

# Paws for Love

DANA MENTINK



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## **PAWS FOR LOVE**

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*To the selfless volunteers at the Animal  
Rescue Foundation who gave us Junie,  
ten pounds of joy and mischief in a fur coat.*



*Let your light shine before others,  
that they may see your good deeds  
and glorify your Father in heaven.*

MATTHEW 5:16





## One

Misty Agnelli crouched behind the Sherman tank, ignoring the detonations and nervously chewing a stick of Juicy Fruit that had lost its flavor hours earlier. Through puffs of smoke, Dirk staggered into view, face bloody, rifle at the ready, and a pack slung over his shoulder.

He coughed, swiped at the wound on his face, sank to one knee, lowered the rifle, and yanked the pack off his shoulder. She was close enough to make out the beads of sweat on his grimy forehead. Digging through the backpack, he found the precious violin and yanked it free. The action set her teeth on edge.

*Easy*, she silently commanded. He should be gentler with the delicate neck of the instrument. But what did she know about battle behavior? Maybe the bombs were getting to him.

Dirk plucked once, very softly. *A perfect pizzicato*, she thought with satisfaction. The action loosed one note into the war-torn air. A lump formed in her throat at the sound of that note, which vibrated with heartache and the horror of battle, a longing for home, a loss of innocence, an affirmation of humanity. It was

lovely, if slightly flat, that one tragic note. Before the sound died away, Dirk sank to the ground with one last bark.

Bark?

The spell broken, Misty blinked in surprise from her hiding place. A dog streaked by, yowling furiously. The little creature zinged in three excited circles so fast it was no more than a blur of pointy ears and whirling tail. From somewhere behind Misty, a notepad was hurled to the ground, followed by a stream of language. Yelling—the antithesis of music.

“Cut!” Mr. Wilson hollered in a voice so loud that Misty ducked reflexively, fearing something might be thrown in her direction. “Did that really just happen?” he thundered, ripping off his baseball cap and slapping it against his thigh. “Tell me that did not just happen during our last run-through before we roll film. Can somebody enlighten me? Was I lost in la-la land for a minute?”

Misty was not sure if he was speaking to her or his director’s assistant. Best to remain silent.

Dirk, known to his legion of adoring fans as Lawrence Tucker, rose to his feet. They’d done an amazing job on his makeup, and somehow he appeared much younger than his sixty-three years, every inch the exhausted American GI. He shoved the violin back in the pack and held it out, as if waiting for someone to relieve him of it.

No one appeared to be stepping forward. He looked as though he might toss it aside. The violin was not a Stradivarius, to be sure, but she could not stand the thought of it hitting the ground, so in spite of her jumping nerves, she hastened closer and took it. Might as well retune while she had the chance. No one would notice her, she hoped.

As she grabbed for the violin, Lawrence gave her a distracted nod. He cleared his throat. “You can’t blame this small creature. We’re soldiers. To quote Charles Spurgeon, ‘The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction.’”

Was he giving a speech or making casual conversation? She couldn't tell. Even in their initial lessons, he'd baffled her. Then again, people's behavior often baffled Misty.

"What soldier wouldn't exhibit such behavior?" Another question that fortunately did not seem to require an answer. Lawrence began to call for the dog with no result.

Misty could practically hear Mr. Wilson's teeth grinding.

"It's a dog, not a soldier," he snapped. "This is a film. We make believe here. There is no war, remember?" Misty heard him mutter something about actors under his breath.

Lawrence blinked and offered a wan smile. "It's all so real to me. Sometimes I forget."

"I don't," Mr. Wilson snapped, "not when we pay through the nose for each delay. Your dog is a menace. It snapped at the makeup artist, chewed the gaffer's plans, and I'm pretty sure he peed on my boots while I was napping." He pointed to the expensive leather footwear. "There's an aroma."

"In wartime..." Lawrence began a mournful diatribe. Then he caught the director's exasperated expression and gave himself a shake. "Sorry. Movie set. I got it. Jellybean will settle into his role, I'm sure."

"He doesn't have a role. He's a dog." Wilson sighed. "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to send it off the set. Hire a sitter, put him in a kennel, something."

Lawrence looked as though he had just been bayoneted. Misty's grandmother would be reeling. Nana Bett adored the actor, watching all of his movies often enough to have the lines memorized. She'd thrown her cane aside and literally danced a jig when the movie people had contacted Misty to tutor him in basic violin. Then she'd set about using all her considerable powers of persuasion to convince Misty to take the gig. It had not been an easy task. Nana Bett would be horrified to hear the star was about to have his dog evicted from the set.

“You will be working with the greatest actor ever to grace the silver screen,” Nana had breathed.

The greatest actor ever to grace the silver screen straightened and beamed a look at the director as if he were a vile German commandant. “Jellybean must stay.”

Mr. Wilson straightened to his full five feet three. It didn’t help, as Lawrence was a good six inches taller. “No animals on set. He can’t stay, Lawrence.”

“Then,” Lawrence said after a slow exhale, “we are at an impasse, Director Wilson. I cannot continue. I must depart.”

Wilson gaped. “Are you saying you’ll walk off the set if your mutt isn’t allowed to stay?”

Lawrence glared. “I would communicate it much more eloquently, but yes.”

Wilson’s cheeks flushed scarlet. “You’re under contract, Mr. Tucker.”

He lifted a lazy shoulder. “So sue me.”

Mr. Wilson threw his baseball cap on the floor. The dog zipped in and snatched it up.

“Gimme that,” Wilson snapped, but he had no hope of catching Jellybean as he darted around the director’s boots. “You see? This is intolerable. That’s my lucky hat, and now it has tooth holes in it.”

“Well, it’s a disgraceful excuse for a hat,” Lawrence said. “Who wears a hat advertising mayonnaise anyway?”

The tension between the two men built to a crescendo, so Misty did what she always did when her stomach clenched and the world closed in. She stepped away, took out the violin, shrank back into herself, and played pianissimo, soft enough not to attract attention. She stroked the bow gently over the strings, a sonata, quiet as a whisper. Her pulse slowed to keep time. Eyes closed, she mentally calculated the degree to which the A string needed to be tuned.

Pressure on her shoes caused her eyes to fly open. The little

set crasher known as Jellybean sat on her feet, staring up, small blackish-brownish body quivering, little pointy terrier ears alert. He resembled Toto from the *Wizard of Oz*, she thought, though she could not imagine this specimen getting stuffed into a bicycle basket.

Lawrence looked awestruck. “Please play a little more, Ms. Agnelli. Jellybean is enthralled.”

Misty looked at all the faces staring at her—Mr. Wilson, Lawrence Tucker, the script manager, and the man just walking in with a tray of coffee—and her cheeks went hot. Then cold. Prickles teased her skin. “I don’t, er...”

She lowered the violin, and the dog leapt upward. She barely caught him with one arm as she clutched the violin in the other. Jellybean swiped a pink tongue under her chin, panting hot breath onto her neck.

“It likes you,” the director said in wonderment. “I didn’t think it liked anyone.”

“I...uh...” Misty held the dog as if it were a live grenade. She wanted desperately to put the thing down and let it run away along with all the attention that was focused on her at that very moment. A sick feeling flashed through her, the one that meant, *Run, Misty, escape at all costs!*

Wilson and Lawrence exchanged a loaded glance. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Wilson said.

“I am indeed.” Lawrence beamed. “Ms. Agnelli can both tutor me on the violin and be a companion to Jellybean.”

Her jaw dropped. “Me?”

“Great.” Wilson retrieved the hat Jellybean had discarded before he’d leapt into Misty’s arms. “You’re Tucker’s new assistant until this film wraps,” the director said, turning toward his camera guy.

“But I’m the music tutor—”

“Yeah, you’ll do that too.”

Her mind reeled. “I’m not a movie person.”

“Uh-huh.” Wilson checked something off on a clipboard.

“I’m not actually a people person either.” Never had been. Never would be.

He did not look up. “You’re not here for people. Just Tucker and the dog.” He considered his words. “No offense, Mr. Tucker.”

Misty’s mind could not grasp it. The dog wriggled, nosing at the violin strings. “But I *can’t*.”

Wilson finally looked at her through his reading glasses. “Why not?”

*Why not? Because all these people are staring at me. Because I want to go back to my apartment and play my violin. Because I am a thirty-four-year-old woman with a disastrous case of social anxiety who would rather crawl over barbed wire than interact with this gaggle of people.* Thank goodness that last bit hadn’t slipped past her terrified lips.

“I’ve got to go home,” she managed.

“Don’t sweat it. We’ll pay you extra for your added duties. You teach lessons via Skype, right? So you can still carry on with your music job from here. We’ll set you up in a trailer. Brenda, work that out, huh?” he called to an assistant who could not be much older than some of Misty’s high school violin pupils.

“But...”

The director walked away, leaving Misty, the dog, and a violin with an out-of-tune A string.

Lawrence patted her on the shoulder, ignoring the menacing growl from Jellybean. “You know what they say about those ‘highlands of affliction.’”

With the wriggling dog and the violin in her grasp, and a dozen movie people circling around her, Misty was beginning to feel very afflicted indeed. The feeling intensified when Jellybean gave her a final slurp, catapulted from her arms, and beelined toward town.



Bill Woodson managed to get his six-foot frame sprawled next to Fiona and the little dollhouse he'd built her in the front of his Chocolate Heaven Candy Shop. She solemnly handed him the boy doll. His heart skipped a beat as he looked into the soon-to-be four-year-old's clear azure eyes, so blue, so innocent.

He considered the tiny wooden doll in his big fingers. "Should I, er, put him upstairs in the playroom?"

She nodded.

He put the doll in the specified place. Now what? What was the proper doll scenario to act out with a little girl? Sweat broke out on his forehead. "Maybe he could, you know, do some sit-ups or push-ups. How about that?"

He saw from the crimp in her lip that he'd disappointed her. Again. "No? What about cooking? He could go make some chocolates in the kitchen or fix the car." He held up the toy car. "I think it's due for an oil change."

She shook her head, sending the blond curls bouncing.

He scrunched down lower so he could look her in the eyes. "Fee, I'm sorry I don't know how to play dolls. If you could tell me what to do, I'd try. Okay?"

Instead, she sat down in the child-sized chair he'd set there for a makeshift play corner and picked up the same tattered storybook. Sticking her two middle fingers in her mouth, she sent him another one of those looks as she held out the book.

What was it about that ragged old thing that made her return to it practically every day in the last three months since he'd taken custody of her? "Fee," he started, his gaze fastening on a children's CD player, "how about we have a sing-along again?" He clicked on the music, prepared to do a full-on solo rendition of "The Farmer in the Dell." The music started up, and he was pleased to see that Fiona had begun to clap her hands. *Yes, Uncle Bill for the win!*

An unexpected noise made them both jump. He thought at first that a bird had struck the window, so he opened the door to

see. A dog shot through his legs and raced around the shop in dizzying circles. It was the color of dark chocolate in some places and caramel in others, about the size of a loaf of bread. Fiona clutched the book to her chest.

“It’s okay,” he called. “I’ll get it. It won’t hurt you.”

The nutty terrier-type critter darted around, sniffing the air and avoiding Bill’s grasping hands. He lunged and regrouped, but the thing was fast. “Come here, dog,” he commanded.

Finally, it trotted over to Fiona and sat quite suddenly at her feet, staring at her with unblinking black eyes.

Bill froze.

Fiona stared and crouched to get a better look.

The dog wagged his curl of a tail and rasped a tongue across her cheek.

She clapped her small hand to the wet spot, and he was afraid she was going to cry. He took a step in her direction, stunned when she dropped down on the floor by the dog, who promptly rolled over, stubby legs bicycling in the air.

Fiona looked to him.

“Dogs do that when they want you to scratch their tummies. Let me do it. We don’t know if he’s friendly or not.”

Bill eased closer, ready to snatch for the dog’s collar, when a woman jogged through the door. She stepped on the discarded boy doll and slipped, landing on her bottom on the laminate wood floor he’d recently installed.

“Are you hurt?” he said, springing to offer assistance.

“No.” Reluctantly, she took his hand and climbed to her feet.

She was tall for a woman, with long, straight, golden-brown hair and brown eyes. She had a strong nose, full lips, and a slight dimple in her chin. Her complexion was hard to figure as she now blushed a fiery pink.

She picked up the boy doll, whose head had snapped off. “Sorry. I, uh, decapitated him.”

“No problem. I’ll make another.”

She handed it over. Her fingers were calloused but long and delicate, the nails square and blunt. He wondered what she did for a living.

“Is this your dog?” he said, pointing to the animal, who was now enjoying a tentative belly scratch from Fiona. The dog wriggled helpfully to put his belly in better alignment with the little fingers.

“No.”

He considered. “So you were just running in here at this moment...to buy chocolate?”

She toyed with the zipper on her windbreaker. “Uh, no, I was actually after the dog, but he’s not mine. I mean, I’m the tutor.” She shook her head. “Not the dog’s tutor. I Tucker Mr. Tutor. I mean, I tutor Mr. Tucker.”

He grasped the straw. “Ah. Wait a minute. You’re with the film crew, aren’t you? I think I saw you when I delivered the chocolate fondue yesterday. I’m Bill Woodson.”

Her face took on a dreamy look. “Luscious.” She started. “Oh, um, I meant the fondue. It was great. Everyone loved it.”

He laughed. “Thank you. My special recipe. So you’re not an actor? Do you work for the director, then?”

Her brows puckered. “I’m not completely sure.” There was something in her face, a painful confusion that made him want to help. With what? He didn’t even know what they were talking about, and even now she was shifting on her feet as if she wanted to grab the dog and run for the exit.

His cell phone rang. After looking at the screen, he said, “Sorry, I have to take this. I’ll just be a minute, and then maybe I can get you a cup of coffee.”

She began to protest, but he held up his hand and stepped away to take the call, which turned out to be an order from Vivian Buckley for three dozen chocolate cream balls and assorted caramels for the Lady Bird Hotel. He mentally high-fived himself. Orders

were slowly picking up, thanks to the film crew rolling into the tiny town of Albatross, California. Maybe he'd have enough extra this month to get Fiona a bike, at least an old one that he could fix up.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm..." But he turned to find that both the dog and the blushing woman were gone.

Fiona's head was quirked a bit to one side, as if she was realizing the same thing he was.

He hadn't even gotten the woman's name.



## Two

Lawrence sat rigidly on a chair in Misty's newly assigned trailer the next morning, mouth pinched in concentration, the violin resting on his left collarbone. The window was partially open, letting in a whiff of the ocean.

Misty gave him an encouraging nod. "That's great, Mr. Tucker. Now let's try the G major scale again, okay?"

Jellybean sat licking his paws. When Lawrence raked the bow over the strings, Jellybean let out a tortured whimper, scurried across the worn linoleum, and leapt on top of the bed. It was only through effort that Misty did not do the same.

Lawrence smiled indulgently. "He's sensitive. Loud noises awaken tragic memories in his heart. I rescued him, you know."

She repositioned Lawrence's fingers on the bow. "From where?"  
"A frozen lake."

It was not the answer she'd been expecting. Jellybean, she'd guessed, might have belonged to an indulgent elderly dowager who fed him cake and named him as sole beneficiary in her will.

"It was in Minnesota six years ago." His eyes glazed over as he

recounted the memory. “I was on a break from a film shoot. I took a walk in the woods. I’m a method actor, you see, and I was playing the part of a man hiking through the wilderness to save his daughter who had been kidnapped by a motorcycle gang.” His eyes glittered. “That was an amazing film. You could feel the cold, the isolation, the man-versus-nature theme. Critics went wild for it.”

Misty made a mental note to ask her grandmother if she’d seen that one. “And you found Jellybean?” she encouraged. Lawrence had a way of drifting off the conversational path, she’d learned in their short acquaintance.

“It was freezing, and as I turned to go back, I saw this fuzzy head poking out from a hole in the ice. He was whimpering and shivering, so weak, tiny paws about to lose their hold. The ice was thin, but I could not leave this helpless animal there to slip under the frigid waters.”

“So you went out on the lake to get him?” Misty looked from Lawrence to Jellybean, who was making a nest of her blankets.

“Step-by-step, inch-by-inch. It was a close call.”

Lawrence let loose with another squeaking attempt at the G scale. Jellybean whined. Misty whined internally.

“Less pressure on the strings. Retract the weight of your bowing arm back into your shoulder.”

Lawrence tried again, and this time he produced a fairly decent sound. He sat back, beaming. “Thank you, Misty. I may call you Misty, mayn’t I?”

“Sure. All my students do.”

“And you may call me Lawrence. We are going to be lifelong friends,” he said, flourishing the bow around like a conductor’s baton. She made a subtle grab for it before he could break off the fragile tip by knocking it against the cupboard. Lifelong friends. She didn’t have many of those, for sure. This eccentric man was not what she imagined a close friend would look like, but how was she to know?

“Now you.” He sat back in the chair.

“Me? What me?”

“You must play for me. You will be my muse.”

She let out a relieved sigh. “Oh, I’m not muse material.”

“Play for me, my girl. Let me disappear into the music. It’s the only thing that I will remember when I am fallen on the field of battle.” He slouched back in the chair and closed his eyes.

Misty looked from Lawrence to the ball of blanket-wrapped dog on the bed. Outside, a bustle of activity indicated the crew was emerging to begin the Thursday preparations. “Um, okay. What shall I play?”

He didn’t answer, so she launched into a stretch of Paganini. The music filled up the corners of the trailer. She continued on, the caprice dancing and twirling through the small space.

The swaddled lump rose from the bed and ran to her, once again sitting on her feet, nose quivering, looking much as he must have appeared to Lawrence as he climbed out of the water onto the ice of the frozen pond. She was not sure what emotion was coursing through that canine heart. Was he happy? Troubled? Ready to pee on her sneakers?

She stopped.

Jellybean barked.

Lawrence sighed. “Incredible how I can disappear into my music.”

His music? Maybe he was attempting to be funny. So far he’d only managed to produce a painful G major scale. Of course the actual movie music would be dubbed in, but at least he would know violin mechanics well enough to be convincing on-screen. One more lesson maybe, he’d be prepped, and she could go home. Any follow-up could be done by Skype with a computer screen. The thought bolstered her.

“Mr. Tucker...” She caught his disapproving glance. “Lawrence, I don’t think I can stay here for your shoot after today. You’ve

learned enough of the violin basics, and I'm sure you can get another dog sitter."

He blinked and looked closely at her as if seeing her for the first time. "Most people would do anything to work with a star on a movie set."

She sighed. "I'm not most people."

"That is true." He pursed his lips, head cocked slightly to one side. "You're scared, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Scared." He waved a hand toward the outside. "Of all this."

"No, I'm..." Her words died away.

How did he know? She had not thought him capable of noticing what she tried diligently to hide. Scared of crowds, closed spaces, scared of people, of life.

"That's the thing about being an actor," he said. "I can read people, study them, extract their motivations for my own purposes. It's clinical in a way. I don't engage in other people's emotions, but I can recognize and use them as one would use a tool. I see fear in you, Misty Agnelli." He pointed a finger at her. "You are a woman in hiding."

Her palms felt sweaty against the wood of the violin. She held it tighter for comfort. "I need to go home."

He examined every detail of her face as if he was absorbing it for a later purpose. *Creepy*, Misty thought to herself.

Absently, he reached down to caress Jellybean, recoiling when the dog growled at him.

The silent staring stretched on, and she wriggled like a bug specimen skewered on a pin. How could she politely get away from this strange man? Was he waiting for her to say something? She racked her brain, trying to think of something appropriate. To her great surprise, he started to hum.

"Took me a minute to remember the tune. Can you play this one?"

She listened to him hum a song she had not heard in a very long time.

“Something about ‘this little light of mine,’” Lawrence sang in a fairly decent tenor. “You know it, Misty?”

She did. She’d sung it in Sunday school and heard it belted out in churches in which she’d never felt at home but had lingered on the fringes, quiet and invisible. Mechanically, she played the melody on her violin, eliciting vigorous tail wagging from Jellybean.

“Splendid.” Lawrence got up and went to the door. “I’ve got a meet and greet with the people of Albatross today at ten at the Lady Bird Hotel. Jellybean should come. Celebrity dogs always get a good reaction from crowds.”

“Mr. Tucker, er, Lawrence, didn’t you hear what I said? I can’t stay here. You need to find another dog sitter.”

He continued to hum. “Misty Agnelli,” he proclaimed as he threw open the trailer door, “it’s time to let it shine!”

What was he talking about?

“Lawrence,” she tried again. “Do you need to sit down?”

“Let’s go, Jellybean,” he called.

With a swish, Jellybean dove back under the rumpled covers. Misty wished with all her strength that she could do the same.



Bill led Fiona into the preschool classroom where Dina Everly was putting Play-Doh onto colorful trays. Her hair was pulled back into a blond ponytail, and he wondered why twenty-five-year-olds looked so darn young compared to his thirty-six. Of course, since the accident three months before that had taken his brother and sister-in-law, he’d probably aged a good decade or two. Now he understood why his own parents sometimes had that haggard look when he was growing up. Parenting was not a game for the timid.

Dina knelt down to talk to Fiona, who cowered behind his leg, clutching his knee. “Hey, Fiona. Glad to see you.”

Fiona clung tighter.

Ms. Everly had told him quick goodbyes were best.

“Yeah, uh, you have a great morning. I’ll be back at one to get you, okay?”

Fiona sniffed. *Oh dear, sweet Lord*, he prayed. *Please don’t let her cry*. His insides felt as if they were being seared by a red-hot poker when he had to leave her crying.

Ms. Everly snatched up a toy teddy bear that was nearly Fiona’s size. “Here’s Honey Bear. Take her to the reading corner, Fiona. I just put out a new book there for you. It’s about frogs. I know how you like to read about frogs.” She gestured to a girl with pigtails wearing two macaroni necklaces. “Macy, can you go show Fiona our new frog book?”

The girl waved to Fiona, who trailed after her to the reading corner, Honey Bear in tow. Fiona’s mouth was pinched, but she wasn’t crying. Miss Dina was good. He heaved a sigh and followed the teacher to the door. She offered him a manila envelope and extended a palm.

In exchange, he fished the papers from his back pocket and handed them over.

“I’ll take a look,” she said. “See you later.”

He eased out the door and stopped on the porch, eyeing the worn Happy Days Preschool sign. “This the next project?”

She nodded. “The paint’s peeling and one of the hooks is about to let loose. Can you fix it?”

“Course I can.”

She grinned. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

He felt the familiar twinge of shame. “Think you already know the answer to that.” Resisting the urge to look in again on Fiona, he hurried back to the shop and stowed the envelope on a shelf. The smell of chocolate greeted him, and his memory took him right

back to his mother Ada's kitchen. Her candy-making sessions were the best days of his life, his success measured in easy moments with her and the simple bliss of those pans full of homemade candies. He surveyed the conching machine and the enormous mixer.

Was he really doing this? Was he really running a chocolate shop in the tiny town of Albatross? Three months ago he would not have thought twice about starting such a risky new venture. Three months ago he never would have dreamed that he would abruptly become a parent to his preschool-aged niece. He swallowed down an unaccustomed feeling that he took to be fear.

Gunther waved a freckled hand from behind the counter. "Finished boxing the bonbons."

Bill was pleased to see that his new hire, seventy-year-old Gunther, was wearing the neat white apron Bill had insisted on and the paper hat that covered his perfectly bald head. Bill donned his own apron and hat, took his place next to Gunther, and loaded up the peanut butter puffs and chocolate-dipped strawberries he'd prepared starting at three a.m. in the shop while Fiona slept soundly upstairs across the hallway from his own tiny bedroom.

Gunther pushed his glasses up on his face and moved to the chalkboard easel. "What you want it to say?"

"Just list what we've got in the shop today, and write something about the grand opening tomorrow."

Gunther raised an eyebrow. "How grand's it gonna be?"

"I'm getting balloons. That's pretty grand, isn't it?"

He raised the other eyebrow.

"You just wait, Gunther. This is going to be plenty impressive. A tour bus is coming to check out the film site. One hundred candy-loving tourists, and they're all going to want chocolate."

"What if they don't like chocolate?"

Bill laughed. "Gonna have to work on your optimism, friend."

Gunther snorted. "I'm a senior citizen working for minimum wage in a candy shop. Where's the rosy side of that?"

“You could be the laundryman working for a diaper service company.”

Gunther let loose with a cackle. “All right,” he said, waving a stick of neon-colored chalk at Bill. “I’ll make the sign. You go spread your joy around with those movie nuts.”

“Nothin’ better than chocolate with nuts,” Bill said as he gathered the candy-filled boxes and headed out.



The Lady Bird seemed like a particularly grand name to Bill when he’d first heard it. It was a two-story Victorian structure that could use a good repainting. The tall windows along the front of the building were framed by fancy wood trellises, and a porch sported cozy cushioned rocking chairs. He’d learned from Gunther that the place was actually more of a bed-and-breakfast with five guest rooms and a paneled sitting room with a slate-faced fireplace. He was happy to see the fireplace was not in service now as he let himself in and set down the boxes on the table provided. The place was done in soothing blues and sea foam greens that gave off a beach vibe. There were entirely too many knickknacks for his taste—jars of shells, pelican table lamps, and fussy photo frames with mermaids painted on the glass.

The owner, Vivian Buckley, a slender woman with a long, graying braid down her back, was already busily working the room, chatting with the dozen Albatross residents and tourists who had staked out the best chairs waiting for their meet and greet with Lawrence Tucker.

As Bill finished fanning out the napkins in what he figured was a pleasing arrangement and loaded the chocolates onto silver trays, he heard a yip from underneath the table. It was a terrier much like the one that had busted into his shop, only this one was the color of hazelnut ganache and chubbier around the middle. It was

curled up on a pet bed, and he had bumped the cushion with his boot. "Sorry, dog-o."

"Tinka," Vivian said, looking up. "Come here, baby."

Tinka pattered over to Vivian and, with one impressive leap, jumped into her arms.

The front doors opened, and the star of the film trundled in. Up close, Lawrence looked much older than he did in the one movie that Bill had seen. He was shorter too. His graying hair was cut close, brows darker than his hair, eyes quick as a squirrel's as he immediately shook the hand of the nearest lady who goggled at him.

He moved on to the next and the next, but Bill's attention was drawn to the woman in the back, the one who had chased the dog she was now holding into his shop.

She looked, in a word, terrified. Back pressed to the cluttered sideboard, she held the dog under her chin as if to shield herself. *From what?* he wondered. The small group of Lawrence Tucker's adoring fans who had arrived ahead of the pack? No worries there, he thought as he squeezed over to her. The fans had eyes for no one but the star.

"Hey there," he said. "You in charge of this critter again?"

She blinked and nodded. "I told Lawrence I'm leaving, but I just sort of get swept along, like he's a planet with his own gravity field or something."

Bill chuckled. "I know people like that. Is this his dog?"

"Yes. Jellybean."

"Is he friendly?" Bill asked, putting out a hand.

"No."

Bill took his hand away. Her eyes continued to slide toward the door with longing in their brown depths, and she swayed gently from foot to foot. "Don't like crowds?" he guessed.

She started. "Is it that obvious? I was trying to blend." She shivered. "Too many people in here. Not enough oxygen."

*Claustrophobic?* He offered his warmest smile. "I'm Bill Woodson. Never got your name."

"Misty," she said quietly, hoisting the dog a little higher. "Misty Agnelli. I am...I *was* Mr. Tucker's violin tutor, but I'm leaving," she repeated firmly.

"So you mentioned. Why?"

"He doesn't need me."

They both looked at Tucker, who had the entire room riveted.

"I grew up not far from Albatross, you know," he told the group. "Went to high school right up the coast."

Vivian Buckley beamed a smile that was a little too bright to be sincere. "It's true," she said. "And you even had a local girl for a sweetheart too."

Tucker gazed at her, his smile never wavering. "Ah, Viv. I was just getting to that."

"I'm sure you were." She glared at him as she settled into an upholstered chair, stroking her dog's silky ears.

Bill perked up. This was an interesting turn of events.

"Yes, your very own Vivian Buckley—" Tucker was interrupted by Jellybean, who let out a shrill bark. All heads swiveled toward Misty. Her face flushed a cherry-cream red.

She let out a groan as Lawrence began to wax eloquent about his dog. The stares were fastened on Misty and Jellybean now.

"Can I make it to the door?" she whispered.

"I think you're caught," Bill whispered back.

"Oh yes, let me take a moment to introduce you to my faithful companion, Jellybean. Ms. Agnelli, bring him over, won't you? This is Misty Agnelli. She's a violin virtuoso who is helping me brush up on my skills. She teaches lessons on Skype, in case any of you have a budding violinist at home."

Misty stood frozen as the group stared in fascination. Bill reached out a hand and put it on her rigid shoulder.

"Come on," he whispered, "I'll walk with you."

He braced an arm around her and propelled her forward. They reached Lawrence, who took the now growling Jellybean.

Misty immediately backed up, pressing into Bill. Slowly, he rested a hand on her shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze, guiding her back to the fringes of the room where she seemed most comfortable.

“There’s an interesting story about how this dog came into my life,” Lawrence began.

Bill noticed an elaborate eye roll from Vivian. What was going on with these two? As Lawrence droned on, Jellybean caught sight of Tinka, curled on Vivian’s lap.

Jellybean stiffened, barked, and wriggled so violently that Tucker lowered him to the floor. The dog shot toward Tinka. The startled female took off. In a moment, both dogs were doing laps around the room, knocking over the ornate frames and upsetting a jar of shells that crashed to the floor and broke. Then when a late-arriving guest pushed open the door, Tinka streaked through the gap, followed by Jellybean.

“Stop them!” Vivian shrieked.

Misty did not waste a moment. She sprinted out of the hotel like a racehorse headed for the finish line.

Albatross was turning out to be a pretty interesting town, Bill thought, as he followed on Misty’s heels.