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SUGAR
PLUM
#4

Muttts

SARAH BLACK

Sugarplum: Mutts

Sarah Black

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Sarah Black

A couple of puppies appear outside his door, and everything Matt believed about the lost magic of Christmas changes...

Matt is alone for Christmas, wondering if the magic of his favorite holiday is gone forever in a life of bills and disappointments and loneliness and work. Then a couple of puppies appear outside his door, sitting in a milk crate. Matt enlists the help of Josh from across the hall to hide them from their grumpy landlord, the evil Mr. Scrapple. But Christmas is a time of miracles, and nothing is quite what it seems.

Chapter One

It was two weeks before Christmas when Matt realized he was clinically insane. He stared down into his loose-leaf notebook of fresh ricotta recipes, realized he had been testing fruits in *alphabetical order*. Apple, apricot, banana -- that one was a total wash -- blackberries, blueberries, cherries, cantaloupe -- strange but good -- coconut, dates, durian, figs, grapefruit, grapes, Guinness -- in honor of John Steinbeck's famous beer milkshake -- lemon, lime, and mango. And then he hit the P's: papaya, peach, persimmon, pineapple, and finally he reached plums, his favorite fruit, and he had a million recipes in his head for plum-ricotta dishes; it was Christmas, after all, and what said Christmas like sugarplums? And he wondered for the first time, staring down at the drops of lemon juice and vanilla and tears dried on the pages of his recipe notebook, if this life he had made for himself was entirely *normal*.

He splashed some cold water on his face, put on some coffee. He'd treat himself to a cup of coffee with chicory and a teaspoonful of sweetened condensed milk. He had been looking forward to plums for nearly a year. It was just the Christmas blues, he decided. He missed his mom. She had gone to Greece for the holidays, just like she didn't have a kid anymore. He was twenty-six, and she had told him last year that she wasn't putting up the tree anymore. He really hadn't thought she meant it. And now she was off somewhere eating feta with olives and pasta with lemon juice, getting a Greek sunburn on her face, and he was in Boise, alone, working at the Co-op and testing his fresh ricotta recipes.

He pulled a gallon of milk from the fridge and lined up the equipment on the kitchen cabinet for sterilizing. He had a good kitchen, wide countertops, heavy old

wooden cabinets, with big windows that were over a hundred years old. But the kitchen was the entire apartment -- his landlord, the evil Mr. Scrapple who lived upstairs, had divided the downstairs of his old Victorian into two studios for the desperate. And he had managed to find a couple of desperados -- Matt had the kitchen/studio, and Josh, who worked down at the bookstore, took the half with the living room because he needed the wall space for his bookcases.

Matt heard a footstep overhead, and his eyes lifted to the ceiling. Thump-drag, then click, the sound of the cane. It was almost as creepy a sound as Mr. Scrapple's name. More than once Matt had lain down to sleep on his loveseat, his legs hanging over the side, stared at the ceiling and wondered what sort of woman would marry a man named Scrapple. At least her son, the evil Mr. Scrapple who lived over his head, did not seem to have reproduced. If he did have kids, they had not set foot in this house since Matt had been living here.

The reason for the cane was something of a mystery. Josh, who lived in the other half of his brutally cut up apartment, thought Mr. Scrapple had had a stroke. Matt wondered if it was chronic pain from arthritis in his knees. He had a client at the Co-op who always bought Basque cheeses and who walked with a cane. He told Matt once that his arthritis was enough to make him put a gun to his head, but he didn't, because he would miss Idiazabal and Matt's beautiful face.

Get your game face on, he ordered himself. No more thoughts of insanity or the evil Mr. Scrapple. He was going to bake a fresh ricotta plum tart made the French country way, in an iron skillet. But rather than a traditional tart crust, it would be something like a fallen soufflé, or a puff pastry. He thought about the texture. Too light for plums themselves -- they would weight it down. He needed to juice the plums, cook them down until the essence was almost *too* strong -- then fold that magical plum elixir into the soufflé.

The scrabble of toenails against plastic and yips from outside his front door could not be ignored, however, and it could only be a puppy. He pulled open his front door, stared down at the box. Two puppies in an old milk crate, white and brown mutts

with floppy ears and fur sticking up every which-a-way. What the heck? If Mr. Scrapple saw puppies in the hall, he'd have another stroke!

Matt picked up the milk crate, knocked on Josh's door. The puppies were all over him, licking his hand, doing their little puppy dance. Josh pulled open the door. He looked rough, like he'd just crawled out of bed after a very tough night. He was wearing baggy boxers and nothing else, and his black hair had partially escaped from its ponytail -- pieces were straggling out, and his chin was black with whiskers, and the rest of the ponytail had managed to work its way into a rat's nest on the side of his head. Josh blinked at him, then looked down at the puppies.

"Josh, old man Scrapple's gonna kill you if he finds out you've brought puppies into the house! You left them in the hall!" Matt shoved the milk crate into his arms, noticed for the first time what looked like tear tracks on Josh's face. Josh stared down at the milk crate in shock, and one of the puppies leaped up, managed to lick his chin.

He shoved the milk crate back at Matt. "They aren't mine! What the hell? Where did you find them?"

Matt stared at him, and set the puppies on the floor. "They were in the hall." They looked down into the box, and Josh reached in, picked up a puppy and held it to his chin like he was under the influence of an irresistible impulse. Matt couldn't leave the other puppy alone in the milk crate, that would be too cruel, so he picked up the other one, gave it a snuggle. When he looked up, Josh was crying.

"What's wrong? Are you allergic?"

Josh shook his head, and the puppy licked a tear before it dropped off his chin. "No, it's just Christmas, and I always wanted a puppy for Christmas when I was a kid. And now my mom is off on a cruise to Hawaii! She's gonna be gone until January, can you believe it! My mom said it was time for me to start making my own Christmas traditions. What kind of crap is that?"

"I know! My mom went to Greece! Last year she was like, 'Matt, I'm not putting up the tree again. I've had enough evergreen to last ten lifetimes. I want laurel and olive

leaves. Next year you're on your own.' I mean, it's like she doesn't even have a kid anymore!"

Josh wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. "I mean, it's not like all of a sudden you're grown up and you don't need Christmas with your mom!"

They both stared down at the puppies in their hands. They were cute as buttons, some sort of fluffy, floppy-eared mix. As if on cue, Matt's puppy started to bark, little puppy yelps. "Shhh! Quiet!" He shoved the puppy's head under the edge of his sweatshirt. "If Scrapple hears them, he's gonna toss us both out into the street."

Josh sniffed. "Figures. We'll be homeless for Christmas. Perfect. We can stay down at the Mission."

"They don't let puppies into the Mission."

Thump-drag-click. They both heard the ominous step of Mr. Scrapple at the same time. Matt shoved his puppy at Josh, pointed to the alcove that served as a bedroom. He stepped out into the hall as the door at the top of the stairs creaked open.

"What are you boys doing down there? I thought I heard a dog."

Matt made his face as innocent as he could. "We don't have puppies! No pets allowed here, right?"

"Damn right. And don't you forget it." The door slammed and Mr. Scrapple's grumpy face disappeared. Matt stuck his head back in Josh's apartment. He was in bed, with a quilt pulled up to his chin. He scooted over and Matt sat down on the edge of the bed. Matt pulled the quilt down a couple of inches. There were two puppies asleep on Josh's chest. They must have been lulled by the warmth of the bed, by their heads resting over his chest, listening to his heartbeat. Matt thought that he could probably fall asleep that same way.

"What are we going to do?" Josh was whispering. Matt shook his head. "They're *your* puppies," Josh said. "You brought them in here."

"Yeah? Well, you took them to bed. I think that makes them yours." And they both realized at the same moment how ridiculous this was, and grinned at each other.

"We can't leave them alone. They're too small. They'll make noise and bring old man Scrapple down on our heads. I've got some milk at my place. What else do we need?"

"A litter box?" Josh shook his head. "No, that's for cats, right? We need newspaper." Josh looked around. "I've got a couple of old copies of the *New York Times Book Review* around here."

"Perfect." Matt realized they were still whispering. "Okay, I'll take them back across the hall, and give them some milk. You bring the newspaper. Then we need to figure out..."

Matt grabbed both of the sleeping puppies off Josh's chest. He could fit them in a hand each. At the door he looked carefully both ways, then dashed across the hall. Josh peered around the door at him. "Five minutes," he said, mouthing the words silently, and Matt felt a bubble of laughter in his chest, like they were boys playing at commandos. Maybe they should synchronize their watches.

Back in his kitchen, Matt poured some milk into a saucer and put it down on the floor. The puppies seemed to know what to do, though they were not very neat about it, getting milk all over their faces, nearly up to their floppy ears. They had some organic puppy food at the Co-op. He could run across the street and get some when Josh got back with the newspapers.

Josh was good to his word, and the five minutes had been spent on a shower. His black hair was now slicked back and confined in a rubber band, and he was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans and bare feet. His sweatshirt was a black hoodie with a picture of Billie Holiday on the front. The quote said, *Don't threaten me with love, baby. Let's just go walking in the rain.* He was carrying a handful of newspapers. He looked around at the little studio. "Man, you and me got gypped on these apartments. I got one room, and you got one kitchen."

Matt nodded. "It would be a decent apartment if we put it back together. But I need the kitchen."

"What have you been cooking? It always smells good over here."

"I've been making fresh ricotta cheese and cooking with it."

"Wow. You make your own cheese?"

Matt felt his face turning red. "Well, just ricotta so far because I can't seem to... finish with it. I keep thinking of more recipes to try."

Josh gestured toward the counter. "What are you making now?"

"It's sort of going to be a country soufflé with plums. Sort of a puff pancake."

"Are you making up the recipe?" Matt nodded. "You got to think up a cool name, then. Is that what you do? Make up recipes?"

"I guess." Matt felt his shoulders droop. "You know I work over at the Co-op, right?"

"Yeah?"

"I've been to cooking school. Cordon Bleu. But my first job in a restaurant kitchen? I quit in two days. It was horrible, so many people rushing around, yelling, the sound of dishes clattering into plastic bins, waitresses bitching -- and at the end of the night, it felt like you'd been beat with sticks, and for what? So the restaurant would make money." He shook his head. "That's when I realized it was all about money, not food, and I just... couldn't do it."

Josh gave him a look, nodded, and started putting paper down on the floor for the puppies. "Yeah. I get that. You know how many books I sell either got Chicken Soup or Naughty Housewives on the cover? Makes me think we've lost our soul."

He sat down on the floor, cross-legged, and Matt pulled up a stool. They watched the puppies in silence for a moment, and when the saucer was empty of milk, the puppies crawled across the paper, fell asleep in mid-stride.

"Are you working today?" Josh nudged a puppy with his finger.

"Yeah. I have to go in at one."

"I'll come back and get them about 12:30, then. I'll keep them overnight if you want. What about tomorrow? I've got to be at work at eight."

"I've got tomorrow off."

"Cool. Matt... If we send them to the shelter..."

They both pictured the cement floor, the metal cages stacked four tall, the smell. "No way. We need to figure something out."

Josh nodded. "I'll go get some food."

He wasn't back in the five minutes it would take to get puppy food from the Co-op, so Matt started on his ricotta. He had a couple of cups of fresh draining in the cheesecloth and was cooking the plums down when Josh got back. He was loaded down, puppy food, the good organic stuff, and a small bed lined in plaid flannel, and a little brush, and puppy pads for the floor. And food bowls and water bowls, two sets each. "We ought to have one set for each apartment so we don't have to move them back and forth across the hall every day. Do you want purple or blue?"

"You choose," Matt said. Josh looked happier, some color in his cheeks, and he looked over Matt's shoulder, studied the fruit in the pan. "Are those plums?"

Matt nodded, and Josh looked up and met his eyes. They were blue and clear, like the warm waters of the Aegean. "I'll take the blue bowls," Matt said.

Josh was studying the plums again. "Purple's good for me." He pointed to the pan. "Is there enough of that to share? I just spent my food money."

Josh watched with interest as the plum juice was folded into the ricotta, which was then folded into the beaten egg whites. Matt thought quickly about how to plate and serve food again, something he had not done in some time, since it was so much easier to eat out of the pot. Josh wouldn't mind eating out of the pot, he thought, but the plum soufflé was going to be so lovely it deserved plates. He had some French roast coffee, too.

When he had everything poured into the iron skillet, and into the oven, and a fresh pot of coffee brewing, he took off his apron and joined Josh on the loveseat. He had both puppies up on his lap, and they were curled up together, making snuffly little puppy noises. Josh scooted over to make room for him. "You sleep on the loveseat?"

"Yeah. I've got a sleeping bag I throw on the floor when I can't stand the loveseat anymore."

"But it's the kitchen, right? You took this place for the kitchen?"

"I have to cook, even if I can't do it in a restaurant. I've always loved to cook. I baked a Boston Cream Pie when I was six."

"Is that the one with the pudding in the middle? I like that cake. I haven't had it in years, though."

"It's gone out of style now -- seems old fashioned. But some classics have flavors you can't improve on."

Matt noticed the smell of the soufflé in the air, and the warmth of Josh's thigh next to his own, and the puppies curled up so sweetly, and he had a sudden urge to curl up himself, put his head on Josh's shoulder and sleep.

"I think I'm going insane," he confessed, and explained about his bizarre testing of fruit and ricotta cheese recipes in alphabetical order.

Josh listened carefully, then stretched an arm out and draped it casually over his shoulder. "You're not insane. You're just a cookbook writer."

"I'm what?"

"You're a cookbook writer. That's what you do. You make up recipes, test them, write them down. I'll help you think up some cool names for the stuff you make, or maybe stories -- like some little adventure story for each recipe. That might be fun."

"What kind of adventure story for a fresh ricotta-plum soufflé?"

"You could tell a story about stealing plums in the middle of the night, or making this recipe over a juniper wood campfire on a cattle drive in New Mexico on Christmas Eve. Or maybe you could call this puppy soufflé."

Matt laughed, settled in with his face buried next to Billie Holiday on the front of Josh's sweatshirt. He didn't want Josh to see his eyes had filled with tears. "People would think I baked the puppies into a soufflé, like some bizarro Hansel and Gretel cookbook."

"My friend, I guarantee you it would sell. People are bizarro in the extreme. But I see you more as the Arabian Nights sort of cookbook writer. Like, massively romantic and cool."

“Really? I’m massively romantic and cool?” He looked up, and Josh’s face was very close to his own. Black hair was escaping from the ponytail again, curling against his cheek, and his chin was covered in dark whiskers below a mouth so soft and bright a litany of summer berries started racing through Matt’s mind. And when he looked up, he looked into eyes the color of the sea, warm and smiling, and there was nothing for it but to reach up and kiss him.

He tasted like plums, and Matt loved plums best of all fruit. Josh had a strong hand, and he reached behind Matt’s head, settled his palm against his neck, fingers moving through his hair, and Matt could relax, let Josh hold him, enjoy the kiss, while the air filled with the smell of plums cooking, and a warm pile of puppies slept between them.

The timer on the stove called Matt back to himself, and he pulled the iron skillet from the oven, poured coffee and watched the shock on Josh’s face when the soufflé let out a small belch and sank gracefully. Josh stared at him, and Matt could see he was wondering what to say in the face of such a catastrophe. Matt poured him a cup of coffee with a tiny spoonful of sweetened condensed milk. “It’s supposed to do that. That’s why I put it in the iron skillet.”

Josh pressed a hand against his chest. “Oh, man! You could have warned me.” But then Matt gave him a slice, and he watched his face when the plums and ricotta dissolved against his tongue, and the look on Josh’s face was the most wonderful Christmas gift he had ever received. This was what he had been missing, he thought. A person to cook for. Maybe even, he thought, feeling a little tentative, a person to sleep with who also loved his food. Could there be more joy to life than that? He watched one of the puppies wake up, stretch, stagger and fall off the love seat, make his way across the room and collapse against his foot. Puppies. There was always room for puppies.

Chapter Two

He got home from the Co-op late, since the holiday season seemed to breed crises and havoc. Feelings of impending doom had swept over Boise, and half the residents seemed to need a hysterical trip through the aisles of the Co-op, looking for something, anything to fix whatever was wrong. There was not a cookie left in the building when the doors were locked up tight.

Josh's light was still on, and, after a careful look up the stairs, he knocked quietly on the door. Josh looked like he'd been tearing at his hair. The puppies were racing around like hyperactive little maniacs, falling all over their legs and yipping at each other. Matt was starting to wonder how old they were. When did their eyes open? These puppies were walking, talking, eating, and peeing without any trouble.

"My God!" Josh closed the door behind him. "They're demons! I don't know what's in that puppy food but they're acting like they've been into the espresso!"

"What are they doing?" There was already a trash bag filled with puppy pads tied up next to the door.

"Just... racing around! I mean, they're never still, not for one second. Oh, they're both boys. I checked."

"Have you thought up names?"

Josh shook his head. "I've been trying to figure out if I could pad the ceiling so upstairs," he raised his eyebrows in the direction of Mr. Scrapple, "wouldn't be alerted. You don't think he'd kick us out, do you? Where would he find anybody else poor enough to take these two crap studios?"

"I was thinking about this at work today. He wouldn't kick us out. But he could tack on a huge pet deposit. That lease I signed? I don't remember it saying anything about pets."

Josh sat down on the end of his bed, which seemed to also serve as his couch and reading chair. "I don't have enough for a pet deposit. I have enough for rent and heat and books, and whatever is left I spend on food."

Matt studied the tiny alcove where Josh had a kitchenette -- a microwave, a half fridge, and a tiny sink. He didn't for a moment think this was up to code. The shelf next to the microwave held about half a case of off-brand chicken noodle soup and several big Ziplock bags of shredded wheat cereal. Josh must buy in bulk to save money. When he turned around, though, he could see what Josh loved -- the bookshelves were made of cherry, and the books stretched from floor to ceiling. There was a stack next to the bed, as well, and when one of the puppies tried to scale it, and Josh heard the sound of tiny puppy nails against paper book covers, he clutched his chest and snatched the puppy up. "You see what I mean?"

Matt bit his bottom lip to keep from smiling. "You hungry? I can make you some supper."

Josh shook his head. "You look tired, Matt. And I don't want you to go across the hall and sleep on the loveseat. Why don't you stay over here with me? Help me keep these little maniacs quiet."

Matt stood over the bed, looking down at him. "Is that why you want me to stay? To keep the puppies quiet?"

Josh shook his head, held out his hand.

He knelt on his bed, pulled Matt's sweatshirt over his head. Then he reached out, put his hand flat on Matt's chest, over his heart, and leaned in and kissed him. Matt's heart started beating fast, like it was thrilling at his touch, and Josh sighed, smiled against his mouth, leaned closer. Matt put his hand against Josh's chest, felt the heart thrumming under his skin. Then he slid his hand down Josh's flat belly, let his fingers

curl around the tangle of black hair. Matt pulled back, looked at the bright flush in Josh's face, at the tangle of black curls against his cheek. "Tell me what you like."

Josh smiled at him, and his eyes were gentle. "This. I like this. Kissing and touching. What about you?"

"I don't really know. I think it's different when you have feelings for somebody."

Josh leaned in, nuzzled his neck. "Do you have feelings for me? I want you to."

"I think so."

"I think so, too. And yes, it's different when you have feelings. Let me show you."

And he pulled Matt down into his bed, tucked a pillow under his head, and kissed him, mouth moving across his skin, stopping at a collarbone, a strawberry nipple, at the delicate line of chestnut hair on Matt's belly. When he nuzzled between Matt's legs, hips gripped in strong hands, Matt felt himself melt, some hard cold shell crack under the gentlest touch of mouth, and tongue, and fingers.

Josh's dark head was nestled against the pale skin of his belly, black hair curled like a question mark. Josh was laughing. He lifted his head, let Matt's slippery red cock slide out of his mouth, from between his wet lips. "I can't decide what tastes better, that plum deal or this sweet little plum." And he licked across the thick purple head of Matt's cock.

Heat spread across his belly, spread down between Matt's legs until his balls drew up tight, and honey-sweet yearning throbbed through his cock. He thrust his hips up, and Josh held him tighter, let the rough edge of his teeth scrape gently along the sensitive long length of Matt's cock. Then he was coming, and Josh swallowed, a little hum of pleasure deep in his throat, let his long fingers trace through the chestnut curls on Matt's belly as he moved upward.

Josh tasted warm, the skin on his neck salty and sweet. Matt nuzzled and kissed and sucked and bit until he looked down in alarm at the bright pink hickey he had left on Josh's skin. "Oh, sugar. I just gave you a hickey."

Josh laughed, reached for him and tugged him over onto his chest. "Give me another one," he said, turning his head. "I want a matching pair."

The long line of his ivory throat was so irresistible, long black curls tangled damply against the sweaty skin. Matt felt a wild moment of vampire delight, lowered his mouth, felt laughter bubble up in the throat under his lips.

"I love that," Josh said. "You kiss like you mean it."

"I do mean it." Matt pushed the tangled sheets aside, let cool December air drift over their bodies. "That feels good. You think we'll get some snow for Christmas?"

"Yeah, I do," Josh said. "Hey, you got any condoms?"

Matt shook his head.

"I do. But only if you want to, Matt. I'm good with this. But it would be so sweet to fuck you." He reached up, traced the lines of Matt's mouth with one finger. "You don't know how long I've been thinking about this. I hear you across the hall, hear you in the shower, smell your shampoo under the door. A couple of times I almost broke down the door."

"I don't really..."

"Have you ever?"

"Only once. It..."

"I won't hurt you, Matt."

His hands were slick, and he pulled Matt up to his knees on the bed. Josh leaned over him, pressed his mouth to the sensitive skin at the base of his skull, traced down his backbone until he ran a wet tongue down the crack of his ass. Then Matt could feel his warm fingers, slick with oil, tracing the sensitive skin around his anus, pressing gently against the opening. Then his finger was replaced with something heavier, the thick weight of Josh's cock. "Lean into me," Josh said, and Matt took a deep breath, felt his own cock bouncing gently against his belly, and leaned back.

Josh had him around the waist, fingers digging deeply into his skin, and he pulled him back onto his cock until the swollen head slipped inside. Then Josh was moving, rocking against him, sliding with the rhythm of his breath, the beautiful rough

rhythm of fucking. The heat spread, his cock throbbing, then Josh reached around, grabbed Matt's cock in a rough hand, and Matt shoved back against him, semen spurting over his belly.

* * *

In the morning, Josh helped him shuttle puppies and bed and puppy pads across the hall before he left for work. Matt was thinking of a recipe, and for the first time in over a year, it did not include ricotta cheese. He'd call it plum-love, he thought, kissing Josh on the mouth. Josh reached for his shoulders, stepped back and stepped on a puppy's paw, and for the next few moments they filled the little studio with yelps and frantic hushing and chasing of puppies. Thump-drag-click. Then the opening of the door upstairs. They froze, each with a puppy tucked up under their sweatshirts.

"Boy!"

Matt shoved his puppy at Josh, stuck his head out the door. Mr. Grumpy-face was peering down at him like a gargoyle. "Good morning, Mr. Scrapple." Matt's mind was racing. "Would you like some breakfast? I was about to make pancakes with plum preserves. I could bring you some."

Mr. Scrapple looked confused for a moment, like he couldn't think what to say. "Just... just keep it down! You boys are too noisy. And that better not be a dog I keep hearing." He slammed the door, and Matt darted back into his studio.

"Good save," Josh said. "Maybe if you cooked something for him, it would get him on our side. I'd follow you across the desert for another piece of that deal from yesterday."

Matt reached into the fridge, handed him a thick wedge wrapped in plastic. "I thought you might like a little snack for lunch."

"Hey, thanks."

After Josh left, and the puppies had collapsed into a sleeping pile on their little flannel bed, Matt decided to try the plum pancakes he had mentioned to Mr. Scrapple. He had seen a recipe once for plum upside down cake that could easily be adapted into pancakes on the griddle. He melted some butter and brown sugar in the microwave,

sliced ripe plums into the mixture, then laid them on the hot griddle. While they were bubbling, he mixed up some pancake batter, and when the plums gave off a ripe, melty smell, he poured the batter over the top of the plums and butter. When he flipped them, the little pancakes were lovely, so purple and shiny and buttery he ate the first one too hot, straight off the griddle, and burned the roof of his mouth.

When they had cooled a bit, he put three on a plate and took them upstairs to Mr. Scrapple. No one answered his soft knock, and he thought about painful knees and dragging oneself out of a recliner chair. He waited another moment and pushed open the door. For one horrifying moment, he thought the evil Mr. Scrapple was dead in his chair, but then he let out a little snort through his nose. Matt held his own breath, set the plate down next to the recliner and stepped backward to the door. Back in the hallway, he walked on the edge of the wooden staircase, hoping to avoid the step that creaked, and didn't take a full breath until he was back in his own plum-and-puppy-filled apartment.

Mr. Scrapple lived in darkness, with the curtains closed to the sunlight. He also had pictures in frames on every surface, some old-fashioned, grandmothers in high-necked blouses and button boots, and some newer. The one sitting next to his chair was of a much younger Mr. Scrapple with three boys kneeling in front of him, wearing football uniforms.

Josh looked tired when he came home after work, but he gave Matt a sweet smooch and snuggled both puppies before falling down on the loveseat. He leaned back and eyed the ceiling. "Any problems from upstairs?"

"Not as far as I know. Hey, do you think Scrapple has any kids? I've never seen anyone here, but there's this picture next to his chair of three boys."

"I've seen this one man I thought might be a son. He came just before you moved in, driving a big-ass Lexus with Washington plates. I thought he looked like Seattle, you know? Raincoast cool. Anyway, he was upstairs for about an hour, and I heard them yelling at each other. This was right after Scrapple came back from the hospital."

"Was that when he had the stroke?"

"I guess, if it was a stroke. I knocked on his door a couple of times to see if he needed anything, and he just yelled for me to go away."

"He gets his groceries delivered from the Co-op. I bet he never even comes downstairs."

"He's gonna miss out, then, 'cause I think it's about to snow."

Matt pulled the curtains back and looked at the sky. "Hey, I think you're right! Look at that sky. Maybe we'll have snow for Christmas."

"We can make a snowman in the yard if we get enough, put a Santa hat on him."

Josh walked over and joined him at the window, and Matt turned, looked at his face with the late afternoon sun warming his skin. He was delightful, Matt thought. Part of it was not knowing him, being surprised by what he said. Matt wondered if that ever changed, if people got to know each other so well that they couldn't surprise each other anymore. That would be a real shame.

Josh smiled at him. "Your eyes are the color of Tupelo honey. I keep thinking you'll have this slow-talking southern drawl."

Matt smiled back at him. "How come?"

Josh shrugged. "You've got that tragical romantic air of a Faulkner boy. I just want to bundle you up in bed and let you suck honey and butter off my fingers."

Matt's knees went liquid, and he reached out and let Josh hold him up. "I'll make Shepherd's Pie for supper," he said, and closed his eyes when Josh pulled him against his chest.

"Hey, you know what we did before?"

Josh nuzzled against his neck. "The hickies or the fucking?"

"Well..."

"Did it hurt you, baby?"

Matt shook his head, put his hands flat against Josh's chest. "No, not at all."

"You got any more olive oil?"

Matt nodded. "You got any more condoms?"

Josh pulled him close, slid his hands up under Matt's sweatshirt, pulled it up over his head. "We aren't going to fit on the loveseat. How about the shower?"

Josh pulled him into the bathroom by the waistband. He turned the water on, skinned out of his jeans. Matt reached for Josh's cock, hefted the heavy thick weight of it in his fist. Josh pulled him close, nuzzled into his neck. "I like the way you smell. You smell like something spicy." Matt shoved his jeans down over his hips, stepped out of his boxers, and let Josh pull him into the stream of hot water.

Josh turned him around, squirted some of Matt's shampoo into the palm of his hand. He ran his hand down over his ass, slid the slippery shampoo between his fingers. Josh pulled him closer, his heavy cock nestled against Matt's ass, reached around. Matt felt his cock lifted in a silky hand, and Josh started pumping him, the sensitive head sliding against the rough callus on his palm. Bubbles dripped from Josh's fist, and the shower filled with the scent of his shampoo. Then he was coming, a hard hand around his cock, a firm arm around his waist, and a strong man at his back. He leaned back, let Josh take his weight. Josh nibbled on his ear. "Lean against me," he said. "I'll hold you up."

* * *

"Josh... you know I'm no bargain, right? I mean, I've got this weird obsession with ricotta cheese, and it may even meet the criteria for OCD, and that..."

"I wasn't out looking for a bargain, Matt. We just need to stay cool, you know? And see where this story takes us."

They slept together in Josh's bed, and the puppies claimed a warm chest each. Josh said they liked sleeping over a heartbeat, and the rise and fall of their chests, breathing, rocked them to sleep. Matt thought it was a bad precedent, to let the puppies sleep on the bed instead of in their own little plaid flannel bed. But he was too happy to kick anybody out.

Josh's voice was sleepy. "I'm trying to remember a story I heard about plums. I think crazy King John died from eating too many plums."

"You mean Robin Hood's King John?"

"Yeah. He signed the Magna Carta. At lance point, most probably."

"I hope I didn't kill Mr. Scrapple with plums today. I brought him plum pancakes. He was asleep. I just pushed the door open and set them next to his recliner."

"Whoa! You got some *cojones*, my friend, to walk into his lair uninvited."

"No, it was the pancakes. They were perfect. I mean, somebody had to eat them." He hesitated a moment. "I'm starting to wonder if the most perfect food is a food you share. Like, it can only get so good until another person tastes it."

Josh smiled at him. "You think about food the way other people think about sex. That's why you cook like the angels." Matt felt his cheeks heat up, and hoped Josh wouldn't see in the darkness. "Hey, let's see if it's snowing yet."

At Josh's single window, they studied the beautiful falling snow, the pattern of crystals forming on the wavy old glass. Josh wrapped an arm around his waist. "Let's go outside and play."

"What, now?"

"Snow angels. Snowball fight. In the middle of the night. Our moms are gone to sunny lands, my friend, and that means they aren't here to tell us we can't play in the snow in the middle of the night."

"Hey, that's right! Should we take the puppies?" Matt reached for his sweatshirt.

Josh shook his head, and they both looked over at the bed. The puppies had curled into a fluffy lump on Josh's pillow. "We'll let them sleep, but if they pee on my pillow, there is gonna be murder. Puppicide."

Josh was a stealthy snowball fighter, and more than once he surprised a shriek from Matt when he leapt out from behind a tree and pummeled him with snowballs. He went for the face, too, where Matt always tried to aim low. When Josh finally tackled him, and they ended up in a snowy pile next to the driveway, he thought this was surely the best night of his life, even as the snow trickled down his neck and his fingers lost all feeling. But then Josh rolled over and kissed him, and his mouth was cold and hot at the same time, and then he knew for sure this was the best night of his life.

They lay next to each other, making snow angels with their legs and arms, let the snow drift down on their faces. In the quiet of the snowy night, Matt realized, staring up at the house, that there was a light on upstairs, and the curtain was pulled back on one of evil Mr. Scrapple's windows. And then he heard the faint yip and howl of a couple of puppies who had been abandoned in the night.

Chapter Three

They stood in the hall, dripping muddy, melting snow on the linoleum. Mr. Scrapple's gargoyle face peered down at them. "Get that mess cleaned up. Then you two come up to see me." He grinned down at them, a truly horrible sight that sent ice colder than any snow down Matt's spine. "Seems we have something to discuss."

Matt turned to Josh after the door closed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have just let those puppies..."

"What? Sit in the milk crate in the hall? You ignore them, they just get louder. Listen, you just follow my lead, okay? I've got this."

"What? What do you mean?"

Josh shook his head. "Let me handle this. Go get a dry sweatshirt and throw a towel down on the floor. I'll meet you back here in two minutes."

Josh was back in a minute and a half, and he was loaded for bear. His ponytail was pulled back ruthlessly tight, and he had on a faded old sweatshirt with USMC on the front. He also had a puppy in each hand. Matt nodded toward the puppies. "You sure about this?"

Josh nodded. "Just follow my lead."

They marched up the stairs, and at the top, Josh rapped on the door with a knuckle, nearly using a puppy's head, then he pushed Mr. Scrapple's door open.

The old man was in his recliner, his hands folded in his lap. He studied the two of them for a long moment. His eyes seemed to linger on Josh's sweatshirt. "That's not going to do you any good, kid."

Josh dumped the puppies into his lap, and they scrambled around a bit. One of them planted his tiny paws onto Scrapple's chin and licked him on the cheek. "And that's not going to do you any good, either."

Josh put his hands on his hips. "There is nothing in the lease that says no pets."

"There's nothing in the lease that gives you permission for pets, either. I could toss you both out of here. At the minimum, I could charge both of you a pet deposit, since it seems these little rats have been all over the house."

"Fine. How much is the pet deposit?"

"Four hundred." Matt felt all the air leave his lungs. His head was buzzing. Four hundred? Oh, my God.

"Each," Scrapple said, and grinned.

"It's two weeks before Christmas!" His voice was too faint, a clear sign of weakness, and Josh gave him a stern glance.

"Bullshit! Pet deposit is usually half a month's rent. That's standard. And besides, if we move, you'll never get another pair of bozos like us to rent those cubbyholes downstairs. Or if you do, they'll be cooking meth in the kitchen and playing metalpunk all night."

Cooking meth in his beautiful kitchen? Matt felt a black haze cross his vision. He reached out and felt Josh take his hand.

"And every time you two leave the house I've got to listen to that racket? Not a chance. You boys just go ahead, see if you can find a better place to live."

"You won't have to listen to them. We can put a fence up around the back yard and let them play outside. You buy the material, Matt and I'll put up the fence."

"Ha! Now I'm paying for a fence?"

"And that's not all." Josh squeezed his hand, hard, and Matt squeezed back. "We want to fix the apartment downstairs. We're gonna put it back together again. Make it one apartment. We'll do the work if you buy the material. But you're gonna have to give us a long-term lease and let us keep the puppies."

"Ha!"

Josh raised his chin. "That's the best offer you're going to get this year. I recommend you take it."

Matt could feel his knees shaking. What was Josh doing? They had come up here to beg for mercy, right? They were about to get tossed out into the snow. Mr. Scrapple eyed him. "Is this what you want, boy?"

What had Josh said? Follow my lead. Okay, fine. "No, I want more. I want to cook you breakfast at least once a week. I want to bring you cookies when I make a batch. And I want you to eat them." Josh and Scrapple were both staring at him, their mouths open. Matt looked back at Josh. "That goes for you, too. I'm tired of cooking for myself. I want both of you to eat what I cook."

Scrapple threw up his arms. "Puppies, cookies, anything else? A Christmas tree? Santa coming down the chimney?"

Josh shook his head, pulled Matt gently toward the door. "No, I think that's about all for now."

Scrapple held out the puppies. "Come take them before they pee on my lap. And you're responsible for that linoleum! For God's sake put some newspaper down!"

"Yes, sir."

Matt nodded. "Yes, sir."

They clattered down the stairs, and Josh pulled Matt into his room. "Josh, what the heck was that all about?"

Josh put a finger to his lips, pulled Matt over to the bed. He dumped the puppies onto his pillow. "My grandfather and old man Scrapple were in Vietnam together, Marines. When he got out, he kept a kennel."

"What, like a dog kennel?"

Josh nodded. "Where do you think these puppies came from? They must have come from him. I think he had somebody put them in the hall where you would find them."

"What?" Matt felt that buzzing in his head again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I think old man Scrapple put the puppies there for us! They're our Christmas present!"

"Josh... there's no way. I just don't..."

"Yes." Josh took him by the shoulders, gave him a little shake. "Yes, you do. You can believe. You can believe in Christmas." And above their heads, very faintly, Matt thought he heard laughter, and the sound of sleigh bells.

Sarah Black

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