity said and stuffed her hands down her jeans pockets.

The gray woman nodded somberly. "Oh, that's all right. I know you would have helped
me up and wiped away my tears if I had taken a bad tumble."

"Ah… yeah. Anyway, I spoke to someone who was interested in donating a sum to keeping the bookstore going. He's coming by sometime today…” Felicity said and took the opportunity to push in a book that wasn't in line, "so I'd appreciate it if you and Miss Rock Chick there refrain from making any scenes while he's here," she continued with her tongue stuck firmly in her cheek.

Lisa-May didn't appear to understand the humor and responded by nodding somberly. "We shall, Felicity. Don't you worry. I'll tell Kristen as soon as she-"

The Rock Chick in question noticed they had a visitor and pulled out the earphone on the right-hand side to return to the present. The air was at once filled with thunderous indie rock that made the two older women wince from the abuse of tones. "Girl… did ya finish kissing ass? That was bad… real bad," she said with a wink.

Felicity matched the wink with a grin. "Yeah, I'm done. Listen, we have a potential investor coming over soon, so behave, yeah? Kristen, I'm talking about you."

"Awwww, when did I ever embarrass you, girl?" the tattooed woman said and pretended to be deeply hurt by the accusation.

"Well, let's see," Felicity said and began to count off on her fingers. She put up seven or so before she gave up. "On a weekly basis, kinda. And this week has been trouble-free so far so I'm guessing you're building up to a real thumper, right?"

Giggling out loud in a warm, pleasant fashion that belied her hard exterior, Kristen shook her head as she put the earphone back where it belonged. "That's for me to know and you to find out," she said before she moved her attention back to the sheet music.

Felicity chuckled and shuffled back to Lisa-May's side of the sofa. "Good. Now we adults can have a serious conversation," she said with a grin. "Hey, I've come up with a little project that I think would be fun. We've had a few broken hearts in here recently, so… so I thought it would be appropriate if we created a shrine for the Goddess Aphrodite."

"Aphrodite? The Goddess of Love?" Lisa-May parroted listlessly.

"Yeah!" Felicity said and sat down next to the gray woman. Nudging Lisa-May with her hip to make the petite woman make way for the wider one, she offered her a smile when the request was followed. "So, here's how I see it. I intend to find a pic of Dite somewhere online and print it out… then I'll put the pic on a large piece of pink or purple cardboard. Once all that's in place, I want us to make a small offering to the goddess. Just a trinket, but something personal. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Lisa-May shrugged.
"Good. I'm thinking about adding a keyring. I have a one in the office with a real colorful rainbow logo on the side that would be just right. What'll you bring?"

The gray woman shrugged again. "I don't really have anything I can spare."

"Oh, there must be something… anything…? C'mon, it's just a bit of fun," Felicity said and leaned in to give Lisa-May a brief bump with her shoulder.

"Well…” Lisa-May moved her arm clear of the wider woman next to her and searched the right-hand side pocket of her cardigan. She produced a purple handkerchief adorned with little, white hearts. "Will this do? It's clean, of course."

"Oh, that's just great, Lisa-May!" Felicity said, secretly shocked the gray woman's handkerchief was in color and not gray like the rest of her.

Down on the floor, Kristen pulled the earphones out to mark the end of her loud indie session. She put the sheet music away and turned around to lean her shaved head against the sofa's cushions. "I heard what you were talking about. I'll make a sketch of my dream babe. Dite's gotta respect that, right?"

"I'm sure she will, Kristen. Uh… please don't make it too explicit 'cos it's probably gonna come up on the public message board," Felicity said with a broad grin. "Awright, it's off to a great start. Now let's see if I can get anyone else in on the project."

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Half an hour or so later, Felicity shuffled out of her office and came to a halt in the middle of the floor. Cocking her head, she waited for a repeat of the odd sound she had heard, but nothing happened. The bookstore only had a few guests at the time, and they were all quiet while studying books they could have an interest in buying.

Lisa-May's lunch break was over so she had gone back to the modeling agency she worked for, Williamson, Crewe & Rosenthal, but Kristen was still there in all her colorful glory. The young woman was rummaging through the Adult & Erotic section so she would be occupied for a good while, too.

Felicity shrugged and turned around, but just when she put her heel down onto the smooth linoleum, the sound was indeed repeated - and it was someone knocking on the main entrance. "What the…?" Felicity mumbled and hurried over to the door to see if it had been locked by accident.

She grabbed hold of the handle and whooshed it open in case it was stuck, but the hinges and everything else worked like they always did. A cute blonde in her early to mid-forties with a ponytail and square-framed spectacles - that covered wide, embarrassed eyes - stood outside with a sheepish look on her face. The first thought through Felicity's mind was that it was the 'pretty blonde' referred to in the little love note she had found on the
The woman's bashful look and curious behavior were clues that she hadn't been at the bookstore before, though, so Felicity stepped aside to let her in. "Hi! Welcome to the Bookworm Sanctuary. For future reference, we don't knock, we just barge in. If the door's locked it's because I haven't shown up yet."

"Uh… noted," the blonde said sheepishly as she stepped into the bookstore and looked around. She was dressed in dark shoes, pale-blue jeans and a graphite-gray windbreaker over a white shirt. Her ponytail that swished across her back as she moved had left a few blond hairs on the fabric of the windbreaker, but it didn't detract from her smart image. She was dry, meaning the downpour had ended.

As Felicity closed the door behind them, she couldn't help but notice the rather exquisite curvature of the blonde's rear. Chuckling, she thought back to the days in her early twenties where she considered any woman over twenty-five a museum piece. Somehow, the women around her seemed to grow finer as she grew older. "Hi, I'm Felicity LaMarre. I run the place. You're new here, aren't you?" she said and put out her hand.

"Yes, I am," the blonde said and turned around so she could shake Felicity's hand. "Sandra Gottfried, hello. Boy, you sure have a lot of books here… well, duh… it's a bookstore!" Her expressive green eyes that were set well in a cute, natural face made a quick tour of the premises, stopping at the posters, the aisles and all the other little bits and bobs around the store.

"Hah, yeah. Books, CDs, DVDs… we have a lot of great stuff," Felicity said and glanced at the stock. Looking back at the blonde's face, her eyes stopped at the right wrist which sported a thin bracelet decorated in the colors of the rainbow flag. It made her grin - at least she didn't have to worry about that particular aspect. "So… are you looking for anything specific? We have pretty much every kind of rainbow-tinted book you could ever wish to read."

The beginnings of a blush colored Sandra's cheeks, and she shuffled back and forth on the smooth linoleum floor like it was all so new to her that she could hardly think straight. "Well, I do enjoy a cozy romance… perhaps spiced with a little mystery as well…?"

"You're in luck," Felicity said and gestured towards one of the aisles. "We have an entire section dedicated to romantic thrillers. C'mon, let me show you where it's at so you can begin browsing."

Sandra broke out in a wide smile that made her face light up. Unzipping the windbreaker down to half mast, she shuffled across the linoleum to get to the aisle Felicity had gestured at. She momentarily slowed down her steps when she caught a glimpse of Kristen in all her shaved, tattooed splendor, but she was soon back at Felicity's side.
"Action, biographies," Felicity said, pointing at the aisles as they walked past them, "crime dramas, personal dramas, sports dramas, medical romance novels, regular romance novels, historical romance novels… I guess we like romances, huh? Anyway, Westerns, sci-fi, Fantasy. The adult stuff is over there, by the way. Ah, here we are. Thrillers and romantic thrillers. Also murder mysteries. Knock yourself out."

"Gosh, thank you very much," Sandra said and let her eyes roam over the shelves that were all filled to capacity. Seeing wasn't enough for her, and she moved a hand up to touch the colorful spines so she could feel the texture.

"I do that too all the time," Felicity said with a grin. "It makes us connect better with the books, doesn't it?"

Sandra lit up in a smile, and she adjusted her spectacles to show she agreed with Felicity's statement. "Yes, it really does. The books really come alive for me when I can feel the paper they're made of. The various eReaders are smart, of course, but I must admit I still adore actual books." Sandra turned back to the books, but since she was several inches shorter than Felicity, she had to lean her head back to check out the titles on the top shelves.

Felicity noticed at once and shuffled up to the end of the aisle where she always kept a kickstep ready for just such an eventuality. Wheeling it over, she delivered it at Sandra's feet. "Here you go, Miss. It'll be easier for you to look upstairs."

"Oh, thank you… and please, call me Sandra. May I call you Felicity?" the woman said, placing a touchy-feely hand on Felicity's elbow.

"You certainly may," Felicity replied with a broad grin stuck to her lips. Having a pretty woman touching her wasn't bad at all in and by itself, but the prospects of having Sandra Gottfried becoming a regular customer was even better. The bookstore had been through a weird, negative phase so any positive news was accepted with eagerness. "Yeah. We see ourselves as one, big, happy family here. Just like all families, we have the zany aunts, the responsible adults, the sourpuss teens and the adventurous kids. I'm one of the adventurous kids," she continued and briefly stuck out her tongue.

Sandra laughed out loud and gave Felicity's elbow a little squeeze. "Oh, how charming! To be honest, I don't know yet which category I fit into."

"I guess we'll find out. Anyway, if you catch a book you think looks interesting, feel free to mosey on down to the purple sofa in the Kozy Korner and read it. That's how we do it here. Okay?"

"Okay. Sure… thanks, Felicity. And when I find something to buy, I just come over to the office and pay for it…?"

Felicity grinned and returned the earlier favor by reaching out and putting a gentle hand
on Sandra's elbow. She hadn't flirted with a customer for years, and she did wonder if she was overdoing it, but the smile on the blonde's face proved it had been an appropriate response. "In short… yes. My office door is never closed… except when I take a nap."

"Noted," Sandra said with yet another grin splashed across her face.

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The hands of time had just crept past one p.m. when the main entrance opened and a woman in her late fifties shuffled into the bookstore. Once Cathy Giardella was inside, going backwards to protect the white cardboard box and the stack of flyers she was carrying, she stepped away from the multi-colored door which slammed shut behind her with a bang.

She usually wore batik t-shirts, denim bib overalls and sandals - the casual clothing was a good match to her graying hair that she always kept down to her collar in a boyish haircut - but today was a special day so she had chosen a nicer outfit: classy shoes, almost-new dark designer jeans, a gray blouse and a black sports blazer.

Cathy had never been a Size Zero, and certainly wasn't one at fifty-nine, but she felt better in her skin than she had during the many years where she had been on a permanent starvation diet because she knew she would be scrutinized by all and sundry on a daily basis. Save for her indispensable chapstick, vanity care products had been banished from her life, but she still shaved her pits - after all, Jungle Jills just weren't sexy.

After she had been fired from the newspaper where she had worked as a journalist for close to twenty-five years, she sued them for age discrimination and won the case. The meager sum that was left after the lawyers had taken the lion's share was spent on building a new career as a biographer for the regular, hardworking folks whose voices were never heard in a society that grew ever faster and shallower.

Looking around the half-empty bookstore, Cathy shuffled over to the public message board which was located next to the colorful posters. It appeared to be a slow day at the Bookworm Sanctuary as the board was hardly used. She had no trouble finding a good spot for the orange flyer advertising her sister's brand new croissant bakery down the street, and she attached it with two bright red pins.

Since no one was there to greet her, she picked up the cardboard box and shuffled down to Felicity's office. Knocking on the doorjamb, she stuck her head inside. "Hi, Felicity… got a moment to taste something really delicious?" she said in a voice that still carried the aftereffects of the thousands of cigarettes she had smoked for the thousands of deadlines she'd had over the years.

Felicity sat at her desk with a look of raw boredom on her face. The mere sight of Cathy Giardella made her grin, but it was overpowered by a yawn that threatened to break her jaw. "Oh… excuse me," she said and smacked her lips. "Yeah sure… come in, Cathy.
Siddown. What's that you're carrying?"

"Croissants. My sister's butter croissants, to be precise," Cathy said and pulled the spare swivel-chair over to the desk. Putting down the cardboard box, she opened the lid to reveal three pastries with a filling of soft, creamy chocolate.

"Ooooh!" Felicity said and was suddenly wide awake. "So today's the big day? I was wondering when it might be… it was raining so damn hard when I drove by this morning I didn't notice a thing. Hey, let me get the plates," she said and got up. She was back at the desk in a hurry with a pair of almost-clean plates that she had forgotten to clean the day before.

Cathy maneuvered two of the croissants onto the plates before she pushed one of them over onto the other side of the desk. She arranged it so it was neat and ready for whenever Felicity returned.

"You want some coffee or something? I don't have any sodas left," Felicity said before she sat down again.

"No, I'm fine, thanks," Cathy said with a grin. "Now, when you eat it, you gotta watch the creamy filling. It has a tendency to go everywhere if you're not holding it right. And with that fancy shirt you're wearing…"

"Haw haw… look who's talking," Felicity said and took the plate.

"Yeah, I suppose I've been dolled up today. Eh, it's a special occasion."

Grinning, Felicity took the first bite. She remembered to hold it right and got the full dose of the creamy filling onto her tongue instead of down her burgundy shirt. The dark, rich taste of proper chocolate exploded in her mouth and made her groan out loud. "Aw, this is just… aw, Gawd, this is good! So damn good!" Felicity mumbled, savoring the croissant.

"Does that mean you're a satisfied customer?"

"Gawd, yes!"

"I'll pass it on," Cathy said and took a second bite of her own pastry.

A brief Knocking on the door proved to be Sandra who came into the office holding a stack of books. When she noticed the older woman, she put down the books on a corner of the desk and extended her hand. "Hello, I'm Sandra Gottfried. I'm new here."

"Cathy Giardella. Hiya. I'm part of the furniture," Cathy said with a grin before she went back to more important matters, like eating the pastry.
"Uh... okay," Sandra said, furrowing her brow. She glanced at Felicity who was too busy with her own pastry to notice. Shrugging, she picked up the stack of books she had put on the corner. "Felicity, I've found a couple of titles I'd like to buy... when you have the time."

"Two minutes," Felicity said around a large bite.

Sandra nodded and began to shuffle around the office. She eyed the last croissant in the cardboard box but didn't dare ask about its availability. Instead, she shuffled over to the window and peeked out through the blinds. The sun had come out, but the puddles were still visible around the parking lot. "Oh, Felicity, a quick question before I forget it," she said and turned around, "do you know if it would be possible for you to source the fourth book in Loretta Jean Baker's period murder mystery series *It's Murder, Darling*? You know, the one about the rich heiress Lady Leah Crammond, better known as the First Lady of Justice?"

Felicity munched on the last of the croissant while she rummaged through some of the paperwork that had sprouted out of nothing on her desk while she hadn't been paying attention. "I remember the First Lady of Justice series," she said while she licked her fingers clean. "'s funny, I actually thought we had all eight books. We don't?"

"No, you only have one, two and three, then five, six and seven. Book eight isn't as important because the quality slipped a little during the run... uh, in my opinion... but book four was really good."

Grinning over the unexpected enthusiasm of the cute blonde, Felicity wiped her mouth on a napkin and pulled out the bottom drawer on the left-hand side of the desk. The drawer contained the laptop where she kept the electronic copy of the databases, and she pulled the gizmo up and placed it on the desk. "Let's see..." she said as she opened the lid. Once the PC had come back from hibernating, she clicked through the program and sorted the thousands of records in alphabetical order of the author's surname. "Baker, Baker, Baker... Carlotta, Chester, Fred... okay, Loretta Jean Baker. *It's Murder, Darling.* Hmmm... it says we have book four, so I'm almost certain it's been mislaid somewhere."

"Oh... darn," Sandra said and put down the other books that were suddenly unimportant since a vital part of the sequence was missing. "I guess it's inevitable with hundreds of people looking at your books. Does it happen a lot?"

Felicity scratched her dark hair. Missing books was the absolute last thing she needed in a situation where she was going to sweet-talk a sponsor into donating money. Although the man she had spoken to was late, she had a hunch he would turn up at the worst possible moment. "Well, not really. Our customers know better than to mess around with my strict system," she said and shuffled around on the swivel-chair. "Did you check on the shelf behind the other books? Perhaps it's been pushed in...?"

"I checked. It wasn't there."
The annoyed look that fell upon Felicity's face was Cathy Giardella's cue. She got up and dusted off her hands before she put it out for Felicity to shake. "I'd love to help relocate the book, but I just don't have the time right now. I'll swing by tomorrow as always… maybe later today if I get a gap in my schedule. Yeah?"

"Yeah," Felicity said absentmindedly before the words registered in her pre-occupied mind. "Cathy, wait… you can't leave before you've made an offering to the Goddess Aphrodite!"

"Before I… what?"

"Make an offering to the mighty Dite," Felicity said and got up from her swivel-chair. "To make her clear the air and send us a few, groovy love waves. Just a little thing… maybe a pen or something?"

"Well, I only have my keys and some coins, and Aphrodite ain't getting those! How about I wrote her a little poem?"

"A poem? Works for me, Cathy. Pen here, paper there," Felicity said and pointed at the desk.

Cathy grunted and took the offered items. She doodled a little flower in the corner of the page while she waited for a flash of inspiration. "Ah… roses are red, violets are blue… Dite, I hope you're queer 'cos I wanna do you. Love, Cathy."

A strangled "Oh-my-Gawd!" said as a single word burst out of a furiously blushing Sandra who promptly turned away from the two other women so they wouldn't see the shade of crimson that swept over her cheeks. With shoulders that shook from the nervous laughter that bubbled up inside her, she let out a chuckle that was perhaps just a tad too screechy for what had actually been taking place.

"Yeah," Cathy said and pushed away the paper. "If that doesn't get old Dite's heart going, I don't know what will. See ya later today or tomorrow, Felicity… Sandra, it was nice talking to you."

"Bye, Cathy," Sandra squeaked, looking anywhere but at the little love poem.

Felicity laughed out loud and followed her old friend out of the office to leave the young 'un alone to cool off. In the doorway, she turned around and pointed at the last croissant. "Sandra… if you feel like it, help yourself to the pastry. Just be careful when you eat it 'cos the chocolate is alive."

"Thank you… I think I'll have a bite." Breathing deeply, Sandra nodded to herself a couple of times before she shuffled over to the desk and reached for the cardboard box.
The screeching howl that burst out of the office a scant minute later was loud enough to penetrate the wall of noise that blasted directly into Kristen's brain. Sitting up straight at the Kozy Korner, the colorful young woman pulled out the earphones and stared wide-eyed at the space in front of the office where the cause of the commotion soon became evident.

Sandra Gottfried came out of the office wearing a chocolate-brown shirt rather than the white one she had worn when she entered. Her shirt wasn't the only item that had received a quick color-correction: her face had grown shock-white in the melee.

"Shit," Kristen said and put away the anthology of sizzling short stories that she had found in the adult section. The goings had just turned good, but she jumped to her feet and ran over to the unfortunate woman to help her.

She met Felicity and Cathy halfway there. The expressions carried by the two older women were a mix of mirth and worry - mirth over the bad spill, and worry over the risk of getting sued - and they seemed reluctant to get too close to Sandra Gottfried in case she threw a hissy fit.

None of that was ever on Kristen's mind, and she put her hands on the stained blonde's shoulders and steered her back to the wash basin inside the office. "Girl," she said as she opened the hot faucet, "that's gonna stick if ya don't soak it at once. Maybe it's too late already."

"I only bought this shirt yesterday," Sandra mumbled as she adjusted her spectacles. She cast a cautious, sideways glance at the tattoos, the many piercings and the odd hairstyle of the woman next to her who - by the smell of things - was unwilling to use deodorant. In other situations, she wouldn't be caught dead in the company of a member of that segment of society, but Kristen was the only one who came to her rescue so she couldn't be as bad as her exterior made her out to be.

"Yeah, and it's a really nice shirt," Kristen said and moved her pinkie out of the stream of hot water. With no towel in the vicinity, she wiped it off on her butt. "Okay, the water's ready… ya probably need to take the shirt off before ya douse it."

Sandra's eyes grew wide for a moment. She turned her head to look at the open door, but the chance of saving her new shirt proved stronger than the risk of being humiliated by taking it off in public. "Uh… okay," she said and began to unbutton it from the top down.

"Kristen," Felicity said from the door, "this is where you go back to whatever you were doing before. C'mon."

The colorful young woman chuckled and patted Sandra's shoulder. "Best of luck with it, girl."
"Thanks…" Sandra said, pausing at the third button which would reveal her bra once it was opened.

At the door, Felicity tapped her knuckles on the jamb to urge the young woman into getting a move on.

"Yeah, yeah, Felicity, I'm coming," Kristen said and shuffled across the office floor. Once she reached the curvaceous administrator, she stopped and offered her a grin. "By the way, I've found a really great anthology… awesome sexiness. I'll put it aside for you."

"Thanks. Now git."

"I'm gittin', I'm gittin'," Kristen said and left the office.

Once Felicity and Sandra were alone, the administrator closed the door and turned the lock so the cute blonde wouldn't be caught in the buff. "Listen, Sandra," she said and wrung her hands, "I'm really sorry about your shirt. I'll pay for it if you can't save it. Okay?"

Sandra shrugged and resumed working on the buttons. "Okay, but it was my own fault," she said as she pulled the shirt out of her jeans and off her shoulders, revealing the white bra that kept her two shapely globes in place. She moved the shirt under the hot faucet and soaked it thoroughly. "I bit down on the croissant, and splat… chocolate everywhere. You had warned me, though."

"Yeah, but it was a tricky pastry," Felicity said, observing the toned muscles on the blonde's back and shoulders rippling when she rubbed the fabric. She knew she was crossing the line between simple curiosity and plain creepiness, so she licked her lips and shuffled over to the remains of the croissant which had been distributed all over the desk.

Grimacing, she began the clean-up operation to take her mind off the fact that a half-dressed - and more than fully fit - woman was standing in her office.

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After a long campaign of strenuous scrubbing, Sandra let out a sigh as she looked at the results. No matter how hard she scrubbed, a dark-brown stain was visible in the shirt's delicate fabric. "It's no use. Damn," she said and turned off the hot faucet. "Perhaps you should have offered me a bib before I took that last croissant."

Felicity chuckled briefly. "You know, that's not a bad idea. We don't have any bibs in our merchandising line yet, but I think I'll make a note of it. No, seriously… Sandra, I'm really sorry. Like I said, I'll pay for your shirt. Let's do that at once so there won't be any financial stuff between us," she said and reached for her rear pocket. Finding her wallet, she opened it and counted a few dollar bills. "How much did you pay for it?"
"Two hundred dollars."

Felicity's fingers froze around the twenty dollar bill she had already selected. "Oooookay. Two hundred bucks for a shirt," she said and realized she only had sixty dollars in total in her wallet. "Was that a three-fer offer, or are we talking just the one shirt?"

"Just the one shirt," Sandra said and crossed her arms over her chest so she wouldn't be so exposed.

"Right. Does it have gold buttons? Listen, I think I'm going to have to write up an I-O-U 'cos I only-"

"Do you have anything here I could wear so this won't turn into a peep show?" Sandra said, turning to face Felicity though she still had her arms crossed over her chest.

"Well," Felicity said and licked her lips all over again, looking anywhere but at the bare, toned midriff and the perfectly sculpted shoulders in front of her. "I do, but not in your size. And it's old."

"Doesn't matter as long as it's dry."

"It's dry, but it might be a little dusty," Felicity said and opened the drawer above the one where she kept the laptop. A bundle of old clothes came into view, and she chose a flannel shirt in the traditional red and green pattern. "Okay, this should do nicely," she continued as she pulled it out of the drawer and fluffed it to get any potential critters out.

The shirt was in one piece save for a missing button across the tummy. She had meant to get it fixed for months, but somehow it always ended up at the foot of her to-do list. Now, it would come in handy as a life preserver. "Here you go," she said and got up from the swivel-chair. After handing the shirt to Sandra, she turned around and shuffled over to the door to give the unfortunate blonde some privacy.

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Changing clothes didn't take too long, but it was a shaken Sandra Gottfried who left the office guided by Felicity's steady hand on her elbow. The two women shuffled across the smooth linoleum to get to the Kozy Korner so the unfortunate woman could catch her breath. Her graphite-gray windbreaker was still lying where she had left it when she had gone to the office in the first place, and she picked it up like she wanted to leave.

The looks of honest concern on Kristen and Felicity's faces made her reconsider, and she put the windbreaker back before she sat down with a bump on the soft sofa. Once she was comfortable, she patted the windbreaker's inner pocket to feel if the important documents were still there.
"Girl, I think I know where the missing book four is," Kristen said, crouching down in front of Sandra so she would be at eye-level with the other woman. "Cathy told me you couldn't find book four of the murder series, right? Well, I think I know where it is 'cos I only saw it yesterday in a wrong aisle."

"Oh… oh, that would be nice," Sandra said, picking at the unfamiliar, though comfortable flannel shirt. "If you can find the fourth book, I think I'll buy the whole series…"

Felicity grinned and gave Kristen a nudge. "And that definitely works for me… get to it, girl."

Getting up, the colorful Kristen spun around on her heel and strode over to one of the other aisles where she started going through the shelves from top to bottom.

While the young woman was busy, Sandra reached for the anthology of erotica to sneak a peek. The cover image of a red rose in full bloom promised plenty, but she wasn't quite ready for the direct prose she found. Within half a page, she had read about flushed skin, rigid nubs and throaty moans, and her cheeks responded by catching fire. The book was quietly pushed away, but she kept it within reach for a later study when she wasn't watched by Felicity.

The administrator grinned at the cute reaction to the sizzling book, but her attention was soon snatched away by the whoop let out by Kristen. Smiling at Sandra, she strolled over to the aisle where the colorful young woman had found the missing book.

Kristen blew the worst dust off the book's cover and removed the rest by slapping it against her butt. "Told ya I saw it," she said as she buffed the paperback's cover. "Book four of the It's Murder, Darling series by Loretta Jean Baker. Don't I deserve a book token for being so helpful to a new-"

"We can talk about that later," Felicity said and took the book from Kristen's tattooed hands. She flipped it over to make sure it was really book four. The series had been published in the late 1990s, but the cover art and the typeface used were both designed to fit with the period and location in which it was set, namely London in the 1880s. "Great work, Kristen. Thanks. Wait, before you go… you wouldn't happen to have a hundred and forty bucks on you, would you?"

Kristen narrowed her eyes down into slits. "You shittin' me or something? Where would I get a hundred and forty bucks from?"

"Yeah, forget I asked. I owe Sandra two hundred bucks for the ruined shirt."

"Whoa, girl…"

"I know. Who in their right mind would pay two hundred bucks for any clothing item,
Kristen chuckled and reached down to rub a couple of tattooed fingers against Felicity's decorated bell-bottom jeans. "How much you pay for those? Ten bucks at a dumpster sale?"

"Forty bucks! Now scram, ya little brat!" To take the sting out of the words, Felicity stuck out her tongue and gave Kristen's shoulder a fair nudge. They winked at each other before they went separate ways, and their laughter echoed through the aisle.

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When Felicity returned to Sandra with the recently excavated book, she was still chuckling over the exchange. As she got closer, the cute blonde pushed away the anthology once more, but the red cheeks proved that she had been reading it.

"Look at this, Sandra… book four," Felicity said and put the book down on the Kozy Korner sofa. "Kristen found it for you. It had been mislaid in the aisle for Westerns. No idea how it got there, but here it is."

"Oh!" Sandra said and made sure the adult anthology was discreetly pushed as far away as she could reach. Taking book four of the It's Murder, Darling-series, she leafed through it and finished by reading the credits page at the front. "Yes, that's the right one. Thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank Kristen. I know she looks wild, but she's a sweet kid."

"I will. What do I owe for all seven books? Let's forget the eighth for now. Loretta Jean was contractually obliged to release it, but she didn't have her heart in it so it's nowhere near as entertaining as the others." When Sandra realized her comments had strayed into the realm of all-out nerdiness, she cleared her throat and adjusted her square-frame spectacles.

"Boy, you know a lot about books, Sandra," Felicity said and tried to turn up the old charm. She managed to coax a smile out of the blonde, but the mess with the croissant still weighed too heavily on her mind so it was soon gone. "Well, hmmm… I feel bad for ruining your shirt so let's make it an even fifteen dollars."

"Oh, they must be worth more than that…"

"Seventeen bucks and fifty cents to be precise," Felicity said with a chuckle, "but the two bucks fifty is a special discount."

Sandra shook her head as she reached for her wallet. "No way, Felicity. Here's twenty dollars. Keep the change."
"Well… okay. Much obliged," Felicity said and stuffed the twenty into her breast pocket before the cute blonde changed her mind.

"Would you mind if I went into your office and took the other books? They're on the corner of your desk."

"Of course not, Sandra. Just stay away from the chocolate… you're wearing my last clean shirt!"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I learned that lesson the first time," Sandra said and broke out in a nervous laugh. Working autonomously from the rest of her body, her fingers crept towards the anthology with the sizzling short stories. "I've… I've… uh… I've been keeping Kristen's book warm for her while she's away," she said and let out a squeaking chuckle as she tapped her fingers on the anthology's cover.

"Oh, she's probably forgotten all about that now. You know the kids today… never doing the same thing for more than five minutes at a time," Felicity said with a grin. "Which means you have plenty of time to read the next story if you want. Eh?"

Sandra ducked her head down while yet another red surge tainted her cheeks. "I might do that. It was just getting good."

Male voices from the main entrance made Felicity look over her shoulder. Two men in their mid-twenties had entered the bookstore, each with a hand buried in the other one's rear pocket. She grinned at the obvious sign of affection. "I better steer the guys over to the appropriate aisle. Talk to you later, okay?"

"Sure," Sandra said without looking up - she was already leafing through the anthology to get back to the page where she had been forced to stop.

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Felicity had just finished updating the database with the sale of the seven Loretta Jean Baker books when the old-fashioned landline telephone on her desk started ringing. Closing the laptop's lid, she drained her coffee before she took off the receiver and pressed the button to make the incoming call go hands-free. "You've reached the Bookworm Sanctuary… this is Felicity LaMarre. How may I help you? Oh, and you're on vox," she said before she leaned back in her swivel-chair.

'Uh… okay. Don't know what that means. Is it a collect call?' a male voice said at the other end of the line. The sound was a little hollow like the man was standing in a large hall of some kind.

'Oh, yeah… this is Pete from PartyPeople Rentals. You have ordered fifty stackable chairs and a dais to be delivered this coming Wednesday, right?'

"Thursday!" Felicity said and leaned forward on the chair in a hurry. "Whatever you're calling about, it better not be bad news!"

'No, no, Miss, calm down. Thursday, right. It's not bad news... we're experiencing a teeny-tiny hiccup getting all fifty chairs, but now that we have the freedom of another day, we'll probably get there in the end.'

"Look, Pete," Felicity said and leaned real close to the telephone like it would make a difference to the man at the other end of the line, "we need those fifty chairs on Thursday afternoon. And the dais, too. Are you saying you can't deliver? The person I spoke to when I placed the order said it wouldn't be a problem!"

'Oh, we got the dais and there isn't much of a problem with the chairs, Miss, we're just experiencing a teeny-tiny hiccup.'

"-tiny hiccup. You told me already, Pete. Let me tell you something, I hate hiccups. You hear me? Why is it so difficult to get fifty stackable chairs? Don't you have them in stock or something? Last time I took the freeway, I happened to look down at a giganto PartyPeople Rentals warehouse just off the road. That's why I called you in the first place!"

'Uh... calm down, Miss. That's not our warehouse, we only rent the end wall for the advertising space.'

"Aw, that's just great... that's just so damn great, Pete," Felicity said and rubbed her brow. "We need the chairs for a really special event Thursday afternoon and evening, and that can't be moved. Would it help if we cut down the number of chairs? How many have you managed to find so far?"

'Uh... twenty-two.'

Felicity's face grew even darker than its usual brown hue, and it was scrunched up into a perfect image of a bullfrog in a foul swamp. "Twenty-two out of fifty chairs?" she said in a low, dangerous voice.

'Yes, but we have every reason to believe we'll find the rest before Wedn- make that Thursday. I'm calling you as a favor, lady, but you seem a little hostile."

"Oh, I'm not hostile, Pete. Waiting for a bus in the pouring rain only to see it drive past without stopping would make me hostile. Aiming for the last tube of ketchup at the supermarket and seeing it snatched before I could get there would make me hostile. This isn't hostile... just disappointed."
'Whatever you say, lady. You still seem hostile to me. Anyway, now you know about the hiccup. We'll contact you again if we're unable to get the chairs. Have a nice day.'

"Have a nice day!" Felicity mocked, but Pete had already closed the connection. Grumbling, she put the receiver on the telephone and leaned back on the swivel-chair. After a few seconds, she swiveled around to look at the shrine she had made to honor the Goddess Aphrodite. "Dite… you're not helping. You're supposed to be creating groovy vibes for us, that's why we offered you all those things."

The small picture on the pink piece of cardboard didn't reply.

"Ah, this is going to hell in a handbasket," Felicity said and leaned forward again to pick up the receiver. "I better hedge my bets and call another rental service."

Before Felicity could punch in the first digit, Sandra peeked around the corner with a puzzled look on her face. "Who are you talking to, Felicity?"

The cord for the telephone was tied around Felicity's little finger several times before she answered the question. She knew the silence was getting suspicious, so she put the receiver back on the telephone and leaned back in the chair. "Oh… uh… myself, I guess… ha ha."

"Is there a problem?" Sandra said as she stepped into the office.

"No problem… just a hiccup. Did you see the flyer for the big poetry jam next Thursday?"

"Oh, on the message board? Well, I glanced at it but I must admit I didn't read it."

"Seems we might be standing up during Kristen's performance. The chair people ain't got no chairs," Felicity said and threw her hands in the air.

Sandra eyed the desk carefully in case any chocolate filling had stayed in hiding to stain her jeans as well. A brown stain on a shirt was bad enough; a brown stain on a pair of pants was bound to cause untold hysteria. Everything seemed clear, so she pulled out the spare swivel-chair and sat down. Just as she was about to inquire about the 'Kristen'-part of Felicity's statement, her eyes fell on the pink cardboard. "Oh… the shrine for Aphrodite. I didn't have time to look at it before I was assaulted by the croissant."

"Ah, it was just some silliness I cooked up that I thought would be fun…" Felicity said and waved dismissively at the cardboard.

"It is fun! And we all have to… uh… sacrifice a token to the Goddess?"

"That was the plan, yeah," Felicity said with a muted chuckle.
"That's so charming! I think I have... I'm sure I had... a little... I used to have an old..." Sandra mumbled while she rummaged through her pockets. She finally found what she was looking for - a tiny brass key. "Here we go. I don't know why I've kept it... the locket it was for is long gone. Oh, there's already a keyring... how appropriate," she continued as she put the brass key next to the other items.

Felicity stared at the brass key. She had provided the keyring, and now the cute blonde with the friendly eyes and the perfectly shaped butt had offered the key to go with it. The symbolism strayed dangerously into cheesy territory, but she couldn't stop a big grin from forming on her lips. "That's great, Sandra... I'm sure the Goddess will be pleased. Ugh, now I have to call around to other rental services... wish me luck."

"Best of luck, Felicity," Sandra said and got up. "Oh, I think I hear a book calling my name... I better answer it. Have you ever read the *Knifed Through The Heart* series by Erikka Colchester? They're really good."

"Mmmm... don't think so."

"You know, I could spend a lot of money here... a lot of money," Sandra said before she left the office.

Felicity nodded in a highly exaggerated fashion before she picked up her smartphone and went online to find a better rental service than PartyPeople.

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Calling around took a lot of time, and the hands on the clock were already approaching three in the afternoon before Felicity crossed the final name off the list of potential companies. The mission had been a success: even if PartyPeople Rentals let them down, she had found another rental service that could deliver an unlimited amount of chairs anywhere in town within an hour of getting the call.

She had the munchies for something sweet, but her secret stash of candy was as empty as her love life had become lately. A yawn crept up on her and she put her hands behind her head to stretch out. When the skin on her tummy itched, she stuck a hand in through a gap between two buttons in the burgundy shirt to scratch it in an overly lazy fashion.

"Nah, I'll fall asleep if I keep this up," she mumbled, pulling her hand back out. Yawning again, she rose from the swivel-chair. She glanced at the percolator, but she didn't feel like she could hold more coffee on top of the five mugs she had already had during the day. Instead, she shuffled out into the bookstore that saw more activity than usual.

She was surprised to find that Sandra had left without saying goodbye, and it made her furrow her brow in disappointment. The two twenty-something men from earlier in the day had returned and they had brought a couple of friends with them. All four guys wore black jeans and white T-shirts, and they were teasing each other down at the Kozy
Korner. A pile of graphic novels had been spread out on the floor in front of the sofa.

"I guess a combo of black jeans and a white T is the thing to wear these days," Felicity said with a shrug as she observed the four men. They hadn't bought anything yet, but each of them had a small hill of books near his feet.

Walking around the bookstore to see if everything was in good order, Felicity chuckled out loud at the sight of Kristen Laneau flat on her back down on the floor. The colorful young woman used one of the cushions from the Kozy Korner as a pillow, and she had her legs straight up in the air, resting her ankles against the middle shelf of the romance aisle. The music she listened to through her earphones was so loud Felicity could hear the screamed lyrics plain as day.

"How can she lie in such a position? Gawd, if I did that for two minutes, my back would kill me," Felicity said and shook her head. There was no need to disturb the grooving Kristen, so she shuffled over to the message board to check out the new Out & Around magazine and study the flyers on display.

The latter part didn't take long since only three had been pinned to the board. The look of the one advertising Cathy's sister's croissant bakery had an interesting design that caught the eye at once. Their own flyer promoting the upcoming poetry jam was less flashy, but it was perhaps more personal in its artistic effects.

Someone had left a clean napkin on the narrow shelf below the posters, and Felicity swept it up to throw it into the trash. Letting out a curious grunt, she reconsidered and began looking for a pen instead. "I wonder if I could draw a flyer that would stir up some new interest?" she mumbled as she shuffled around for a writing utensil.

Once she had found a felt-tip pen, she took the cap off and began to doodle on the napkin. A line here, a few words there; a box here, an arrow there. When it was finished, she took a step back to get the big picture. The jury of one didn't need long to determine that the feeble attempt at creating a flyer wasn't all that great. "Crapola. Pure and simple," Felicity mumbled and tore up the napkin so nobody would ever see it.

In the meantime, Kristen had moved her legs down into a more regular position: sitting cross-legged on the purple cushion from the Kozy Korner. She was checking something on her phone, but looked up when Felicity approached her. "Girl, you look exactly like my Dad does when he's gonna chew my ass royally… what did I do?"

"Actually, I was going to ask if you would do me a favor," Felicity said and put away the felt-tip pen.

"Yeah? Okay. Hey, what happened to that fancy-boy investor who was gonna come over? Did he shit on you?"

Felicity shrugged. "I think he did, yeah. I haven't heard anything since the call."
"All that ass-kissing for nothing. That blows. Anyway, I'm your woman," Kristen said and got up in case she needed to do something physical like carry boxes of books from the storage room in the cellar.

"Great! Wait a minute, how come you turned your T-shirt around?" Felicity said and pointed at the text on Kristen's front which now said WHY NOT? rather than WHY?

"'Cos I'm in a 'why not' kinda mood right now."

Felicity narrowed her eyes and took a good look at the colorful, young woman. "You didn't swap it around out here, did you?"

"Sure I did."

"You were topless in front of four guys?"

"None of those guys got any clue what to do with a pair of girl-breasts," Kristen said and glanced at the four twenty-something men who were still playfully teasing each other at the Kozy Korner.

"Okaaaay," Felicity said, drawing out the word to cover for the fact she didn't have a proper comeback to Kristen's statement. "Anyway, do you think you could draw us a flyer? I mean one advertising the Bookworm Sanctuary? We could get it photocopied and distributed in key places around town… 'cos, frankly, business could be going a little faster."

"I've noticed," Kristen said and looked around at the half-empty bookstore. Only the four men at the Kozy Korner brought any life to the proceedings. "But girl, really… photocopied? I know you're kinda old, but nobody photocopies anything anymore. Social media," she continued, holding up her telephone.

Felicity hadn't made it far beyond the 'kinda old'-part, but she managed to screw a smile on her face and remember that she had been just like Kristen when she had been that age. "Okay… social media. I know social media. Facebook, right?"

"Facebook?" Kristen echoed, trying hard not to break out in a condescending smile at the older woman's limited knowledge. "Facebook is so yesterday, girl. WoCo is where it's at."

"I have no clue what that is," Felicity mumbled.

"World Connected, girl. What do you do in your time off?" Kristen said and gave Felicity a teasing slap on the arm.

"I watch TV."
"Oh. Okay. Never mind. Anyway, I can draw you a flyer, post it and share it with my online followers in… shit, fifteen minutes. Maybe ten if I hurry."

Felicity stared at the colorful young woman to see if she was pulling her leg, but it didn't appear that she was. "Uh… sounds good. I'd rather you spent fifteen minutes on it to make it just right. Can you do that? And this time, you will get a book token."

"Consider it done, girl," Kristen said with a grin. She mashed the earphones back into her ears and turned up the volume to get into the zone. Before long, thunderous indie rock blasted into her brain from both sides at once.

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Eighteen minutes and forty-two seconds later, Kristen held up her phone to show a disbelieving Felicity that the flyer she had made had already traveled halfway around the world on the wings of her WoCo profile. The news item had received comments from Alaska to South Africa, and from Finland to New Zealand - and more importantly, a host of locals now knew about Felicity's Bookworm Sanctuary.

"You were right before," Felicity mumbled while she looked at the telephone just as another comment dinged in on the WoCo profile. This time, it was from right next door; sent by someone working on another of the community center's Rainbow Family projects. "I'm getting old. Old and fuzzy-brained."

"Aw, you're still cool, Felicity," Kristen said and bumped shoulders with the old-older-woman.

Behind them, the door opened and Sandra Gottfried stepped inside holding a fabric carrier bag advertising an environmental organization. "Hi!" she said cheerily as she took off her graphite-gray windbreaker. She still wore the flannel shirt underneath, but she had tucked it into her jeans which transformed its appearance from an old rag to a fashionable clothing item.

"Hi again," Felicity said and left the colorful Kristen behind. It pleased her no end that Sandra hadn't left for good after all, but she tried to keep a neutral expression as she walked closer to the cute blonde. "Where'd ya go? You were here, and then you weren't…"

"Oh, I just put the It's Murder, Darling books in my car," Sandra said and reached into the carrier bag. "Out in the parking lot, I noticed a convenience store across the street. I had the munchies for something sweet so…" - she pulled out her hand which held a bag of multi-colored Candy Balls, a chocolate bar, a CaraMellow bar, a stick of high-quality liquorice and a bag of Fine English wine gums - "… I got some."

"Oh, baby!" Felicity cried and took a big step closer to the blonde visitor and the enticing
contents of her carrier bag. "I've been a really nice girl today… I think that rates a Candy Ball at least."

"You can have the whole bag," Sandra said with a grin as she gave Felicity the bag of multi-colored candy. "I'm more of a wine gum girl myself. Wine gum and all sorts liquorice… and chocolate… though I had enough chocolate today to last a week," she continued, pretending to wipe down her shirt.

Felicity nodded as she tore open the bag of Balls. She popped a yellow one in her mouth at once and began to suckle on it. "Love candy balls," she said around the jawbreaker candy. Her mouth never stood still as she waved Kristen over to share the loot.

All three women were soon busy with the candy, but they nearly choked on their respective treats when a loud, rolling crash was heard from the aisle housing the science-fiction and Fantasy books. "Awww hell!" Felicity croaked around the candy ball, "that fu-mmmphing shelf! That's the fourth time it's collapsed in the past ten days, dammit!"

"So the books are all over the floor now?" Sandra asked, taking the opportunity to throw another pair of wine gums in her mouth.

Felicity pushed what was left of the candy ball into her cheek so she could speak better - it created a huge bump that looked like she had the world's worst gumboil. "Yeah. But it's the bottom shelf, thank God."

Sandra nodded and closed the bag of wine gums. After swallowing some of the juices produced by the frantic chewing, she patted Felicity's arm. "I'll help. It's the least I can do."

"Oh! Look at the time," Kristen said and pointed at her bare arm. "I'm sorry, girls, but I promised I'd be home for dinner today. So… catch ya tomorrow, yeah?" Before Felicity had time to even move the yellow candy ball away from her tongue so she could speak, the colorful woman spun around on her heel and exited the premises through the front door.

Felicity chuckled as she watched the door close behind the young woman. "I love her, but she's been here the whole day without buying a single book. Sometimes, I think we're running a warming shelter and not a bookstore."

"Perhaps she doesn't feel welcome anywhere else? I mean, she does look kinda… mmmmm… out there. I must admit I didn't feel comfortable around her at first," Sandra said and began to shuffle over towards the aisles. "Is she a college student or what?"

"No. Her parents couldn't afford it," Felicity said as she followed Sandra across the smooth linoleum floor. She was hard-pressed to convince her eyes not to look at the blonde's gently wiggling hips in front of her, but she managed to stay away from the worst danger - mostly.
"That's too bad."

"Yeah. Now she's just doing odd jobs here and there to stay afloat. Don't quote me on it, but I think she's kinda big on the Internet."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. The Jam next week was booked full in a hurry. She writes pretty good street poetry for her generation, and I know she's got a whole bunch of online followers. That's all fine and fancy, but she'll never get a decent job looking like that… she knows it, too."

"Mmmm…"

"But that's who she is… the piercings, the tattoos, the crazy hair and all that. Who are we to force her into a box labeled 'Normal,' huh?"

"No kidding, Felicity," Sandra said, looking over her shoulder. "Didn't we all spend most of our adolescence trying to break out of that damn box?"

"Yeah…"

Turning a corner between the aisles hosting the medical romances and the science-fiction and Fantasy titles, it wasn't difficult to find the shelf that had collapsed. Three dozen paperbacks with fanciful titles and futuristic covers had been spread all over the floor; two of the older, well-worn books had lost chunks of pages that were resting haphazardly on top of other books.

The shelf - or second-hand plank to be precise - that hadn't been able to support the weight of the tomes hadn't cracked as such, but it was drooping in the center to such an extent it nearly touched the floor. A small strut that had been used to hold up the weight had snapped in two which had led to the paper avalanche.

"Uh-huh," Sandra said and rubbed her nose that was tickling from the dust that hung in the air at the accident site. "I'm not a professional, but I definitely think the shelf has collapsed."

"No! Really?" Felicity said and clapped her hands on her cheeks for comical effect. "You should join the FBI with those sublime skills of yours! Gosh, I'm so glad you're here to explain these things to li'l ol' me…"

Chuckling out loud over the inane silliness, both women knelt down next to the unruly piles of books and began to sort them into orderly stacks. The books didn't take too long to sort, not even those that had lost pages, but the wooden board itself proved tricky. The support was only fit for the trash, so a new one had to be produced from somewhere before they could start arranging the books.
While Sandra sat down on her butt and began to leaf through a couple of the Fantasy titles to check out a genre she didn't usually read, Felicity went on a search and rescue mission to locate a suitable support strut. The search took her all the way to the drawers in her office before she found what she was looking for. Although it resembled someone's long-lost peg leg, the wooden strut was in fact created for the purpose of acting as a shelf support.

When the community center had had evening classes in carpentry a few years back, she had asked a woman she knew from the bookstore if she would mind making a dozen struts or so - she didn't, and she had.

A quick count proved they only had five struts left after the recent spate of collapses. "Damn," Felicity mumbled as she slammed the drawer shut. "Why didn't that damn investor-fella come over when he said he would? This place will fall down on our heads one day if we don't keep up the maintenance."

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Back out at the collapsed shelf, Felicity lifted the wooden board and jammed the strut in at the center. It wasn't pretty, but it would do until the day came where the peg leg would give up the ghost just like all its brethren. She let out an annoyed huff as she took the first stack of books and put them on the shelf with a little more force than necessary.

"Oh… was it something I did?" Sandra said while she handed Felicity the next pile of books.

"No. I've been stood up today, that's all. I spent nearly half an hour sucking up to an investor slash sponsor this morning. He said he'd send a fellow over who'd take a look at the bookstore," Felicity said and almost threw the next load of books onto the shelf.

"And the fellow didn't come?" Sandra said, looking over the rim of her square-framed spectacles.

Felicity shook her head as she took the last books. "He didn't come. I mean… would it have killed him to call and say he couldn't make it? I guess it would 'cos he didn't call, dammit."

"Well, that's just rude."

"You said it, Sister! Rude's the word," Felicity said and dusted off her hands after filling the shelf with the errant books. Sighing, she turned around and sat down on the smooth linoleum next to her blonde companion. "You know, I think the problem could be the unusual financial structure we need to follow. The Bookworm Sanctuary is part of an umbrella project run by the community center called the Rainbow Family."
"I remember reading about that in the papers, actually."

"Yes, it was a big deal when it was announced. We even had a TV crew down here who shot a segment for the noon show on Channel 59. Anyway, the bricks all around us are owned by the city council, but we don't receive any funding at all from the center or the council when it comes to what's actually in here."

"Oh... I didn't know that," Sandra said and looked around at the hundreds of books near her.

"The shelf systems, the books on them, everything in my office, even the damn purple sofa over there... all those things have been donated by individuals with big hearts. Well, that's beautiful, but we can't go back to them and say, 'hey, you wouldn't happen to have another section of the shelves, would ya, 'cos the old one's a piece of shit now...?'"

Grinning, Sandra reached over to slap Felicity's knee. "I suppose you couldn't."

"No. And that's why we need to come up with fresh funding. Before the things get so old and dilapidated they'll only swallow up more money than we can throw at them," Felicity said and wiggled around on the floor like she couldn't find a comfortable spot. "Oh, my big butt's getting numb from sitting on the hard floor... wouldya mind if I went back into my office?"

"Of course not, Felicity. In fact," Sandra said and jumped to her feet with the agility of a cat, "I think I'll join you once I've visited the bathroom. There's something I want to run by you."

"Yeah?" Felicity said, taking a little longer to get her rotund figure up from the floor than her younger, fitter companion. "If it involves more candy balls and less collapsed shelves, I'm all ears."

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The main entrance swung aside once again to reveal the returning Cathy Giardella. She wasn't carrying a box of croissants this time, but the coffee-to-go-mug had been bought at her sister's bakery. She glanced around to greet anyone she knew, but the bookstore was in a lull just like the first time she had visited. The only activity came from the bathroom where someone flushed the toilet.

Unlike her first visit of the day where she had worn her fancy outfit, she had changed into regular clothes and was wearing a batik t-shirt in a Polynesian design, denim bib overalls and sandals.

Shrugging over the odd inactivity, she stepped inside and shuffled over to what was probably her number one favorite aisle, the one with the historical romance novels. After sipping her organic de-caff frappa, she started from the top at A and worked her way
down towards Z, hoping that Felicity had managed to get a few more novels by J.P. Lovestone who had turned into one of her top-three authors.

She didn't find any new titles, but one she had read before from Lovestone's pen caught her eye. Smiling at the prospects of revisiting an old friend, she pulled the paperback out of the shelf to look at the cover and read the blurb. *Mairie's Marauders* was a bodice ripper that told a tale of a Celtic chieftainess who was ruthless in battle but who was powerless to stop her heart from falling in love with a fair-headed maiden her men had claimed as spoils of war during a bloody campaign. J.P. Lovestone would never win the Nobel Prize in literature, but her stories always touched Cathy's heart - and elsewhere, too, with their numerous steamy love scenes.

Grinning, she took *Mairie's Marauders* and her coffee-to-go-mug and shuffled over to the Kozy Korner. "Mairie, I'm all yours," she said out loud as she made herself comfortable and opened the book on page one.

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At the other end of the bookstore, Sandra stepped out of the bathroom after washing her hands thoroughly. Like the rest of the Bookworm Sanctuary, the bathroom wasn't up to current sanitary standards, but at least it was better than aiming at a hole in the ground.

She spotted Cathy sitting at the Kozy Korner and decided to shuffle over there to say hello to the earthy woman with the graying hair, but before she could get going, Felicity stuck her head out of the office and tapped her knuckles on the doorjamb.

"Now where'd ya go?" Felicity said with a shrug.

"It took a little longer to work the faucets than I had expected," Sandra said with a grin. She looked up and briefly locked eyes with Cathy, but the older woman soon went back to her book. Grunting, Sandra turned around and shuffled into the office - she had plenty of important topics to discuss with the administrator.

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The Bookworm Sanctuary finally saw a bit more life - though gray life - when Lisa-May Farrington came back in after a long day behind her desk in the accounts department at the Williamson, Crewe & Rosenthal modeling agency. The gray woman stood at the door trying to blend in with the wall for a little while before she committed to entering the bookstore. She closed the door softly behind her and shuffled over to one of the aisles to find a book to read.

"Hello, Cathy," she said as she sat down on Cathy's left on the sofa in the Kozy Korner. As always, she held her legs together in a prim and proper fashion.

"Hiya, Lisa-May," the older woman said without taking her eyes off the pages. Unlike
her gray companion, she was sprawled on the sofa with one leg draped over the armrest. Turning a page, she had time to look up at her sofa-mate. "What are you reading?"

"Over-Over-Under Knitting Made Easy by Inga-Sidsel Eliasson. She's a Norwegian woman who invented a new knitting method in the early 1980s."

Cathy narrowed her eyes and took a good look at Lisa-May's face to see if the gray woman had learned the concept of sarcasm since the last time they had met. The title splashed all over the book's cover confirmed that it was indeed Over-Over-Under Knitting Made Easy. "Huh. Betcha that's a page-turner."

Lisa-May harrumphed and looked at the cover of the book her companion was holding. "Mairie's Marauders. Again? Haven't you read that several times already?"

Cathy turned to the gray woman and shot her a blinding smile. "Yeah. The sex is so awesome. Look, in this scene, Mairie is trying to interrogate the maiden by torchlight, but the tables are turned and they end up… ba-da-bing, on the table!"

"Well, that's just a filthy boys' locker room fantasy. Having sex on a table is not only unrealistic, it's dangerous."

"Oh, I could tell you a few tales, my friend… but I won't," Cathy said with a saucy wink.

"Thank you. I've told you before, and I'll tell you again. You have a one-track mind, Cathy," Lisa-May said and shuffled around uncomfortably. Putting aside the knitting book and her purse, she opened the top button of her cardigan.

"You know, that's what my nineteen-year old girlfriend said!"

The juvenile joke made the corners of Lisa-May's lips point downward, and she turned around to shoot the older woman a suitably scandalized glare. "Cathy Giardella, tell me you don't have a nineteen-year old girlfriend! Why, that's practically cradle-snatching."

Cathy chuckled and reached over to pat Lisa-May's hand in a very reassuring fashion. "Of course I don't. I'd need to bribe any nineteen-year old with a ton of jewelry just to make her look at me twice. Or at least to look at me without crinkling her nose in disgust."

Lisa-May didn't have a comeback to that apart from a half-shrug. "Love. Who needs it?" she mumbled after a little while.

"Shhh, Mairie's coming," Cathy said with a wide grin plastered onto her face. As expected, her lewd comment earned her a scandalized glare and a matching snort from the gray woman.

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Holding her graphite-gray windbreaker over her arm, Sandra shuffled into the office and put the jacket over the backrest of the spare swivel-chair. She sat down and patted her thighs like she wanted to say something important.

Felicity looked up from the paperwork and locked eyes with the blonde whom she had initially considered 'cute' - now, she considered her 'cute with a really, really pleasant personality.' "What's on your mind, Sandra?" she said and leaned back in the chair.

"Well…" Sandra started, but soon fell quiet. Craning her neck, she studied the office with all its basic amenities that could also use a little touch-up here and there. One of the three strip lights in the ceiling had failed, and the cord to one of the other two had fallen out of its clamp and was dangling loose. "Oh, it's just that…"

"You're gonna sue us after all 'cos of what happened to your shirt?" Felicity tried when it became evident that the blonde had something important on her mind.

"No, no… well, I did get upset, but it wasn't your fault. No, I… I think I've fallen for the rustic charm of the Bookworm Sanctuary. I mean-" - Sandra gestured towards the open office door - "it's just so cozy and old-fashioned, and… simply a fun place to spend time if you love old books, which I do. If we could only get a few more customers, it would be perfect."

"Huh. Thank you for the vote of confidence, Sandra. I'm not sure where you're going with that, but… thank you nonetheless," Felicity said and saluted the blonde sitting opposite her.

"Oh, you're welcome, Felicity. What I'm getting at is… would you mind if I started as a volunteer gofer?" A faint blush crept up on Sandra's cheeks almost like she worried about being rejected. "I mean, to do all the practical stuff… and stuff? Okay, I already have a full-time job, so I won't be able to be here all day like Kristen, but I could pop over every afternoon and help you with this and that until you closed. Then I could help you clean up… and stuff."

Felicity sat up straight and cocked her head. The words needed to be parsed a couple of times before they had been processed enough to enter her brain, but when they had, a smile spread over her face at the prospects of seeing the cute, congenial blonde on a daily basis. "A volunteer gofer? Be my guest, Sandra. I'd love to spend some time with you here… uh, I mean, I'd love to get new input, and… you know, have you add a little life to what can be a dull day. Welcome aboard!" she said, reaching across the desk to shake the new woman's hand.

Hands duly shaken, Sandra sat down and grinned broadly at the dark-skinned woman across the desk.

Felicity grinned back and felt a little happiness bubble up inside her for a change. Still grinning, she rummaged through the drawers to find a spare name tag that she was sure
she had somewhere. She needed to go through three of the four drawers before she found it back in the first one she had checked - it had been hiding underneath the bag of Candy Balls. "Ah, here we go," she said and pulled it up.

The plastic name tag was dull and dusty, but it was nothing a quick rub against her jeans wouldn't take care of. To call it a name tag was an exaggeration as it had begun life as a luggage tag, but that was beside the point. The slot where the name should go was empty, but Felicity tore off a corner of a piece of scrap paper and wrote S-A-N-D-R-A on it with the felt-tip pen so everyone would know the name of the new volunteer. Once the paper had been pushed into the slot, she handed the name tag to the cute blonde. "Here you go. Signed, sealed and delivered. The Bookworm Sanctuary is now your playground."

"Thank you very much!" Sandra said and accepted the tag. Beaming, she extended the pin and attached it to the flannel shirt. It was hanging a little crooked because the soft fabric couldn't support the weight of the plastic, but it was still readable. "I've always wanted to carry a name tag again. I haven't done so since I worked part-time at a supermarket as a teenager. I don't need one at the company," she said as she craned her neck and crossed her eyes to look at it while she wore it.

"Oh, why is that? Because you sit in cubicles and don't interact with your colleagues or something?" Felicity said and put her hands behind her head.

"No. Because I own it."

"Uh… okay," Felicity said and furrowed her brow. The dots were slowly connected in her mind, but she needed a moment or two to really draw the pretty picture. The line connecting the dots picked up speed, especially as she took in the smug grin on the cute blonde's face. "Wait a minute… waaaaait a minute…" she said, creeping forward on the swivel-chair.

Chuckling, Sandra leaned forward as well and put out her hand again. "Sandra Gottfried, the owner of ZenTech World Business Solutions. Hi. I believe you spoke to my right-hand-man earlier in the day. He said someone would come over, and I did."

"Gawd almighty… and holy shit!" Felicity cried and put her hands on the edge of the desk so she wouldn't slip off the swivel-chair. "I was… we were gonna… we meant to… I wanted to make the Bookworm Sanctuary nice and shiny for your representative… but you were already here! We ruined your shirt… and we exposed you to smut… and Kristen scared you… and you sat on the floor while we fixed the damn shelf! Gawd, I'm so sorry, Sandra… the day's just been a disaster," Felicity said and buried her face in her hands.

"Disaster… what are you talking about, Felicity? I've had the time of my life. I just joined up as a gofer, remember? And besides," Sandra said and reached into the inner pocket of her windbreaker, "I think your day is about to get a whole lot better." She produced an old-fashioned checkbook that she opened on the first page.
"How so?" Felicity said through her fingers.

"Well, doesn't twenty thousand dollars sound like an improvement?" Sandra said and wrote out the check. She finished by adding her signature with a flurry of her wrist.

Felicity shook her head but kept her hands in place as she did so. "I'm dreaming. I know I am."

"Oh, this is no dream, Felicity," Sandra said and tore off the check. She put it on the desk and pushed it over to Felicity's side. "This is a donation on the value of twenty grand. For fixing the shelves, getting new strip lights in here, new faucets in the bathroom and whatever else we can think of."

Felicity took the check and stared at it wide-eyed. After a few heartbeats, she looked up and locked eyes with the blonde who was apparently just as wealthy as she was cute. "But why?"

"Because I know a good thing when I see it, and I know that good things should be supported," Sandra said and crossed her legs at the knee. "Because of your regulars who are one hell of a great bunch of gals... and because of the rock-solid way you run the project."

"Gawd, thank you... but I've done nothing but laze about on my fat ass all day..."

Sandra chuckled as she got up and reached for her windbreaker. "Well, you love this place. It's evident in everything you say and do. Am I wrong?"

"No."

"Didn't think so," Sandra said as she ran her arm down the sleeve. "All right. I need to go now, but I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. Sweet dreams."

Felicity laughed out loud and held up the check. "Oh, I will. Hey... thank you. I-" Realizing she needed to show more gratitude, she got up and hurried around the desk. "We really appreciate it, Miss Gottfried. This is amazing."

"Oh, what happened to 'Sandra', Felicity?" the blonde said and reached around the administrator's rotund figure to pull her into a hug. "We're going to be working together now, aren't we? It's Sandra."

"All right. See you tomorrow afternoon, Sandra," Felicity said as they separated. "Oh, and I promise we won't be buying any croissants for a good, long while... even if Cathy will get sore about it since it's her sister's bakery."

"I wouldn't want that. We can still buy croissants, but I'll stay away from the chocolate
ones… 'cos that was too much of a good thing!' Sandra moved over to the door but turned around and shot Felicity a blinding smile before she left.

Felicity smiled back, but she soon looked down at the check with the huge donation. Nodding, she gave it a little kiss before she put it into her breast pocket and turned back to her swivel-chair. It was time to break the fantastic news to the regulars, but before that, she was going to celebrate with a wild, extravagant candy ball - a red one.

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**EPISODE 2 - LISA-MAY**

*Three days later.*

The main entrance to the Bookworm Sanctuary opened softly, and the gray, somber presence of Lisa-May Farrington stepped inside. The only splashes of color on her being came from the pure white carrier bag from the croissant bakery down the street that she had over her shoulder, and the gold pendant of a pierced heart she had on a necklace. The rest of her was draped in gray from her shoes, past her slacks and up to her blouse and cardigan. Her short, dusty-blond hair was neat and wet-combed like she had just stepped out of the shower.

Laughter reached her from the office to her left. She recognized Felicity and Sandra's voices, but she didn't feel like saying hello. Instead, she shuffled to the right and picked up a copy of *Out & Around* from the stack of magazines that occupied a narrow shelf underneath the public message board. She put the colorful magazine into the carrier bag for later reading. Finishing off the little tour, she cast a brief glance at the message board itself, but nothing caught her eye save for the flyer announcing the Poetry Jam the following week.

Lisa-May wasn't too keen on activities involving a great number of people, so she moved on towards the first aisles. More laughter from the office made her turn around and shoot a wistful, longing look in the direction of the open door. She could just make out the back of the spare swivel-chair that appeared to carry Sandra Gottfried, the woman who had invested a handsome amount of money in Felicity's Bookworm Sanctuary.

Sighing, she turned around and walked over to the shelves that carried the medical romance novels. She moved her finger down the row of books on the top shelf, stopping here and there for the occasional interesting cover art. A book with an evocative title - *All Hope Is Lost* - was her first catch of the day. It was a mass-produced, pulp paperback valued at ninety-nine cents and written by a ghostwriter, but it was just what she needed.
She carried on along the rows of books until she came to a halt at a specific book, and allowed herself a brief smile. Patricia Quentin's *Doctor Jennifer's Diary* was right there at her fingertip - one of her all-time favorite melodramas about a pediatrician who discovers she's terminally ill. Lisa-May grimaced when she realized the old book was in a poor shape. It had been published in the mid-1980s, and the glue in the spine had become so old and dry that several pages had come loose. On top of that, there was a tear in the cover that hadn't been there the last time she had read it.

Putting down the carrier bag with the magazine, the coffee-to-go mug and a cardboard box containing a croissant, she used both hands to extricate *Doctor Jennifer's Diary* and carried it with great reverence over to the bright purple sofa in the Kozy Korner.

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Half an hour later, a clattering of chairs from the office meant Lisa-May didn't have the Bookworm Sanctuary to herself anymore. She put her own bookmark into *Doctor Jennifer's Diary* and prepared to greet Felicity and Sandra. As always, she sat with her legs prim and proper together like she felt all ladies should, and she took the opportunity to straighten the creases on her slacks that had become messy.

As anyone who worked in an accounts department knew, messy was bad - in fact, messy was the first step to the apocalypse. Neatness was the be-all and end-all of the world, and Lisa-May Farrington was neatness incarnate. Therefore, she closed the top button of her cardigan so it wouldn't look to Felicity and Sandra that she was trying to be provocative by accentuating her bosom.

The two charming, cheerful women were just around the corner now, and Lisa-May sighed and put a listless smile on her face.

When Felicity turned the corner intending to sit down on the sofa, she came to a jerking halt with her dark-brown eyes wide open like she had been spooked by the gray woman's presence. "Oh! What in the world, Lisa-May… when did you get here? I didn't hear a thing! Hell… you weren't here all night, were you?"

"No. I came in half an hour ago. There's a conference at work I don't need to take part in so I have the day off. Good morning, Felicity. Miss Gottfried," Lisa-May said softly.

Felicity smirked as she looked at Sandra, her new business associate, who smirked back. "Well, how are you this morning, Lisa-May?"

"I'm fine, thank you. I'm reading a few books and the new magazine. Oh, let me move away so you and Miss Gottfried can sit and talk here," Lisa-May said and began to collect her things.

Sandra stepped in at once and put her hands on top of Lisa-May's. "No, no, no… that won't be necessary. Just sit tight and enjoy your coffee and the rest of your pastry," she
said with a smile. "Felicity and I can talk while we go around and sweep the floor. Right?"

"O-yeah," Felicity said with a grin.

The woman in gray smiled back at the two women, but it soon faded from her face as she studied Sandra and Felicity. The latter was dressed in an electric blue shirt and her regular decorated, bell-bottom jeans that Lisa-May felt were perhaps too tight for a woman with such a rotund figure. The former wore white Capris and a forest green, wide-strap tank top that matched her eyes. The tank had a slight gap at the waist that allowed a peek at her stomach as she moved.

Lisa-May was in two minds about that; although a part of her wished she could be as bold in her choice of clothing, another part considered it inappropriate for women over a certain age - thirty - to be flaunting their bodies. It was bad enough that Sandra's toned arms and shoulders were in plain view, but she drew the line at tummies and belly buttons. To end the discussion, she turned her attention back to Doctor Jennifer's Diary.

Sandra and Felicity looked at each other and performed identical shrugs. "Oh, Lisa-May," Sandra said and briefly sat down next to the gray woman, "when you eat the rest of your croissant, you need to take great care or else you'll get chocolate filling all over your cardigan. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

The two women locked eyes for a second or two before Lisa-May offered her companion a brief smile. "I asked for a croissant without any filling at all, so I'll be safe. However, I truly appreciate the warning, Miss Gottfried."

"Oh… no filling? Just the dough? Isn't that kinda… well, bland?"

Nodding, Lisa-May once more locked eyes with Sandra, and that conveyed a silent message that her favorite taste was no taste at all.

"Right," Sandra said and got up. "Uh… we'll leave you to it, then." She cast a glance at Felicity and shrugged once more - Felicity just grinned.

"What are you reading, Lisa-May? It looks kinda ragged," Felicity said, bending over to look at the cover while the gray woman was reading in the book. "Doctor Someone's Diary?"

"Doctor Jennifer's Diary, in fact, by Patricia Quentin. It's a beautifully written melodrama," Lisa-May said and held up the tattered book. As she did so, another section of the old glue holding the spine in place released its grip on a few pages that nearly fluttered to the smooth linoleum floor. She caught them in time and swept them back inside the book. "Oh… but it's getting old. There's a tear in the cover and the glue is hardly doing what it's supposed to."
"Oh, that's too bad. I must admit I'm not familiar with that author," Sandra said and sat down again. It was clear by the honest look on her friendly face that she was eager to strike up a conversation with Lisa-May.

With her favorite book waiting to be read, taking part in a conversation wasn't at the top of the gray woman's wishlist. She humored the blonde with the square-framed spectacles by showing her the back cover that was graced by a picture of Patricia Quentin saddled with an unfortunate - and huge - 1980s hairstyle. "She only wrote a few novels. None of her other works came close to matching this one. It's fiction, but it's written in a verité style. It's actually unfinish-

"Oh! Is there a chapter missing?"

Lisa-May looked at the bubbly Sandra with a listless though pointy gaze that said she wasn't too appreciative of being cut off like that. When the blonde piped down and put her hands in her lap, Lisa-May smiled and continued: "No, but it's written like a diary. It's supposed to invoke an impression that she passed away before she could write the last entry. The premise is that a dear friend of the woman extrapolated from the diary to write the book after the doctor's death."

"Oh… I see. It sounds intriguing, but it's not exactly your average happily-ever-after ending, huh?" Sandra tried, craning her neck to read a few lines of the page.

"Some stories are better without one."

Sandra smiled again, but it was a puzzled, slightly confused smile. "Ah, perhaps so. Felicity, weren't we supposed to sweep the floor?"

"We were," Felicity said, grinning at the interaction between the two women who were perfect, even polar, opposites of each other - one cheery and bubbly, and the other gray and perpetually downcast. "Lisa-May, tell you what…"

The gray woman sighed and put down the book all over again. "Yes?"

"You can have it. Nobody would want to buy such a ragged book anyway," Felicity said and reached down to put a supportive hand on Lisa-May's shoulder. "It's a gift."

For once, a genuine smile spread over the gray woman's face. It didn't last long, but it had been there, and it had transformed her appearance into something prettier and warmer. "Oh… I'm grateful, Felicity. Thank you very much. It really means a lot to me."

Felicity chuckled and gave her old acquaintance's shoulder a little nudge. "I knew it would. I hope you'll love it to bits. C'mon, Sandra… we've got work to do."

Getting up, Sandra smiled at Lisa-May in the hope of seeing one in return, but the gray woman had long since gone back to her regular listless expression. Puzzled, the bubbly
blonde moved away to grab the broom Felicity held out for her.

Lisa-May tracked Felicity and Sandra with her eyes when they finally left her alone. Peace was restored to the Kozy Korner, but it was accompanied by a sinking feeling inside her. She had once again been rude to someone without really wanting to. It just happened; it always just happened. The cheerful people just didn't understand that not all were like them - she could be social when the mood hit her. It just rarely did. But on the few occasions where she did have a need to speak to a fellow human being about deeper topics than books or tips on how to knit in the Norwegian over-over-under technique, nobody came to her because of the impenetrable brick wall she had put up around her.

Sighing, she returned to the pages of Doctor Jennifer's Diary. It had lost its magic for her and she put it away after inserting her bookmark. With the news she had been given the book as a gift, she didn't need to read it all at once, anyway, so she reached into the carrier bag and took the colorful Out & Around magazine that was produced by the community center as part of the Rainbow Family umbrella project.

While she leafed through it in the hope of finding just one article that had her type as the intended audience, she picked up a conversation between Sandra and Felicity from the next aisle where the two women swept the floor. They spoke in hushed tones, but Lisa-May had never had problems with her long range hearing.

She put her thumb on a random page and closed the glittery magazine around it so she could divert her full attention to the words that were spoken about her.

'I must admit, I just don't get Lisa-May... and I think the feeling is mutual,' Sandra whispered with every word accompanied by a whooshing sound from the broom. Now and then, the whooshes stopped and were replaced by plastic hitting linoleum - the dustpan at work. 'You should have seen the look she gave me when I asked if there was a chapter missing. I mean... that was a perfectly legitimate question, in my opinion. Did you see the state of that book? How should I know the story actually ended like that?' she continued in a whisper that had grown a little weaker as she went further down the aisle.

'I know,' Felicity chimed in, 'but that's how Lisa-May works. We have to respect that.'

'Well, of course... of course we have to respect that, but that look she gave me made me feel like an moron. That wasn't nice of her.'

Activity at the door to the bookstore made Felicity and Sandra pipe down and concentrate on sweeping the floor. A couple of women in their mid-twenties entered the Bookworm Sanctuary and went over to the Science-Fiction & Fantasy aisle. Behind them, another woman entered and closed the door softly behind her. She clutched a purse and a pair of old books to her chest, and took a faltering step into the store like she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do.

Lisa-May's shoulders slumped hearing Sandra's fully justified closing statement. The look
she had shot her had been inappropriate, but it was for another reason than what the bubbly blonde thought. "It wasn't for that at all," she mumbled to herself. "It wasn't because of the question, it was the fact that I was interrupted… if I don't draw the line somewhere, I might as well be a doormat… but I misjudged it. Again. I walked all over her instead. And now I can't address it because they'll frown even worse at me for eavesdropping on them…"

Sighing deeply, she opened the Out & Around magazine and looked at a random article about a gay actor without reading any of it. A small tear formed at the corner of an eye, but she wiped it away with her new handkerchief before anyone could see it.

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The cautious, female guest of the Bookworm Sanctuary still had the purse and the pair of old books clutched to her chest as she walked around the various aisles. Looking high and low at the thousands of titles on display, she stopped now and then to pull out a book and study the cover. Most went back onto the shelf at once, but she kept the odd one.

The inevitable happened further along the aisle: the stack of books she had found slipped through her fingers and ended up creating a racket as they fell onto the floor. A color best described as fire-engine red burst onto her cheeks as she looked around in a panic to see if she had disturbed anyone. Breathing deeply, she knelt down and scooped up the books, but to add insult to injury, she dropped all of them a second time which worsened her blush.

Lisa-May put down the magazine and stared at the female guest who was working hard collecting the books she had dropped not twenty feet from the Kozy Korner. Her gray lips had been reduced to a pair of tense lines in her face for being interrupted for the umpteenth time on her day off, though the expression softened when she took in the appearance of the woman.

The slender visitor was on the tall side of average and looked to be in her mid-thirties. She had a full head of mousy-brown curls that reached a short distance down her back, and she used fashionable dark, horn-rimmed spectacles. Though she did have a certain grace, it was clear by her frantic gestures trying to hold onto the books that she didn't possess the same kind of suave hand-to-eye co-ordination that many women in that age-bracket had.

She dressed old-fashioned - even for Lisa-May's standard - in gray ballet flats, white bobby socks, off-white slacks that stopped a few inches shy of her ankles, and finally a dusty-gray sweater that sported a pair of unmistakable peaks. In short, she looked as if she had just stepped out of a postcard celebrating the wholesome All-American lifestyle of the clean-cut 1950s. All that was missing was an Archie-like boyfriend who would escort her to the malt shop.

Lisa-May sighed and looked down at her magazine, but her sixth sense kicked in at the
last moment, and she looked up again. The visitor locked eyes with her and offered her a nervous smile. Moments later, the new woman shuffled closer to the Kozy Korner.

Sighing, Lisa-May put away the copy of *Out & Around* and returned the smile. "Hello," she said when the other woman was close enough to hear.

"Hello… may I have a seat, please?"

"Why, certainly," Lisa-May said and began to scoop up her things so there would be better room for the visitor. She put most of them into the white carrier bag save for the half-empty coffee-to-go thermos mug.

The other woman sat down and put her legs together in a prim and proper fashion. Lisa-May noticed at once, and the small, though vital, gesture prompted her to smile. "I'm Lisa-May Farrington," she said and put out her hand.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm Adrienne Gryszkowski," the other woman said while she shook the hand offered to her. Following the formal introduction, they fell silent and appeared satisfied with keeping mum.

Up close, it was revealed the sweater was genuine cashmere which earned Adrienne another little star in Lisa-May's Book of Approval, as did her sparing use of perfume which seemed to carry an exquisite flowery scent.

The pause was too pregnant to last, and before long, Adrienne turned towards the gray woman sitting next to her. "I beg your pardon, but you wouldn't happen to know if the Bookworm Sanctuary still buys second-hand books, would you?"

"I believe they do, but you need to ask the administrator, Miss LaMarre. She'll be in her office," Lisa-May said and pointed at the open office door where Felicity and Sandra had gone to after sweeping the floor.

"Oh… I see," Adrienne said and craned her neck to locate the door.

Silence once more fell between them, and Lisa-May decided to give the cheap, ninety-nine cents medical romance novel *All Hope Is Lost* a try.

It didn't last long. "So is it all right to just knock on the door and go in there?" Adrienne said, looking like she was on the brink of chewing on her fingernails.

Sighing, Lisa-May put down *All Hope Is Lost* before she had even had time to look at the credits page. She shot Adrienne Gryszkowski a look of pure exasperation though she managed to rein herself in before her look would turn insulting to the woman who was clearly just shy and nervous. "Yes it is. Miss LaMarre is always in, though you should remember to knock on the doorjamb before you enter."
Right on cue, Felicity stepped out of the office to go on a little tour of the premises. She whistled through her teeth as she pulled out a book here and pushed in a book there to maintain a uniform look to the shelves. Stopping at the public message board, she picked up one of the Poetry Jam flyers and read it.

"There's your chance, Miss Gryszkowski," Lisa-May said, pointing at Felicity. "That lady there is the administrator I mentioned."

"Oh, thank you very much, Miss Farrington," Adrienne said and rose from the Kozy Korner. With an unfortunate intervention of fate, the grip she had on the books she had found wasn't good enough, and they ended up on the floor with a rattling bang all over again. "Oh... oh no," she croaked, staring at the mess of books at her feet.

Felicity stopped whistling and hurried over to the Kozy Korner to see if the characteristic sound of books falling onto the linoleum had been caused by yet another shelf collapsing. When she noticed the pile, she smiled and bent over to help the curly-haired woman retrieve them. "Whoops, huh? It happens. You think your fingers are strong enough, and then... you find out they ain't."

Adrienne nodded, still clutching the original pair of books to her chest. She opened her mouth to ask about selling the books, but she didn't have time before the dark-skinned administrator had shuffled over to the gray woman on the sofa.

"Lisa-May, I'm glad I caught you," Felicity said and sat down. She held up the flyer for the poetry evening and showed it to the listless woman. "I've been meaning to ask you... have you seen this? I know you're not much for this kind of thing, so perhaps you should find something else to do all of next Thursday. It's going to be pretty hectic and confusing all day long. And loud. Just a heads-up."

Lisa-May nodded with a small smile on her lips. "I've seen it, thank you. Kristen deserves a turn in the spotlight. She's smart, even if she can be quite infuriating at times with her challenging behavior."

"Yep. All right?" Felicity said and rubbed Lisa-May's shoulder.

"Yes. Thank you."

Felicity grinned at her old acquaintance before she got up from the Kozy Korner. "You're welcome. I'll be in my office if you need me."

"Oh! I need you right now!" Adrienne said and stuck her hand in the air like a schoolgirl who wanted to be excused. When she realized she had said something that could be perceived as innuendo, she blushed all over again and clutched the books to her chest.

Felicity looked from the gray Lisa-May to the blushing Adrienne and wondered if someone had invented a cloning device without the press getting wind of it.
"I'm Adrienne Gryszkowski, hello," Adrienne said and put out her hand that was jittering with nervous energy. "I was wondering if you would perhaps be interested in buying these books? They're volume one and two of Loni MacLean Porter's fabulous series Henrietta & Co. Volume one is Henrietta's Great Riverboat Adventure, and volume two is Yee-Haw Cowgirl. They're in good shape. I have more at home if you're interested in them. I got most of the series for Christmas and my birthdays and other holidays. I've had them for many, many years but I don't really read them anymore because they were written for an audience mainly of young teens and I haven't been a teenager for decades, ha ha, but the books were really good and exciting and well-written and I've spent many a night in my bedroom reading underneath my blanket with a little flashlight... and... I'm talking too much. I'm sorry. I'm just a little nervous," Adrienne said and adjusted her horn-rimmed spectacles.

Even Lisa-May's eyes were wide as she took in the nervous bundle of energy in the shape of a woman. She glanced over at Felicity who clearly held back a grin. After shaking the nervous woman's hand, Felicity wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I'm Felicity LaMarre, hi. C'mon into my office and we'll take a look at them. It's just over here." As they shuffled on, Felicity gave Lisa-May a broad, exaggerated wink.

With peace once again restored to the Kozy Korner, Lisa-May let out a sigh of relief and opened All Hope Is Lost. Before she started on chapter one, she looked up and observed Adrienne's slender, and surprisingly graceful, figure walking into the office. A brief, unprompted smile played on the gray woman's lips that she had no idea where came from.

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Seventeen pages into All Hope Is Lost, Lisa-May came to the conclusion that all hope was indeed lost for the book on a whole. Closing it, she got up from the Kozy Korner and shuffled over to the aisle where she had found it earlier. The other titles she picked out of the lines couldn't capture her imagination, so she shuffled back to the sofa to read another chapter of Doctor Jennifer's Diary instead.

Before she could even open her favorite book, Adrienne came bouncing back with a big smile on her face. Instead of the pair of old books, she held a crumpled five dollar bill in her hand that she put into her purse. "Miss LaMarre wanted to buy the books," she said as she sat down with a bump next to Lisa-May whose face had gained the beginnings of a dark scowl. "I'm so glad... well, not that Miss LaMarre wanted to buy them, although I'm quite satisfied with that... no, that someone else will now have the chance to read Henrietta & Co. They were so important to me when I was a young teen and now someone else will get the chance to fall in love with Henrietta and all her crazy, silly, beautiful friends. Henrietta stirred emotions in me that I could hardly understand at the time but that became abundantly clear to me when I hit puberty a couple of years later. She was my first girl-crush. Isn't that just adorable?"
The scowl on Lisa-May's face only darkened by the endless stream of words, and she didn't even have time to nod before Adrienne had taken a deep breath and was off on the next voyage.

"Oh, Henrietta was depicted as a freckled, cute, little tomboy in denim overalls and a striped T-shirt and a baseball cap that she always wore backwards. She always got into all sorts of bother but her big heart and her group of loving friends always saved the day. She was a redhead and I think that's why I have a thing for redheads now. Although the redheads I've known in real life haven't been half as sweet or cute or even charming as Henrietta. Are you familiar with the series, Miss Farrington?"

"No-"

"I promised Miss LaMarre that I would bring all the remaining titles the next time I came in. Like I said before, I got them for Christmas and my birthdays and the like and I ended up with nearly the entire series. Loni MacLean Porter wrote twenty-five books in total about Henrietta and her friends, but a few were sold out so quickly my parents were unable to find them in the bookstores at the time. I did read them later, though… I found them in the public library at the kids' section which felt somewhat odd to browse through because I had reached my early twenties by then. Don't get me wrong, the books I read then were still magical, but they were perhaps not quite as exciting to me as when I had been a teen."

"Oh, well, that's understanda-"

"And of course I read the last few out of sequence which is never a good thing to do with a story world that lives and evolves in a natural manner. Loni MacLean Porter was able to infuse such magic into the books it was quite extraordinary. As the titles alluded to, the first two books saw Henrietta going on a long canoe trek down the river with her parents and two of her best friends. They saw an old, flat-bottomed riverboat that had been converted into a hostel, and that set off her imagination. Yee-Haw Cowgirl saw Henrietta visiting her grandfather's ranch which made her imagine that she was a tough-as-nails cowgirl in the Wild West. Oh, the adventures that came out of that! A stagecoach hold-up, a bank robbery, a big shootout in the middle of Main Street… now, Miss Farrington, please don't think I have a photographic memory because I can describe the old books so vividly. I just had to read them again the other day before I let them go."

"I see-"

"There were many other books, too. In another, Henrietta & The Red Ladder Day, she visited a fire station and took part in a special day that was meant to introduce the neighborhood kids to the basic training that all firefighters start with. Later on, she and her friends saved the day when a fire broke out in a utility shed belonging to their elderly neighbor. Oh, I could go on and on," Adrienne said and clapped her hands in glee.
Lisa-May's face gained another dark tone or two, and she reached out and put a calming hand on Adrienne's elbow which made the excitable woman clam up. "I'm sure you could. Perhaps we should save it for a rainy day?"

"Oh… well…"

"If you will excuse me," Lisa-May said and got up from the Kozy Korner. "I need to visit the restroom."

The gray woman got up and strode across the floor without looking back. Her ears were still ringing from the incessant stream of words, and she was pleased, even proud, that she had finally dared to assert herself. When she reached the corner of the next aisle, her conscience forced her to look back at Adrienne. The curly-haired woman sat on the sofa with her hands clenched in her lap and a sad frown etched onto her face.

The frown was mirrored on Lisa-May's own face. What good did it do to assert her position when all it had done was to make someone else miserable? She felt the familiar sinking feeling inside her. What she ought to do was to go back to Adrienne and apologize, her conscience told her that in no uncertain terms.

At that moment in time, the main entrance opened and Cathy Giardella stepped inside yapping away into a telephone. She hobbled like she had hurt her ankle or knee. The earthy woman noticed Lisa-May and waved at her before she shuffled over to one of the aisles to begin the day's browsing and chatting.

Lisa-May didn't wave back. Instead of going over to Adrienne to apologize, she wrapped her arms around herself and did the opposite - she went into the restroom. Switching on the light and locking the door behind her, she hurried past the mirror above the wash basin so she didn't have to look at herself. She knew she wouldn't like what she would see in the eyes of the woman staring back at her.

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After Lisa-May had conducted her business, she was forced to move over to the wash basin but did her best not to look up at the mirror. As she washed her hands - the temperature of the water that came out of the faucets was hit and miss, as always - she kept a firm eye on the lathering and thorough scrubbing. One of the deadliest sins of the seven was not washing hands after visiting the restroom. Millions of lives could have been saved had more people washed their hands during times of crisis, according to her.

Even Lisa-May Farrington could only wash her hands so far, and she had to stop before the hot faucet burned her skin off. She was reluctant to look up, but her conscience dictated that she should. The image of the gray woman in the mirror wasn't pleasant in the least as it stared back at the living representation of her.

She wasn't good with mirrors on the best of days, and today was one of the worst days.
Though it was unconnected to the present situation, it was something that had been ingrained in her from an early age when her mother tried to force her into becoming a cute, little doll. She had no intention of ever being a 'cute, little doll' but it had never stopped her mother. It had given her a life-long aversion to mirrors that only grew stronger when she reached adolescence and found she wasn't as pretty as the other young girls she tried to hang out with. Prettiness shouldn't be the deciding factor of anyone's worth, but it invariably was. There wasn't anything to look at, so there was no reason to look in the first place.

It was even worse in the situations where her conscience demanded that she righted a wrong; that she made amends for something she had done. She should look at herself and see how she would have appeared to the person she had wronged. It wasn't a pleasant sight. The sinking feeling returned with a vengeance and formed a word that simply had to escape her gray lips. "Bitch," she mumbled. "Bitch, bitch, bitch… how could I be such a bitch to Adrienne…?" The mirror mocked her far too much for her to keep exposing herself to it, so she looked away.

Unlocking the door with her fingers safely wrapped in her handkerchief so all the scrubbing wouldn't be for naught, she switched off the lights and peeked out into the Bookworm Sanctuary. She could just make out the off-white slacks which meant the curly-haired woman was still sitting at the sofa. Cathy hadn't made her way over there yet, so Adrienne was alone.

Lisa-May exited the bathroom swallowing a bitter taste that had formed in her mouth. She closed the door behind her by wrapping the handkerchief around the door handle as she depressed it to make sure the nasty germs stayed where they were. Laughter once again bubbled out from the office to her left, and she cast a gloomy look at the open door - she still needed to square the earlier misunderstanding with Sandra Gottfried.

First things first. Looking back at the Kozy Korner, she confirmed that Adrienne was still alone. The excitable woman was leafing through the Out & Around magazine that Lisa-May had left on the sofa - or maybe it was a new copy, it was hard to tell since they were all identical. She furrowed her brow and scowled at the mere thought of someone taking the magazine she had selected, though the scowl was swept away by an echo of the statement 'you're doing it again, bitch,' that had somehow entered her ear.

One step led to the next, and before long, she stood in front of Adrienne whose stiffened body language proved that she had noticed Lisa-May returning. "Miss Gryszkowski," she said, but had to stop to let out a sigh while she wrung her hands in front of her stomach. "Adrienne, I'm so sorry for being a b- a bitch just now. I had no right to behave like that. Please forgive me."

The two women locked eyes for the briefest of moments before they both looked away. "I'm sorry for blathering on and on like an idiot," Adrienne said in a tiny voice. "I didn't stop to think that others wouldn't find it obnoxious… oh…"
"It wasn't really that," Lisa-May said and sat down next to the curly-haired Adrienne. She crossed her legs with the upper knee pointed away from her companion like a proper lady should. "It just became a little too much in one go. I love to talk about books, but you said so much in such a short amount of time that it was just... well, too much."

Adrienne nodded. "I know. I'll try to moderate myself from now on. It's just that when I get nervous or excited, I tend to blather on and on about nothing in particular, and when there's a topic that's so dear to my heart as the Henrietta books, I just can't stop... myself... fr- from... God, I did it again. I'm so sorry."

The raging flood of words had already kick-started Lisa-May's proverbial brick wall around her soul, but the sincere look of repentance on Adrienne's face caused the bricks to tumble. Instead of the bitchy scowl that had already begun to form on her lips, she smiled and reached out to pat the back of Adrienne's hand. "Think nothing of it. You caught it in time."

A blissful silence fell among the women. Content with her smooth, respectful solution to her earlier indiscretion, Lisa-May counted to ten on the inside before she reached for Doctor Jennifer's Diary. The second she touched the book, Adrienne turned around on the sofa and took her hand.

"Miss Farrington, may I confide in you? I think another reason why I talk this much is because the relationship I have just escaped from didn't allow me much time to truly get in touch with my emotions. My girlfriend was so demanding of me... she expected me to do everything at the house though I had to work longer hours than she. She got home at three, and yet she expected me to make dinner in a hurry when I got home at five instead of at least preparing parts of it."

"Adrienne-"

"I'm so glad I got out of that relationship though I'm sorry I had to do it the hard way. One day not so long ago... well, it's already been six months this coming Monday, to be exact... I got home from work an hour early and found her in bed with our neighbor. A guy. Can you believe that? When I walked in on them, she was giving him hea-"

Shock and horror flashed across Lisa-May's face, and she reached out with the speed of a striking rattlesnake to grab hold of Adrienne's hand. "I. Don't. Need. To. Know. Thank. You," she said in a strangled voice. Her eyes shone with the intensity of a laser beam to convince her companion to stop talking about such filthy matters and otherwise remain quiet.

"Oh... I'm sorry," Adrienne said with a blush creeping up on her cheeks. "I didn't mean for it to be that explicit. It just... just..."

Lisa-May cleared her throat and actually managed to smile at the other woman though the scowl had presented a stronger case for itself. She was determined to be on her best
behavior after being rude to Adrienne earlier, but it was hard going to keep her impatience in check. "I know. I don't want to appear rude, but I would like to read my book now. You have a stack of books too… wouldn't it be fun to take a look at one of them?" she continued, pointing at the handful or so of paperbacks that Adrienne had found when she had first made a tour of the aisles.

The curly-haired woman looked at the books like she had forgotten they were there. "Oh… oh, it certainly would. I found several really interesting books by authors I've heard of but never… read… I'm sorry. I'll be quiet."

The two women briefly locked eyes before they each took a book and dug into it.

* * *

Felicity's Bookworm Sanctuary saw more customers than usual at the lunch break. The flyer Kristen had created and distributed through her profile on the World Connected web service had been shared and liked countless times, and it seemed people were responding the old-fashioned way by showing up in person.

The regulars had been joined by pairs and singles, by young and old, and by men and women that came from all stops along the rainbow spectrum. Books were presented, accepted or rejected ceaselessly, and everything took place to a soundtrack of life and buzzing activity.

The influx of people brought an end to the peace and quiet, but Lisa-May wasn't too dissatisfied with the hubbub for once. She had nearly made it to the final, tear-jerking chapters of Doctor Jennifer's Diary, but she would read them at home, in private, so she didn't need to explain the tears that would surely come. She put the book into the white carrier bag from the croissant bakery and stole a glance at her companion on the Kozy Korner sofa.

Adrienne Gryszkowski was thoroughly taken by the book she was reading. Snuggled up into the corner of the sofa, she had kicked off her gray ballet flats and folded her legs up underneath her. She sat in wide-eyed - and silent - excitement as she was halfway through a romantic thriller about how a tough FBI profiler and her star-actress wife cracked a dangerous case wide open. Adrienne's left pinkie was wedged between her lips as she moved her eyes down the paragraphs; only the need to change pages could persuade her to take it out. Now and then her cheeks would redder as she reached one of the sizzling hot passages where the two lead characters did far more than talk.

Irregular footsteps approaching the Kozy Korner made Lisa-May move her eyes away from the woman next to her. Cathy Giardella came towards her sporting a wide grin and a taped ankle that gave her a slight limp. The woman with the boyish haircut was dressed in her regular denim bib overalls and sandals, but she had left the batik patterns at home. Instead, she wore a neutral black T-shirt with red highlights at the hem and the sleeves. "Good afternoon, Cathy," Lisa-May said and put out her hand. "Oh dear, have you hurt
"Yeah. I klutzed out last night like you wouldn't believe. Hiya, Lisa-May," Cathy said in her trademark smokey voice as she looked across the sofa at the woman with the curly hair. "Hiya, I'm Cathy Giardella. Nice to meet ya," she said and once more put out her hand.

Adrienne looked up in a daze like she had been pulled from a really good dream - or erotic scene. It took a while for her to realize what went on, but when she had, she leaned forward and put out her left hand since the right one held the book. "I'm Adrienne. Pleased to meet you, Miss… uh…"

"Giardella. It's Cathy. Everybody calls me Cathy," she said with a grin as she shook Adrienne's hand. When she pulled her own hand back, she furrowed her brow and looked down at her glistening palm where the wet pinkie had touched her skin. Chuckling, she noticed where the wetness had come from as Adrienne promptly put her pinkie back in her mouth upon returning to the book. "Now, if all the gals would greet me with a wet pinkie, I'd be in heaven," she continued with a saucy wink aimed at the prudish Lisa-May who responded just like she had predicted - with a horrified grimace.

"To be less vulgar," Lisa-May said after shaking her head in a slow, deliberate fashion, "are you going to tell me what you did to your ankle?"

Chuckling, Cathy hobbled over to Lisa-May's side of the sofa. She put both hands on the armrest and cocked her leg back to take the weight off her injured limb. "Aw, that was the stupidest thing ever. I went down the staircase from my bedroom up on the first floor but sort-of missed the bottom step. Sort-of because I only had my heel on it. I guess I'm a little heavier than I used to be so it couldn't support me, and down I went. It was the final step so it wasn't too bad, but I lost my balance and slammed down flat on my ass! Wham, baby! Once I got that body part to talk to me again, I discovered my ankle hurt like a sonovabitch."

"You should be more careful," Lisa-May said somberly.

"I know. Anyway, I wanted to ask you about something," Cathy said and produced a folded-up flyer from her rear pocket. "Have you seen this? Do you know anything about it?"

Lisa-May took it and unfolded the crumpled piece of paper. "Is it about the Poetry Jam? That's next Thursday… oh, this isn't the Poetry Jam," she said as she read the top of the flyer that invited all interested women to an open debate on 'the recently published Neo-Feminist Manifest.'

"No, it's some kind of round-table debate. Eh… I'm an old-school feminist so I don't know if it would give me anything," Cathy said and took back the flyer. She studied it again before she folded it up and stuck it down her rear pocket. "The speaker is going to
be a Professor Melissa Kramer. Ever heard of her?"

"Can't say that I have, no."

"Me neither. Are you gonna com-"

"No," Lisa-May said with conviction.

Cathy grinned at her old, gray acquaintance. "Oh, okay. I haven't decided yet. I need to think about it a little more before I commit to it. Going alone won't be fun if you know more about applied feminism than the speaker. Right?"

"I wouldn't know, Cathy."

"Well, if you're in that kind of mood, I'm gonna find someone else to ask. Ha!" Cathy said and leaned down to give Lisa-May a playful nudge on her shoulder to coax but a single smile out of the gray woman. The plan worked, though only briefly.

After Cathy had hobbled away in search of someone who knew more about the event, Lisa-May reached over to tap Adrienne's leg. "Miss Gryszkowski, I need to stretch my legs. Please excuse me."

"Mmmm-all right," Adrienne said, not even bothering to take the pinkie out of her mouth.

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Lisa-May had barely made one tour of the Bookworm Sanctuary when the main entrance was opened and a wall of noise in the shape of loud indie rock blasted through the bookstore. The sound was quickly muted, but the damage had been done, and Felicity and Sandra came storming out of the office to see what on earth was going on.

"Kristen! Please don't turn your boom box on in here!" Felicity said with her hands firmly akimbo on her wide hips.

"Sorry girl, sorry ev'rybody," Kristen Laneau said, holding her earphones in one hand and a carrier bag in the other. "My right earphone kinda got snagged on the door handle. It popped out of my ear like shit from a mule!"

Felicity and Sandra stared wide-eyed at the colorful young woman and the white earphones she was holding. "Damn, that music came from your earphones?" Felicity said and looked at her blonde companion who could only shrug. "Damn, Kristen! You're gonna be deaf as an Easter Island sculpture before you're twenty-five!"

"Huh?" Kristen said, putting her free hand behind an ear. She winked at Felicity who had already narrowed her eyes down into brown slits. Sandra patted her new friend's back in a hurry and guided her back to the office.
Chuckling at Felicity's all-too predictable response, the tattooed woman with the slick possum hairstyle on top of her semi-shaved head shuffled into the bookstore. As always, she was dressed in boots, khaki cargo pants and a sleeveless, o-neck T-shirt. On this day, the T-shirt was crimson and carried the words *SAVE THE WORLD* on the front and *FROM THE F#%&ING POLITICIANS* on the back in large, blue letters.

She headed for the Kozy Korner before she noticed the woman sitting there staring at her in wide-eyed horror wasn't Lisa-May or anyone else of the regulars. Grunting, Kristen turned around and swung the carrier bag over her shoulder. When she located Lisa-May busy reading the spines in another of the aisles, she shuffled up to the gray woman. "Whassup, Lisa-May? Girl, I need to ask a favor. Wouldya mind taking a look at some of my lyrics? It's for a new song I'm writing for the Jam," she said as she dug into the carrier bag and produced a black notebook with a fabric cover.

"Lyrics? I'd love to," Lisa-May said and took the notebook which contained the lyrics to all the songs Kristen had created over the years.

"I just can't get the tone right, you know what I mean? I want it to be somber and depressing but the words don't want to play along."

A part of Lisa-May felt she should be insulted for being considered the resident expert on 'somber' and 'depressing', but then she realized that she probably was. "I'll take a look at it. How soon do you need it?"

"There's no rush, girl," Kristen said and waved her tattooed hand. "I gotta be places today, but I'll be back tomorrow at the same time. Yeah?"

"Can we make it tomorrow late afternoon instead? I have a dentist's appointment in my lunch break," Lisa-May said and instinctively ran her tongue across her teeth that needed to be cleaned professionally.

Kristen scrunched up her face like she was trying to recall her agenda for the following day. "Yikes, girl… late afternoon? Shit, I don't know if I can make that… I'll try to be here. Yeah?"

"All right, Kristen," Lisa-May said with a faint smile creasing her lips. To show the proper respect to the young, colorful poet, she clutched the black notebook to her chest.

"Okay. See ya then… probably. Hiya!" Kristen said and soon left the gray woman behind. The last thing she did before she stepped out of the bookstore was to turn the volume back up to one notch below apocalyptic.

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There was one thing Lisa-May needed to do before she could sit down and take a closer
look at Kristen's lyrics. Her gray shoes seemed to know, because they took her closer and closer to the office despite her mind's unwillingness to acknowledge it.

The important matter of explaining the earlier disagreement to Sandra Gottfried - who was arguably the most important person at the bookstore following her donation of twenty thousand dollars to cover many of the running costs - weighed down on her mind. Lisa-May could speak to most people even if her replies would on occasion be uttered as single-syllable words, but she and Sandra Gottfried seemed to be on different wavelengths altogether. In the three days Sandra had been at the bookstore, they had barely said two sentences to each other without having at least one of them cause confusion, annoyance or simply hurt.

Arriving at the open door to the office, she knocked on the doorjamb and stepped inside. The office looked like it always did; the strip light in the ceiling hadn't been fixed yet, and the faucet at the small wash basin at the window was dripping. Scores of color-coded binders filled the numerous shelves and made them droop down in the center. A reed basket filled with shiny, red apples stood on the desk, and Felicity and Sandra were both munching on a juicy specimen.

"Hi, Lisa-May," Felicity said and put the apple down on the desk so she could wipe her fingers on a napkin. "What brings you in here? You found some books you'd like to buy?"

Lisa-May looked from Felicity to Sandra before her eyes settled on the dark-skinned woman behind the desk. "Yes, but that's for later. I would like to have a word with Miss Gottfried… in private, if you don't mind."

"Uh… okay. No problem," Felicity said and shot Sandra a puzzled glance that was responded to by a shrug. "I need to pick up something from next door, anyway. That's gonna take me ten minutes or so. Is that enough?"

"Oh, certainly, Felicity," Lisa-May said and folded her hands in front of her stomach. She cast a glance at Sandra Gottfried's dusty-green tank top that parted slightly at the tummy even when the blonde was sitting down. She still felt it inappropriate for a woman of that age to wear something that revealing, but she knew she needed to suppress it during the conversation.

Felicity got up and strolled through the room, putting a hand on Sandra's shoulder as she went past her.

Lisa-May tracked the administrator with her eyes before she turned her attention back to Sandra. She grimaced at the prospect of explaining herself. Whenever she was forced to do so, the risk of only adding nonsense to the fire was great bordering on the inevitable.

In the meanwhile, Sandra swiveled around on the chair and crossed her Capri-clad legs at the knee. She didn't point her top knee away from the other woman in the room, and Lisa-
May was annoyed by that within a second. Once Sandra was comfortable, she shot Lisa-May a puzzled look that proved she had no idea what the conversation would be about.

Lisa-May took a deep breath and prepared her vocal cords to speak, but she hadn't made it beyond a first, inarticulate grunt before Sandra interrupted her all over again.

"Lisa-May, please don't take this the wrong way, but I don't have much time today. I need to leave in fifteen or twenty minutes for a little project I have going. Will it take that long?"

"No," Lisa-May croaked, narrowing her eyes at yet another interruption. "Oh, Miss Gottfried, I just came to apologize for shooting you that glare earlier today. Remember, when you asked me about the missing chapter in the book I was reading?"

"Oh… oh, that thing. Ah," Sandra said and waved her hand in dismissal, "Lisa-May, I forgot all about that ten minutes later."

"I didn't."

Sandra lowered her leg and leaned forward so she could put her elbows on her thighs. "Well, your apology is accepted, but… but I'd really like to know the logical processes behind your, uh… oh, behavior is such a negative word. I can't find a better one. I'd just like to know what made you do it?"

Lisa-May studied the blonde that she knew by way of a gossiping Cathy that Felicity had developed a strong crush on. Despite the fact that she was seven years her senior, not to mention that she wore spectacles, she was still prettier than Lisa-May had ever been, and would ever be. Pretty people just didn't understand it - they didn't need to because they world was always at their feet no matter how much they screwed up. "Well… it was the interruption. I just can't stand being interrupted."

"Oh… I'm sorry. I interrupted you again just now…"

"Yes."

Sandra and Lisa-May both clammed up and began to study each other's presence. Where the former was the very image of cool and pretty-pretty with her fit frame and cute face, the latter was the very image of frumpy that began at her gray clothes and ended with her dull looks. Beyond the fact they were both women who loved women, they had absolutely no points in common.

Lisa-May looked down and pressed her hands to her stomach. "If I don't make a stand somewhere, people will just push me around," she said in a tiny voice. When it didn't garner a response from the blonde, she looked up and locked eyes with her. "I know that from painful experience. I'm not saying you would do that. I don't know you. But I'm saying it's happened too often already. I need to draw a line in the sand so people will
know they're dealing with a human being and not a furry, little pet."

"I think I understand, Lisa-May," Sandra said and leaned back on the chair. "I've been forced to make an aggressive stance many times in my career. I promise I'll never push you around... but I'd also like to say I was hurt by the looks you sent me. They made me feel unwelcome. Like I was some kind of unwanted outsider who needed to be taught her place. Isn't that what you're struggling against, too?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry. I should have been more forthcoming. But it was just the interruption, you see," Lisa-May said and began to wring her hands. "Nothing more than that. I certainly respect you greatly as a businesswoman, but..."

This time, Sandra waited for Lisa-May to continue on her own. When she didn't, she reckoned it was safe to reply. "Thank you. It took me decades of hard work to get to where I am now. But?"

"But we're so different... so night and day different that I'm afraid it wasn't the last time a misunderstanding will come between us."

Sandra smiled and got up from the chair. She put out her arms and pulled a reluctant, but overruled, Lisa-May into a stiff, clumsy, awkward, all-arms-and-elbows hug that proved once and for all that Lisa-May's words about the two of them being as different as night and day were true. "You're probably right. However, I promise that if I feel slighted, I'll speak up at once so it won't fester for half a day like this time."

"Didn't you say you had forgotten all about it?"

"Weeelll..."

Lisa-May nodded. She never forgot anything so she knew exactly how it would have played on Sandra's mind. "And I will try to be more understanding of other people's needs. It won't be easy, but I'll try."

Sandra chuckled at the statement which was delivered in a bone-dry deadpan. Pulling back from the awkward hug, she realized it wasn't meant as a humorous comment at all. "Good... that's good," she said, furrowing her brow.

The potential for embarrassment was defused by Felicity knocking on the doorjamb to her own office. "So... have you gals finished, or do you need another ten minutes?"

"No, I think we're good. Aren't we good, Lisa-May?" Sandra said and reached out for the gray woman's hands.

"We're good," Lisa-May said, allowing the blonde to give her hands a squeeze though she wasn't too comfortable with anyone she didn't know well touching her anywhere without an invitation.
Felicity grinned and stepped into the office carrying a plastic bag of second-hand books she had been given for free by the community center's janitor. "Neat. Hey, have an apple before you leave, Lisa-May. They're great and juicy."

"Thank you, Felicity," Lisa-May said and took a red apple from the reed basket. "May I take one for Miss Gryszkowski as well?"

"Sure! Oh, is she a cutie? Is she girlfriend-material?" Felicity said and stuck out her tongue at the gray woman.

"Oh, please…" Lisa-May said and took another apple. She buffed them on her cardigan which brought out the deep red color. She studied the apple for a few seconds before she realized Felicity and Sandra were looking at her with great expectations. "You're getting worse than Cathy now!" she said, spun around on her heel and stomped out of the office.

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On her way back, Lisa-May stopped just out of sight from the Kozy Korner to observe the curly-haired Adrienne who was still snuggled up in the corner of the sofa reading the romantic thriller.

She let her eyes glide up the off-white slacks, past the gray cashmere sweater, the horn-rimmed spectacles and up to her mousy-brown curls. Was Adrienne Gryszkowski a 'cutie,' as Felicity had called her? She was, even Lisa-May could see that. Was there potential for a friendship? Yes, though it would be hard work with one speaking like a waterfall, and the other relishing silence. Perhaps they could meet in the middle?

Lisa-May's heart beat faster at the prospects of actually knowing someone apart from her colleagues at work who would never, ever get in touch with her off-hours even if the world was spiraling into the sun. The acquaintances she had made at the bookstore were good for casual conversations, but nothing more substantial than that. The thought of finding a special someone was exciting, but it scared her beyond belief at the same time.

Pushing all those foolish notions aside, Lisa-May sighed deeply and stepped away from the shelves she had been hiding behind. When she approached the Kozy Korner, Adrienne looked up and offered her a smile.

"Hello again," the curly-haired woman said and for once put down the romantic thriller.

"Hello. Would you like an apple?"

Adrienne smiled and reached for the shiny red fruit. "Oh! Yes, please. I love apples… I have ever since I was a little girl. They always remind me of the lazy summer afternoons where the best thing for my friends and I was to get a refreshing apple."
She shuffled around on the sofa to put her socked feet down on the floor next to her gray ballet flats. "I hope you don't mind, but I've been looking at the notebook. Goodness me, those songs are dark, gloomy, depressing… I wonder why anyone would write songs and poetry that dark? Isn't music supposed to create a sense of joy in the listener? Well, joy was the last thing I felt when I read them. They're about gay-bashing, rape, uncaring parents, even suicide attempts…"

Lisa-May narrowed her eyes upon hearing that Adrienne had looked through the notebook without asking for permission. Kristen had trusted her with it, and it wasn't something that should be made available to the public at large. She bit down a barb that had already formed on her tongue—it wouldn't help, and it would only hurt Adrienne. Instead, she bit into the juicy apple to hide her annoyance.

Chewing, she sat down on the sofa and took the black notebook. Though she had to make an important statement, she did what any lady should by waiting until she had swallowed the first bite before she spoke. "Kristen Laneau is a very sensitive young woman despite her provocative exterior. There isn't anything in these lyrics that hasn't happened in real life to her or her circle of friends. She collects the things told to her and distills them into poetry and music. This is what's really going on out there, every single day. She and her friends have had a harder life than any of us can understand. Please, Adrienne, give her some leeway."

"I'm sorry… I didn't stop to think they could be depicting situations from the real world. I just thought that… that she made them that gloomy to attract attention to herself… you know, that she was one of the Youtube generation who film themselves picking their nose and expect to become worldwide celebrities…"

"No, there's far more to Kristen than that. Far more," Lisa-May said and opened the notebook to skim the opening paragraphs of the first song. The lyrics were indeed dark, but written with insight and a literary quality that belied the colorful woman's age.

Adrienne suddenly flew up from her corner of the sofa and fell into Lisa-May's arms. The red apples went one way; the black notebook the other.

The unexpected impact sent them both sprawling onto the seat in an embrace that rivaled anything Lisa-May had ever taken part in - in short, it was a five-star, fur-lined, ocean-going moment of grotesque awkwardness, of stiff, unnatural gestures and clumsy fumbling-about with their hands and legs that suddenly went where limbs shouldn't go unless the ladies involved had already signed on the dotted line on the marriage certificate.

"Oh, Gaaawd, what's going on? What are you doing?!!" Lisa-May croaked into Adrienne's shoulder. Her heart was thumping in her chest; not just as a result of the shock created by being bowled over by a hundred and nineteen pounds of flesh, although it did play a part - but most of it stemmed from the fact that she was locked in a tender embrace with an attractive woman for the first time in more than five years.
While Adrienne howled in embarrassment and tried to scoot back without coping any feels beyond those she had already copped unwittingly, Lisa-May mellowed out and became a boneless creature. She hadn't sought out the contact, but now that it was there, she didn't want to let go. A warm hand touching the skin on her stomach; a leg adding sweet pressure to her thigh; hot breath against her neck. How long had it been? Nearly six years. Too long. Far too long. The tiniest of moans escaped her lips as a warm river of bliss ran through her. Once the moan was over, she wasn't even sure if it had come from her.

It wasn't until someone let out a piercing cat call that Lisa-May opened her eyes and realized she had turned into the sideshow of the day.

Felicity and Cathy each grabbed hold of one of Adrienne's arms to pull the hapless - and fiercely blushing - woman off Lisa-May's languid body. Sandra joined them with a clean handkerchief in case anyone would burst into tears, but Lisa-May felt like smoking a cigarette instead.

Cathy wore an expression on her face that said she was ready to burst as she looked at the other women with eyes that shone with wicked delight. The earthy woman displayed a wide-open grin as she bent down and slapped Lisa-May's legs. "Aw, hell yeah!" she finally cried, adding to Adrienne's acute embarrassment. "I shoulda known you'd be the first one to get frisky on the sofa! Hot diggity damn, girl!"

"Oh, get real, Cathy," Lisa-May said and sat up. She showed far more skin than usual since her blouse had ridden up to the point where it wasn't hiding any part of her stomach at all. She folded it down in a hurry and shuffled around on the spot to get her slacks a bit further down as well. Sighing, she looked at the two shiny red apples that had been thrown about in the melee. "Oh… you bruised the apples…" she said somberly.

The throwaway comment made Cathy explode in a howl of laughter that soon claimed Felicity as well. Sandra kept appropriately neutral, but Adrienne's cheeks caught fire all over again, and the conflagration soon spread to her forehead, throat and even the tip of her nose.

Felicity shook her head and helped the shaky Adrienne sit down on the couch. "Can we trust you kids not to play doctor in public? Thank you," she said in a voice designed to present her as one of the Responsible Adults. "Jeez, you gals," she continued in her regular voice, breaking out in a giggle.

As Cathy hobbled back to the aisle carrying the Western novels, and Felicity and Sandra moved back into the office, Lisa-May and Adrienne stole a shy glance at each other. They were both still visibly embarrassed, but the grotesque awkwardness had served as an effective icebreaker. To show that she wasn't angry or upset, Lisa-May picked up her carrier bag and scooted closer to Adrienne - and she even had a faint smile creasing her lips.
A beautiful, soothing silence spread over the Bookworm Sanctuary as the gray Lisa-May and the excitable Adrienne continued to read their respective books. Now and then, they happened to glance at each other at the same time. Shy, little smiles were exchanged before they returned to the pages.

This continued for an hour or so until Adrienne flipped the last page of the romantic thriller and closed the book. She read the blurb and studied the picture of the author before she put it down on the sofa between her and her companion. "Oh, that was really exciting… I'll definitely buy that," she mumbled to herself like she had forgotten someone was sitting right next to her.

Stretching out, her back cracked and popped a few times as she shook and shimmied to get the kinks out. "Miss Farrington, please excuse me," she continued and got up from the sofa in the Kozy Korner.

Lisa-May put down her book; her attention was snatched by Adrienne's slender figure moving around with grace as the woman shoved her feet into her shoes. "Certainly. Are you going home now, Miss Gryszkowski?"

"No, I need to use the bathroom."

"Ah, in that case… you need to be careful with the faucets. They're unpredictable at the best of times."

Adrienne smiled as she bent down to slip the heel counter of the ballet flats in place over the back of her feet. "I'll remember that. Thank you." Taking her purse, she turned around and strolled over towards the bathroom which had recently become vacant.

Silence returned to the Kozy Korner, and Lisa-May snuggled down to read the final few chapters of a book on man's impact on the environment that she had found in the Miscellaneous department lodged between a Tex Mex cook book and a self-help guide. It was heavy reading, even for her, so her mind took the occasional detour into a far more pleasant scenario: one where she and Adrienne explored each other. Never explicit, but certainly sexy. A brief smile crept over Lisa-May's lips as the pretty pictures danced across her mind's eye. The warmth she had felt during the unfortunate hugging-incident made a welcome return, and she allowed it to grace her soul for a brief moment. It performed a slow tour of her body, stopping in places that she had almost forgotten she had.

The smile and the warmth faded when she arrived at the unfortunate fact that she was so rusty in the art of love - not to mention the techniques - that her worth to any woman
would be that of a three-dollar bill.

She went back to the book but the drab message had lost her. Sighing, she closed it and put it away.

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Adrienne came back from the bathroom five minutes later with cheeks that were once again tinted red. The cause was readily evident as wet spots peppered the off-white slacks from the waist to the knees.

Lisa-May scrunched up her face in horror - the evil, recalcitrant faucets had no doubt doused the slacks. She could only imagine how the sensitive Adrienne felt about it, but if it had been her who'd had an involuntary shower, she'd be devastated. Getting up in a hurry, she started looking around for napkins, towels or anything she could use to mop up the water.

Armed with a stack of gray napkins made of recycled paper, she guided the mortified Adrienne over to the Kozy Korner and helped her down on the sofa. "The faucets?" she asked as she began dabbing down the lower ends of the off-white slacks.

"Yes… it's water… not the other thing, thank God," Adrienne croaked, taking a few of the napkins to dab the upper reaches of her slacks.

"I've told Felicity time and time again to get the faucets fixed before someone is burned by a hot water fountain. Why she hasn't listened, I have no idea." Grunting, Lisa-May continued soaking up the excess water until the napkins were wet and the slacks were dry - or at least, drier than they had been.

Adrienne smiled and let out a sigh of relief at the success. "Thank you so much… goodness me, what a crazy, crazy day it's been. And I only meant to ask Miss LaMarre about the Henrietta & Co. books! I never meant to stay for this long!" The statement was accompanied by a shy smile directed at Lisa-May.

The gray woman returned the smile as she scooped up all the spent napkins and crumpled them into a wad of paper. She threw them into the nearest trash can for recyclable paper and sat down again - then she remembered the book she had found had lost her interest. A fun thought entered her mind that refused to leave before she had at least asked about it: "Miss Gryszkowski, may I show you my favorite shelves?" she said and put out her hand.

Adrienne's mouth formed an excited O as she took the hand offered to her. "You certainly may! Lead on, Miss Farrington."

"Please…" Lisa-May said with the beginnings of a shy smile creasing her lips. "Please call me Lisa-May."
"Oh! I will! But only if you call me Adrienne."

"I will. That's such a pretty name."

Adrienne smiled and gave the offered hand a little squeeze. "Thank you. Lisa-May is very pretty, too."

The two women moved away from the sofa and walked around the first of the large bookcases. Holding hands - which attracted plenty of attention from the other patrons - they went past Science-Fiction & Fantasy, Western, Romantic Thrillers and Sports Dramas until they reached the rows containing the personal dramas.

Lisa-May let her finger run down the spines of the rows labeled A, B and C until she reached D and Rosita Dosamantes. The book she pulled out had a vibrant, deep orange cover that depicted a sun setting over a ranch house somewhere on the prairie. "You should read this, Adrienne. All Our Sunsets. It takes place in a rural region, but don't be fooled into thinking it's a Western… it's an intense, personal drama about the awakening of a woman who does all the work on a family ranch after the death of her father. One day, a brooding female ranch hand comes along on a motorcycle looking for a job, no questions asked. The two women get off on the wrong foot, and- no, I won't spoil it for you. Just read it."

"I will… thank you," Adrienne said and studied the cover with great interest. Once she had read the blurb at the back which told much the same story, she sought out Lisa-May's hand again. With her fingers, she snared the hand into her own, and once it was there, she gave it a little squeeze.

Lisa-May looked at Adrienne with a wistful smile on her gray lips. She hadn't expected to be holding hands with an attractive woman on her day off, but it was all right because holding hands was safe - she knew exactly how to do that. "So," she said, moving along the rows until she found M. "Alicia Milton-Jones. Driving Towards The Light. A fantastic novel about a woman from the poor side of town who's forced into smuggling heroin to pay for… silly me, now I nearly spoiled it again. I'm so sorry," she said and pulled the book down from the shelf.

Adrienne giggled and gave Lisa-May's hand a little squeeze. "Oh, that's all right. This is fun! And you look so cute when you realize you're about to say too much."

Much secret furrowing of brow later, Lisa-May stole a glance at the bubbly woman with the horn-rimmed glasses who was eagerly reading the back of Driving Towards The Light.

She could feel her palms starting to sweat over the unexpected term of endearment, but it would be too awkward to pull back from the squeeze which in turn made her palms sweat even more. Cute? The last time she had been called cute was when she was nine years old. Then, it had been justified, but not later. When she left puberty behind, her face had
been transformed into a permanent, near-androgynous shape and look that didn't leave much room for cuteness, perceived or real.

Nervous energy started building up inside her, so she licked her dry lips several times before she moved along the row, intent on showing Adrienne another book or two. Who knew, it might even give the curly-haired woman an opportunity to call her 'cute' again. "Here's another favorite of mine… and not just because it carries my name. You're Not Lisa by Yvette Ouisterham. A fabulous story translated from French where."

A sound akin to a twig snapping in two was heard from the next aisle; the noise was followed immediately by a pained groan that could only be created by wood about to give up the ghost. A second later, a loud, rolling crash made everyone in the vicinity of the Science-Fiction & Fantasy aisle jump a foot in the air.

Adrienne grabbed hold of Lisa-May and pulled the gray woman closer to her. Her effort was markedly better than their first, fumbling attempt at a hug, because not only did both women manage to stay erect this time, no skin was exposed. "What. Was. That?" she whispered hoarsely. "It sounded like the roof was collapsing…"

"Something did collapse, Adrienne, but it was a shelf…" Lisa-May croaked in a strangled voice. 'Strangled' because her nose was brushing against the side of the other woman's neck. The smoothness of the skin underneath the curly hair was astonishing, and she wished she would never have to leave it behind. The twin peaks hidden by the cashmere sweater were pressed against her own chest, and the exquisite perfume Adrienne used only added to the little slice of heaven she found herself in. With her eyes slipping shut, she extended all her senses and soaked up as much of the sweet, close contact as she could while it was there at her fingertips.

To go six years between girlfriends was a criminal waste of the precious little time people had on the planet, Lisa-May understood that now. Her senses were all working overtime to take as much in as she could before it would be over and done with, but her heart was a greedy little critter that simply refused to roll over and give up the rampant emotions that blasted through it.

'Tell me that wasn't a shelf!' Felicity barked from clear across the bookstore. Heavy, rapid footsteps proved that the administrator was stomping towards the offending aisle. 'It better not be a shelf... or I'm gonna be really, really- damn, it was a shelf! And books are all over the damn place- argh!'

Lisa-May sighed deeply and pulled back from her companion. It didn't take but a second for the separation to become painful, and she wanted nothing more than to go back into the embrace and stay there for a century - but she knew she couldn't. "Oh, we better help Felicity retrieve the books," she said in a somber, downcast voice.

"Do you think it's safe?" Adrienne whispered, keeping her hand firmly on Lisa-May's side and her face in striking distance to the gray woman. "Miss LaMarre sounds like a
"caged bear…"

"That's pretty accurate… but if we help her collect the books, she'll get better in a hurry. It won't take long. Come on." The two women moved apart and turned the corner to go into the next aisle.

Felicity sat flat on her rear in the middle of the aisle scooping up the wayward books. She created smaller piles, then larger piles, then huge piles so she wouldn't have to move too often. Moments later, the inevitable happened: one of the medium-sized piles toppled over and once more distributed the books it contained all over the floor. Felicity stopped working to stare daggers at the insubordinate paperbacks.

Cathy arrived at the same time Lisa-May and Adrienne did, but the earthy woman could only hobble along the aisle, and she needed to put a hand on the shelves to support herself for every step she took. "Damn, Felicity… another shelf?"

"Another shelf," Felicity said and thumped her fist into the smooth linoleum floor.

"I wish I could help ya, but… with this bum ankle, I'd be a hindrance, not a help. Just imagine the brouhaha when you and the skinny girls there were gonna pull me back up again. Hell, we better not even try. I'll just find a chair and supervise the work."

Felicity sighed and began to create yet another pile of books. "It's the thought that counts, Cathy. Damn, the Poetry Jam can't come fast enough. Sandra and I decided we wouldn't want to get started on the maintenance work until after the special event. It wouldn't be fair to Kristen to make her perform in dust and all kinds of shit from the builders."

Lisa-May nodded in agreement, as did Adrienne. "That was very thoughtful of you, Felicity. I'm sure Kristen will appreciate that. All right, Adrienne and I will round up the books for you. Miss Gryszkowski?"

"Right behind you, Miss Farrington," Adrienne said and began picking up the books that had made it all the way over to - and in some cases, under - the shelves on the opposite side of the aisle.

"Thanks, gals," Felicity said and clambered to her feet in a somewhat labored fashion. Once the rotund woman was standing up, she dusted off the seat of her pants and began to nudge errant books closer to the main pile with her foot.

"Griss-cow-ski, huh?" Cathy said with a grin. "Tell me, how d'ya spell that?"

Adrienne stood up straight and adjusted her horn-rimmed spectacles. "G-r-y-s-z-k-o-w-s-k-i, Miss Giar- uh, Cathy."

"Now there's a sobriety test, huh?"
"I suppose," Adrienne said and cast a brief glance at Lisa-May who conveyed to her silently that Cathy didn't mean anything by the question.

Cathy grinned at the look on Lisa-May's face. Not only was the gray woman smiling, her complexion was in fact far less gray than usual. Something had happened, that much was clear. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that she had been smitten by the curly-haired woman helping her - but that it had taken place over the course of an afternoon was nothing short of mindboggling. "Hey, lovey-dovey, you missed one over there… underneath the collapsed shelf. Yeah, Lisa-May, that's right, I was talking to you."

Pausing in her work, Lisa-May scrunched up her face into a mask of annoyance and shot the earthy woman a dark glare. "Lovey-dovey… really, Cathy. That represents a new low, even for your pretty awful standards."

"Well, you do say I have a one-track mind. So… I call it how I see it. Lovey. Dovey."

They all heard the deep, long sigh that came out of the woman in gray, but nobody dared to make a comment about it. When Lisa-May moved over to rescue the one that had been trapped underneath the shelf, she realized that the book wasn't alone - a handful of paperbacks had gone the wrong way when the shelf had collapsed and were lodged underneath the heavy bookcase itself.

"Felicity, we have a problem," Lisa-May said, looking under the shelf resting on her hands and knees and with her back end pointing straight up in the air. "Several books have-"

"Houston, we have a problem!" Cathy echoed, followed by a loud laugh.

Lisa-May pulled back to sit on her thighs. She shot the earthy woman a silent look of pure exasperation that didn't need words to go through loud and clear.

Felicity chuckled over the exchange before she fumbled back down onto the linoleum floor. Sitting down, she scooted over to the shelf and began to fiddle with it. "Yeah… I see what you mean. Damn. We need to remove the entire bottom shelf to salvage those books. But if we do, I don't know if we can get the planks back in there without damaging them… or if we can even do it without the proper tools… that we don't have. Hmmm…"

"So," Cathy said and got up from the hard, uncomfortable chair she had found. Nobody ever used them to sit on for more than three minutes at a time, and now she knew why. "Here's a conundrum. How many women does it take to change a-"

"Cathy…" Lisa-May said somberly.

"No, no, this is good… how many women does it take to change a shelf that's fallen down?"
Lisa-May rolled her eyes and went back to work. If she pulled back the sleeve of her cardigan, she was just barely able to slip her hand in under the collapsed shelf. She could touch the books with her fingertips, but she couldn't pull them back out because there wasn't much to hold onto, and the weight and resistance from the shelf was too great. "Hmmm," she said as she rolled her sleeve back down, echoing Felicity's earlier comment.

"Do you want me to try, Miss Farrington?" Adrienne said and placed a tender hand on Lisa-May's upper back.

Lisa-May smiled as she dusted off her hands that had picked up quite a few bunnies that had been hiding under the shelves. "Be my guest, but I doubt you can do much about it."

Cathy observed the silent exchange between the curly-haired newbie and the woman in gray. She had known Lisa-May for a couple of years, and never in that time had she smiled more than once a day - and she had never, ever allowed anyone she didn't know well to touch her so blatantly. Suppressing a broad grin, she shuffled around on her bad ankle to get a better view. "Gals, I'm serious… how many women does it take to change a shelf that's fallen down?"

"How many, Cathy?" Felicity asked to get it over with.

"Just one. So who's gonna call her?"

Though it was too silly for its own good, the joke did create a ripple of chuckles that rolled among the four women. Adrienne tried her best after pulling back her sleeve, but her fingers could only graze the books that were lodged underneath the shelf, not pull them out. "I'm afraid it's no use. I don't even think it would help if we found a long poker or something because the books are stuck."

"In short, we need to remove the shelf," Felicity said and clambered to her feet all over again. "All right, take five. I need to come up with a plan to get those suckers out… besides, Sandra will soon be back and-"

"Miss LaMarre," Cathy said in a tone that was inquisitive and more than a little mischievous, "I dare say you and Miss Gottfried spend a lot of time together now. I need to know when I should expect the wedding invitation so I can get my favorite dungarees ironed."

Felicity groaned, Lisa-May rolled her eyes and Adrienne blushed.

"Blah, blah, blah," Felicity said as she dusted off the seat of her decorated bell-bottom jeans. "You're butting in where you shouldn't be. Now butt out."

"Yes, Ma'am! Butting in is what I do best, Ma'am, but I'll give butting out a shot too!"
This time, Felicity rolled her eyes and Lisa-May groaned loudly. Adrienne blushed again as she took in the exchange between the old friends.

The moment was saved from further embarrassment by Sandra coming back into the Bookworm Sanctuary carrying two white, paper carrier bags from the croissant bakery down the street. She was already on her way over to the office when she noticed the whole gang standing in the Science-Fiction & Fantasy aisle. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what had happened, and she groaned out loud as she crossed the smooth linoleum floor to join the others.

Stopping at the piles on the floor, she looked at the collapsed shelf and the many books with a furrowed brow. "Is there any reason why four able-bodied women… oh, I forgot about your ankle, Cathy… why three and a half able-bodied women are just standing around when there's a pile of books on the floor?"

"We need to come up with a plan first," Felicity said, peeking into the paper carrier bags. "A handful of books are stuck down there. We'll damage them if we yank them out without removing the shelf… and we're discussing if we'll damage the shelf if we try to remove it without the proper tools."

"Oh… okay. Well, that certainly calls for a strategy meeting, I can see that," Sandra said as she looked at the others. "Anyway, so we're taking five?"

"More like ten," Cathy said with a grin.

"Right. Well, in the meantime, I visited your sister's croissant bakery. I must say, Cathy, that's a really well-run bakery… clean and inviting. And the smell of the fresh coffee beans! Makes this woman purr, I can tell you."

"Thanks! I'll let her know."

Sandra smiled back and adjusted her square-framed spectacles. "I bought a selection of spelt buns and different blends of organic coffee that we need to test before we host the feminist debate next week. It'll be a little more expensive but a lot less hassle to buy the nourishments instead of making them ourselves while all the other stuff is going on. Yeah?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," Felicity said and put her hand on Sandra's elbow.

"While we're on the subject of the debate," Cathy said, waving her hand in the air to get everyone's attention, "does anybody know what the topics of discussion will be? I'd kinda like to come over, but not if it's some sort of theoretical, intellectual chit-chat by a dry creek college professor who's never been out in the real world."

"Well, I haven't heard any details," Felicity said. Sandra chimed in with a shrug and a
"Me neither."

Cathy sighed and stuffed her hands down her pockets.

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Ten minutes later, Lisa-May and Adrienne each held a coffee-to-go mug and a paper plate with a spelt bun. Lisa-May's was plain dough, but Adrienne had snatched one with blueberries. The sofa in the Kozy Korner had been occupied by the time they got back to it, so they took their books and personal belongings and shuffled off to find a new spot where they could sample the coffee.

The new spot turned out to be the crates with old vinyl records. Lisa-May hadn't had a record player since her teen years, but Adrienne was the proud owner of a USB turntable that could be hooked up to her computer, so she began to browse through the many second-hand albums while they sampled the coffee and the buns.

"Oh, look at this! This is from her best period!" Adrienne said, pulling up a pristine Nina Simone album. "Oh… forty-five dollars! No, I can't afford that. I better stop browsing or else I'll go bankrupt. I have a thing for old records, actually. It stems from my childhood. We always had a record player going in the background. My father is an avid collector of old rock'n'roll albums from the 1970s. He's got all kinds of wonderful albums by bands you've probably never heard of. His pride and joy is a double live album from the 1976 Monterey Folk & Rock Festival. It's a really great album that I've listened to so much I know the songs by heart. One of the groups is still going strong, actually. They released a greatest hits compilation last year that I bought as download, not as vinyl. It's pretty good, but it doesn't have the warmth and soul of the old vinyl recordings. They were typically produced with low-grade equipment, but I must say they're actually far more interesting to listen to compared to much of today's music that's always so glossy that no soul is left anywhere on the album or even the single. Of course, these days, most people stream their music on poor… speakers… which… oh, I'm talking too much again. I'm sorry."

Instead of wearing a dark frown or even a scowl like she would have done not so long ago, Lisa-May wore a warm smile. She scooted a little closer to the other woman whose voice she suddenly found the most soothing she had listened to for a long while. "It doesn't matter," she said with affection. "You have a charming voice."

"Oh… uh… thank you," Adrienne said and adjusted her horn-rimmed spectacles. "How is your coffee?"

"I haven't tried it yet," Lisa-May said and took a sip. The brown liquid had barely touched her tongue before the corners of her mouth pointed down like she had eaten a lemon whole. "Ugh… what's this? This isn't coffee." She pulled open the lid and looked at the dark brown liquid that did in fact have a passing resemblance to coffee in both appearance and aroma.
Adrienne furrowed her brow and tried her own coffee. Once she had swallowed the first sip, she smacked her lips to bring out the taste. "Well… this is pretty good, actually. Would you like to try a sip?"

"I don't know if I dare," Lisa-May mumbled as she accepted the other to-go mug. Trying a tiny sip, her face lit up when she found it to be far better. "Oh… this is definitely coffee. That other thing isn't."

"Look," Adrienne said and pointed at the bottom of the mugs, "the blend of coffee is printed on the underside… well, that's just silly. Who can read that before they've emptied it?"

Lisa-May chuckled as she held up the mug containing the poor blend. "Cinnamon-spiced blended imported Guillermo Royale. I better tell Miss Gottfried to remove that one from the list. What does the other one say?"

"Uh… Melange Viennese-style with genuine whipped cream," Adrienne said and broke out in a snigger.

"Oh, that figures. Do we feel brave enough to try the spelt buns?"

The two women looked at each other for a few seconds before they shrugged and bit down into their buns that were - mercifully - well-made.

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The military operation to rescue the stranded books was set in motion at two minutes past five in the afternoon. Felicity had created a seven-point plan they needed to follow to the letter in order to get the books out without tearing covers or losing pages.

Step one had already been accomplished with little difficulty. After all, standing in a huddle before sitting down on the floor wasn't too hard. Lisa-May had shed her cardigan to have her arms free. Her hands had been deemed to be the smallest of the women present, so she had been given the important task of reaching in and grabbing hold of the books as soon as Sandra and Felicity were able to loosen the screws holding the collapsed shelf in place.

Step two consisted of Felicity working an electric screwdriver that she had borrowed from the community center's janitor. The first screw came out in one go, but the second needed a bit more work. The whine created by the metal head made everyone flinch, and it turned excruciatingly bad when the third screw didn't feel like releasing at all. "The damn thing won't come off!" she croaked through clenched teeth that watered from the incessant whine.

Cathy supervised the work like she had said she would. After having snatched the spare
swivel-chair from the office to give her injured ankle a rest and her rear a softer place to sit, she kept a running commentary on the progress. "Maybe you need a hammer, Felicity?"

"Huh?"

"A hammer! To give it a whack! Damn that whine… no, that's better. It's almost there… oohhhh, and the bit broke free of the slot! And again! You probably need to press down more, Felicity."

Adrienne and Sandra had both stuck fingers in their ears so they couldn't hear Cathy's comments - or the whine - but Lisa-May could and she was well on her way to becoming annoyed. The whine drilled into her brain through her left ear, and Cathy did her best to clog up the right. "No… no, wait, Felicity," she said and pulled her hand out. "Forget the screw. Let's try to lift the plank instead."

"Lift it? Look, my seven-point plan clearly states that we need to get the screws out first," Felicity said as she turned off the screwdriver. Everyone sighed in relief when the whine cut out. Adrienne and Sandra popped their fingers out of their ears and shot each other tired glances.

"Let's bypass the plan for the moment. The plank's loose in one end, remember? When you lift it, it'll either slip off or break off. Either way, we can rescue the books," Lisa-May said, fiddling with the plank. When her comments were met with silence, she looked up at her companions with a puzzled frown etched onto her forehead. "For Pete's sake, I can't be the only one here who has assembled furniture from IKEA? Or can I?"

"I've bought some things from IKEA," Adrienne squeaked, "but I've always paid them to assemble it for me."

Everybody else shrugged.

"I don't believe it. Of all people, I, Lisa-May Farrington, am the only one who's had her hands dirty," she continued in a mumble while she pointed at the plank she wanted Felicity to lift. "There, Felicity. Let's try it."

Adrienne gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh, please be careful, Lisa-May… that looks dangerous. What if it slips and crushes your fingers?" She spoke in a squeaky voice that earned her a throaty chuckle from Cathy.

"Yeah, 'cos we all know how important fingers are to us grrrls!" Cathy said, earning herself a round of identical groans from the others.

Almost as Lisa-May had expected, the rescue operation wasn't difficult at all when it came down to the nitty gritty. Felicity didn't need to lift the plank more than an inch and a half for Lisa-May's petite hands to slip in and scoop out one book at a time. Seven books
in total came out: all three in Zoë Clare's *Goddess of War*-fantasy series, volume two and three of Lucy Benson's award-winning science-fiction series *Destination Antares*, and two individual novels, Oona Locare's *My Synthetic Heart*, and MacNeil Cooper's *Survivors Of The Plague*.

"And that's all," Lisa-May said, peeking in under the shelves.

Groaning, Felicity released her grip on the plank which plopped back down in place. "All right… now we can get the books back up. I just need to get the next strut from the office so it won't happen again in ten minutes' time."

"Well, I won't be here to help in ten minutes, so you better," Lisa-May said as she dusted off her hands. Sandra gave her a hands-up, but Adrienne did one better and pulled her into a hug that wasn't anywhere near as awkward as the first few had been.

"You were so brave!" she said before she pulled the gray woman even deeper into the hug. Smiling nervously, she lowered her voice to a whisper: "Lisa-May, I'm cooking vegetarian lasagna tonight. And I'm going to have red wine. My dinner table has plenty of room for two. W- W- would… would… d- do you think-"

Lisa-May's heart doubled its pace from one moment to the next as her mind and body tried to put up a brick wall defense against the offer. The situation was frightening, terrifying, even nerve-shattering, but most of all wonderful. She leaned in close and brushed her lips against the smooth skin on Adrienne's neck. "Yes," she whispered back, once again closing her eyes to take in the delightful scent and warmth of the other woman.

Adrienne's cheeks blushed red at hearing the answer. When they separated, she performed a little hip-shimmy on the spot that attracted plenty of attention from the other women there. "Sweet! I'll buy the books I've found and then we can leave."

A flabbergasted Felicity looked at Sandra who could only shrug in return, but Cathy laughed out loud and hobbled over to Lisa-May where she put her hands on the shoulders of the gray woman's recently donned cardigan. "I'm proud of you, girl. Really I am. Will you think of old Cathy when you gals feast?"

"That," Lisa-May said and deftly snatched Adrienne's hand before the curly-haired woman could move over to the office, "will be the only thing I won't be thinking of, Cathy. You'll just have to find your own cutie."

A wink at Felicity and Sandra settled the deal. Walking hand in hand, Lisa-May and Adrienne strolled over to the office to pay for the books. The former hadn't even bothered to button her cardigan.

Licking her lips, Felicity cocked her head and waved in a puzzled fashion at the two retreating women. "Okay, what just happened there? Who was that woman wearing Lisa-
May's clothes? She winked at us... she smiled... she let someone hug her... and she's
going on a date... no seriously, who was that?"

Sandra chuckled and slipped her arm around Felicity's round waist. "I'm guessing the
shrine we made to honor Aphrodite is finally paying off."

"It must be. Huh. Just when you thought you had seen it all... oh, I better get in there and
update the databases. Can't leave the kids alone for too long... in fact, they're kinda quiet
in there, aren't they?"

Moving her arm in an exaggerated fashion, Cathy put her hand behind her ear to amplify
the sounds. She grinned and turned back to Felicity and Sandra. "Yeah. Awfully quiet.
Betcha five bucks they're swapping spit."

"Lisa-May? Nuh-uh," Felicity said and shook her
head. "On the other hand..." she added
in a slow drawl. Chuckling, she set off in a fast jog to be the first to see if Lisa-May and
Adrienne really were kissing in the office.

"Hey! Unfair! Injured woman here!" Cathy cried, but the other two didn't have time to
wait for her.

Sandra caught up with Felicity in the doorway where they let out a pair of identical,
heartfelt "Awwwww" 's at the sight of Adrienne Gryszkowski and the original Woman In
Gray, Lisa-May Farrington, locked in a tender embrace that saw their arms wrapped
around each other.

Lisa-May's head was resting on Adrienne's shoulder so they weren't kissing, but it didn't
take a professor of advanced cartography to see they would be exploring that particular
field of pleasure later on in the evening.

"Are they kissing? Are they kissing?" Cathy said, huffing and puffing as she finally
cauced up with the others.

Felicity shook her head. "Nope. Five bucks. Deliver."

Grumbling, Cathy dug into her jeans pocket to find a five dollar bill. When she slapped it
into Felicity's open palm with a grunt, she happened to look at Lisa-May who stuck out
her tongue at the older woman in a rare case of the woman in gray getting the last laugh.

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**EPISODE 3 - KRISTEN**
Felicity LaMarre pulled back the sleeve of her burgundy shirt to check her wristwatch. Grimacing, she realized the hands of time were storming ahead like they were being chased by ol’ Scratch himself. Despite the fact she had barely finished eating the chicken salad sandwich she had bought for lunch, it was already twenty past three in the afternoon.

"Three hours ten minutes to go… damn," she mumbled as she looked around at the group of people she had assembled to help put up the chairs and the dais for the week’s big event, the Poetry Jam. The group of people shuffled about aimlessly looking at the second-hand books and the old vinyl records because there was nothing for them to do - the chairs she had rented from PartyPeople Rentals hadn't shown up yet. "Double damn," she mumbled, pushing herself off the doorjamb to her office.

She could hear Sandra Gottfried on the phone complaining to the person at the other end of the line. Sandra had called the tardy rental company, but the conversation seemed to be a one-sided affair measured by how much she was speaking compared to the brief gaps where she wasn't.

Felicity couldn't deal with that on top of all her other worries, organizational issues and various challenges, so she shuffled over to the bathroom and knocked softly on the door. "Kristen… are you okay?"

Inside the bathroom, the resident poet, singer-songwriter, sketch artist and much more, twenty-two year old Kristen Laneau, was kneeling on the floor with her hands clutching the sides of the porcelain toilet bowl. The cesspool of nervous energy that always arrived prior to her performances blasted through her at the speed of a raging hurricane. She didn't have anything left in her stomach, but it didn't stop her diaphragm from convulsing.

A single dry heave wasn't much fun; ten of them in a row made her regret ever having agreed to do the Poetry Jam. If she only had to do her own works, it wouldn't matter too much, but she was going to present the poetry and songs she had created out of the stories told to her by the people who lived on the mean streets. It needed to be perfect, and not just a hundred percent perfect, but a thousand percent perfect. Tonight, she wouldn't have any room for foul-ups, missteps, slips of the tongue or any other kinds of errors. Some of the people whose stories she told would be in the audience, so everything had to be from the heart.

As always, she was dressed in ankle boots and low-riding, khaki cargo pants, but the loud muscleshirt she had selected for the evening's big event was soaking in warm water in the wash basin, a victim of the first, unexpected clenching of her stomach. As a result, the numerous colorful tattoos she carried on her torso and arms were in plain sight.

Her first tattoo had come when she was thirteen: a blue rose on her left arm. It had earned
her a strong ass-whooping and a month confined to the house. The latter was worse than the former since she wanted to spend the summer hanging out with the group of like-minded girls and boys she had met behind the mall.

That summer was when she realized a great deal about herself. She understood that she enjoyed the company of girls far more than boys, and she understood that she needed to rebel against her uptight parents. The best way to do that was to dress and act the opposite of them - thus, she had nearly a dozen further tattoos made over the course of the next couple of years.

When she turned eighteen, her torso and most of her arms and hands were covered in ink. The rebellion had worked as she had distanced herself from her parents, but now that she grew older, she could see things from their perspective as well. Not all she had done had been smelling of roses.

Much to her surprise, her parents had still tried to help her when the time came for submitting to a college, but her grades weren't good enough for a scholarship, and they weren't wealthy enough to do it the regular way. Instead, she walked the streets and performed odd jobs to make a buck or two.

The dry heaves grew weaker, so she leaned back on her thighs to give her rubbery, trembling arms a rest. She counted her blessings for having the foresight of bringing a bottle of water into the bathroom; taking it, she unscrewed the cap and rinsed her mouth a few times.

Sighing, she splashed a little water onto her hands that she used to cool off her neck and the back of her nearly-shaved head. The only hair she had was an oval patch on the very top of her head that lay flat against her skull in a heavily gelled, slick possum cut. Most of the time, it was jet black, but she had dyed it shocking-red to mark the big event. A cool drop of water trickled down her bare back until it reached the waist of her cargo pants.

The numerous piercings she had in her ears and eyebrows reflected the light from the bulb above the wash basin. Unlike most of her peers, she didn't want studs in her lips, nose or tongue because they interfered with her singing, and that was too important for her to mess with.

Sighing again, she clambered to her feet and shifted over to the wash basin.

'Kristen...' Felicity said from beyond the locked door, 'you've been in there an awful long time... are you sure you're okay?'

"I've been pukin' my guts out, girl," Kristen croaked in a raw voice.

'Oh... do you want me to come in and help you?'
"No. But I need a shirt or something. I puked on my T."

'Yuck... all right. I'll be back before you know I'm gone.'

"Whatever," Kristen croaked, looking at herself in the mirror. Red eyes, gray complexion - she looked like something even an alley cat wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. It wasn't the first time she was going to perform songs and poetry to an audience, and it wasn't the first time her stomach had rebelled against it, but it had been far worse than usual.

She still had a gruesome taste in her mouth, so she took a mini-swig of the water in the hope she could hold it down. The way her diaphragm performed a flip-flop when the water reached the lower end of her gullet proved that she couldn't.

With her stomach clenching hard, she barely made it over to the toilet before the small swig of water came spewing back out like a fountain.

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The only spare shirt Felicity had left in her office was the red-and-green checkered flannel one Sandra had borrowed when her far nicer shirt had suffered a head-on collision with a chocolate croissant on her first day at the Bookworm Sanctuary.

She scrunched up her face as she held up the flannel shirt. It didn't belong to the type of clothing Kristen usually wore, but it would have to do. Shuffling back to the bathroom door, she knocked softly and put her head closer to the door so she didn't have to yell. "Kristen? I've found a shirt for you."

The door was unlocked and pushed ajar without a word from the other side. A tattooed arm came out with the hand already searching for the shirt. When Felicity put it there, the hand was moved back inside in a hurry.

'What the F- A flannel shirt?' came the all-too-predictable response.

Felicity chuckled. "Yes! It's a fashion statement!"

'When? In 1984?'

"More like 1992."

'Ugh... thanks.'

"You're welcome," Felicity said and moved aside as Kristen locked the door from the other side.

A sudden commotion at the main entrance finally heralded the arrival of the movers from
PartyPeople Rentals. The multi-colored door was opened with a bang, and three men pushed sack trucks into the Bookworm Sanctuary each carrying ten stackable chairs that were wrapped in protective plastic and miles of adhesive tape. A cheer rose from the assembled men and women who had been at the bookstore early to help set up the seats.

Felicity hurried over there and made a quick inventory of the stacks of chairs. Counting to thirty, she scrunched up her face and turned to the man who, at least judging by his khaki coveralls and the name tag on his chest that said 'Supervisor Pete,' seemed to be the one in charge of the movers. "Well, you sure took your sweet time in getting her e… and where are the dais and the remaining twenty chairs?"

'Supervisor Pete' - a man in his late thirties who had a four-day stubble that was a good match to the rest of his scruffy, ruddy appearance - wiped a few beads of sweat off his brow with a tan handkerchief. "Out in the truck, Ma'am. Please calm down. Hostility will only make my guys nervous and drop their loads."

Felicity narrowed her eyes at the man's comment - she realized it was the same man she had spoken to over the phone, the one who had nearly driven her up one wall and down the other with his lackadaisical behavior. Forcing a smile on her face, she folded her hands in front of her chest. "Oh, but I am calm, Mr. Pete," she said in the sugary voice she had perfected for dealing with people like that. "I suppose I need to sign a letter of receipt or something?"

"That's right, Ma'am. I have it right here," Pete said and reached into his coverall. Before he could produce the documents, a sharp - though smokey - voice cut through the air out in the hallway:

'Who the hell parked their Goddamned big-ass delivery truck in the middle of the parking lot?! It's taking up a whole row of slots and I had to walk from the other side of the Goddamned universe to get here!' Cathy Giardella roared, barking loud enough for the entire community center to hear.

Felicity chuckled, but Pete didn't seem to find it funny. "Ma'am, I can't recall experiencing this much hostility… well, ever. How can you work in such an environment?"

Scratching an eyebrow, Felicity tried to find a humorous comeback to that, but she gave up. Some people were just too out of reach to even bother. "Yeah, well… anyway, the letter of receipt…?"

-*.*.*-*

Inside the bathroom, Kristen scrubbed her muscleshirt to make it clean and presentable for her show. She had managed to scrub the vomit out of it aided by the burning lava that streamed out of the unpredictable hot water faucet.
Her stomach was still jumping up and down, but the full body tremolo that had racked her entire being earlier was growing less by the minute. Gulping down the bitter taste she still had in her mouth, she held up the muscleshirt that had the words *Proud 2-B-A Womyn* printed on it in nineteen different fonts and sizes.

She wrung it as much as she could, but it was obviously still wet. There wasn't anything to hang it on inside the bathroom so it could drip-dry, so she needed to take it elsewhere. Holding it by the collar, she unlocked the door, opened it and stepped outside into the bookstore.

All around her, the women and men Felicity had invited to help set up the infrastructure were busy unwrapping the fifty stackable chairs and rearranging the piles for ease of access. When they noticed the colorful, young woman hadn't bothered to button the flannel shirt but had it hanging loose on her shoulders, a few of the gals stopped and grinned at her - the guys blushed and looked away.

Felicity was among those who grinned. "Hiya, Kristen… nice to see you're still one of the living. Tell you what, I think you've misunderstood the concept of buttons…" she said, pointing at the bare skin which was in plain sight all the way up and down Kristen's front.

"Girl, is there anyone in here who doesn't know what a boob is? Hey, wouldya mind if I hung my shirt in your office? It needs to drip-dry and you got a metal heater…"

"No, go on… Sandra's in there and she can help you find a hanger."

"Thanks, girl," Kristen said and shuffled over towards the office.

Felicity kept standing at the door to the bathroom, waiting for the inevitable 'Oh-my-Gawd!' that blurted out of Sandra a few seconds after the colorful Kristen had entered the office. "Aw, she's so damn cute," Felicity mumbled as she stomped back to the construction site to be in firm control of her troops.

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Ten minutes later, the main entrance opened and a woman in her late twenties stepped inside the busy bookstore. She had a large camera around her neck, and she used it to snap several photos of the women and men who were buzzing around trying to get everything in place. Well-dressed and suave with modest makeup and nice hair, the woman wore a pale-coffee pant suit that covered a shirt with wide lapels.

Though Felicity spotted the woman at once, it took her more than three minutes to finally have time to go over to her. One person after the other came by with questions connected to the seating arrangements ranging from how many chairs they needed to put up in each row to how far the first row of chairs needed to be from the dais.

Patience had never been Felicity's strongest trait, especially not when it was up against
disorganization of such a magnitude. When the third person came to her and asked the same question, she pulled Cathy Giardella over to deal with the rest in her inimitable fashion.

The photographer beckoned, and Felicity hurried over to the woman so she wouldn't get a poor impression of the Bookworm Sanctuary. "Hi, I'm Felicity LaMarre. I'm the administrator of the bookstore. We're sorry you had to wait, Miss," she said and put out her hand.

"Hi," the photographer said, shaking it. "I'm Claudia Keenan from Out & Around Magazine. Wow, this is a beehive…"

"Yeah, tell me about it," Felicity said as she wiped a few beads of sweat off her brow. She glanced around at the chaos which didn't seem to follow her nine-point plan at all. She made a mental note of not bothering to make one in the future if the others couldn't be bothered to follow it. "Out & Around? We have a stack of your magazines right over there."

"I noticed," Claudia said with a grin. "Do you think there's a possibility I could get a brief interview with Kristen Laneau before the big event? She's a role model to quite a few young people out there."

"I honestly don't know, Miss Keenan," Felicity said and craned her neck to look at the office door. True to style, Kristen hadn't even bothered closing it despite her half-undressed appearance. "Truth be told, she's been caught in an upheaval all afternoon, if you know what I mean. I'll find out and come back to you."

Felicity smiled and reached into her jacket pocket to find her smartphone. She went through a few taps and swipes to load the recording app so it was ready in case the interview could be granted.

Felicity smiled back before she shuffled over to the office door to peek inside. Although Kristen did wear the flannel shirt as she arranged the muscleshirt on a coat hanger above the metal heater, she still hadn't learned the concept of buttoning it. Sandra sat on the spare swivel-chair facing away from the tattooed woman. "Hey, Kristen," Felicity said and knocked on the doorjamb, "do you have the inclination to speak to a reporter from Out & Around? She seems okay."

Kristen squeezed the lower hem of the shirt with the many words and letters to get the last water out of it. "I don't know, girl. Out & Around is so hit and miss. What's her name?"

"Claudia Keenan."

"Mmmm? I think I remember her name on a couple of bylines. Tell her it's okay," Kristen said and turned around - at once, Sandra found something really interesting to
observe on the office floor. "Hey, Sandra, can I ask you a question? Why are you so disturbed by my breasts?"

Sandra chuckled and reached up to loosen her collar. "I'm not disturbed, Kristen. I'm just looking away out of respect."

Felicity stepped further into the room and patted Sandra's shoulder. "It's a generation thing, Kristen. Don't worry about it. But please, can you close your shirt while you talk to the reporter lady? You know your pair of girls there will take the focus away from the important stuff I'm sure you wanna say to her."

"Yeah, all right," the colorful woman said as she began to button the flannel shirt.

"Thanks," Felicity said with a grin. "Do you wanna talk to her in here, or…?"

"No, at the Korner."

Felicity nodded and moved back to the door. "Okay. I'll let her know."

A few seconds after Felicity had left, Kristen finished buttoning her shirt, but she had deliberately made it crooked to make a statement. "Don't you have a pair?" she said and rested a buttock on the metal desk.

"Pardon?" Sandra said as she swiveled the chair back around.

"Of breasts?"

"Well, yes, but… I don't quite follow you."

"Nah, it's clear you don't," Kristen said and got up. Without speaking another word, she shuffled out of the office and left the thoroughly confused Sandra behind.

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The bright purple sofa in the Kozy Korner was the only place in the entire bookstore that didn't resemble an anthill. All around it, people were whooshing back and forth carrying chairs and the wooden boards needed to erect the small dais where Kristen was going to perform later on. The number of people in the Bookworm Sanctuary was too great for the available space, which killed the regular coziness stone dead.

Nobody had time to look at the books save for a brave soul or two who had been snared in by the colorful spines in the various aisles instead of schlepping the heavy furniture around.

The reporter had already taken her place at the sofa when Kristen shuffled over there with her hands pressed to her stomach. On her way there, she had walked right into a strong
whiff from a baloney sandwich that one of the helpers was eating. Her stomach had rebelled at once, and she needed to press against it to keep it calm.

Groaning, she bumped down onto the sofa and snuggled down into the far corner. After a few seconds, she kicked off her boots and folded her legs up into a protective fetal position so she could rest her head on her knees.

"Miss Laneau," the reporter tried, holding up her smartphone so it could record the conversation, "are you sure you're able to talk to me? You look terrible."

"I'm fine. I just need a moment," Kristen croaked in a raw voice.

Claudia Keenan nodded and put the telephone down onto the sofa. To kill time, she snapped a few photos of the mass confusion that took place all around them.

Kristen was dizzy from fatigue and the vomiting. She had a sore throat and a thumping headache, and her limbs felt like lead. All in all, it wasn't the best way to prepare for such an important performance. She wished she could pop one of her tranquilizers, but it wouldn't look good in front of the reporter.

Sighing, she relaxed the fetal position she had been in and stretched out her legs. "I'm kinda ready now if ya wanna talk to me, girl," she said, reaching out for the reporter who was still taking pictures at the uncoordinated pandemonium that took place all around them.

Claudia smiled and put away the camera. "If you're up for it?" she said and picked up the telephone.

"Yeah," Kristen said and shuffled around on the sofa so she was closer to the other woman.

"All right. Miss Laneau, when and how did you get started writing songs and poetry?"

"Not long after I turned thirteen," Kristen said and nodded slowly. The gesture didn't make but a single hair move around on her head. "I fell into a depression 'cos I was a freak compared to the others. An outcast who couldn't compete with the popular girls and all their crap pink pom-poms. I wanted to go my own way and I did. The tattoos. That made me even more of a freak. The fact my wet dreams were all about girls was the kick in the head that sent me tumbling into the depression. My Mom had always preached to me that those people were freaks. Well, guess what, Mom… your little Kristen is one of those freaks. I went into hiding… I mean, inside my head. My parents forced me to take anti-depressants and all that shit in the hope they'd get their little daughter back. The only way I could get back on an even keel was to commit all the dark thoughts to paper. So I did."

"Mmmm, very successfully so," Claudia said, checking that the recorder app was
working as it should. "They became an instant hit online when you made your body of work available three years ago. You have followers from all over the world."

"Yeah, but you shouldn't fall into the common trap and think those people are really there because of me. Some of them are there for the poetry, yeah, but some are just random followers, and some are just spambots cruising around to make a quick buck. Divide the number of followers by ten and you have a clearer view."

"I see. Noted. Miss Laneau, other popular blogs with large viewing figures are sponsored by everything from hair care products to-"

"O-yeah, they've asked, all right. I've always told them to go F themselves, Claudia. Here's what I think of corporate money… and you can use that in the magazine if ya want," Kristen said and flashed a pair of extended middle fingers.

Claudia chuckled as she took a picture of the provocative gesture. "Thanks, Miss Laneau. Can't promise we'll use that… but who knows. But money isn't all bad, is it?"

"Nah, of course not," Kristen said and fell back against the purple sofa's backrest. "It depends on the owner and what they use it for. Corporate money equals greed. Faceless minions raking in the cash so the fat spider at the center of the web can get richer and richer. I mean, does any single person actually need those extra five billion a year or whatever? And millions of regular folks, regular women, need to prostitute themselves just to get by. What's wrong with that picture?"

"Indeed. And that's what inspired you to collect songs and poetry written by the regular folks, as you called them?"

"Naw, Claudia, you got that wrong way 'round," Kristen said and sat up straight. "I talk to them… the people I meet around the city streets. All those men and women whose eyes have turned dull 'cos they're forced into an undignified life they'll never escape from… I talk to those people and hear what they say. I listen to their experiences, good and bad… their fears, hopes and dreams and all those things. Then I write poetry or songs that tell the stories of those men and women. That's what I do."

"Oh, I'm sorry… I'm glad that little confusion was cleared up."

Kristen sighed and fell back against the corner of the bright purple sofa. Her brief spark of righteous fire had quelled the slapping waves in her gut, but they returned when the fire died down. "Yeah… these poems and songs come from the heart. Not just my heart, but the heart of the people out there in the real world. The people we never see on TV except when someone's been raped, beaten or killed. We never get to see their faces unless it's through the windows of a cop car. We never get to hear their voices unless their cases are presented on Court TV."

"Miss Laneau, it's clear these people are close to your heart. You said they've been forced
into an undignified life… what would you suggest we did to improve the situation for these people? Lower taxes for people with fixed income, or-

"It doesn't matter what we do," Kristen said with a dark chuckle.

"You say that with conviction. So there's no hope for them?"

"No. It's far too late. We're back at the corporate money thing. All right, an example from downtown. Take the slums down at Thirty-Fourth Street, yeah? Dozens of blocks that are one broken window away from being condemned. A single fat spider owns eighty percent of those blocks, and he's squeezing a high rent out of the residents without giving anything back in the shape of maintaining the buildings. As a result, the residents are forced into living under crappy conditions. You with me?"

"Yes, Miss Laneau," Claudia said with an excited grin on her lips.

"All right. A social foundation has been set up to buy the blocks and improve the living standards for everyone, but the fat spider doesn't want to sell 'cos although he'd get a ton of money in his slimy hands now for the bricks and shit, he'd rather bleed the residents dry over the next couple-a years or decades. To him, it's a no-brainer 'cos the rent is most often provided by the city council who'll deduct it from the residents' social income. So you might say he's got his fat snout stuck deep into the city's coffers, yeah? And why kill the golden goose or whatever it's called."

"Why, indeed."

Kristen let out a deep sigh as she leaned her near-shaved head against the top of the backrest. The pandemonium around them hadn't grown less while she had been talking to the reporter, but at least the chairs and the dais had been set up and were ready to be used. "Yeah. Listen, I can't talk anymore. I need something to drink so my voice won't suffer when it matters. Are we done?"

Claudia smiled and turned off the recording app. "We're done, Miss Laneau. Wow, that was a fascinating interview. I can't promise we'll use the picture of you flipping the birds, but I'll mention it to the editor. I'll definitely root for you tonight."

"Thanks," Kristen said and snuggled up in the corner of the sofa while she could.

Later on, a sound engineer from the community center's AV-department laid down what seemed to be miles of thick cables that were going to connect the two microphones to an amplifier that stood just below the dais. Word had spread that a handsome fellow was in the bookstore, and he had attracted quite a crowd of hopeful boy singles who provided a running commentary on the quality of his work and the color of his eyes.
It was a quarter to six, and the scheduled time for the start of the show was approaching fast. Felicity had organized enough special events to know they often had a nasty surprise up their sleeve; sometimes it was just a little thing like forgetting to buy enough sodas for everyone, sometimes it was A Thing that turned into An Issue that needed to be solved ahead of time or else, and sometimes, it was an apocalyptic calamity that would always trip them up at the wrong moment.

On this occasion, hints bubbled to the surface that they could be headed for scenario number two, 'A Thing that could turn into An Issue.' True to form, it would definitely have to be solved before the performance because someone had forgotten to rent a special chair for Kristen to use on the dais. Somewhat unexpectedly, that someone wasn't Supervisor Pete but Felicity LaMarre.

The regular chair that had been put up by the microphones as a makeshift solution was wrong, wrong, wrong - it didn't take a genius to figure that out. Even the basic shape was wrong for someone who would be singing and playing on the guitar she would carry around her neck.

"It's done, Miss LaMarre," the sound engineer said and got to his feet. His little fanclub followed him along the dais, but a long, sad groan was heard when he took off his left glove which revealed a gold wedding band. "I'm sorry, boys, I'm a one-man-at-a-time kinda guy. And this one's forever," he said and tapped the wedding band to a strong chorus of Awwwwww!

Felicity and Sandra stood behind the little group of hopefuls, chuckling when everyone's hopes were dashed. "Eh, I dunno… is he cute? Does he look cute to you, Sandra?"

The wealthy blonde, who was part of the Corporate Money class that Kristen had warned about through her self-made company ZenTech World Business Solutions, adjusted her square-framed spectacles to see better. "Well… I suppose he does. And is."

"Oh, he is, mark my words," Cathy said in her trademark smokey voice as she shuffled over to join the other women. She had lost the limp she had received in the accident she'd had on a staircase where she had twisted her ankle through falling down a step, but she still needed to treat it gingerly.

Felicity let out a throaty chuckle that was just on the right side of teasing her old friend. "And how would you… of all people… know that, Cathy?"

"Unlike you bookworms who have your noses buried in paperbacks the whole day, I've been around the block plenty, thank you. I've seen enough wall posters with baby-soft twenty-something guys who looked like him to know his type is really popular… believe me."

The sound engineer hopped off the dais and crouched down at the amplifier to turn it on. A brief, scratching sound gave way to a steady electronic hum. When it was ready, he
moved back up onto the dais and proceeded to do a microphone check by counting to ten and back to zero. Everything seemed to work just fine.

"Okay," Felicity said and gave Sandra's shoulders a squeeze. "Since we're getting there, I'll ask Kristen to come over and try out the chair so the sound guy can put the microphones at the correct height. I know what she's gonna say, though."

Smiling, Sandra turned around and gave Felicity's side a casual, little caress to return the favor of the squeeze. "Which is?" she asked, cocking her head.

The caress was hardly noticeable, but Cathy's sharp eyes didn't miss a beat. She broke out in a cheesy grin and stored the information for later.

Felicity cleared her throat and attempted to mimic Kristen's fairer voice. "Girl, you expect me to sit and do my magic on this piece of shit?"

The impersonation made Cathy laugh out loud. "But in fewer words, Felicity."

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"Girl…" Kristen said three minutes later while she balanced her acoustic guitar across her lap. "This sucks. No way I can use this crap. No way," she continued while she tried to get her butt comfortable on the chair which was the wrong proportions for the task at hand.

"Told ya," Cathy said with a chuckle.

Kristen shuffled around on the chair to find a better position, but no matter what she tried, her chest was compressed which would render her unable to get enough air to sing without sounding like a bleating goat. "Girl, I can't breathe properly with the chair this low. It'll just screw up the whole damn thing. I can't use this crap!"

Felicity grunted and began to look around for something else to use. They did have other chairs around the bookstore, but as Cathy would attest to, they weren't designed to sit on for more than three minutes at a time. The spare swivel-chair in the office was a theoretical solution, but the wheels couldn't be locked off and the dais wasn't fully even - the risk it would run off with Kristen before she had time to finish the first song was just too great. "Hmmm… what we need is a barstool. An old-fashioned, tall barstool."

Now Sandra let out a grunt. "You're right. A barstool would work fine… and I saw one just the other day. Where was that?" She scrunched up her face and began to move around in a little circle while she racked her brain to come up with the spot where she had seen it. It had been placed against a white wall of some kind, but that wasn't much of a clue since every wall inside the large building housing the community center and all the satellite projects was white. "It was here in the center… but where? How long do we have, Felicity?"
"Oh, forty-five minutes now. Give or take."

"Right. Hmmm. Okay," Sandra said and grabbed hold of Felicity's arm. "I'll go on a quest to steal the barstool for tonight. I'm sure they won't mind."

"Don't push anyone off if it's occupied when you find it," Felicity said with a broad grin. She took the opportunity to pull Sandra into a sideways hug before the fit woman zipped off on her Amazonic quest.

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Ten past six. With twenty minutes to go until the scheduled starting time, the bookstore was slowly filling up. The colorful, young women and men who all wore loud, grungy clothes and wild hair gathered in small groups by the chairs and chatted in excited tones about what they hoped to see.

One thing they didn't yet see was the barstool. The dais was empty which left the metal stand for the two microphones looking like an ostrich standing all by itself. The amplifier had been turned off so the chattering voices wouldn't create any feedback, and the dais seemed curiously abandoned in the middle of the sea of activity.

The main entrance opened to reveal another handful of young people in wild, colorful clothes. They laughed when they recognized their buds and were soon mingling to slap palms and thump fists. Some of the more sensitive members of the audience crept along the walls so they wouldn't get caught up in anything.

"Not long to go now, huh?" Cathy said, shuffling over to Felicity who was leaning against the narrow shelf underneath the posters advertising the many different campaigns set in motion by the city council.

"No. I hope Sandra will be able to find that damn barstool before it's too late…"

"Yeah. Wow, have ya ever seen that many piercings in one place before? There's a girl over there where you can hardly see her facial skin! I mean… that's a bit too much for me, personally, I gotta admit."

"Me too, Cathy. It's a generation thing."

Cathy chuckled and picked up a copy of the current *Out & Around* although she had already read every word of every article. "Must be. I guess we did stuff back then they would consider out of this world… like disco dancing."

"Or Vogueing."

"Or bell-bottom jeans… no, wait!"
Felicity groaned out loud and reached out to slap the older woman next to her. Her hand didn't connect on the first swing and she was too tired to try again. "Don't knock my bell-bottoms! I look fabulous in these jeans!"

"Not saying you don't, Felicity," Cathy said, wearing a grin so broad a 1974 Cadillac Eldorado could have driven through it. "Nah… I'm not wearing cutting edge stuff either," she continued and yanked at a button on her denim bib overalls that she wore over a batik t-shirt like she always did.

"Uh-huh, glad you noticed."

"Hey! No, seriously, look at all those kids… piercings, tattoos, garish makeup, wild hair and beards. Loud, crazy stuff… and yet," - Turning around, Cathy pointed at a group of quiet girls huddled together near the back - "We still get the sensitive wallflowers who are here to see Kristen, not to get caught up in all that loudness."

"True. I better keep an eye on them as the evening progresses," Felicity said while an unfortunate flashback to her own experiences as a rotund wallflower at proms and parties raced across her mind's eye.

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In the office, Kristen moved back from the door and closed it softly behind her. She had been watching the people arriving, but she didn't need to know how many had shown up - she would see that soon enough when she stepped onto the dais with her guitar and her bared soul.

The soul in question was still raw after the unpleasant episodes in the bathroom, but at least her throat was better after a healthy dose of soothing easy apple cider. She tried to take deep, even breaths to get her jittery nerves under control, but it was hard going and it only took a cheer from the bookstore to topple what she had achieved.

Grabbing her guitar, she pulled the strap over her shoulder and began to walk around in circles to burn off some of the nervous energy that coursed through her. She began to play a few chords of one of her songs, but the moment of Zen hadn't arrived yet and she put the guitar down on the metal desk for later.

Her muscleshirt with the many iterations of Proud 2-B-A Womyn was almost dry after having spent several hours hanging over the metal heater. It was only the lower hem that was still moist, so she unbuttoned and whipped off the old, unloved flannel shirt to don the outfit she had chosen for the big event. She felt better wearing her own clothes even if the moist hem tickled her stomach.

She continued to walk around in a circle, but as the hands of time moved closer to six thirty, she could feel her confidence growing. When another cheer from the bookstore
didn't send her nerves into a tailspin, she took the guitar and began to rehearse the important opening act, a spoken-word song about life on the mean streets.

A series of tiny knocks on the office door made her come to a halt from one syllable to the next. The knocks were repeated, so she shuffled over to the door to see what was going on.

The person outside was one of the young people there for the performance: a colorful woman in her early twenties. "Hi! Is this the bathro-" she said, but never made it further before she recognized the person who had opened the door.

The young woman's eyes popped wide open at the sight of her idol standing right there in the flesh. She wore black basketball boots with neon-green laces, torn black jeans and a black sleeveless T-shirt with a custom-made print of a candid photo she had downloaded from Kristen's World Connected profile. The stylized, high-contrast image was accompanied by Kristen's name in a graffiti-like scrawl.

Like a majority of the young people in the audience, she had metal studs everywhere on her face, but mostly on her lips, nose and eyebrows. The lone tattoo she wore on her right upper arm hadn't yet been filled in, so it looked incomplete. To finish off the ensemble, her hair had been dyed shocking-purple, and it was short and spiky all around save for a heavily gelled wave up front that reached down to cover her eyes. "Aw shit… this isn't the bathroom," she croaked. Her eyes were still wide open which gave her black eyeliner a comical touch.

Kristen grinned at the shocked look on the woman's face. "Nope. That's down there... the tan door. See it?" she said and pointed out of the door past the young woman's shoulder.

The starry-eyed fan could barely tear herself away from Kristen, but she managed to turn around and follow the pointing finger. "Oh… okay. I'm sorry. Thank you… Kristen," she said, no more than a heartbeat away from freaking out over having met her biggest heroine.

"You're welcome. What's your name?"

"Dana Ste- Stepanek…"

"Love your shirt, Dana."

"Oh, God, thank you…"

"But I kinda need to rehearse now, so… catch ya at the performance. Yeah? Won't be long, girl," Kristen said and put a hand on the door.

"Sure… yeah… I'm sorry," Dana mumbled as she backed out of the door. Her eyes stayed behind a little while longer and went on a quick tour of Kristen's face and body
like she wanted to gather all the information she could in case she wouldn't get another chance.

When Kristen closed the door, she could hear Dana letting out a loud, incoherent, squealing whoop from the other side. The rest of the audience would soon know that she had met and spoken to the person they were all there to see. Chuckling, Kristen shuffled away from the door to finish fine-tuning her performance.

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At the same time, Sandra swam upstream through the hallway, battling against the strong flow of people going the opposite way. A great deal of the evening classes and popular lectures held by the community center started at six forty-five or at seven, and it seemed that half the city's population of young and old had decided to choose Thursday evening as their night on the town.

She had already apologized a dozen times to the people she had bumped into carrying her heavy load, but judging by the new, massive group of mothers with strollers who had just entered the far end of the hallway - no doubt headed for the center's much-hyped course called Discover Your Toddler's Artistic Skills - she would have to apologize another fifteen or so times before she would reach her destination.

The heavy weight of the clumsy load she carried made her glad she had kept up a strict fitness regime lately. She had found a barstool, and not just any barstool, but the last of its kind; a study in chrome and fake, black leather.

After rummaging through several different storage rooms that only had a ridiculous amount of dust on offer, she had found the last remaining barstool in the office belonging to the community center's chief administrator. She couldn't find anyone to talk to about borrowing the furniture, so she had left a note stating her name and her association with Felicity's Bookworm Sanctuary.

Once the big group of mothers, toddlers and strollers had been dealt with, the door to the bookstore came into sight. She breathed a sigh of relief and put down her heavy load.

Opening the door, she put her butt on it to keep it open while she bent over and took a firm, two-handed grip on the barstool.

Grunting, she fumbled through the door and into the Bookworm Sanctuary. She reckoned that all her troubles were over with the safe return to the bookstore, and to celebrate, she grinned and held up the rare piece of furniture in triumph. Two seconds later, the smile faded from her face, and the barstool thumped down onto the smooth linoleum floor in defeat.

She faced a wall of young, black-clad people who all had their backs turned to her. They were chatting in an animated fashion about what Kristen was wearing, the new color of her hair and a hundred other things, and none of them looked ready to give up their spot.
It would be possible to move to the left if she wanted to go to the office, but she had her sights set on the dais - unfortunately, it looked like that particular task was going to be futile.

"Okay. Now what?" she mumbled, looking around for Felicity or Cathy. She finally spotted the dark-skinned administrator talking to one of her regular customers who appeared to be wanting to leave before the raucous crowd would get out of hand. Sandra waved at Felicity, but her smaller height compared to many of the colorful, young people made it difficult for her to break through the din that dominated the visual as well as the audio plane. Huffing, she adjusted her spectacles and waited for a plan B to come to her.

By a stroke of good fortune, Felicity eyed the petite blonde who had remained at the main entrance. She whooped out loud when her eyes fell on the barstool, but the cheer was soon quelled when she realized getting through to the dais would be akin to a trip up Mount Everest - doable but damned difficult. She waved and sent a thumbs-up at Sandra who caught the gestures at once. The blonde pointed at her wristwatch; Felicity nodded. "Cathy! Hey, Cathy… I need your help!" she cried and waved the older woman over to her.

"You just can't live without me, can you?" Cathy said with a grin once she had barged her way through the crowd.

"No, and Sandra can't either," Felicity said with a matching grin.

"Ooooh, now you're talking! You wanna get a little triple action going? I could dig that though I'm basically-"

"Oh, keep your mind out of the gutter, will ya? Us round girls gotta save the day. Sandra needs to get up to the dais with that thing, and we gotta clear the way."

Cathy stood up on tip-toes to eyeball the blonde at the door. "Damn, how can that little slip of a girl carry that big thing? I'll bet she's got muscles everywhere, eh? I can only imagine how her abs look… and feel," she said, giving Felicity a whole series of nudges with her elbow.

"I wouldn't know, Cathy… c'mon, it's bulldozer time!" Felicity said and put out her arm.

It didn't take Cathy long to understand what was needed, and she hooked her opposite arm inside Felicity's to make them an unstoppable force that drove an effective wedge straight into the throng. The two round women stomped ahead and carved a path for the more petite Sandra who once more grabbed hold of the barstool and hurried up close behind her two supporters.

Reaching the dais, Cathy and Felicity moved apart to make way for Sandra and the cumbersome barstool. As the throng closed in behind her like quicksand, Sandra put her right foot up on the dais but needed a hand on her butt for leverage. When she got a little
push, she made it the rest of the way and put down the circular, chrome base of the tall barstool at the microphone stand. Though it was fake leather, it looked better than she had feared.

Huffing and puffing, she dusted off her hands on her jeans before she wiped a few beads of sweat off her brow. "Whoa… it looks like a Black Sabbath concert from up here," she croaked, looking out over the wildly-colored heads of the sea of black-clad humanity. The floor of the dais was only fifteen inches off the ground, but it offered her a view she never had: one where she could see the top of people's heads instead of their backs. She tried to count the many different hair colors on display, but she stopped when she ran out of fingers to use.

Felicity stepped up next to Sandra and pulled her into a sideways hug that she responded to by wrapping an arm around Felicity's round waist. "Great work, Sandra. It looks fabulous… just the right thing for Kristen."

"Yeah, I thought so. You're welcome. Oh, and thank you for doing your Moses impersonation… you know, parting the black sea."

"I coulda sworn Moses parted the Red Sea…" Felicity said and pulled Sandra closer.

Guffawing, the blonde gestured out at the audience. "Nope! Definitely the black sea! Get it?"

"Ohhhh!" Felicity said and broke out in a snigger that was responded to in kind. They gave each other a further little squeeze before Felicity pointed her thumb at the barstool. "So… where'd ya find it?"

"In the chief administrator's office."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Did you know he's got a private bar in there?"

"Does he? Perhaps we should visit the chief administrator more often, huh? Okay, we've gone two minutes past the scheduled time. I think we're about ready to kick this into action," Felicity said and craned her neck to look at the condition of the path to the office door. "There aren't too many people over there… would you mind getting Kristen?"

"Not at all… I'm on it," Sandra said and jumped off the edge of the dais. She offered Felicity a quick thumbs-up before she hurried over to the office while the path was clear.

Felicity grinned and moved back to the center of the dais. She grabbed hold of the microphone but remembered at the last moment that the amplifier wasn't turned on yet. She signaled the sound engineer - who stood out like a sore thumb in his pale-brown coverall, enveloped as he was by people wearing black - that he could commence the
evening's entertainment.

Once the equipment was on, Felicity drew a deep breath and once again grabbed hold of the microphone. "Good evening, everybody," she said, marveling over the way her dark, silky-smooth timbre sounded over the speakers, "and welcome to Felicity's Bookworm Sanctuary. I'm Felicity LaMarre and we're... about... to-

She came to a halt when she realized the crowd hadn't clammed up yet - in fact, the din seemed to have grown stronger in expectation of what Kristen Laneau would bring to the show.

At least half the audience looked at their telephones while the other half spoke among themselves; five seconds later, the situation was reversed with the first half now speaking and the other half checking their telephones. Another five seconds later, everybody spoke to everybody else, but it didn't stop them from checking their telephones at the same time. "Uh-huh... okay, this is going to hell in a handbasket," Felicity mumbled.

Narrowing her eyes, she tapped a finger on the microphone several times which created a deep rumble in the speakers. "It's showtime, peeps. Please pay attention to what's going on up here. Respect the woman who's about to share her soul with you. And have a seat... it was hard work putting up all those damn chairs so we really want you to use them." Looking around, she could see that most - but not all - followed her instructions. The group of sensitive wallflowers at the back wall shuffled up to the chairs at the back row and sat down.

Felicity moved back from the microphone to look at the office. Sandra stood in the doorway wearing a big grin and flashing a pair of thumbs-up. A thought of 'can she get any cuter?' flashed through Felicity's mind before she stepped back to the microphone. "Thank you. All right, you're here to see Kristen Laneau... and here she is."

A huge cheer rose from the crowd who all spun around in their seats to look towards the door to the office. The buzz grew once more, but it was from excitement and not the odd, technologically driven detachment from earlier.

Inside the office, Kristen felt her stomach perform a flip-flop all over again. She needed to stretch her arms up in the air and shimmy around on the spot to get her nerves back under control. Gulpindown a nervous lump, she offered Sandra a weak smile that belied her hard exterior before she stepped out into the bookstore with her guitar over her shoulder.

The reception she got couldn't have been better. All the colorful, young people cheered her name, patted her on the back more than a dozen times, and snapped so many photos that her likeness had been shared worldwide even before she made it up onto the dais.

Nervous didn't begin to describe her condition, but she managed to screw a smile onto her face as she stepped up on the dais and shuffled over to the microphone stand. She
waved her arms in the air to try to get the crowd to settle down, but since it didn't work, she allowed herself to bask in the spotlight for once. "Whassup, everybody… nice to see ya. I'm Kristen Laneau and I hope you're all good," she said into the microphone.

The brief message set off a new round of cheering and snapping, and it took nearly a full minute for the audience to settle down so Kristen could get on with the program. In the meantime, she moved the barstool closer to the microphone stand and made herself comfortable on the fake leather. "Glad to hear it. We got a lot of ground to cover tonight so I'm gonna start by performing a song I wrote myself. It goes a little something like this…"

The next four and a half minutes went by in reverent silence. The members of the unruly crowd all kept quiet while Kristen accompanied herself reciting her spoken-word song about the constant injustices that were committed against minorities of all kinds on the cracked sidewalks, in the stinking back alleys and even on the fancy polished floors of the upper echelon.

At the back of the bookstore, Cathy, Sandra and Felicity were lined up at the narrow shelf by the posters so they wouldn't disturb the performance. When the spoken-word song ended, the whole place erupted in a wild cheer. The three adult women clapped along to show their respect, even if the lyrics dealt with a reality that was far removed from their own. "Wow," Cathy said, leaning in towards Felicity so she didn't have to raise her voice, "that's powerful stuff, huh? You'd never think it looking at Kristen, but she's got brains to spare."

"Yeah. Remember when we first met her? She was just a weak, confused little mouse of a girl… look at her now. A worldwide celebrity."

Sandra nodded and leaned in towards the other two women. "Amazing, really. She's got such an authentic voice, too. Oh, that's the good of the Internet right there. There's plenty bad about it, I agree, but it's refreshing to see the positive sides for once."

"Yeah, well," Cathy said with a shrug, "I don't think we'll ever agree on the Internet even having a good side, but it's definitely great to feel the positive energy in here."

Up on the dais, Kristen rose from the barstool. She walked along the edge of the stage to be close to all those who had come to see her perform. While the audience cheered for her, she locked eyes with as many of them as she could to show that they, not she, were all that mattered. One of those she locked eyes with was the girl with the purple hair and the homemade T-shirt. Kristen winked at her which nearly sent the young Dana wobbling to the floor.

"I hope you're okay out there?" Kristen said which earned her another cheer. "Great. It's gonna be a night of bad times and good times… of poetry and song… through the stories that were born on the mean streets by you people and by those who are far worse off than we are. In short, real stories by real people… not that glossy superhero robot shit that
Hollyweird tries to cram down our throats all the fuckin' time!"

Down the back, Cathy stuck two fingers in her mouth and let out a loud whistle to show her support. "Too damn right," she said to Felicity and Sandra. "I haven't been to a movie theater for a decade… have you guys?"

Felicity shook her head, but Sandra nodded and leaned in towards Cathy. "You just have to know the right theaters, actually. There's one not far from where I live that shows independent and foreign movies all the time. They're still people-movies, not glossy robot sh- uh, stuff."

"Yeah, but foreign movies… I wanna watch a movie, not read it," Cathy said with a shrug.

Felicity quickly shushed her companions when Kristen pulled a piece of paper out of her pants pocket.

"I was given this letter by a friend," Kristen said and held up the paper for all to see, "who had written it to clear his mind after speaking to a homeless girl in her early twenties. The girl was huddled up with all her belongings in a cardboard box that she called home down by the rear side of the central station, near the concrete jungle of the Thirty-Eighth Street neighborhood. Her face was raw meat and bleeding after she had been assaulted, but the cops didn't wanna help her. The ambulance people didn't wanna help her. The paramedic people from the central station's clinic didn't wanna help her… even the fuckin' Sisters of Mercy mission didn't wanna help her, so she staggered back to her three by three foot home and bled half to death before a good soul finally took pity on her. A nun from a different chapter or whatever they call it."

An upset murmur rippled through the audience.

"Yeah… that's the reality of what's going on out there. Anyway, the letter my friend wrote me was so powerful I had to make it into a poem told from the girl's point of view. It's not going to be pretty, people. It's called I Begged You."

Kristen took off her guitar and pushed the barstool away. Grabbing hold of the microphone, she closed her eyes so she could be alone in the middle of the crowd of people. "I begged you not to threaten me, but you did, and you smiled / I begged you not to hurt me, but you did, and you laughed / I begged you not to violate me, but you did, and you crowed / I begged you not to leave me helpless, but you did, and you said you would be back for more / I begged you to kill me, but you didn't. You walked away."

If a safety pin had been ready to fall, it would have been possible to hear it hit the smooth linoleum floor. A somber silence spread among the audience who - for the most part - had witnessed, or been exposed to, similar incidents.

"Yeah. The girl's name is Johanna. She made it, but how long does she have before the
motherfucker returns?" Kristen said and folded up the letter. She put it into her pants pocket and took her guitar.

Pulling the barstool back to the microphone, she strapped her guitar over her shoulder and struck a somber chord. The gloomy music created another wave of murmurs that rippled through the crowd. "I heard someone ask what we can do about it… how we can help Johanna and the others. Not through any of the official channels. Like I said, nobody gave a shit about her when she needed help. All that's left for us to do as human beings is to give society and the politicians a giant F-Y-A and actively help the people in need by providing a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. Society has gone to rot, we're the only sane people left. A million things need to be done out there… and we need to do them ourselves."

A thunderous applause that threatened to blow out the square, padded tiles in the ceiling filled the Bookworm Sanctuary. Everybody clapped and cheered so hard and for so long that Kristen needed to put her arms in the air to restore the calm.

Down at the back, Cathy chuckled out loud. She leaned over and gave Felicity's shoulder a good nudge. "She should run for congress, huh? Oh boy, she would kick up a storm among those old, fossilized fellas."

Felicity didn't have time to answer before Sandra tugged at her shirtsleeve. "Psst, Felicity… you're closer to Kristen and these people. She said, give the politicians a giant F-Y-A… what does that acronym cover?"

Grinning, Felicity licked her lips as she leaned in towards Sandra's ear so she could provide the explanation in a whisper. "It either means F you all, or F you, a-holes. Depends on the context. I'd say it was the second option here."

"Oh…" Sandra said, blushing. "I should have known… or figured it out. Thank you."

"You're welcome. If you need another translation, just let me know."

"No, I think I got the rest of it…" Sandra said and adjusted her square-framed spectacles.

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The ninety minutes the performance was scheduled to last flew by in a blurry flash. Before anyone had time to really understand it, Kristen started the final set of songs. When she began playing a sequence of chords for another of the songs she had written herself, the audience fell quiet like they invariably did. It was a lengthy intro so it took nearly a minute for her to begin to sing, but she had the crowd in her hand throughout.

Closing her eyes, she sang a quiet, insistent song of how a young lesbian couple living on the streets only found hostility and aversion to their presence, and how a simple but heartfelt love was able to overcome all that and blossom between them when they were
finally left alone by the aggressive thugs and the over-protective social workers.

The song hit the right notes with a great deal of the audience who could mirror their own experiences in the poet's perfect choice of words. Before long, many of them had activated the flashlight function and held up their swaying telephones.

At the back, Sandra's jaw slipped down as she took in the sight of the many points of light that danced across the ceiling. "Uh… what… what are they doing? Is that the modern equivalent of igniting your lighter at concerts?" she whispered so she wouldn't disturb the singing.

"Sure is… that's the eternal flame," Cathy whispered back with a grin.

The song ended with Kristen playing an outro that was almost as long as the intro had been. Once again, everyone piped down when her fingers created magic by moving gracefully across the strings. By the time she reached the final notes, she quieted the guitar and looked out at her audience. "Thank you for the lights, everybody. That was one of my favorites… as you probably know from reading the playlist on my WoCo profile."

The audience cheered when the song was over. A lot of them took the opportunity to snap photos of Kristen as she sat there in all her glistening, steamy glory, and she made outrageous faces at them to make the photos memorable.

Chuckling from the goofiness, she shuffled around on the barstool and pulled out in her sticky shirt to get some fresh air down her front. "To close the show, I'll recite a short poem that was inspired by a conversation I had with a girl I met in hospital a couple of years back. It doesn't have a title 'cos she didn't put one on the note she left behind. She intended it to be the last thing she ever wrote, but she was found in time. She's since made a full recovery from the overdose of pills she took."

Kristen took off the guitar and put it down on the floor. She took a deep breath to prepare for the somber recital before she moved up to the microphone and closed her eyes. "I know I've been a failure from the moment I was born / I know my life, my friends, my soul didn't please you and that you would rather see me gone / you've told me often enough / mother, you need to find someone else to tell / I'm going to heaven; you're stuck right here, in your own little hell…"

A collective gasp was heard from the audience, some of which were no strangers to suicide attempts and notes left for the family.

"I know. It's powerful isn't it?" Kristen said and looked out at the people on the floor. "Her name is Rachelle. Like I said, she made a full recovery. She's moved far, far away from her mother… from what I know, she's happy now, living with some of her father's relatives in another state. All right, that's it. You've been wonderful. I love you all."

A couple of seconds went by in silence while the audience soaked up the final words of
their heroine, but then the entire bookstore erupted in a wild cheer that made many of the bookcases tremble. Calls for an encore rippled through the crowd, but Kristen shook her head and got up from the barstool. "I can't tonight, people. I'm beat. If ya wanna talk, join me over at the Kozy Korner, yeah? The purple sofa over there. Thank you… thank you all for coming. It's been so beautiful tonight."

Felicity grunted and moved away from the back wall. "We better play traffic cops or they'll grind her into sawdust in two seconds flat. C'mon, gals, now it's our turn."

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Exhausted from the fatigue that washed over her now the adrenaline left her system, Kristen shuffled over into the Kozy Korner and fell down with a bump onto the purple sofa.

She kicked off her boots and scooted up into the corner where she stuffed one of the fluffy cushions behind her back. She had burned off so much energy through her singing and reciting her poetry that all she could was to rest her near-shaved head on the cushion and let out a long sigh. Her body was steaming hot and her shirt clung to her torso in all sorts of places.

Twelve seconds later on the dot, the sofa was crowded to the point of being a fire hazard. Like-minded women and men dressed in black and with crazy hair competed to sit next to, or at least close to, their heroine. A scuffle broke out when two early-twenty-something girls both wanted the same spot; it had the clear potential of evolving into a real catfight in a matter of seconds if the lid wasn't put on it at once.

"Aw hell… we're too late," Felicity groaned when she had to separate the two girls who both wore similar uniforms. "Cathy… please take this fighting hen right here… I'll deal with the other one."

Cathy grinned and helped her 'fighting hen' away from the danger zone. "C'mon, don't get upset. There's plenty of Kristen to go around, you know. She ain't going anywhere," she said as she pointed at a safer spot the young girl should go to to try again.

One after the other, the members of the audience brought up their telephones and stood next to the armrest Kristen was leaning against to shoot selfies - at times, it resembled a conveyor belt. In no time at all, the poet had featured on forty selfies that had all been shared on their WoCo profiles, and more were lined up. Some even lined up twice to get one where they were acting serious and one where they pulled crazy faces for the camera.

Kristen played along to most of it, but when a girl moved up to the armrest for a third time, it was enough even for the stoic poet. "Girl… give the others a chance too, will ya?" she said, leaning in towards the offending party.

The young girl blushed red and moved away in a hurry so she wouldn't upset the star, but
the gap she left behind was soon filled by others who were just as excited about being close to Kristen as the other one had been.

Felicity acted like a traffic cop like she had said she would. At the back, she organized the unruly crowd into orderly queues so they could get their selfies in the can without other people's arms or noses filling out the frame. Now and then, she looked up and locked eyes with Kristen who found it all rather amusing.

"Don't sweat it, people," Kristen said and moved her arms in the air - the gesture alone was enough to make some of the devoted faithful let out excited squeals - "This is the friendliest bookstore in the world. Let's keep it civilized so you all survive, okay? Come on, girls, there's always room for one more selfie."

That earned her another excited squeal, and several young women lined up at once to snap away. One of them almost sat in Kristen's lap, but it didn't seem to cause the star any discomfort.

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The most adventurous among the selfie-crowd had all but snapped the photos they wanted, but several fans were still waiting at the back. Noticing the shy, reserved people while she downed a full bottle of water, Kristen sat up straight and waved the girls - and the single boy - over to her so the wallflowers could get their chance at meeting her too.

"Whassup?" she said, smiling at the fans who hadn't had the nerve to move up to the head of the queue on their own, "did you like the performance? I thought the evening was pretty damn good. Everything went well."

A chorus of "Yes," "Me too," and even an "I love you, Kristen," reached her ears and made her break out in a smile. A few of the shy people wanted hugs and she was only too happy to provide a little physical contact to those who probably needed it the most. Soon, selfies were taken that all featured shiny eyes and blushing cheeks - one of the fans even wanted an old-fashioned autograph in addition to the picture.

When the shy fans had moved away in a hurry so they wouldn't be at the center of attention for too long, Kristen leaned back in the sofa and took a long, wistful look at her devoted followers while she emptied her bottle of water. They were there for her and for the songs and poetry she wrote and performed. Some of the fans weren't as alternative as their outrageous looks and clothing would suggest - they came from well-off homes, not the mean streets - but she wanted everyone to feel welcome, regardless of their background.

It was still difficult for her to understand how far she had come and how quickly it had happened. One day the shine would wear off and she would be forgotten like yesterday's newspaper, she knew that all too well. The Next Big Internet Thing was always just around the corner - he or she might even have been in the audience. All it took to break
through was a strong idea, access to the right channels, and a willingness to work hard while it lasted.

Success in the modern world wasn't measured by the bottom line that business people always obsessed over, or by clinging onto power beyond the point where it became embarrassing to watch like so many politicians did, but by doing good while the spotlight happened to fall on that person. She was happy with what she had accomplished. When the spotlights would be turned off and she would slip back into obscurity, she would walk the mean streets with a satisfied smile on her lips, she was sure of that.

Kristen took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Stretching her back, she snuggled further down in the sofa while she observed the people in the bookstore. It had been a good evening, and the good kind of fatigue ran through her veins like a warm, comfortable blanket. Sometimes when the shows were poor or even bad, the frustration would leave her so brooding that she couldn't sleep for days, but she had done well tonight. She had been able to inject the most important songs and poetry with the heart and soul they needed, and that left her with a sense of pride over a job well done.

The fatigue only grew stronger, so she closed her eyes and leaned her near-shaved head against the fluffy cushion at her back. She was only allowed a moment's rest before something weighed down the backrest right next to her. Looking up, she locked eyes with Felicity who shuffled around the sofa. "Hey, girl," Kristen said and patted the seat. "You want a selfie? Go right ahead."

Felicity chuckled and settled for mussing Kristen's shoulder. "You did well tonight, Kristen. Really well. To be honest, I think that was your best performance at a Poetry Jam."

"Thank you. The righteous fire was burning… I'm kinda proud over what I did."

"You should be," Felicity said and sat down next to the poet. "Anyway, some of the fans are drifting away… why don't you go home and get some shuteye?"

"Yeah, I was thinking about that," Kristen said and broke out in a wide yawn.

Smacking her lips, it occurred to her that she hadn't seen the purple-haired Dana for most of the evening, or at least since the show ended. She furrowed her brow and looked around at the remaining fans. There were a few purple patches here and there, but none belonged to Dana. "Felicity… uh… this is gonna sound all weird and shit, but I think we've lost a girl… purple hair that went down into her eyes, black T-shirt with a picture of me on it… I can't find her anywhere…"

"Oh… I know who you're talking about," Felicity said and mirrored Kristen by looking around. "Nah, I can't see her. She's probably left already."

Kristen yawned again but sat up straight to see better. "Yeah, could be… but she didn't
"I think we got some Twilight Zone shit going on, girl."

"Kristen, we've got a lot of things on the agenda now... hell, a ton of things," Felicity said and rubbed her weary brow. "We can obviously look for her, but right now it's more important to collect the chairs and take down the dais... and the sound system and all that. We're supposed to have it ready so the crew from PartyPeople Rentals can pick it up tomorrow morning at seven. I'm tellin' ya, there's no way I'm gonna come in at a quarter past six in the damn morning to finish up, and I know you won't either, so it needs to be done tonight."

"Yeah, I hear ya, girl... but we've got someone missing. We just need to do both. I'll look for her. You can-"

"Pack up the chairs," Felicity grumbled, shooting the colorful, young woman a sideways glance. "Yeah, all right. But when I say we need a hand, it's not to scratch our asses, okay?"

"Don't sweat it. I'll be there when you need me. Someone else needs me now." Patting Felicity's thigh, Kristen rose from the sofa and began to look at - and under - the nearest aisles that were still crammed full of books though no one had bothered to look at any of them while the performance had been going on. The initial search didn't yield anything, so she shrugged and began to mingle.

The fans who were still there squealed when their heroine stepped up to them, and a few more selfies were snapped now that they had a golden opportunity to do so. Kristen mugged for the cameras and played along with her fans' wishes, but she kept an eye on each finger trying to work out where the purple-haired girl could have gone to. "Hey, friends," she said, shuffling over towards a cluster of young women clad in black, "didya happen to see a girl with purple hair that kinda went down into her eyes? And a home-made T-shirt? She's sorta missing."

All she got out of the line of questioning was a mix of "no," "can't remember her," and "I saw her, but that was a long time ago," which didn't bring her any closer to finding Dana.

The fans drifted away save for the last few diehards, but even they had other things on their mind following the latest round of selfie-snapping. Kristen mingled like a pro and touched as many as she could by thumping guy-fists and offering squealing girl-hugs just to give the last remaining few an extra little thrill.

Over by the bathroom, Cathy let out a grunt which was soon followed by a "What in the flaming hell? The bathroom door is jammed! Hey, open up in there, I gotta go something fierce!"

Kristen came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the floor. Furrowing her brow, she stared at the handle on the bathroom door - it was drooping like it wasn't connected to anything inside. "Aw hell... Cathy! Cathy, I'll bet Dana's in there," she said and hurried over to
the bathroom using far more speed than she had shown for a month.

"Could be. It's screwed, that's a fact," the earthy woman said, trying to yank the door handle around. She gave up when all she succeeded in doing was to make the metal appliance rattle and squeak. "... and who the hell's Dana?"

Kristen scrunched up her face as she moved over to the door. "One of the fans... she's probably been in there a while," she said before she knelt down and put her mouth at the keyhole so her voice would travel better. "Hey! Hey, Dana! Can you hear me? Are you in there?"

'Kristen? Oh God, Kristen, I can hear you!' a tearful voice replied. A few bumps were heard that were followed by a scratching sound on the door's panel. 'The door's jammed shut! I can't get out!'

"Shit," Kristen said and put her hands behind her head while she gathered her wits. "Shit, shit, shit, she's been in there for... shit! Dana, are you hurt?"

'No...'

"Okay. That's good. Can you try to jerk the handle around?"

'I can't! It fell on the floor when I wanted to leave...'

"Okay. Uh... sit tight!" Standing up, Kristen rubbed her mouth while she looked at Cathy. "She's locked up in the shithouse. What the hell should we do?"

"At least she's got the can at her disposal," Cathy said and crossed her legs. When it wasn't enough to stem the tide that threatened to spill over at the first hiccup, she crossed her eyes as well. "I need to go something awful... if I don't find a can pretty Goddamned soon, we'll have another little problem to mop up."

"Ew, girl... wouldya mind not pissing on the floor? There's a bathroom over by the cafeteria..."

Cathy sneered in a good-natured fashion as she inched away from the bathroom and over to the Bookworm Sanctuary's main entrance. She left in a hurry, needing to take care of business before it would take care of her.

The commotion reached the office where Sandra had been busy making fruit pulp juice and healthy sandwiches for those who were about to work hard disassembling the stage. She peeked out of the office holding a slice of toast in one hand and a crisp lettuce leaf in the other. "What's going on, Kristen? What's all the hubbub about?"

"We've got a girl jammed up in the shithouse... the handle's busted."
"Oh… uh…" Sandra said, looking at the food she was holding. She hurried back into the office and put the items down on the metal desk where she was making the refreshments. Ten seconds later, she came to a stop at the bathroom door to survey the situation. "Yes… it's broken," she continued as she yanked at the drooping, rattling handle.

Grunting at the undeniable truth to Sandra's statement, Kristen knelt down to be at the keyhole in case Dana would say anything to her, but all she could hear was a series of quiet sobs. "Dana, are you still okay in there?" she said, molding her lips around the little hole.

'I'm scared and I wanna get out!'

"We're trying, girl. Just hang on, yeah?"

Sandra wrung her hands again and again while she stared at the broken door handle. "Maybe a screwdriver?" she said and bent down to take a closer look at the offending item. "The lock's beyond repair as it is. We might as well break it down."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Felicity said, hurrying over to the bathroom door after putting down a stack of chairs - she was the only one who adhered to what her detailed plan said they should be working on. "Not sure I like the sound of that… break what down?"

"The bathroom door," Sandra said, wrapping an arm around the rotund administrator's waist. "There's a girl trapped in there."

Groaning out loud, Felicity looked towards the padded tiles in the ceiling. "Shit! That was all we needed. All right… let's try a screwdriver first."

"Ha, that's what I said!"

"There's one in the desk drawer. No, I'll get it, I know exactly where it is," Felicity said and ran into the office.

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"We need a bigger screwdriver," Felicity said after the fifth attempt at getting the recalcitrant lock to release. The one they had was a fancy, six-inch Chrome Vanadium Phillips-head that the salesperson on the Home Shopping Network had lauded as being the master of any situation, but they needed a regular flathead to jam it deep enough into the locking mechanism.

"Shit," Kristen and Sandra said as one.

"Will a crowbar do?" a female voice said from the door. They all turned around to see Cathy walk back in holding an old-fashioned crowbar.
The earthy woman grinned and shuffled up to the bathroom door with the large tool. "Cathy delivers… as always, ha ha. I happened to come by this bad boy in the utility room."

"Girl… you peed in the utility room?" Kristen said with her eyes narrowed down into slits.

"Ah, no. The janitors had a stall I could use. Never mind that now. Ya think it's got enough oomph?"

"Less talking, more breaking down, Cathy," Felicity said and stepped away to give the older woman plenty of room to insert the crowbar's forked end into the narrow gap.

"Stand clear, ev'rybody. I don't know my own strength at times," Cathy said and gave the crowbar a strong yank that didn't do anything apart from chipping the paint and stripping off the outer layers of wood. "Oh… shit," she mumbled, looking at the mess she had made.

"Let me try," Sandra said and gently pushed the older woman aside. She spat in her hands and took a firm two-handed grip on the long bar. "Dana… look out! We're gonna use a crowbar to break down the door!"

'Okay…' Dana mumbled from inside the bathroom.

Taking a deep breath, Sandra rammed the tool in far enough for most of the forked end to be buried into the crevice between the door and the jamb. With a heave-ho, she flexed her fit frame and pulled the crowbar towards her. The strong pull forced open the door with an agonizing crunch.

Cathy only just had time to nudge Felicity's side and whisper "Abs of steel, baby!" before a purple and black shadow flew out of the bathroom and into the arms of the nearest person - who happened to be Kristen.

Dana let out a howling sob as she was comforted by the poet. The two young women hugged each other and swayed back and forth on the smooth linoleum floor. "God, I was so afraid…" Dana croaked into Kristen's shoulder, "I thought I'd never get out… I've been in there for half an hour… nobody came to look for me… and nobody needed to use the bathroom… I was all alone in there and it was scary… I texted my friends but they were too busy… or something. And I missed half your show!"

Kristen rubbed her hands up and down Dana's back to comfort the frightened youngster. "But you're out now… shh… c'mon, let's go over to the Kozy Korner and catch our breaths. Yeah? You can tell me all about it there… okay?"

"Okay," Dana said and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.
Kristen smiled as she pulled the other girl in for a sideways hug while they shuffled past one of the abandoned stacks of chairs. "Okay. It's just over here. Girls, thank you so much. I got it from here," she said over her shoulder at the three older women standing at the busted door.

Felicity chuckled darkly, glaring at the chairs that nobody seemed to want to gather up except her. "Yeah. No problem, Kristen. Glad to help. Now who's gonna help me collect those damn chairs? Sandra? Cathy? What in the… where did Cathy go?"

"She had promised to return the crowbar once we were done with it," Sandra said. She was kneeling on the floor, scooping up the many pieces of wood that had been knocked loose from the busted lock and door.

"Oh. How convenient."

"And I was making sandwiches for later on," Sandra said and clambered to her feet holding a handful of bits and pieces from the doorjamb - she deliberately avoided the dark look that Felicity shot back at her. "So now we can't use our only bathroom," she continued to change the subject into something less dangerous.

Though Felicity was grumbling under her breath about the mountain of work she had to pull off on her own, the mere presence of the cute blonde rendered her unable to stay annoyed for too long. Shrugging, she shuffled over to the nearest row of chairs and began to stack them. "That's why they invented string. Tie one end to the door and the other end to the faucets. That'll keep the sucker closed."

"Well, excuse me," Sandra said and adjusted her spectacles, "but I'm not going to drop my breeches when the door can't close properly. I know that Kristen and others in her generation wouldn't think twice about it, but… no. Just no."

Felicity chuckled and leaned against a tall stack of chairs that she had just finished collecting. "I'll get the janitors to come over and take a look at it tomorrow. This is a respectable establishment, young lady, not a hole-in-the-wall peep show!"

Laughing out loud, Sandra turned around and stuck out her tongue at her companion. "Thank you for seeing things my way. If the chairs can wait for five minutes, I'll come out and help you with the rest when I have the sandwiches done. How does that sound?"

"Just fine, Sandra. I'll give my back a breather in the meantime," Felicity said and sat down on the next chair.

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At the Kozy Korner, Kristen helped the shell-shocked Dana up into the sofa. The young girl with the purple hair kicked off her boots and scooted into the farthest corner so she
wouldn't disturb her heroine, but Kristen patted the seat right next to her. "Don't sit way over there… c'mere. Let's share the moment."

Dana blushed but shuffled closer to the poet. When she was nearer to her idol than she had ever dreamt she would be, she leaned against the soft shoulder offered to her and let out a satisfied sigh. She stiffened when Kristen reached around her and began to muss her arm, but the friendly contact only added to her comfort, and she was able to relax again.

They sat like that for a while until Kristen tapped Dana's shoulder. "Girl, can you scoot over for like two seconds? I wanna get my legs up," she said quietly.

Dana nodded and scooted way over in the corner all over again so she wouldn't upset the star.

"No, girl," Kristen said with a chuckle. "I just wanted to pull up my legs. C'mon back… you may rest your head on my lap if you feel like it," she continued, folding her legs up underneath her. The casual sitting position created a nest along her thighs that was just perfect for a head.

Dana's cheeks blushed tomato-red, but she overcame her acute embarrassment and scooted back to her idol. Gulping audibly, she shuffled over onto her back and rested her head on Kristen's khaki cargo pants.

"Yeah, this is nice," Kristen said with a broad grin on her face. "Hey girl, I'm so sorry you got locked up in the shithouse. What did you miss of my show?"

"Most of the second half," Dana squeaked, lying stock still so it wouldn't appear she was trying to cop a feel on the star's legs. "But… but… I still heard most of it through the door… when I wasn't yelling for someone to come and help me."

"Shit, girl… if I had heard you, I would have come to your rescue."

"I know you would, Kristen," Dana said, but clammed up at once out of fear of appearing too familiar with a woman she had only known for seven minutes all in all - apart from the two years she had obsessed about her from a distance.

Another minute of silence went by until Dana's hand crept down towards her pocket. Licking her lips, she looked up at Kristen like she was arguing with herself to go ahead with it or not. Going ahead seemed to win because she croaked: "I… I've written a poem. It's-"

"Oh, you're a poet?"

Dana shook her head which made her purple wave fly left and right. "Oh no, no, not like you. Nothing like you. It's just a little thing that… that I wanted to give you. Or recite to you."
"Seems to me we're in a pretty good place to do just that. Don't you think?"

"Uh… well… I suppose. Really?"

"Really," Kristen said with a chuckle that spread down her body and into her legs where the trembling caused Dana to blush all over again.

Gulping down a lump of terror, Dana finally reached into her front pocket with a trembling hand. She produced a folded-up piece of paper that she fumbled with for several, long seconds before she could get her fingers to work. "Uh… uh… okay, I… uh…"

"Dana, just calm down and let the words speak for themselves. Yeah?"

"God, you called me by my name…" the young girl croaked while her eyes nearly crossed over from pure excitement. She shook her head to get everything back in place. "Uh… okay. I'll try. I… it's titled Shadows."

"Go on," Kristen said, leaning her head back to focus on the words.

Dana licked her lips and read the first few lines a couple of times to get the words under her skin. When she had found the right tone, she began: "I am but a shadow / walking alone on Pressley Square / people are all around me / but it's clear they don't care / about a shadow. I am but a shadow / neon signs selling triple X / aging prostitutes / offering cheap, dirty sex / we shadows see it all. I am but a shadow / dreaming about how it would be / if they tore it all down / and left it to you and me / we would no longer be / in the shadows." Having finished it, she folded the note and awaited the judgment with bated breath.

"You know," Kristen said, looking down at the purple-haired fan, "that wasn't bad at all, Dana. It reminded me of one of my older poems, Pressley Square, except that it was a lot less muddled."

"I… I think I may have been inspired by your poem. But I've walked around Pressley Square so often that I felt I had something to say about it as well."

Kristen chuckled. "Too damn right. I think you captured it better than I did. I tried to use metaphors, but now I think direct prose would have been better. Wow, you go, girl."

"Oh God, thank you… you can't imagine how often I've torn it up and started over…"

"Yeah, I can, actually. You always know where to find me when I'm writing 'cos there's a path of torn-up notes leading up to my cave."

Dana chuckled at the star's candid comments but soon blushed out of fear of appearing
like she was laughing at her. "Oh yeah, I know what that-"

The quiet conversation was rudely interrupted by a sound akin to a dry twig snapping. The twig was followed within a second by an odd case of rolling thunder that seemed to go on for a while.

Dana jerked around on Kristen's lap as she tried to stare in all directions at once to figure out what had caused the strange sounds. "What was that? Was that an earthquake?" she whispered in a hoarse voice.

"Nope," Kristen said, letting out a deep sigh.

'That wasn't a shelf!' Felicity barked from the other side of the bookstore where she had just finished stacking the final chairs. 'Tell me that wasn't a shelf! Anybody? Tell me that wasn't a dirty, rotten, piece of... shelf!'

'A shelf has collapsed, Felicity,' a friendly soul said from the aisle where the mishap had occurred.

Four seconds went by; just enough time for Kristen to count off on her fingers. Before she could show a full hand, Felicity exploded in a fit of rage that sent Dana jerking around all over again.

"Don't tell me that wasn't an earthquake…?" the purple-haired girl croaked.

"Nope. That was Felicity, the administrator. One of the shelves has collapsed."

"Oh… I guess we should help…?"

Kristen nodded and gave Dana a little nudge to tell her the improvised fan session was over. The two women sat up straight and swung their feet down onto the floor. While they were busy putting on their boots, Kristen reached over and put a warm hand on Dana's arm which made the purple-haired woman come to a screeching halt. "Girl, are you doing anything afterwards?" she said, cocking her head and shooting her companion an intense look.

Dana's face turned red in an instant, and she pulled her lips back in such a crazy grimace it was possible to see that she was missing one of her molars on the right side of her upper jaw. She licked her lips furiously and looked anywhere but at the star. "Kristen, I'm… not… I'm not gay."

"Oh…"

"So... we... we... I can't- I wouldn't be comfor- comf- comfortable-"

Kristen chuckled and leaned in to bump shoulders with the other woman whose face
resembled a entire tomato hot house. "I'm not looking for a groupie. I was gonna ask if you'd like to go down to Isaac Ivory's… the all-night coffee shop down on Twenty-Third Street? I was thinking we could play a few songs on my guitar and... you know, chat about poems and shit. I need to talk to someone who understands where I'm coming from."

"I'm free all evening! Isaac Ivory's?" Dana croaked in a thick voice. She tried to go on, but her voice failed her at the worst moment. She wanted to nod instead to show that she would very much like to spend a night on the town with such a star as Kristen Laneau, but the pitiful jerking of the head that she produced didn't offer much of a clue either. "Oh God, yes!" she finally croaked.

"Cool. Let's do that after we've helped Felicity. She's really, really old... almost fifty... so she needs all the help she can get. Yeah?"

"Uh-huh!" Dana said and hopped off the sofa.

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The bookstore had already turned into a hen house with women of all ages flocking to the site of the collapse to give a hand or to provide a running commentary on how the others should do it.

Felicity stomped across the smooth linoleum floor with a worried Sandra and a chuckling Cathy in tow. The mismatched trio went around a great deal of the Bookworm Sanctuary to check if anything else had gone wrong until they reached the unruly pile of books that had been strewn about in the middle of the aisle housing the medical romance novels.

A single look at Felicity's face - which seemed a lot darker than usual - prompted Sandra to kneel down and begin to scoop up the books and sort them into neat piles. The medical romance novels all had realistically drawn covers featuring women and men in lab coats, surgery scrubs or even EMT uniforms; the men were always Alpha types with manly jaws and big hands, and the women all had beautiful hair and were depicted with perfect skin and graceful proportions, save perhaps for their bosom which tended to be somewhat on the voluminous size.

One cover in particular made her snigger and shake her head. The book it was for - Dee Jaye Fredericks' Saviors In White - was thirty years old which was quite evident in the starry-eyed way the female patient gazed at the hunky doctor while he took her blood pressure by holding onto her Barbie-doll-sized wrist with his large, manly fingers.

Kristen and Dana shuffled up to the flock of interested spectators and peeked through the massed ranks. Felicity's face hadn't yet returned to its regular dark complexion, and Sandra was sniggering to herself from the look of the silly covers. "Girl, I don't think there's much for us to do here. Wanna go back to the sofa? Or you wanna go down to Isaac Ivory's at once?" Kristen said and reached for Dana's hand.
The purple-haired woman let out a strangled squeak when her fingers were given a squeeze, but she overcame the awkward fangirl moment to offer Kristen a little squeeze in return. "Uh-huh," she said, looking down at the star's tattooed hand.

"Which 'uh-huh' would that be, Dana?"

"Uh… what? Oh… the sofa."

"Okay. Hey, Felicity, you don't need us right now, do ya?"

Felicity looked up with a sour grimace etched onto her face. When she caught a glimpse of the entwined hands, her mood - and look - lifted and she was able to screw at least a partial smile onto her face. "Nah. I think we've got enough people here… who are watching when they could be helping!" she said a little too loudly for the circumstances.

Many of the spectators cleared their throats in embarrassment and shuffled away. Kristen and Dana went last after the poet had winked at the two older women who were busy with sorting the books in alphabetical order after the author.

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Twenty minutes later, the sofa at the Kozy Korner echoed from the sound of the mini-concert that was taking place. Kristen sat at one end singing a song and playing her guitar, and Dana occupied the other end clapping time and grinning like a maniac at the billion dollar experience of seeing her big idol Kristen Laneau doing what she did best.

The song ended and both women broke down in giggles. Reaching out, they thumped fists before they fell back against the corners of the sofa. "So," Kristen said, striking a dramatic chord. "Are we still on for Isaac Ivory's?"

Dana nodded and swept the purple hair out of her eyes. "Uh-huh. If you don't mind having a fan there."

"'Course not, girl. It'll be cool and shit to have someone to talk to. Hey, have you ever tried to play the guitar?"

"Gosh, no. Well, that's not true," Dana said while her cheeks were tinted by the umpteeenth blush she had experienced on the crazy evening. "I got one for Christmas one year, but it sounded so shitty-like I gave it away before the Spring Break. Sorry. When did you learn to play?"

"When I was seven."

"Oh… I must be stupid, then…"
Kristen eyed the purple-haired girl to see if she was jesting, but it was clear by the frown that had formed between her expressive eyes that she wasn't. Grunting, she shuffled around and took off the guitar. "C'mon over… come over and I'll teach you… okay, maybe not teach you 'cos that's a whole lotta shit, but show you some grips and things."

"No, that's too much hassle for a dimwit like me…" Dana mumbled.

"Oh, BS, girl… c'mon over. There's plenty of room over here," Kristen said and patted the seat next to her.

When Dana finally moved over to the other side of the sofa, the guitar was put over her shoulder. Gulping, she tried to hold her hands in what she felt were the proper places. "Like this… right?"

"Almost," Kristen said and hopped up into the sofa. She shuffled around so she knelt close behind the newbie with a khaki-clad thigh on either side of the torn, black jeans. Though she felt Dana stiffen by her closeness, she guided her left hand a bit further up the guitar's neck, and her right a bit further down to the base. "Okay, and your right hand on the board… down here. Feel it?"

Someone cleared her throat in front of the sofa which made Kristen look up.

"Since you got a guitar, I guess it really is fore-play, huh? Why don't you gals find a nice, little hotel room somewhere?" Cathy said with a grin.

"It's not like that at all, girl," Kristen said in a voice that had a harder edge than normal. When she felt a shiver run through Dana's body in front of her, she pulled back and cocked her head. "Dana?"

"I didn't wanna say anything… but I'm really uncomfortable with anyone getting that close to me," Dana said in a tiny voice. Gulping audibly, she got to her feet to create some distance to the warm body that had been leaning against her back.

"Shit… shit, girl, you should have told me. I'm so sorry," Kristen said and moved back at once. When she noticed Cathy was still observing them, she zoomed in on the earthy woman with a hard glare in her eyes. "Bye, Cathy. Nice talking to you."

Cathy grimaced and let out an insulted huff, but she did as asked and shuffled away from the sofa.

Kristen sighed deeply and scooted over to the backrest of the sofa so nobody would get the wrong impression of what they were doing. "I'm sorry, girl… I never stopped to think it was a problem. I'm really sorry."

"That's all right," Dana said with a weak smile. "I should have told you sooner. It was my fault. I guess Ivory's."
Shaking her head vehemently, Kristen hopped down from the sofa. She quickly stuffed her feet down her boots before she helped Dana take off the guitar. "Girl, it's never your fault. Ever. You hear me? It's my fault 'cos I didn't think about asking how you felt about it. We're gonna go over to Isaac Ivory's right now and I'm gonna pay for their gold coffee and a whipped cream pie to make up for being such a dick. Please don't say no," she said and put out her hand.

Dana stared at Kristen with a pair of round eyes. A faint smile slowly crept onto her lips as she took the hand offered to her. "Thank you. I'd like that… I'm a sucker for whipped cream pie," she said and swept the purple wave out of her eyes.

"We got a deal, girl," Kristen said as she put down the guitar in the bright purple sofa at the Kozy Korner. She put out her arms in an invitation for a hug; one came, though it was quick and carried a greater distance than the ones they had shared earlier. When they separated, she briefly held onto Dana's arms - a safe zone. "Listen… I'm really sorry for sitting so close to you. I didn't have a hidden agenda. Honest."

"It's old news, Kristen… really. It's just a mental hang-up from something that happened a while ago. I was assaulted in a bus by some fuckhead who thought I was fair game. I was going home from a concert… I was buzzed and tired… I didn't notice him until it was too late. He came at me from behind and pressed his crotch into my ass… you know, rubbed himself against me."

"What a fucker… I hope you kicked his balls to Canada."

"I didn't… I ran away the second the bus came to a stop. Kristen, don't think about it, okay?" Dana said and pulled herself in for a second, stronger hug. A wistful smile graced her lips upon seeing the dark look of genuine concern on the star's face. "The coffee shop…?"

"Will never know what hit 'em," Kristen said and stepped aside so Dana could lead the way. "Hey, girl… didya ever talk to anyone about that?"

"No…"

"You should. It can fester. Believe me, I know."

The smile on Dana's lips was brief, but sincere. She studied the star's face for a few seconds before she ducked her head and shrugged. "Oh, I don't wanna bother you with it, Kristen… it's just an old thing."

"Girl… let's talk. It'll help, I promise," Kristen said in a voice that proved she meant it.

The two young women locked eyes for a moment before Dana moved her head in an near-imperceptible nod. "I'd like that," she said in a tiny voice as she began to shuffle
towards the multi-colored door at the main entrance.

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EPISODE 4 - CATHY

*The following Tuesday*

A merry whistling in the hallway outside the main entrance of the Bookworm Sanctuary provided the first clue that someone had their sights set on spending a relaxing day surrounded by thousands of second-hand books; fumbling at the door offered solid proof.

Cathy Giardella moved inside going backwards to protect the fragile items she carried: a large paper bag from her sister's croissant bakery down the street, and a cardboard tray with four coffee-to-go mugs.

As always, the earthy woman was dressed in her favorite denim bib overalls and she had bare feet in sandals, but she had decided to leave the batik T-shirts at home in favor of one in rust-brown and sea-green promoting a folk rock album from the 1970s called *A Whale Of A Time*. The boyish haircut that reached down to her collar was perhaps growing a bit too long at her ears, but she considered it a criminal waste of money to go to the fancy salons for a measly inch of hair - and besides, she had kept it that way since she had gone into business on her own writing biographies for the country's regular folks.

Looking around with great interest, she was glad to see the old bookstore had bounced back with regards to the number of people shuffling around the aisles. Some were chatting, some were reading, and some were browsing the many books, discs and vinyl records.

The Poetry Jam and the flyers that Kristen Laneau had produced had created a buzz among the people visiting the community center that had led to a larger turnout - all colors, all ages and all groups of the rainbow family were represented among the customers, though women still outnumbered the men five to one.

When the aforementioned colorful woman with the odd hair and the many tattoos turned a corner and headed for the crates with the sheet music, she waved at Cathy who waved back with the hand holding the croissants. Moments later, Kristen's new BFF Dana Stepanek - who was just as colorful, though mostly purple - slipped into place next to the poet and glanced into the crates.

Cathy grinned and began to shuffle off to the office carrying the many special items she had picked up at the bakery. She had only just reached the doorjamb to the office when
her telephone rang somewhere deep down her front pocket. "Oh, damn," she mumbled, unable to answer it with her hands full.

Sandra Gottfried and Felicity LaMarre sat at the metal desk playing cards when Cathy stepped inside. Both women looked up in a startled hurry when their quiet office was disturbed by what had to be an advancing army judging by the sounds and the fumbling to get inside.

"Hi, gals! I just gotta…” Cathy said in her trademark smokey voice, balancing the bags and the tray while she strode over to the desk with the telephone ringing merrily.

Still startled, Sandra adjusted her square-framed spectacles and lowered her hand without thinking about her cards. "Uh… hi, Cathy," she said, looking at the white paper bags. When she turned her head to look at the vanguard of the supposed army, her blond ponytail whooshed across the back of her royal-blue blouse which was designed to resemble a baseball jersey from the local Major League team.

"Hey, Cathy. Your phone's ringing," Felicity said with a grin. The opportunity to read Sandra's cards was too good to miss, so she peeked at them in a sly, though casual fashion. She scrunched up her face when she realized there wasn't anything she could do to combat the better hand.

She was dressed in her indispensable decorated bell-bottom jeans and an electric blue shirt that was open all the way down to the top of her cleavage. A thin necklace with a gold pendant shaped like a teardrop created a stark, and fabulous, contrast to her dark skin. The teardrop moved around when she crossed the legs the other way.

"No kiddin'! I just gotta… gotta… gotta borrow the desk for two seconds… yeah… like that," Cathy said and put the fragile bags and trays down on top of the rejected cards and the playing pile.

Sandra noticed that she had let her hand slip too far down, and she raised it at once. When she looked at Felicity, it didn't appear the administrator had had time to peek, at least judging by her scrunched-up expression.

When Cathy's hands were free, she unzipped the pocket in the bib and reached for her telephone. "It's Cathy… yeah? No worries, you're welcome. Yeah. Thanks, buddy. You can buy me a six-pack of Bud one day. Yeah. Okay? Yeah. Bye."

Sandra crossed her legs the other way and looked up at their guest. "Who was that, Cathy?"

"Oh, my neighbor. I helped him last night with a little dog-sitting problem. He had a hot date, but she didn't like dogs. So either it was a no-go for nookie or the mutt had to take a hike… the mutt went," Cathy said with a grin.
Felicity chuckled and put down her cards while they waited for the playing area to be cleared. "Say, whatcha got there?" she said, poking at the white bags. "The tray with the coffee-to-go mugs is kinda self-explanatory, but what's in there…?"

Cathy put the telephone back into her bib pocket and zipped it. "Oh, just a bunch of spelt buns and a mixed selection of croissants. Chocolate, Sandra…"

"Ouch… thanks for the warning. I can hear my jersey screaming in terror already," Sandra said with a grin. "Mmmm, they sure smell great, though."

"Yes, they're freshly made. Okay, the coffee…" Cathy said and tapped a fingernail on the plastic lid on one of the to-go mugs. "We never reached an agreement the other day on what kind of coffee you wanted to serve for the debate, so I had my sister make four basic kinds. Once we've chosen a favorite, I'll call her with the results and… well, she'll make plenty of that blend."

Felicity nodded and reached out to turn the tray with the coffee-to-go mugs so it would be moved back from the brink of disaster where Cathy had put it. "Great idea, Cathy… it's not gonna be the mocha latté dishwater, that's for sure."

"Actually," Sandra said and shuffled around on the swivel-chair, "that was my favorite…"

"Oh…"

Cathy chuckled at the exchange between the two women she knew had developed a big two-ways crush. Even if she hadn't known, it was all too evident in the way they behaved when they were close - nothing but shy glances and little touches. "You gals can have a catfight later, yeah? First, I'll go into the cafeteria and get a couple a' piles of mugs and dessert plates so we're ready for later on."

"I'll go with you," Sandra said and wheeled back the swivel-chair, "I can carry more."

"I should feel insulted… but girl, you're only speakin' the truth," Cathy said and tried to flex her biceps that hadn't been there since her fortieth birthday.

Felicity and Cathy, both far softer and more rounded shapes than the lean, fit Sandra, chuckled and shot each other knowing smiles.

A knock on the doorjamb made all three women look at the open door where a woman in her mid-forties waited to be let in. When she was met by a "Please come in" from Felicity, she bent down and picked up a cardboard box. The bottom of the box sagged in the middle from the heavy load inside, so Sandra got up in a hurry - revealing that she wore a pair of royal-blue sweatpants that matched the baseball jersey - and helped the other woman move it over to the chair she had just vacated.
"Hello," Sandra said with a smile. "Our desk is kinda occupied as you can see… what do you have here?"

The woman in her mid-forties let out a sigh of relief when she let go of the heavy box. "Books that I'd like to ask if you would be interested in. They're my son's… he's in a steady relationship now so he didn't want to… well, I guess he didn't want his potential husband-to-be to find them. I haven't looked at them at all, but I believe most of them are… of an adult nature." The last words were delivered in a semi-whisper.

"Oooh!" Cathy said and moved over to peek into the box. "Oh…" came the prompt response when she realized the covers she could see were all graced by strapping, bare-chested young men wearing leather jackets - or less.

"Now," the customer said, "I realize the bookstore is mostly for women, but I thought that you could perhaps, oh… I don't know. That someone could find use for them. They weren't expensive, but they're in pretty good condition."

Felicity smiled at the customer and got up from the swivel-chair. "Let's take a look at them, Ma'am. All right. Sandra?"

Sandra's cheeks blushed red at the prospect of wading through erotic books, but she gulped down her embarrassment and turned to the customer. "Uh… let's see what's in here," she said and pulled a stack out of the box.

Like the customer had said, they were all in good condition with nary a broken spine or torn cover. Most of them came from the same series called Livin' Hard. Sandra couldn't hold back a strangled, embarrassed chuckle when she read the titles aloud: "Hot Boys & Big Toys, Hell Bent For Leather, Racing For Dawn, Tell Mike I Loved Him, Johnny's Well-oiled Machine…"

"Holy crap!" Cathy said, looking over Sandra's shoulder at the last book. "They're all about motorcycles and bikers in leather… yeah, I'm guessing they're of an adult nature," she continued, winking at Felicity.

"Twenty-seven books in total, Felicity," Sandra said, moving a finger up to loosen the hem of her jersey before the blush could spread that far.

"All right. Ma'am, how does forty dollars sound?" Felicity said and reached into the desk's bottom drawer to take her laptop so she could update the databases.

The customer smiled and took a step back from the box like the contents had the ability to bite her. "Oh, that would be just fine. Just fine, thank you. If I find more such books-"

"Feel free to come over with them. We have a large and varied group of customers here at the Bookworm Sanctuary," Felicity said and found forty dollars that she gave to the woman. "I can promise you these books will find new homes pretty quickly."
"Oh… oh, that's good. Thank you. Goodbye," the customer said and backed out of the office.

When they were alone, Cathy returned to the cardboard box and rummaged through it to see if she couldn't find just one book that had a female lead. "Eh. They don't know what they're missin'," she said with a shrug when the search proved to be a fruitless one.

"They probably say the same thing about us, Cathy," Felicity said with a grin. "How about clearing the desk so Sandra and I can continue the game before you go for the plates and stuff? It's just impossible to test-sip coffee and play a decent game of cards at the same time… or so I've been told."

Sandra opened her mouth to counter that statement, but a wink from Felicity made her pipe down and let out a snigger instead.

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Four hands and three-and-a-half empty coffee mugs later, Sandra, Felicity and Cathy all sat deep in thought with their faces suitably scrunched up. "All right, I yield," Sandra said and put down the empty mug she had been holding. "The mocha latté is great with the croissants, but not with the spelt buns. All in all, I like the caramel delicata best."

"The caramel delicata?" Cathy echoed in a tone that proved the coffee in question had been even lower on her wishlist than the mocha latte that she considered repulsive. "Well… I must admit I prefer the regular one called 'coffee, cream, sugar.'"

"But… Cathy, that's a bog-standard, dime a dozen coffee!"

"Exactly. Felicity?"

Felicity scrunched up her face even more as she looked at her two companions. She waved her hand back and forth as she tried to make up her mind. "I'll… oh… I'll go for the regular coffee as well."

The statement earned her a pair of wildly different responses from Cathy and Sandra. Where the former grinned and reached for her telephone, the latter let out an annoyed huff and adjusted her spectacles.

Once Cathy had found the number for her sister's bakery and pressed the appropriate button, she leaned back on the chair while she waited for it to be picked up. "Hi, it's me, Cathy Giardella. Would ya mind getting the boss lady on the horn? Yeah, I'll hold," she said and grinned at the others. "Hi, Sis! The coffee blends were real hits. Yeah. Listen, we'd like to order eleven to-go mugs… no, better make it twelve… of number four, regular coffee with regular cream and regular sugar. Yeah, that's right. Yeah, we'll pick it up at…" - she looked at Felicity who mouthed Four O'clock - "…four this afternoon."
Yeah. Okay, thanks… bye. Done!” she said and put the telephone back in her pocket.

"I still think the caramel delicata was the best," Sandra mumbled.

Felicity chuckled and reached out to offer the defeated party a hand in reconciliation. The hand was duly taken and squeezed, but it didn't do much for Sandra's mood, nor for her facial expression.

"So," Cathy said, "today's the day for the big debate on the neo-feminist manifest, huh? Sounds mighty important, that's for sure. I still haven't decided if I want to join the debate circle or not… depends on the host, I think. Do you know when she's due, Felicity?"

"Nope."

"Okay. I'll make up my mind when she gets here," Cathy said and got up from the chair which was just as hard and uncomfortable as the others. Getting up, she had to wait for a few seconds before her lower back wanted to come along following the harsh treatment. "Do you need my help at the mo?"

"Not right now, thanks," Felicity said and leaned back in the swivel-chair. She put her hands behind her head to underline her hopes of blissful inactivity before the real work started. "Oh, later on, we'll need a hand unfolding a bunch of packing cases for the books. We've got a couple of carpenters coming over to take a look at those damn shelves that keep collapsing. Would that interest you?"

"Unfolding packing cases? Sure. I think I'll mosey on down to the cafeteria and get started on the mugs and plates first, though. Sandra?"

"Yep… right behind you," Sandra said and got up.

"Great. Once we're done with that, I'll be browsing the books 'til you come… sorry, get there with the packing cases," Cathy said, winking at Sandra whose cheeks had already gained a red hue akin to a ripe tomato.

*_*_*_*_*

The alternative rock bursting out of Kristen and Dana's earphones and directly into their brains could be heard over most of the bookstore. The two colorful young women sat glued together on the floor below the purple sofa in the Kozy Korner; Kristen studied sheet music and Dana was engulfed in a novel.

Cathy was three aisles away from the epicenter but could hear the lyrics as plain as day. She shook her head as she ran her finger down the spines of the books on the shelves labeled Westerns. Although her number one favorite books were still historical romances, Westerns were a guilty pleasure for the former journalist; the plots weren't too taxing on the mind, and yet the stories were always written with a lot of soul that reflected the hard
life the lead characters had to live. And besides, who could say no to tough gals in chaps and Stetsons, or school marms with an eye for the fairer sex?

Her finger reached a title that piqued her interest, and she slid the book off the shelf to look at the cover and the blurb. "Wildcat," she mumbled, "mmmm… mmmm… a determined saloon owner… mmmm… a feared female gunslinger… sold!"

Chuckling, she stuffed the ninety-nine cent paperback down her rear pocket while she continued along the row of books to find a few more.

After nearly thirty years in the business of stringing words together into forming coherent sentences, she had become choosy when it came to the technical quality of the books she read. She didn't mind far-fetched plots or whimsical developments, but factual errors, story threads that were left hanging, or characters changing names mid-story due to spelling mistakes would see her throw the book across the room without hesitation.

While she was happy to note the increase in releases that had taken place over the last decade, somehow the quality had dropped when the focus had turned to quantity. She had her favorite publishing houses, and she stuck with them. Even if she had never heard of the author, she would give the book a chance if it came from one of her favored houses.

The music died down from one beat to the next. Cathy let out a sigh of relief and peeked around the edge of the bookcase to see what had caused the respite: Kristen appeared to be showing Dana something on her telephone.

"Hey, Cathy… did you have time to help us with the packing cases?" Felicity said somewhere behind the older woman.

"Yeah, sure," Cathy said and turned around. She came to a dead stop when her eyes fell on the pile of cardboard sheets that Felicity had just put down on the smooth linoleum floor. "Holy shit… I thought you meant three or four cases! That's… that's… how many?" she continued in a voice that grew in pitch as she spoke.

"Twenty-five. And they're only for this side of this aisle," Felicity said with a grin.

"Twenty-five. Shit. Okay, I can't back out… but I'm telling you right now," Cathy said and shuffled over to the nearest chair, "I'm not standing up while I'm working on assembling twenty-five packing cases. If you wanna do that, be my guest… but me? No how, no way, no ma'am."

Felicity laughed out loud and pointed at the other chair. "Are you nuts? That one's got my name written all over it!"

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Ten minutes later, they had only made it through a quarter of the pile of cardboard sheets.
Cathy sighed as she took in the rest of the hard work she had to expose her delicate fingers to.

Grabbing the next sheet, she folded it one way to get the inner bottom in place, then the other way to make the wings stand up. After that, she had to fold the left wing once more to get the lid in place. Once that was done, she had to hold onto the left section while she folded the right wing to get the connecting pieces to line up properly. The outer bottom came last with two tabs that needed to fit into two slots; one on either side. To finish it, she had to flip it around and give it a shake to see if the connecting pieces did in fact connect with the other pieces. If they didn't, the packing case would be too loose and she could start over.

"Goddamn…" she croaked, staring at the completed case. "This is gonna kill me before the day is over… can I get a book token for this, huh? Huh, Felicity?"

Felicity grinned and put down a finished case. "We can talk about it. I suppose you could get a ninety-nine cent token for it."

"Damn, girl, I deserve a ten dollar token!"

"Don't push your luck, Sister," Felicity said in a mock growl as she took the next sheet of cardboard.

"What's Sandra doing, anyway? Wasn't she supposed to join us?"

"She's still doing the dishes. The plates and mugs the peeps down at the cafeteria gave you were ugly… real ugly. Hell, they were ugh-ly!"

Shaking her head, Cathy put down the case she had just finished. It wasn't as tight as the other one, but it would have to do. "Yeah, yeah… oh… wouldya look at that."

"I can't see around the damn case…"

"Lisa-May and her new squeeze just walked in the door," Cathy said, grabbing the opportunity to take a rest while Felicity couldn't see her. "I forget her name… Dora? Sally? Mesalina?"

"Adrienne."

"Adrienne, right. Well, get this… she and Lisa-May…"

When Cathy didn't continue, Felicity lowered the case to see for herself. "She and Lisa-May, what?"

"Are wearing identical rings."
"What?! No way…" Felicity said and whipped her head around so fast her dark-brown hair flew out to the side, and her teardrop-shaped pendant got lodged underneath her right lapel. She zoomed in on the two women who came strolling towards her with their hands entwined. True enough, they both wore golden bands on their right ring fingers.

"Uh-huh," Cathy said, nodding in an exaggerated fashion to prove the point. "Big way. They're right there, girl."

The gray being known to the world as Lisa-May Farrington walked hand in hand with the curly-haired woman who had stolen her heart in a matter of hours, Adrienne Gryszkowski. Although Lisa-May still dressed conservatively for the most part - gray shoes, a gray skirt and a gray blouse - she wore a dusty green cardigan that matched her eyes well. As always, her short hair lay flat and wet-combed on her head.

Adrienne wore stronger colors in the shape of burnt-orange ballet flats, a long-sleeved T-shirt in a matching color, and a pure-white silk scarf thrown casually around her neck. To round off the ensemble, she wore a pair of off-white, high-waisted slacks with a braided strip of orange leather that ran through the belt hoops. On this day, she wore contact lenses instead of her regular horn-rimmed frame.

Cathy cocked her head when it dawned on her that Adrienne was in fact a striking, and certainly a well-dressed, woman. Her form-fitting slacks accentuated her legs well, and her blouse did a good job of showing off her prominent peaks. On top of that - literally - her pretty, girl-next-door face blossomed to life without the heavy spectacles getting in the way. "Oh, Lisa-May, you rascal you… ya hit a home run, didn'tcha? Hell yeah, ya did. Knocked it clean outta the park. Hiya," she said and put out her hand.

Lisa-May rolled her eyes but shook the hand offered to her. "Hello, Cathy. Still with the one-track mind, I hear."

"Who, me? Hey, girls, what's up with those gorgeous engagement rings? When the hell were you gonna tell us?"

"They're not engagement rings, Cathy."

"Well, ya coulda fooled me…"

Adrienne smiled and gave Lisa-May's hand a little squeeze. "They're soulmate rings, Miss Giardella."

"Awwwww!" Cathy cried and slapped her palms to her ample bosom. "That's so neat! Ya gonna make me cry now, girls!"

Lisa-May duly rolled her eyes again before she turned to Felicity. "Hello… oh no, are you closing? If you are, please allow me to say that I've had enough wonderful hours here to last me a lifetime. All good things must come to an end. Such is the nature of life.
One day, we shall all die… and I-

"No!" Felicity said the first moment she could get a word in edgewise. She guffawed over the stream of words that came from the woman who had always been quiet to the point of near-apathy. "We're not closing, Lisa-May… we're just rearranging the shelves to protect the most sensitive books. We're gonna have some carpenters over later today who'll begin fixing the damn things."

"Oh…"

"Oh," Adrienne said and gave her sweetheart's hand another little squeeze, "that's such a good idea!"

Felicity nodded while she waited for the rest of the flood of words she knew would stream out of the curly-haired woman. When nothing further came, she furrowed her brow and looked at Lisa-May who simply smiled.

"Felicity," Lisa-May said, returning the earlier squeeze. "We'll gladly help you rearrange the books, but I'm afraid there's something Adrienne and I need to do first. Namely sit at the Kozy Korner and bask in each other's presence while we read a novel or two."

"Ah… I see," Felicity said, nodding once more. "Well, go on, then. We're not stopping you. Oh, Kristen and her new friend are over there… it might be a little loud."

Lisa-May and Adrienne smiled at the two older women before they strolled onto the purple sofa at the Kozy Korner.

Cathy observed the way they held each other until they turned the corner and went out of sight. "Felicity… can you imagine those two in bed on their wedding night? After you dahling. No, after you dahling. No, after you dahling. No, after you…"

"Aw, that was just on the wrong side of unfunny, Cathy. They're great together."

"What are you talking about, girl? That was funny!" Cathy said and let out a saucy chuckle. The laughter died down when she happened to look at the pile of cardboard sheets they still had to go through. Sighing, she took the next one and began to fold it.

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A quarter to four in the afternoon, the Bookworm Sanctuary had been readied for the coming debate. Felicity and Sandra had wheeled the portable fiber glass walls into position so the people participating in the talk could have a little privacy, and eleven chairs had been placed along the rim of a round table which seemed apropos considering the nature of the debate.

The table had been put up in a secluded corner of the Bookworm Sanctuary, though with
the increased activity of the bookstore, the customers would still be close by. It had already drawn some attention from a few regulars, but when they heard which kind of debate it would be, they all preferred to settle down with their books instead.

After putting a stack of white napkins on the round table - and fanning them out in a butterfly spread so they would be neat and inviting - Felicity dusted off her hands and took a step back to survey the situation. "Hmmm," she said and moved back to the table to adjust the napkins once more.

Cathy stood behind the two younger women to supervise the work and to provide clever comments and throwaway one-liners while the others toiled away at moving the walls and chairs. "Gee, don't you think they need just one more nudge there, Felicity? One of 'em is off-center compared to the ones closest to it… at least an eighth of an inch. We can't have that, can we?"

"Shut up," Felicity said out of the corner of her mouth.

"Ohhhh… that's no way to talk to an old lady!"

Sandra knew from experience that once Cathy and Felicity got into a mock-bickering row, they wouldn't stop until the cows came home, so she put her hands in the air to quell the silly game before it could get started for real. "Please… can we put a lid on it? It won't be long before the first guests arrive. Felicity, do you want me to wheel in the trolley with the mugs and plates?"

Felicity chuckled at the look on the blonde's face which was a mix of annoyance and impatience. "Go ahead, Sandra. Don't forget the sugar bowl. Of course, the old lady there can't walk that far, or else she could have helped you."

"Oh, stab me in the ass, why dontcha!" Cathy said and let out a belly laugh.

"Don't tempt me… don't tempt me, girl!"

Sandra just scrunched up her face and shot the two others a look of pure exasperation.

The battle of wits was interrupted by the main entrance opening. Several women of all ages entered the bookstore and began to look around for the spot where the debate was to be held. One by one, they came inside and took off their coats and jackets while they glanced at the many aisles and the countless second-hand books the Bookworm Sanctuary had on offer.

Sandra held up a stern index finger at her two companions to say they better pipe down or else. Spinning around on her heel, she put a broad smile on her face and shuffled over to the guests. "Hello and welcome to the Bookworm Sanctuary! I'm Sandra Gottfried. I presume you're all here for the debate?" When she was met by a selection of nods and grunts, she stepped aside and pointed at the round table which was just visible beyond the
"Wow, girl," Cathy whispered, leaning in towards Felicity's ear so she didn't have to speak up, "she's got that hostess thing down pat, huh? She's so damn fine, rippling muscles and all. Didya notice she's wearing a baseball jersey today…?"

"Uh… yeah? I fail to see what that's got to do with anyth-"

"When the hell are you gals gonna make it out of the dugout and onto first base?" Cathy said with a lopsided grin.

"Well, who says we haven't been there already?"

"You forget who ya talking to? I know you, Felicity… you'll need a note of approval from the President before you'll get even remotely frisky."

"I beg your pardon! Find you own damn cutie-pie to get frisky with!" Felicity said and nudged Cathy's side.

Sandra had heard some, but not all, of the exchange, and she responded by shooting Cathy and Felicity a pair of cocked eyebrows as she went past them leading the guests to the round table. Before long, she had wheeled the trolley behind the fiber glass walls and offered the guests the quality selection of spelt buns and butter croissants.

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Lisa-May and Adrienne barged through the main entrance five minutes past four each carrying a large cardboard tray with coffee-to-go mugs. The beverages were distributed in a hurry among the seven guests at the round table before the two women pulled back to find Felicity.

The college professor who was supposed to host the debate hadn't shown up yet, and Felicity was slowly getting worried that she herself, or one of the other regulars, would be forced into assuming that role without having the academic skills needed to do it properly. When Lisa-May and Adrienne came over to her and Cathy - who were both leaning against the shelf at the public message board - she took the receipt handed to her by the formerly gray woman. "Great work, Lisa-May. Thanks a bunch for driving down there. Did you have any hiccups?"

"No, everything ran smoothly," Lisa-May said with an appropriate shaking of the head. "I've been there often enough to know which sales clerk to use. He was there so it all worked out just fine. It was quite full, though. Wasn't it, darling?"

"It was," Adrienne said and sought out Lisa-May's hand.
"Awwwww… dahling," Cathy said, but it earned her an electric blue elbow in the ribs.

Despite her objections to Cathy's comment, Felicity couldn't stop a broad, goofy grin from spreading over her face. To have someone like Lisa-May - who had been a quiet, brooding woman for as long as everyone had known her - find happiness could very well be the proudest achievement in the history of the Bookworm Sanctuary. That, and all the other little moments of glory that had taken place since they had put up the shrine for Aphrodite, the ancient Greek Goddess of Love. "All that's missing is the lecturer. She hasn't shown up yet," Felicity said; her smile fading into a shrug.

Adrienne's lips formed an O and she reached up to place a finger on her lips. "Oh, we saw someone who could be a college professor or a minister's wife just outside the community center. She was on the phone with someone."

"A minister's wife?!" Cathy echoed, trying hard to suppress a loud laugh.

"Yes," Adrienne said and nodded vigorously. "Oh, I can't describe it… you'll know what I mean if you see her, Miss Giardella."

Chuckling, Cathy scratched her forehead. "Hell, I definitely need to be on the lookout for any ministers' wives who happen to enter the Bookworm Sanctuary. Oh yeah, that'll be a sight to see, I can tell ya. We may need to practice our mouth-to-mouth resuscitation techniques ahead of time."

Adrienne and Lisa-May sniggered and leaned in to rub shoulders - they were way clear of Cathy in that particular Olympic discipline.

"Let's hope it's her, no matter how she looks. All right… thanks, girls," Felicity said and pushed herself off the wall she had been leaning against. She smiled at Lisa-May and Adrienne who shuffled over to the Kozy Korner. "Cathy, I'll be in the office until the professor arrives. Call me, yeah?"

Cathy nodded and followed Felicity away from the wall. "I will… unless it happens when I'm on the can. I have to go something fierce. Hey, which reminds me… the makeshift door stop we got in there works really well. That odd contraption underneath the frame actually does stop the door from swinging open… I didn't think it would, but it does."

"Sandra insisted on it… she blocked the busted keyhole as well. She spent half an hour rolling up a sheet of tin foil into little balls that she squeezed in there with four toothpicks that she had taped together."

"I suspected as much," Cathy said with a grin. The tide was high so she had to cross her legs in order for it to remain on the inside. "Oh, can't talk now… gotta hustle. Bye!"

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Once mother nature's call had been heeded in appropriate fashion, Cathy came back out of the bathroom a lighter woman. Looking around while she wiped the last water off her fingers by rubbing them against her denim overalls, she spotted a woman by the door who could only be a college professor or, like Adrienne had said, a minister's wife.

The woman who appeared to be in her late forties was dressed in a gloomy, dark-brown pant suit over a dark-tan shirt with wide lapels. She was of average height and size, and the sensible shoes and the tight bun in her hair that gave her tall forehead an odd, stretched appearance didn't provide her with any charisma. She carried an old-fashioned leather briefcase that was nearly dropped by accident when she pulled her left sleeve back to check the time.

"Huh," Cathy grunted to herself. "Like I predicted… a dry creek college professor. Ugh, should I attend the debate? Or not? Eh… shoot, I don't know…"

She took a step back to get out of sight but kept an eye on the professor who was still waiting alone at the door. "The coffee and croissants are free… but the lecture's probably gonna be boring… I could get a little female interaction going… but I doubt any of the others play on my team…" she mumbled, keeping a running score of the yeas and nays. It was pretty even which made her come to a conclusion of: "Oh, why the hell not?"

Screwing a grin on her face, she stepped back into view and shuffled closer to the professor. Before she could make it all the way there - it was nearly thirty feet, after all - Felicity and Sandra had spotted the lecturer and had come out with their hands extended ahead of them.

Cathy responded at once and made an instant forty-five degree left-hand turn that would take her past the college professor and back around the fiber glass walls. There were still four seats available, so she laid claim to one of them by pulling it a short distance back from the table before she shuffled over to the trolley. Grinning, she snatched a coffee-to-go mug and one of her sister's prized butter croissants, and noted with great satisfaction that she had taken one with marzipan and chipped almonds. "Hi, everybody," she said to the others as she sat down at the round table. "I'm Cathy. Been waiting long?"

"We have," one of the guests said. Like the six others, the early-forty-something woman had an air of detached intellectualism about her that didn't sit all that well with Cathy - and she had been right, none of them was even remotely Family.

Biting into the croissant and tasting the high-quality, homemade marzipan, Cathy nodded a silent reply. She wanted to say more, but Felicity, Sandra and the professor walked around the corner of the enclosure before she had time to swallow the bite.

"Good afternoon, everybody," Felicity said, putting a hand on the professor's shoulder. "This is Professor Melissa Kramer. She's here to lead the lecture and debate on her recently published paper, The Neo-Feminist Manifest. Isn't that so, Professor Kramer?"
"Indeed I am, Miss LaMarre," Melissa said in a voice that was as dry, dull and lifeless as Cathy had feared - she didn't even have a fascinating accent to liven up the proceedings. "Pleased to meet you all. I fear I am very poor at remembering names, so before we get started, I'll write down the names of those present so I won't accidentally forget it or use the wrong one. Thank you, Miss LaMarre. I'll take it from here."

"All right," Felicity said and took a step back. "I'll leave you to it, then. If you need anything, just tell Sandra and she'll pass it on."

The Professor's lips creased but they never went beyond dull, gray and lifeless. It was supposed to be a smile, but it was a pitiful excuse for one. "I shall. Thank you, Miss LaMarre."

Sandra's smile was far more genuine as she pulled out a chair and sat down at the round table. She produced a coffee-to-go mug featuring the caramel delicata that she had bribed Dana to run down and buy for her. It had cost her five book tokens, but it was worth it.

Letting out a small sigh, Cathy bit into the marzipan croissant to cover the sinking feeling inside her. The debate was going to be just as dull as she had feared it would be, but now it was too late to back out.

"Before we start," Sandra said and got up, which earned her an annoyed look by the professor who had been interrupted in preparing the list of names, "would you like a croissant or a spelt bun, Professor Kramer? They're really good-

"No thank you, Miss Gottfried. I don't eat pastries of any kind."

"Oh… okay," Sandra said and sat down again in a rare moment of defeat. "Well, all right, how about a mug of tea or really good coffee, then? We have regular-

"I'm sorry, but I'm allergic to coffee beans. And I don't drink tea."

Stumped for good, Sandra folded her hands on the table for a brief moment before she moved them down into her lap. She smiled, but it was a puzzled one.

Professor Kramer shot the fit blonde in the royal-blue baseball jersey a pointed look before she began to ask the guests their names so she could have her cue sheet ready for when the questions or comments would arrive. From one word to the next, she came to a dead stop and stared out into the room just before she would have asked Cathy.

Looking up in surprise at the unexpected silence, Cathy spotted Kristen and Dana peeking around the corner of one of the fiber glass walls. She winked at them, and Sandra gave Dana a big, bouncing thumbs-up for getting the good coffee. The gestures were responded to in kind.

It was clear Professor Kramer wasn't too keen on having the colorful, young women
attend the debate, because she didn't go on until Kristen and Dana had shuffled back to the crates containing the vinyl records they had been browsing earlier.

Cathy scrunched up her face, as did Sandra. They locked eyes and sent each other a silent message that said it looked to be a debate where the professor preferred to preach to the choir instead of getting new impulses.

After having written down the names of the people present - misspelling Cathy with a K - Professor Kramer put down the pencil and looked at the women at the round table who appeared eager to hear what she had to say. "Now that we're alone, I'd like to introduce myself properly. I am Professor Melissa Kramer, Bachelor in Early Feminist Literature, Ph.D. in gender politics and sociological studies, author of several books on gender roles then and now, and feminist scholar from the Lambrecht University in Zurich, Switzerland. I have been teaching feminist studies for the past twelve years, and- Miss Giardella, you have a question already?"

"I do," Cathy said and put down her hand. "I'd like to know if all your knowledge and experience comes from your scholarly studies, or if you have marched for women's rights in third world countries and elsewhere with the rest of us old-style feminists? You know, the activists?"

A collective gasp was heard from the other guests, Sandra included. Everyone's head whipped back to the Professor whose lips had been reduced to narrow, gray lines in her face.

"Like I said, Miss Giardella, I am a feminist scholar," Melissa said hoarsely.

"Ah. So you haven't marched."

The Professor's chin trembled and a nervous tic developed near her right eye. Clearing her throat, she returned to her papers to get back on track though her jaw kept moving like she was cursing the older woman in the denim bib overalls. "These are the themes I'd like to discuss today. Pass them on, please," she said and sent a stack of papers around the table.

Sandra took hers and began to study it closely, but Cathy only glanced at the first few bullets when she received her copy: *Beating Down the Patriarchy - The Rise of Woman and Man's Objections - Female Stereotypes as defined by Man (The Kitten, The MILF, The old Witch, and others) - Women's Sexuality and how it's dictated by the Male Gaze.*

"Oh, boy," Cathy said under her breath. She couldn't wait for the bone dry professor to mangle the last bullet point in particular, but none of the others showed much promise either despite the important, and timely, topics.
She had been right. Twenty minutes into the round table debate, all but the most faithful guest had lost interest in the professor's long-winded, lifeless points of argument. Though everyone around the table tried to add their two cents' worth when the debate strayed into topics important to them, it was clear by the long stares and deep sighs that carried on for a majority of the time that it wasn't the world's most rewarding experience.

Even Sandra appeared to have had enough. Her entire attention was directed at the little flowers she was doodling on the piece of paper they had been given containing the points of discussion.

Cathy had zoned out even further than that. She only listened to the dry professor with one ear, and it wasn't even her good one. Instead of paying attention to the admittedly interesting current subject of the debate - how badly men reacted to the growing presence of women in jobs that were exclusive to men in the past - she went on a little journey in time inside her mind; back to the days where the inextinguishable fire of the righteous burned brightly inside her.

In 1973, she and ten thousand other feminist activists marched on Washington to show the government that the times were a-changin'. When they reached the spot where Martin Luther King, jr. had held his landmark I Have A Dream speech a decade earlier, they burned their bras on a huge bonfire to show the Women's Liberation wasn't merely a fad like the conservative critics said, but a society-altering event that could not, and would not be contained or put back in the box - or closet for that matter.

For the seventeen-year-old Catherine Giardella, a practising Catholic and the second daughter of a traditionalist Italian-American patriarch who wouldn't dream of voting for anyone but the Republicans, it was an experience that turned everything on its head.

The following years saw her visit many camps and festivals that were organized by feminist groups. They were exclusively for women of all ages and colors, although the Women's Lib still seemed to be mostly a WASPy thing at the time. The camps were examples of true Sisterhood where every decision was taken in plenum, where every task was carried out collectively by the women with the greatest skills in that particular field, and where every tent was open for anyone who needed someone to talk to about any given topic - except perhaps boyfriend trouble.

It wasn't all perfect, of course. With some of the camps and festivals reaching the size of towns, it was inevitable that problems would crop up. Some women would get loaded or high, or both; some would get lost for days trying to find the way back to their tent or hut, and others would make a living out of stealing from their Sisters. The camp and festival councils would hold endless plenum meetings where they couldn't even decide on what to call the daily work sheets since 'Agenda' was a masculine term, and now and then, Lady Luck would put a group of women together who happened to have synchronized periods - cue plenty of histrionics.

Cathy chuckled to herself when she thought back to the countless fun, odd, crazy, wild
situations she had found herself in back then. One event in particular had stayed with her for all those years: Most camps welcomed partial or full nudity, and a large number of women would always take advantage of that by walking around in the buff. That was all well and good, but in one of the camps she had visited, it created insurmountable problems when the benches in the mess tents proved to be untreated instead of planed planks - thus, three hundred blankets and cushions had to be bought from a local company at the cost of nearly two thousand dollars which was a huge sum of money in 1977.

A festival in August, 1978 marked the first time she sampled the sweet fruits of Woman. She was twenty-two, and a miserable, frustrated, mistaken hetero for whom sex was a grim chore, but the train to a far better, and certainly more rewarding, life had been set in motion one evening in the tent when her roomie finally ran out of patience and told her to shut the hell up about all her 'stupid boy stuff' and come to terms with the fact that she wasn't straight. She already knew deep down, of course, but it had helped to hear it from someone who was part of that mysterious, scary other world.

The first time she felt a woman's lips brushing against her own, her heart had performed a double-beat that left no doubt as to her true nature - even if she was frightened out of her mind at the time because of the implications. The first time she felt the slender, graceful fingers of a woman caressing her body intimately, it had given her such a fiery jolt of pleasure that all memories of the dull, frustrating sex she had endured with her coarse, crude boyfriends were erased from her mind. The strong bonds, the warmth and the inherent understanding - and the occasional high-strung drama - that she discovered among her new circle of like-minded companions meant that she had never looked back since that glorious summer of 1978.

On a grander scale, it was too good to last, and it didn't. When the 1970s became the 1980s, traditional masculine values like money and power returned to the nation's focus, and the young, urban professionals were born. Many of the victories earned by the feminist faithful were pushed to the side or simply forgotten in the eternal quest for green bills, red cars and white powder that followed - not to mention the garish dress code of short skirts, stilettos, big hair and even bigger shoulder pads - but it had been the results of the tireless work in the previous decade that allowed women access to the executive suites as managers and CEOs for major companies instead of just being secretaries or hostesses whose most important task was to look cute while she put two spoons of sugar into the boss' coffee.

It wasn't until the 1990s that the spirit of the 1970s returned; the second wave was fueled by a growing environmental consciousness and the important fight for equal rights for all women around the world regardless of color, creed, caste or religion. By then, Cathy had slipped into a mentor role for the younger generation, even if the early-twenty-somethings of the time were all far more confident and worldly than she had been at that age.

Sighing, she returned to the present and shuffled around on the chair which had proven to
be just as uncomfortable as the others. The professor kept talking about the current topic, but even though Cathy had things to say that she had learned in the real world, she couldn't be bothered to speak up - the scheduled break couldn't come soon enough.

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She had almost fallen asleep when she cracked open an eyelid at the odd sound of someone knocking on one of the fiber glass walls. The Professor stopped talking and let out an annoyed huff which made everyone at the round table turn to look at the woman who had knocked.

She appeared to be in her late fifties, and she wore blue canvas tennis shoes, dark-green two-button jeans and a green-and-blue-checkered flannel shirt that hung loose over a white tank top. She had her graying hair up in a bun, but a few fashionable bangs fell down onto her forehead.

"Hello everybody, I'm June Costanza," the woman said, clutching a small purse. She had a worried, almost anxious look in her eyes as she glanced at the people sitting at the round table. "I'm so sorry I'm late. I had car trouble. May I join the debate, or is it too late?"

Professor Kramer let out another huff that proved she hated interruptions of any kind. "Well," she said in a frosty tone, "I suppose you can join us. I will say that you have missed quite a few important topics."

"Oh, is there a test at the end?" June said as she hurried over to the last available chair.

Cathy couldn't hold back the strong laugh that bubbled to the surface, and the cold look of sublime annoyance it created on Melissa Kramer's face made it even better. She waved at the new woman who duly waved back.

Pulling out the chair, June sat down and put the purse on the table. She nodded a quick hello to the other women at the debate, but only Sandra put out her hand and introduced herself.

"Now that we're all here," Professor Kramer said in a pointed fashion as she shoved the notes of the debate over to June Costanza, "I shall continue with the next topic, the patriarchy in the government and how we can make sure more women will run for-

Hearing the details of the next topic, Cathy zoned out all over again but kept an eye on the new woman who was sitting opposite her at the round table. June Costanza's features had softened due to the date on her birth certificate, but there was something curiously familiar about her deep-brown eyes, even if the anxious sheen that still played in them added some distance. No bells were ringing yet, but Cathy kept digging for the connection - it was bound to come to her sooner or later.
June Costanza turned out to be a woman who had plenty of good points to make about the various topics of discussion covered in the debate. It was soon revealed that she had hands-on experience from working as a volunteer at one of the city council's hotlines, but the fact didn't enamor her in the Professor's eyes.

Cathy leaned back on her uncomfortable chair and tried to get her brain cells to rub together so they could create the energy needed to tell her where she had met June before. Not only were her eyes familiar, her voice was too. A harmonic timber which wasn't too high-pitched or too flat; it was just right.

She didn't know her from her current line of work as an independent biographer, she was sure of that - and worse, if she was unable to remember such a good-looking woman only a few years after meeting her, she really needed to find a nice, tall bridge somewhere to take the big leap from.

It wasn't from her infrequent visits to the squash court near where she lived, either. She had been an avid weekend player for years until her heart began to give her some trouble when she reached her early fifties. The decrease in activity increased her girth which in turn lessened her interest in physical activities of any kind. Now, her center of gravity was so low she couldn't even go into the squash court's viewing enclosure without breaking a sweat - and besides, though June seemed fit, she didn't appear to be the sporty type.

Cathy had to push her thoughts aside when the professor sent a new piece of paper around the table. When it reached her, she groaned inwardly at the headline: 'List and describe Woman's five best qualities as seen from your point of view.'

She looked across the table at Sandra who was already busy writing down the five items with her own ball point pen. June seemed less enthusiastic, and she happened to look up and lock eyes with Cathy. They both grinned, and now Cathy was dead certain she knew the other woman from somewhere.

When the professor put a handful of pencils onto the table, Cathy took one out of pure mischief. If the minister's wife wanted Woman's five best qualities, she would get 'em.

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Once she was done, Cathy turned the paper over so nobody would be able to read what she had written before she could drop the bombshell. Some of the others weren't done yet, so she had time to study June's face.

She was sure she hadn't met her at the newspaper where she had worked for more than twenty years. June wasn't a newspaper-type at all; she laughed, she smiled, she offered humorous comments and anecdotes, and she had a lightness of being about her. The
newspaper people Cathy had known weren't like that at all - rampant cynicism was the mood that typically dominated the editorial floors.

Unlike the other people at the debate, save for Sandra, of course, the Vibe was strong with June. She had that certain air about her that hardly anyone outside the rainbow family carried. Even so, Cathy was sure she didn't know June from the local dives, middle class hangouts and upscale establishments.

"So," professor Kramer said as she rose from her chair, "the five minutes are up. Let's hear how you rank the five qualities you deem most important in us all. Miss Gottfried, would you mind going first?"

Sandra smiled and reached for her paper. "Not at all, Professor Kramer," she said and adjusted her square-frame spectacles. "All right… I wrote them in alphabetical order. Compassion, empathy, sincerity, strength to rise above adversity, and finally willingness to learn and evolve."

"Oh, that's an excellent list, Miss Gottfried. I'm glad you said strength. That'll be the next topic we'll touch upon," the professor said and almost broke out in a smile. The smile faded at once when she turned to Cathy who couldn't stop grinning. "Miss Giardella, I can see you're dying to share your list… please go ahead."

"Okie-dokie," Cathy said and leaned forward. She put her finger on the piece of paper to trail the short words she had written. "Eyes. Boobs. Ass. Legs. And woman's number one asset is, has always been, and will always be the vagina. Can't live without it… don't wanna live without it. I thought about writing clitoris instead, but the whole area down there is just too much fun to simply highlight one aspect of it."

Another shocked gasp echoed around the table. Most of the women were frozen in instant paralysis; Sandra blushed fire-engine red and held onto the table like she was afraid she'd faint if she didn't, and June was clearly struggling to keep back a laugh. When it couldn't be contained any longer, she leaned her head back and let out a braying burst of laughter that made the whole bookstore come to a dead stop and stare at the round table.

Professor Kramer was one of those frozen in paralysis over Cathy's wit. She tried several times to get her clenched jaw to release so she could speak, but all she could produce were inarticulate grunts. With her facial tic thumping like a rubber ball around her right eye, it took her nearly twenty seconds to croak: "Let's take a break."

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The five-minute break stretched out to ten, then fifteen minutes. It wasn't until the professor's nervous tic had receded enough for her to continue that she staggered back to the round table. She drew an audible sigh of relief when the difficult Cathy wasn't there.

Sandra had wanted to stay to the end of the debate so she had remained at her post. When
Melissa Kramer staggered over to the table, she put a hand in the air to catch the professor's attention. "Professor Kramer, Miss Giardella told me to tell you that she was sorry for upsetting you, and that she and Miss Costanza-

"I don't believe that for a moment!" Melissa cried in a screechy voice. Looking embarrassed, she cleared her throat to get a grip. "You're a nice woman, Miss Gottfried. Please don't cover for the bad people among us."

"Uh… okay. I wasn-"

"Let's go on, shall we?" the professor said with a voice that once again strayed into the screechy. Her tic returned for a brief moment before she had everything under control.

Sandra drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Crinkling her nose, she sucked on her front teeth almost like she was considering bailing on the debate after all. When the professor started talking about the next topic on the original list, 'Female stereotypes as defined by Man,' she decided to stay since it was a subject she had intimate knowledge of. As a successful, independent businesswoman, she had often had to deal with men who couldn't grasp that her skills and drive were as strong as theirs though she was a petite blonde with youthful features and a ponytail.

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Up at the back of the bookstore, Cathy cleaned one half of the bright purple sofa at the Kozy Korner and patted the seat to indicate to June that she should sit down. "Here, girl… slap your butt onto this plush cushion. Much better than those rock-hard chairs down there."

Lisa-May and Adrienne were still there with the books they had found - Caroline A. McLaughlin's drama *Will The Stars Twinkle For Me When I Die* for Lisa-May, and Harriet Walton's science-fiction epic *Journey To Planet Earth* for Adrienne - and they scooted down into the far corner to make room for the new guest.

"In a sec, Miss Giardella," June said and put out her hand. "Hello, ladies, I'm June Costanza. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Looking up, Lisa-May took the hand and gave it a polite shake. "Good afternoon, Miss Costanza… I'm Lisa-May Farrington."

"And I'm Adrienne Gryszkowski. We're together," Adrienne said, hooking her arm inside that of her companion after she had shaken June's hand. It didn't take long before Lisa-May leaned in to rub shoulders and exchange sniggers with the curly-haired woman.

"Oh, how nice!" June said with a grin.

"Yeah," Cathy said, "we've got a lot of that going on. Sandra Gottfried and the
administrator also got a nice thing going, and the tattooed girl you may have seen when you got here also found a new squeeze right here in the bookstore."

Lisa-May cleared her throat and leaned over to look past June. "Actually, that's not true, Cathy. Kristen and Dana are just good friends."

"Ah, that's just until Dana finds out how exciting-"

"In that case, do you want to go on a exploratory date with my downstairs neighbor? He's single and bathes at least once a week. You may find out how excit-"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it," Cathy said with a dismissive wave. Lisa-May harrumphed and returned to her book.

June chuckled at the exchange as she sat down next to Cathy. "Miss Giardella, I know you'll probably think this is the world's cheesiest come-on, but…"

"Oh, I don't know… I've heard a couple of five-star ones. Hell, I've uttered a couple of five-star ones. And please, call me Cathy. I get all nervous-like when someone calls me Miss Giardella… I think I'm about to be busted for possession."

June grinned and shuffled around to get comfortable on the purple cushions. "All right. It's strange, but I feel I already know you from somewhere, Cathy."

"I'm glad it's not just me," Cathy said and briefly put a hand on June's leg. "You know, for the past hour, I've been racking my brain trying to figure out where I know you from!"

"Oh, really?" June said and crossed her legs.

When Lisa-May noticed June's top knee was pointing at Cathy instead of away from her, she let out a grunt but decided not to interfere or even make a comment.

"I hope you've come up with something," June continued, "because I must admit I haven't. I recall meeting you in an office environment somewhere, sometime, but…"

Grunting, Cathy narrowed her eyes and tried to picture June in such an environment. Something did stir inside her brain, but it wouldn't come to the forefront no matter how hard she tried to bribe her brain cells. "Oh, I haven't even made it that far. I've discarded the idea of seeing you at the squash court, at the newspaper where I worked, at any of the bars around here-"

"Oh, that's it! I've worked for a newspaper! Were you at the Seattle Sentinel?"

Cathy's face lit up like a little sun at the first part of June's statement, but the second part made it fall back into the same, old frown. "Ah… that would be a no. I worked at the
"Herald here in town for a good number of years."

"Oh… darn."

"No shit, you really worked for a newspaper? I gotta say, you've got a much nicer personality than most newspaper people."

"Why… thank you," June said with a faint blush rolling onto her cheeks.

The snort that came out of Lisa-May proved she had recognized it as the opening gambit in the chess game known as The Big Flirt.

June didn't seem to mind as she shuffled around once more on the purple sofa like she wanted to get closer to Cathy. "Say, do you have a water cooler anywhere around here? I could use a cool drink of."

"Water cooler! Oh, hell yeah!" Cathy cried and smacked her hand down onto the plush cushions with such force it made June, Lisa-May and Adrienne all jump a foot in the air out of sheer surprise. "The Goddamned water cooler! On the fortieth floor of the Goddamned Pengrave building in New York City!"

Growling from somewhere deep in her throat, Lisa-May sat up straight and shot fire at the older woman down the other end of the sofa. "Cathy Giardella, will you please behave? You nearly made me drop my book!" Unfortunately, the complaint was ignored since Cathy and June were too busy to pay attention to her.

"The Pengrave building… of course," June said, staring wide-eyed at Cathy. "We worked for different companies, but we always met for a chat at the water cooler. God, I remember now. For how long? A year?"

Cathy shook her head. "No, less than that. I only worked there for seven, eight months. Wow… June Costanza… of course. You had a different last name then, didn't you?"

"Yes, I was married at the time. Costanza is my maiden name."

"We all make mistakes," Cathy said with a broad grin. "Wow… 1985. Or was it 1986?"

"I think it was 1986 because it was a year before the stock market crash which bankrupted the company I worked for. God, that's nearly thirty years ago now. Look at us," June said and touched her graying hair.

Shaking her head, Cathy let out a strong raspberry and reached down to pat her rotund tummy. "Girl, you look damn fine! Look at me… I allowed myself to get fat. I'm one of those gals who need to powder the underside of her boobs in the summer or else the babies 'll chafe."
"Oh God, Cathy! Will you please stop!" Lisa-May croaked, nearly swaying from the information overload.

Unperturbed, Cathy zoomed in on June instead of the formerly gray woman. "No wonder you couldn't recognize me. I've changed so much… you haven't changed a damn thing, really, now that I remember you. Your gorgeous eyes are still the same. And your smile!"

The blatant flirting made Lisa-May snort and groan, but she was still ignored except by Adrienne who snuggled up even closer to her.

"Oh, thank you," June said and looked down at her hands with a faint red hue tinting her cheeks. "Do you remember the outrageous jackets we had to wear back then because they were the height of fashion? The shoulders went out that far… and the hair… I used to spend half an aerosol can of lacquer on my hair every single day."

"I do remember those jackets. And what about all those golden boys we worked for? Those shirts with blue pinstripes, stupid suspenders and high-waisted pants they wore all the damn time? I can't believe that was ever in fashion."

"No! And the miniskirts we had to crawl into… God, the miniskirts."

"Yeah, but we had the legs for it back then. Some of us still do, huh?" Cathy said, once more touching June's dark-green jeans. The comment earned her an even louder snort from the peanut gallery. Cocking an eyebrow, Cathy leaned forward so she could look past June. "Lisa-May, dahling, I think you need to blow your nose. You got something nasty stuck up there."

The former gray woman put down her book and shot Cathy a suitably scandalized glare, though she did temper it with a wink. "Come on, sweetie," she said and hooked her arm inside Adrienne's. "I can tell when we aren't welcome. Goodbye, Miss Costanza. It was nice meeting you."

"And you, Miss Farrington. Miss Gryszkowski," June said with a smile.

"Hey, girls," Cathy said, "if you're going down to the dry creek professor, wouldya mind checking if there are any croissants left? No?"

The only answer she got came in the shape of two backs walking away from her.

"Whatever," Cathy said and leaned back on the sofa. She shuffled around to be able to look directly at June. The woman next to her was far more interesting than even the juiciest croissant, so the rejection didn't bother her in the least. "So, June… what have you been doing with your life since then? You moved to Seattle?"

June nodded. "I moved to Seattle and started working at the Sentinel, yes. I began as a secretary to one of the junior editors and worked my way up the ladder… until I reached
a dead end in a corner office. There was a change in senior management, and the new bosses got rid of everyone over forty-eight. I guess we were too expensive or something."

"I don't be-flippin'-lieve it," Cathy said and thumped her fist into the cushions all over again. "That's the same Goddamned stunt the big wigs at the Herald pulled on me when I turned fifty… or tried to pull on me. Wow, is that uncanny or what? They failed, those miserable bastards… pardon my French. I sued 'em for wrongful dismissal due to age discrimination. We proved it and won the case."

"Good for you," June said and placed a warm hand on top of Cathy's clenched fist. Under her warm touch, the fist melted and became an outstretched hand. It was a little too soon for that - after all, they had only known each other for an hour and twelve minutes this time around - so she pulled her hand back and put it in her lap.

"Yeah," Cathy said and withdrew her own hand. She knew the odd sense of rejection that rolled around the pit of her stomach was ridiculous and unfair. Nobody but nobody outside the ninety-nine cent pulp romance novels could establish a connection that fast - except perhaps Lisa-May and Adrienne, but the woman in gray had so much pent-up frustration and energy inside her that she was on the brink of exploding at the best of times - and to expect to have one with June Costanza was nothing short of foolish.

"Anyway, did you ever remarry…?"

June shook her head and showed Cathy her fingers that were devoid of jewelry of any kind. "No. I got married at twenty-three, divorced at thirty-one and officially came out of the closet at thirty-five, in 1992. Late bloomer, I know. Of course, my closest friends had already pegged me years before my divorce."

"Better late than never is what I always say. I had you pegged way back at the water cooler," Cathy said and made a half-serious swat at the other woman. "I just didn't want to make a pass on ya 'cos, you know, you were married at the time. What convinced you to take the leap?" she continued as she snuggled down into the corner so she wouldn't be too close to June's tempting fingers.

"Oh, this and that… it wasn't a single event. I grew tired of dealing with all the aches and pains on my own, you know? I didn't want to end up as a sad, lonely old maid who regretted her decisions for the rest of her life." June cocked her head and let out a sigh. "Not that I'm too far off that now," she added in a quieter tone.

"What? No way..." Cathy said and sat up straight.

June shrugged and fiddled with the buttons on her loose shirt. "Yeah. It's been a while since I've had someone to share things with. Share my life with. That's why I go to all these debates and meetings… conventions… I hope to meet someone my own age. Someone who's been there, done that… someone who knows what I mean when I talk about the mental strain of going to a Catholic school… about the emptiness inside when you think you're the only lesbian in the world… about the… the… no. Forget it. Forget
all my damn insecurities, Cathy," she said and waved at her companion. "I'm sorry for dumping all that at your feet two minutes after we've met."

"Whoa, girl... you didn't dump anyth-"

"Do you have a restroom here?" June said and got up in a hurry. "I really need a glass of water." Without worthying Cathy but a single look, June strode away from the purple sofa in the Kozy Korner.

Turning around and putting her feet down onto the smooth linoleum floor, Cathy rubbed her brow several times as she watched June's figure disappear between the aisles headed for the bathroom. "Okay... I didn't see that one coming. Huh. So now what...? Go after her, you dipstick," she said, getting up from the sofa before it was too late.

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"June? Hey..." Cathy said, leaning against the busted bathroom door. She tried to press a finger against it in the hope that June hadn't put the sliding door stop in place, but she had, and the door wouldn't budge. "June, are you okay?"

'Not really...'

Cathy took a deep breath and scrunched up her face. This called for compassion, empathy, sincerity, strength to overcome adversity, and the last thing that Sandra had written down that had slipped her mind - it was something about evolving. "Okay. I'm coming in. Push the bottom slider aside so I can get the door open. Okay?"

'Okay...' June said in a somber tone. A scraping noise was heard, and the busted door creaked ajar by itself.

Cathy smiled and pushed it open the rest of the way. The smile faded from her face at once when she realized that June had been crying. "Oh... please don't cry," she said and slammed the bathroom door shut behind her. With her heel, she shoved the sliding stop in place underneath the door's frame so nobody could interrupt them.

"I feel like crying," June said in a thick voice. "I shouldn't have come down here today. I thought it would be fun, but all it did was to draw a fat line under the fact that... that... no. Forget it."

"That's the second time in three minutes you've told me to forget it... you oughtta know that when I hear things like that, I just get more determined to discover what the hell's going on. I guess that's the old reporter in me. Don't be afraid to open up, girl. Talking about it will help... trust me, I've been there so damn often it just ain't funny."

June sighed and reached up to wipe away a few tears. She gave Cathy a brief, red-eyed gaze before she turned away from her and sat down on the closed toilet seat. "I'm just
lonely. Isn't that pathetic? With all the world has to offer these days, I'm lonely. I live alone, eat alone, watch TV alone, sleep alone… God, this is gonna sound so pathetic… I long for a friend! A confidante. I long for someone to share things with, both good and bad. Someone to go to concerts with, or museums, or restaurants, or a Sunday stroll down at the waterfront promenade… someone with a common past, someone who understands the finer details of who we are and how we got here… you know?"

"Yeah… I do. The world is so damn shallow nowadays," Cathy said quietly.

"Yeah. A friendship… an honest friendship like all you gals have here at the bookstore. It only took me two minutes to see the great rapport between all of you, and you know what? It made me even more miserable. God, how I long for something like that… but who the hell is gonna be interested in befriending a graying late-fifty-something dyke who doesn't even own a cat!"

Cathy let out a sound that could best be described as a cross between a grunt, a laugh and a snort. "Girl! How about a graying dyke of fifty-nine summers who doesn't have a cat either? That's me, if you're still in doubt. And I know exactly what you're going through. I spend a lot of time here at the bookstore, and I think you know why. 'Cos my phone stopped ringing. The emails stopped coming… some nights when I go to bed, it feels like two weeks have gone by since I got up in the morning 'cos time has slowed down to a crawl. Ring any bells?"

"Yeah," June said with a dark nod.

"Yeah. My younger sister owns a croissant bakery down the street, but I can't stay there the whole day either. My presence alone would drive her off the wall. So when I'm not here, I sit at home and watch TV or surf the Internet on my laptop. Alone. I wrote a few books that sold kinda well after I was fired from the newspaper, but they didn't open the floodgates for new inquiries like I had imagined… or hoped… they would. I'm working on a project right now, but because there's no deadline, there's no urgency to it. Some days I can't even work up the energy to write a comma. All in all, I know what you're going through."

June sighed and shook her head slowly. "How did it come to this, Cathy? Do you think our young selves would have believed it if we'd had a portal into the future back then? Believed that we'd end up as a couple of gray, old maids?"

"Well… twenty-nine-year-old Cathy would have said to me, get the hell outta here, ya crazy old broad!" Cathy said with a grin.

With a wistful smile gracing her lips, June shuffled around on the toilet seat and cocked her head. "I guess young June would have as well. So… now what?" As she spoke, she looked Cathy in the eye.

"As soon as we get out of the john, we're gonna go back to the books and I'm gonna show
you a couple of my favorite titles and stuff. Y'know, bring you into the sheep pen, girl. And afterwards? Well, there's an awesome diner on the corner of- hey, now you're crying again. Don't cry," Cathy said and moved over to the toilet to pull June into a consolatory hug.

It was a little clumsy and awkward to begin with like most hugs were when the other person was hovering in the gray area between being a stranger and a friend, but June loosened up and got to her feet so she could wrap her arms around Cathy's back. "It's great to see you again, Cathy… even if I couldn't remember you at first. We had a good thing going back then. I dearly wish we could re-establish that connection. Do you think that's possible?"

"Ain't that what we're doing now?" Cathy said with a grin brought on by the wonderful feeling of a female body pressing against hers. A pair of warm hands on her back; soft hair tickling her cheek; the delightful scent of a high-quality perfume - it had been far too long since she had experienced any of those things. A strong friendship with a like-minded individual was just the thing she needed, and she hadn't even realized it.

"I suppose it is," June said as they separated.

They smiled at each other for a while before Cathy cocked her leg and shoved the sliding door stop aside so they could get out. "Amazing the amount of mischief two old gals can get up to in the bathroom, huh?" she whispered, reaching out to give June the tiniest tickle on the tummy.

"Yeah… and I have the feeling it won't be the last time, either," June said and crinkled her nose in the cutest gesture Cathy had seen for ages.

The two women stepped outside and shut the busted door behind them. When June's face turned into a question mark over the poor condition of the door, Cathy waved her hand. "It's a long story… and I'll tell you all about it over at the diner."

Out of nowhere, a sound akin to a twig snapping in two was heard over the entire bookstore. The sound was soon followed by an odd, rolling thunder that seemed to go on for a while until every last book had fallen off the collapsed shelf.

"That!" Felicity barked, jumping into the doorway to the office. Behind her, the swivel-chair she had been using up until one second after the collapse crashed into the wall behind it. Her face was drawn back into a gruesome mask of anger, and her eyes shot dark-brown fire. "That! Wasn't! A! Shelf! Tell me that wasn't a shelf collapsing after I got a dozen paper cuts from folding packing cases for ninety rotten minutes so we could transfer the most fragile books from the fu- fu- damn shelves!" - deep breath - "Tell me that wasn't a shelf-"

'Oh! A shelf has collapsed, Miss LaMarre!' a female voice said from the other side of the bookstore. It sounded suspiciously like Adrienne Gryszkowski's, but there was too much
thunderous electricity in the air for anyone to know for sure.

"Aaargh!" Felicity barked, slamming her fist into the flat part of the doorjamb - the impact was hard enough to send little clumps of mortar rattling down the rear side of the jamb. With a face like a good-sized summer thunderstorm, she stomped away from the office and into the bookstore, passing Cathy and June on the way.

Staying well back from the furious woman, Cathy chuckled over the comical, though dangerous look on Felicity's face. Scratching her cheek, she turned back to June who just stood there, absorbing it all with wide eyes. "All part of the big merry-go-round known as life, yeah? Hey… are you up for a little improvised adventure? It could be fun or embarrassing, no one can tell. It's always unpredictable, though… and it's something we regulars do together."

"What, scooping up books?"

"Exactly… on a regular basis, too! Beats Pilates, that's for sure. C'mon," Cathy said and hooked her arm inside June's.

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It turned out to be the bottom shelf of the *Sports Drama* bookcase that had collapsed. Paperbacks, hardbacks, pristine copies and torn, old rags revolving around softball, swimming, volleyball, basketball, tennis, track and field, soccer and even motor racing were spread out all over the aisle.

The covers tended to follow the contents of the books, so most were colorful affairs featuring blue water, orange courts, green pitches or gray asphalt.

Sandra came hustling over from the debate to join Cathy, June, Felicity, Lisa-May and Adrienne. The six-Amazon strike team was soon towering over the books with their hands akimbo ready to scoop up the errant tomes and put them back onto the shelf whenever the queen of the tribe - Felicity - gave the command.

She didn't. "I can't deal with that," Felicity growled and threw her hands in the air. "I just can't deal with that. If you wanna get down on your hands and knees and collect the books, be my guest… I'm gonna go into the office and read a hot novel while I get an insane sugar rush from stuffing my face with Candy Balls. Enough is enough." With that, she spun around on her heel and stomped away.

"Uh… what in the world… Felicity?" Sandra asked, but the administrator wasn't in any mood to reconsider her decision. "Felicity, wait up," she continued as she hurried after the irate woman whose angry stomping resembled that of a raging bull.

Cathy chuckled and leaned in to bump shoulders with June. "Told ya it would be unpredictable. How about it… should we take one on the chin for the greater good?"
"Yeah… why not," June said with a smile. After finding a spot that wasn't too cluttered, she sat down on the floor and began to collect the errant books.

Cathy grinned and followed her old acquaintance down there. It wasn't quite as easy for her to get her additional bulk down with grace and style, but she managed. "Girls? How about it?" she said to Lisa-May and Adrienne.

The two women looked at each other and broke out in identical giggles. "Sure, Miss Giardella," Adrienne said as she pulled up in her tight slacks and swept down onto the floor with far greater ease than the older women. "I never look at the sports dramas so it'll be exciting to see something new. Oh look, here's a good one already… it's by F. Meredith Calhoun and it's called Disgraced, the Story of Renee Griffith… oh, she was on the US Track and Field team at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta but she was thrown out after being caught up in a doping scandal and this is the story of how she made a comeback to the sport training a young female track and field talent after serving her suspension. But! Shady businessmen try to tempt the young talent Renee has discovered into doing the same mistakes her mentor did… can Renee keep her protege on the straight and narrow so she can fulfil her potential of going for the gold in Athens 2004? Oh, I think I'll put that aside. It sounds exciting!"

"Sweetie," Lisa-May said, leaning over to muss her soulmate's knee. "I'm sure Cathy and Miss Costanza aren't too interested-

"Oh!" Adrienne cried, oblivious to Lisa-May's attempt at stopping her. "How about this one? I think it was on the wrong shelf as it's a biography of the first ever female winner of the grueling Twenty-Four Hours of Le Mans motor race as written by her partner, an award-winning biographer! Second edition, now with added chapters and twenty-four pages of color photographs! Look at the cover, isn't she gorgeous?" she said and held up the book which showed an elegant, dark-haired woman lounging on a sand-colored reclining chair.

"Yeah," Cathy said, grinning at Adrienne's unbridled excitement. She looked over at June whose mood had improved after the emotional low point in the bathroom. Locking eyes, the two women smiled at each other before they went back to stacking the books.

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Once the sports dramas had been sorted and put into orderly stacks, Cathy found one of the spare packing cases so they could store the books safely until the shelf would be fixed. With the skills of a professional, she took the clumsy sheet of cardboard and folded it up into a perfectly shaped case in no time flat.

Grinning, she gave the finished case a little shake to see if it would hold. "And that's how you do it, girls. Nothing to it. Easy as scratching my-"
"Eyebrow," Lisa-May interjected.

"But of course, dahling. Eyebrow."

Lisa-May scrunched up her face and let out a sound that could be interpreted as a wild horse whinnying somewhere in the far distance. Once she had cleared her throat, she put a smile on her face and turned towards June. "We have to apologize for the behavior of some of the Bookworm Sanctuary regulars, Miss Costanza. Despite her age, Miss Giardella seems to have never left kindergarten."

Letting out a burst of laughter, Cathy reached over and swatted at Lisa-May's arm. "Aw, that was a pretty good one, girl… I think I'll write that one down. See what kind of abuse I have to put up with, June?"

"I do," June said and nodded hard. "And it's great!"

"Great?" Cathy said, but her voice was drowned out by Adrienne and Lisa-May who both sniggered at the new guest's comment. "Well, if you think that's so funny, just wait 'til you have to help me get up from here. How's that for a classic case of hardee-har-har?" she continued, putting out her arms so she could get a hands-up.

Adrienne, June and Lisa-May looked at each other and let out identical grunts. Shrugging, they each took what could be described as a corner of Cathy and helped the heavy-set woman back on her feet.

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Lisa-May and Adrienne shuffled back up to the Kozy Korner with the books they had found, but June and Cathy kept standing at the Sports Drama aisle perusing the shelves for a little while longer. Nothing caught their imagination so they trickled down to the other end to observe how things went at the debate meeting where the neo-feminist manifest was still being discussed.

"Oh boy, they're still at it," Cathy mumbled under her breath. They didn't go past the portable fiber glass walls, but she could hear the dry professor's lethargic voice speaking about how most of the labels that had been attached to women over the past decade, especially The Kitten, The MILF and The old Witch, had all been created by Man as a way of objectifying Woman and reducing her worth to the firmness of her breasts and the length of her legs, regardless of her intellectual strength.

"That's an interesting discussion, actually," June said, standing up on tip-toes to hear better. "About the labels, I mean. Some of them are really offensive. MILF… come on."

"Yeah, sure, but it's not like women haven't been putting labels on other women for one hell of a long time too, you know. I find those labels to be just as offensive as those the guys have made up. A woman who chooses to have a variety of sexual partners, well,
she's a slut or a ballroom. A woman who chooses to use makeup is called a lipstick or a bucket of paint. A woman who chooses to dress up in a bomber jacket, acid-washed jeans and Doc Martens, we call a fugly man-beast no matter how winning her personality is… I know that for a fact since it happened to a gal I helped with her memoirs last year. I mean, are any of those really better than MILF? And do I even have to mention how often the word 'bitch' is uttered by women to describe other women?"

June shrugged. "Good points, Cathy. Sounds like we have plenty to add to the debate… do you want to go back inside and try again?"

"Uh… not really, to be honest. I wouldn't want to give the dear, old professor a cranial meltdown," Cathy said and peeked over the edge of the nearest fiber glass wall.

"I think I will, actually. See you at the purple sofa in a little while, then?" June said and put a hand on Cathy's elbow.

Cathy looked down at the hand and marveled at how good it actually felt to have a connection to another human being again. It didn't matter at all that it was a friendly connection rather than a romantic one - in fact, she was glad she was spared all the hidden dangers that would crop up with alarming regularity in a relationship that revolved around the bedroom. In a friendship, they could have positive disagreements about this, that and the other without having the mood between them, and between the sheets, turn frosty. When she had been in her late thirties, she had suffered through a volatile relationship, and she had been on the brink of swearing off women for good when she and her girlfriend had split up after shouting at each other for so long they had both developed husky voices.

"Well… ugh," Cathy said and performed a little shimmy. "Oh, all right. I better go first so we can get the shock over with in a hurry." She broke out in a smile when she once again realized that a good, strong friendship was just what the doctor had ordered for her.

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Her good mood didn't last as long the second time around. The first time, she had been able to sit through twenty minutes of Professor Kramer's lecture before her rebellious streak bubbled to the surface, but this time, she could feel it coming on after only fifteen minutes.

Professor Kramer didn't seem too pleased with the returning Cathy, either. She had taken to walking around the table while she spoke instead of sitting at it, and each time she went past Cathy, her face gained a look that said she would give anything to be able to smack the older woman for slouching in her chair and not paying too much attention to the debate.

Fortunately for the professor's peace of mind - and sanity - June and Sandra both chimed in quite often with all kinds of comments and observations from the real world with
regards to the interpretation of and countermeasures to the various labels.

"Very Good, Miss Costanza… Miss Gottfried. You certainly understand the challenges we face," professor Kramer said as she came to a halt at her spot. She shuffled her papers around and found the one that looked to be the last. "All right, those challenges are even stronger in our final segment of the debate. Ladies, it's about our sexuality, and how we have allowed Man to define it through the Male Gaze-

Cathy drew a deep breath and sat up straight. Squinting, she looked over at Sandra who seemed mentally prepared for anything that could be said.

"-which is of course the sexualized gaze, the one where we, as individual women, are reduced to our… uh, bits. Where we, as individual women, disappear to them if we aren't dressed provocatively, or aren't egging them on like The Kitten we spoke about earlier. But ladies, as we all know, there's far more to us than that. The entire romantic, emotional aspect form the backbone of the female sexu-

"Ahem!" Cathy said and put up her hand.

Everyone sitting at the round table drew a sharp intake of breath. They froze in place and waited for the inevitable outcome to burst out of the professor. Several pairs of eyes were locked onto Melissa Kramer, and others tried to stare a hole in Cathy's face.

"Miss Giardella?" Professor Kramer said in a hoarse voice that held a slight hint of a screechy undertone.

"Thank you. Okay," Cathy said and leaned forward so she could put an elbow on the table while she spoke, "it's obviously true that we all like to have a deep, emotional connection to our partners, perhaps even that it's ingrained into our female minds to do so, but you shouldn't overlook the fact that the initial wham-bam of lust also plays a strong part for us gals."

"The wham-bam of lust?" Professor Kramer said, keeping her jaw closed while she spoke which turned the 'S' in 'lust' into a long, drawn-out hiss.

"Yes, that initial burst of blood to our nether regions when we see a gorgeous gal… or guy, or whatever we get hot and bothered for… shaking his or her booty on the dance floor in some bar. Now excuse me for calling bullshit this late in the game, but-

"Calling bullshit-"

"-I don't think of her IQ when I see something like that, and she doesn't have to be in a tight dress, either. Worn jeans and a baggy shirt will do just fine, thank you. Anyway, the reptile part of my brain thinks of how she'll move in bed. I'm sorry, but that's a fact. Oh, sure, I'd like to know how she is the morning after, I mean, nobody likes a sourpuss who can't make decent coffee, but the bottom line is… women are sexual beings too. Y'know,
"Calling bullshit?!" the professor croaked, and by now, her voice had strayed far into the screechy register.

"Yes. Where was I… o-yeah. To put it on its head, I feel that some of the things going on right now, like emphasizing how romantic and emotional we are to differentiate ourselves from the boinka-boinka nature of the guys, are just further attempts at wrapping us women in cotton wool to hide our big, bad, scary sexuality from the world. We are sexual beings, right? Therefore, I suggest we don't call it the Male and Female gaze at all!" Cathy said and made a sweeping gesture at the other women sitting at the round table. She noted that Sandra's cheeks were one notch below catching fire. "We should call it the Romantic gaze and the Horny gaze! 'Cos sometimes we wanna cuddle, and sometimes we just wanna get laid. Both are basic human conditions that apply to Woman, Man and all combinations thereof. I rest my case. Thank you."

Leaning back in the chair, Cathy crossed her arms over her chest. She wore a smug grin on her face that was matched to the T by the one gracing June Costanza's features.

Professor Kramer grabbed a handful of her papers and crushed them in her fist. Her nervous tic had made a return and it was doing its best to give the right side of her face a creepy, Exorcist-like quality. Her throat was moving up and down though no sound ever escaped her lips, and red blotches developed on her cheeks and forehead. From one moment to the next, she let out a guttural roar and lurched forward like she wanted to smack Cathy over the head - or strangle her - for creating such a mess of her meticulously planned debate.

"No! Professor Kramer!" Sandra cried and jumped up from her spot. She raced around the round table and grabbed hold of the seething Melissa before she could strike. Even with her fit frame, Sandra had trouble keeping back the raging woman, and it took the help of June to get everything calmed down enough for Cathy to get up from her chair and hustle away from the round table like the Male Gaze itself was trying to take a big bite out of her rearward-facing cheeks.

The commotion had attracted the attention of everyone at the bookstore, and Felicity, Lisa-May and Adrienne were joined by a dozen interested spectators who all ooh'ed and ahh'ed at the spectacle. "I really should ask what the hell's going on here… but I'm not gonna," Felicity mumbled as she took in the odd sight of Sandra and June physically restraining the lecturer while Cathy took the long way around to have several escape routes ready in case the grizzly would break its chains and attack again.

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An hour later, it was all over. The round table and the uncomfortable chairs were put on a cargo cart and wheeled back to the community center while some of the bookstore's regulars moved the portable fiber glass walls back into the tiny storage room at the
opposite end of where the office was.

Adrienne had taken it upon herself to sweep up the many croissant crumbs from the linoleum floor, and she did a good job of swinging the broom. To help her along, she was given amiable support by Lisa-May who pointed out where she should go next.

The last of the guests had barely put on their jackets and coats when normal service was resumed in the bookstore. Happy for the return to the same-old, laid back coziness that had become the Bookworm Sanctuary's main selling point, the regulars started mingling and browsing the many aisles and crates on offer. Soon, books were found, read and bought - or rejected.

Sandra smiled at the cute sight of Lisa-May trying to show Adrienne how to really grasp a broom - and feeling her up in the process - as she walked over to the trolley with the dirty mugs and dishes. She began to wheel it away, but the paper bag from the croissant bakery slipped off a tray and opened up.

Wiser from her bad experience with the filled pastries, she jumped back in a hurry, but she wasn't about to come under sneak attack by a glob of devious chocolate. "Oh! Everybody, there's still a whole croissant left," she said and pulled it the rest of the way out of the bag. "Not sure what's in it, but there's definitely a whole croissant left. Should I try to cut a few slices out of it, or-"

A chorus of "Yes!" "Well, duh," and "hell yeah!" echoed through the bookstore.

The latter exclamation had predictably come from Cathy who hadn't strayed from June's side since the unfortunate incident at the round table. She, June and Felicity were leaning against the narrow shelf underneath the public message board to stay out of the way and let the younger, fitter women do the hard work.

Turning back to Felicity, June resumed her colorful retelling that she acted out with plenty of effort and wild gestures. "Oh, Miss LaMarre, you should have seen the professor's face! Oh God, I didn't think a human face could be contorted like that… it was awful to look at. And her eyes… oh, they murdered poor Cathy here ten times over!"

Felicity chuckled and reached over toward the woman in the denim bib overalls to swat at her tummy. "Business as usual for ya, eh, Cathy?"

"Yeah," Cathy said and hooked her thumbs into the loops on her overalls, "it happens just about every day and twice on Sundays that I'm chased by women who want my body… of course, this one wanted my body hanging on the wall over her fireplace."

June chuckled and leaned closer to her new, old friend. "But Miss Gottfried and I stopped her. I think you owe me one, Cathy!"

"I owe, I know," Cathy said and stuck out her tongue. Sniggering, she and June leaned in
and rubbed shoulders.

Felicity grinned at yet another smashing success - not the neo-feminist debate, but the fact that Aphrodite had come through for them yet again to play matchmaker for those who needed it the most.

"I'm glad I did get to apologize to professor Kramer and her husband when he came to pick her up, though," Cathy said in a more serious tone. "I wouldn't want her to think badly of the Bookworm Sanctuary just because I was such a rascal. I'm sure those weird red and white blotches on her forehead will go away eventually…"

In the meantime, Sandra had managed to cut the last remaining croissant into ten slices, and she carried them around on napkins. "Here you go," she said as she gave yet another regular one of the tiny slices. When she reached Felicity, she offered the administrator the largest of the slices that were left. She winked before she moved onto the next one.

After Felicity had swallowed the few bites, she dabbed her mouth on the napkin and stuffed it into her rear pocket for later. "Remember the carpenters I told you about earlier?" she said to Cathy and June who had swapped slices because June couldn't eat the larger one she had been given. "Well, they couldn't make it today after all, but they'll swing by tomorrow. For the money Sandra donated to the Bookworm Sanctuary, we've ordered new shelves for all the bookcases in all aisles."

Hearing that, Cathy let out a grunt and an "Oh, wow…"

"Yeah. Nothing… absolutely nothing can collapse after the new shelves have been put up. Knock on wood," Felicity said, knocking on the wooden shelf they were standing next to.

Cathy scrunched up her face and looked at the bookstore. "Shit, that's gonna create one hell of a mess… are you gonna close down while you get everything fixed?"

"No. We'll take one aisle at a time. It'll take longer that way, but… yeah. Anyway, there's still plenty of potential for dramas with the noise and the dust and the… ugh. Lisa-May probably won't show up for a month. Speaking of the charming dame," Felicity said and nodded at the aforementioned woman who came strolling arm in arm with Adrienne. "Hi, Lisa-May. Was that it for today?"

"Almost," the former gray woman said. She smiled at her new squeeze who returned it in kind. "But first we're going down to the community center's cafeteria to get something to eat. They have really great egg and tuna sandwiches-

"Egg and tuna!" Cathy said and made a few retching sounds that earned her an annoyed glare from Lisa-May's green eyes.

June chuckled and reached over to give Cathy's shoulder a light punch. "I love a good egg
and tuna sandwich. Just the thing for a late afternoon pick-me-up."

"Oh… egg and tuna, huh?" Cathy said and looked at her new friend. "Well… I guess I could try it… once."

The puppy-like turnaround made the other women giggle at Cathy's expense, but the tongue the former journalist stuck out at all of them proved that she didn't take it to heart.

A little commotion at the main entrance to the bookstore made everyone look over there out of worry that Melissa Kramer had returned with a twelve-inch meat cleaver to settle the score. When it turned out to be Kristen and Dana listening to loud indie rock that blasted into their brains through the ubiquitous white earphones, everybody let out a sigh of relief.

The music became impossibly loud for a moment when Kristen popped out her earphone, but she shut it off before it could become a nuisance. The colorful, tattooed woman with the many piercings and the jet black possum hair shuffled over to Felicity and the others while she checked out the empty space where the round table had been. "Whassup? Did we miss anything?"

"You sure did, girl," Cathy said with a grin. "Anyway, I don't think you've been introduced to June yet. Kristen, this is June Costanza. She's gonna be a regular. June, this is Kristen Laneau, poet and rock star. Hiyas are in order."

"Hiya, June," came the inevitable reply from Kristen who put out her fist.

June stared at it for a few seconds before she understood she was supposed to bump her own fist against it. Duly bumped, she grinned at the colorful, young woman. "Hi, Kristen. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Kristen said and looked over her shoulder. She soon found the purple-haired Dana browsing through the crates containing the old vinyl records. "Hey, Dana! There's someone you gotta meet! Dana?"

The young woman with the purple wave of hair that reached into her eyes hadn't taken out her earphones yet, so she was lost to the world.

Kristen shrugged and turned back to June and the others. "Whatever. Me and Dana just finished recording a song down in the cafeteria. We're gonna go up to the Kozy Korner and listen to it now, so… catch ya later, June."

"Sure! I hope the song has turned out well," June said with a smile and a little wave.

"Thanks. You can check it out on my WoCo profile in ten minutes or so. Yeah?"

"Uh… thank you. I'll do that," June said, furrowing her brow. Once Kristen had shuffled
away, she turned back to Cathy and Felicity. "As soon as I find out what a WoCo profile is…"

Cathy chuckled and hooked her arm inside June's. "I'll tell you all about it over at the diner. We can talk over a soggy egg salad, okay? Felicity, do you need us for anything…?"

"Nope. Have a nice evening, girls. See you tomorrow," Felicity said and shook hands with Cathy and a grinning June before she moved into the office.

As the two fifty-something women shuffled over to the main entrance, June snuck her hand inside Cathy's just because. Gazing at each other, they exchanged a warm smile that proved that Aphrodite had indeed sprinkled a handful of dust labeled *Category 'A' Friendship* in their direction.

"Awwww," Sandra said as she walked past the two older women on her way to the office. Still smiling, she went up to stand in the doorway to see what Felicity was doing.

The administrator was sitting at her desk typing something on the laptop when their connection manifested itself. Pausing, she looked up and offered Sandra a brief smile before she continued working.

An unstoppable urge to do something they hadn't tried yet came over the fit blonde, and she ran her tongue over her teeth to make sure she didn't have anything stuck there. She was clean. The time was right. Moving with stealth, she stepped into the office and slipped the door shut behind her.

A scant minute later out in the bookstore, a pair of sounds akin to twigs breaking in half echoed around one of the aisles. The sound was followed by rolling thunder that went on for a little while longer than it usually did.

The remaining regulars all gasped and waited for Felicity to come out of the office and roar out her frustration to the heavens above, but nothing happened. Another minute later, Kristen and Dana shuffled over to the aisle to see how big the spill was, and established that not one, but two neighboring shelves had collapsed. The resulting avalanche had sent dozens of books all over the floor.

The collapsing shelves seemed to have managed to send out distress signals before giving up the ghost because a pitter-patter of many shoes was suddenly heard from the rest of the bookstore and even out in the hallway. As the regulars flocked to the aisle to pick up the errant books, the main entrance opened and Cathy, June, Lisa-Mary and Adrienne - the latter two carrying diet soda cans and wrapped egg and tuna sandwiches - stepped inside and stomped over to the aisle like an advancing army.

"Amazons to the rescue!" Cathy cried, throwing her right fist in the air. "All right, girls, we know what to do. I'll get a couple of packing cases, you'll scoop up the books. Once
the books are in the cases, we can all say nighty-night and go home. Or to the diner. Yeah?"

Everybody nodded and began collecting the many books, even Kristen and Dana.

Cathy furrowed her brow when it dawned on her that Felicity and Sandra hadn't shown up yet. Letting out a puzzled "Hmmm," she shuffled over to the office but came to a halt at the closed door. Another "Hmmm!" was uttered, and this one had a cheeky tone to it. Knocking once, she depressed the handle and opened the door just enough to peek inside.

Sandra was sitting in Felicity's lap on the swivel-chair. Her square-framed spectacles had been folded neatly and were lying on the desk. The laptop was open like one of them had been using it, but the sweet activity carried out by the two women was far more important than that. They were kissing - and not just a little, but a lot. Sighs and moans escaped them both as their mouths were as busy as their hands that were gripping at clothes, clawing skin and roaming through hair.

The swivel-chair was creaking and groaning along with the two women as it struggled to hold up their combined weight. Cathy had to clamp a hand over her mouth to stop herself from laughing out loud at the thought of Sandra and Felicity ending up in an unruly pile on the floor as a result of all that kissing.

To respect their privacy, she pulled back in complete silence and shut the door softly behind her. "You go, girls," she whispered to herself on the other side of the closed door.

She tip-toed away from the office until she knew she would be out of earshot. "Awwww-some! Score!" she said as she performed an appropriate victory celebration that saw her cocking her leg and pumping her fist in the air. The laughter she had held back earlier couldn't be denied any longer, and she chuckled to herself the entire way up to the aisle where the rest of the Amazons were busy with the books.

Inside the office, the need for air took over and Sandra pulled back from Felicity's succulent lips. She stayed close to gaze deeply into her companion's dark-brown eyes that seemed to have gained a husky quality from the kissing. "Well, that was nice," she whispered, leaning in to administer a few nibbles on the smooth, salty skin.

"Yeah... kinda nice," Felicity whispered back, keeping a steady grip around Sandra's fit midriff so she wouldn't slip off her lap. She grinned to prove that it had perhaps been a little bit more than merely 'kinda nice.' "Not that I'm complaining, but... to what do I owe this pleasure? It's sorta unexpected..."

"Well," Sandra said and traced her fingers down Felicity's dark cheek, "I overheard you and Cathy speaking earlier today. About why we hadn't moved out of the dugout yet."

"Oh... yeah?"
"Yeah. It made me think. We're both adults. We both want to try it, don't we?"

Felicity grinned broadly and took the opportunity to rub Sandra's sides. "We definitely do."

"So I thought… it's time to make a move. And here we are."

"I couldn't agree more," Felicity said and pulled the blonde closer for a little nibble.

"We need to put a couch in here…" Sandra whispered, allocating all her attention to teasing Felicity's neck, pulsepoint and left earlobe with the pink tip of her tongue.

"A cuddle-spot?"

"Mmm-hmmm…"

"We could do that. Do you think we'd use it?" Felicity said and trailed her hand down Sandra's side until it came to a rest on her butt. The firm cheek was given a little squeeze through the sweatpants which earned her a husky chuckle.

Sandra pulled back an inch or two and shot Felicity such an electric gaze the air heated up between them. "I think we would, yeah." Her eyes went on a little tour of her kissing mate's face until they came to a rest on the succulent lips. "Let's talk about it… later."

"Much later," Felicity whispered. She pulled Sandra even closer so they could resume the sweet exercise. Soon, the office was once again witness to plenty of husky sighs and sensuous, little moans.

And on the wall behind them, the little picture of the Goddess Aphrodite that Felicity had printed out showed a bleached blonde grinning from ear to ear.

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THE END.