

With that good news, they set out to examine every surface to make sure the apartment was a safe place, and not just a pretty space. Stan was turning the mattress for perhaps the fourth time, peering with far too much intensity at the box springs that lay beneath.

“You already inspected every inch of this place.” Tabitha laid that accusation at Stan’s feet, even though she’d been ahead or right behind him at every corner, seam, and crevice. “Do you see something?”

“No, but it never hurts to be sure. I’ll come by tomorrow with the black light.”

She laughed, but a wince-inducing queasiness overtook her mirth. “Stop it. If I let you get into my head, I won’t sleep a wink tonight. Imaginary bedbugs and who knows what else will be lurking in my sheets and scrambling up the walls... Eww.” Tabitha shuddered as revulsion twisted her stomach.

The mattress flopped into place. “No worries. I stopped by the store and picked up insecticides, disinfecting sprays, cleaners, wipes, and candles on my way over.”

Tabitha paced over to the small kitchenette and peered into the cabinets. “Everything seems really clean.” She stopped and turned back to Stan, who was bouncing on the mattress. “What are the candles for?” She regarded her best friend since kindergarten. “And stop that.”

He gave her a studied look; one she knew too well. “I was ensuring there were no pests or vermin hiding within.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure you were.”

“Nice.” He grinned, more devilishly than usual. “A queen-sized bed is—”

“The perfect size for me,” Tabitha said, laughing. Stan only took that shot two or three times a year, which was great considering he was a straight, healthy male. He wasn’t pushy or aggressive, but he never missed an opportunity to let her know how he felt... or would like to feel. She laughed again. Since he was ten years old.

She watched him, her heart warm with the love she had for the genius goof. Although they had spent their early school years together, his father separated them in their last year of middle school when he opened the large lab and moved the family to Atlanta. But if anything, their separation had strengthened

their friendship. Not a day passed that they weren't on the phone, in a chat, or issuing a steady stream of emails. Stan was always with her, if not in body, definitely in mind and spirit.

It was a shame she loved him like a brother. Besides being the most brilliant person she'd ever met, he was cute as—

Frank rapped on the frame of the open door. "Knock, knock."

"Please, come in," Tabitha said. "You can be my first visitor."

"What about me?" Stan took one more bounce before coming to his feet.

"You don't count." Tabitha poked out her tongue at him.

Frank smiled. "Came to find out what you decided."

"We're staying," Stan said.

"No, *I'm* staying." Tabitha laughed and turned to Frank. "If you wouldn't mind, we could use your help. I'd like to get moved in before full dark."

"Then let's be about it." Stan bounded past Frank and out the door.

"Let's." Frank smiled, bowed, and allowed Tabitha to exit the room ahead of him.

She nodded, but then paused in the doorway, shivering.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Tabitha, in the grip of an incredible freeze, hugged herself as she stepped out into the hallway. The sensation was like diving through a flow of iced water, but with an edge to it. Like gelatin or something else squishy. "Not sure." She glanced around, taking in the walls and the floor. "Just a draft, I guess."

The air in the hallway seemed thin, the light, splintered as she fixed her gaze on the wall near her doorway. That spot shimmered and blurred in her vision, though the rest of the area seemed fine—sharp and clear. She pulled off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, but a shiver overtook her. Tabitha had never felt so creeped out. She returned her glasses to their usual perch and tried to rub some heat into her hands before squeezing her arms across her chest. "Could this be a cold spot?"

Frank regarded her; an eyebrow raised. "Maybe. I'll check on that."

Tabitha nodded and turned to find Stan, who was running back to her from the end of the corridor. “What are you doing?” Her teeth chattered a little as she spoke.

Stan grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the other end of the hall. “Come see. You won’t believe who’s here.” He stopped and released her. “Your hands are freezing.”

“Drafty hall,” she said.

She allowed him to nudge her down the hallway, but she continued scrubbing at the gooseflesh covering her arms. When she glanced back, Frank hadn’t moved, but he was staring after her, his eyes narrowed, concern playing across his features. She didn’t get a chance to contemplate what that look might have meant.

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Frank watched the pair hurry away, something like dread trying to creep up his spine. What the hell just happened? He shook his head. Her face... Seeing the Pruitt girl’s reaction—it was like looking into a memory. Watching all those emotions crowding in at once, that mix of unease, curiosity, and fear... He remembered that first morning, waking up to find Lou in his apartment... He imagined his face had looked a lot like hers.

This was a problem. A problem he hadn’t expected. *What are the odds the girl is actually...*

A tiny piece of paper, perhaps a gum wrapper, lifted up from somewhere on the floor, caught by a random draft of air.

“No, this is not good.” He stared down the hall after her, lines grooving into his forehead. “Not good at all.”

A sound like the wind squeezing through a cracked window, pinched tight and pitched high, whispered in the narrow corridor. Frank nodded, his countenance grave. It made no sense to think he was the only person living the type of life he’d fallen into. And he used the word fallen on purpose, because he