



Something Cryptid This Way Comes (Love in Maplewood #9)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Trevor Casal loves Maplewood and will do anything for its residents, including host the town's first Cryptid Night to kick off the month-long Halloween festivities.

After all, Mabel, Maplewood's own monster, is a tourist attraction, and this is an opportunity to increase business for his inn, his family legacy.

The event, and a rash of new sightings, brings his best friend Bram, a cryptid investigator, to town, and Trevor worries that spending so much time together will give away his secret... he's been in love with Bram for years.

Bram Macleod's fascination with cryptids began at the age of ten, and his first encounter with Maplewood's resident monster.

In the years since his pro football career ended, he's devoted his time to documenting investigations and myths on his podcast.

Returning to Maplewood after twenty-five years away, Bram is eager to dive into exploring cryptids old and new and to spend time with Trevor, but hesitant on how to handle the fact that, lately, he's started seeing his best friend in a new light... one that feels a lot like love.

As Bram and Trevor chase down cryptids and get immersed in the town's Halloween activities, their feelings for each other become impossible to ignore.

Crossing that line threatens to change the friendship they depend on, but could give them everything they long for.

Total Pages (Source): 36

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

TREVOR

The chime of the grandfather clock in the corner of the inn's lobby overtakes the classical music drifting through the speakers. I finish updating a guest's booking to include a special anniversary welcome basket, then glance down at the corgi terrier mix gnawing on a toy by my feet.

As if on cue, he looks up at me, and I swear, in the two months since I adopted him, he's learned to associate the three o'clock bell chime with my coffee break, which includes a treat for him.

Bending down, I ruffle his fur. "Hey, Bandit, ready for a break?"

He drops his toy and leaps up, planting his front paws on my thigh, his tail wagging like a wild metronome. No matter how stressful a day I'm having, he always brightens it. After one last ruffle, I stand, then nudge the toy beneath the front desk with my foot so it's out of the way.

With Bandit trotting at my side, we cross the wide-planked floor to the coffee station set up on a hutch beneath framed photos of the inn, chronicling its changes over the decades .

A sketch of the original property from the late 1800s starts things off, followed by photos from when my grandparents set out to restore the inn seventy years ago, trading the bustle of New York City for peaceful small-town life here in Maplewood, Vermont.

Seeing them, and then my parents in the shots, always makes me smile.

Beside me, Bandit spins in a circle, chasing his tail.

The light from the stained glass window I added last year casts hues of blue and pink over his brown and white coat.

Above the painted glass, a clear pane gives me a view of a brilliant blue, cloudless mid-September sky, and the pines and maple trees that line the inn's property.

For a moment, a yearning to be outdoors, enjoying this bright, crisp day with a hike, yanks through me so strong, I'm surprised my feet don't power me out the door.

Shaking thoughts of playing hooky from my head, I select a mug from the row that sits atop the drawer housing the selection of coffee blends, place it under the single cup maker, and choose a dark roast pod.

Bandit presses against my shin, his gaze glued to the jar of dog biscuits at the end of the hutch.

Once the machine is gurgling, I take a biscuit from the jar and hold it out to him.

He nips the bone-shaped treat neatly from my fingers and settles down at my feet.

Though his previous owner gave him to the shelter stating he'd destroyed furniture, he's never shown any interest in chewing on or digging through any item here at the inn or at my home.

Even if he did, I could never give him up.

Every time I think about the sad puppy I met that day at the shelter, my heart breaks

for him. Crouching, I give him scratches.

Most of the furniture surrounding me, from the Queen Anne chairs my grandmother adored, to the art deco pieces my parents favored during their time at the helm, is thanks to scouring antique shops with them when I was a kid.

Each piece tells a story, holds a memory, and I love that.

Since Bandit's been with me, we've added some more.

I grew up knowing I'd run this inn one day, and since my parents retired five years ago, I've done my best to put my own stamp on this place.

The gold and tan wallpaper lining the lobby's walls, the new bedding in all the rooms, and the kiosks at the doors so guests can check in and out if they want a people-free experience have been a good start, but living up to the family legacy means continually looking for ways to improve and expand.

The twenty-four-seven coffee and tea station is our most recent improvement. Turning our six-room carriage house into a haunted house during the week of Halloween has been the most risky endeavor.

The door from the office creaks open, followed by footsteps heading in my direction. I give Bandit one last scratch, then stand, and turn toward the sound.

Holding a violet mug matching the streaks of color throughout her dark hair, Jo, my assistant manager, gives the tea kettle beside the coffee maker a longing look.

Purple, Jo's favorite color, continues in her flowing dress and the tablet she sets on the desk as she passes by.

“Trevor, we had a call from Agnes Peabody. She said she’s on her way here and needs to discuss something with you. ”

“Uh oh.” The last time Agnes needed something is etched firmly into my mind.

And I shudder. I step to the side to add sugar and creamer to my mug so Jo can get hot water for her tea.

“If she needs a favor, I hope it’s more along the lines of needing us to donate the reception hall for a charity event and less like the time she roped us into joining her gardening club’s team for that mud run. ”

Jo lets out a groan that ends in a laugh. “That was a mess. My sneakers were never the same.”

“I had to throw mine out and buy a new pair.” As I sip the coffee, I take an inventory of the packaged snacks beside the coffee maker. “The maple fig bars are more popular with the guests than I expected.”

She picks up one of the blueberry tarts. “I think I’m the only one who’s eating these.”

“They’re not bad, neither are the fig bars, but I like the apple ones better.

” I snag one of the apple bars and tear off the foil wrapper.

Lunch was hours ago, eaten in a rush as I checked in a girls’ soccer team and their chaperones in town for a tournament.

“Once we’re finished with Agnes, we should go over the plans for the haunted house.

I want to change up the lighting and effects, and I think we should keep a room

blocked off so the staff have a place to go to decompress on their breaks. ”

Halloween is a month and a half away, but how to improve the haunted house for attendees and workers alike has been on my mind since the music festival in May.

Jo nods. “I like that idea. I’m thinking I’ll retire my goth vampire costume. I saw a white lace wedding dress in a vintage shop that would be perfect for a ghost. It has haunted Victorian vibes.”

Grinning, I salute her with my mug. “Whatever you want.”

We grew up together, and Jo has worked here almost as long as I have. I couldn’t imagine anyone else helping me run this place.

The front door swings open and Agnes Peabody sweeps into the entryway, clad in black from head to toe. She smooths her short, white bob away from her face, then holds out her hands to us in greeting. “Dears, it’s been an eventful few days. Thank you for seeing me.”

I abandon my coffee and snack and hurry forward with Jo at my side. “Agnes, are you okay?”

She has a flair for the dramatic, but she’s also the great-aunt of my best friend and I feel a responsibility to look after her.

With a soft smile and a twinkle in her eyes, Agnes squeezes my hand. “I’m all right... now . Trevor, and Jo,” she turns to Jo and places her other hand on Jo’s shoulder, “I knew you were the ones to help me.”

“What do you need?” I guide her to a wingback chair. “Can I get you a drink?”

“I’d love a whiskey.”

Pressing my lips together, I hide my smile. That’s classic Agnes. “Sorry, we only have tea or coffee right now.”

She slips out of her black leather jacket and bends to pet Bandit. “Tea, then. Milk, no sugar. In a proper cup, please.”

Smiling, Jo rolls her eyes at me and detours toward the kitchen, where there are multiple sets of china for the afternoon teas we hold here during the winter. “I’ll get it.”

I claim my coffee and apple bar then sit across from her. Bandit trots to my side. “What can we do for you? What’s been going on?”

Agnes glances over her shoulder like she’s making sure the coast is clear. Amid a thunder of footsteps, a group of the soccer players rush down the stairs, laughing and talking over each other. They wait in the entryway, discussing their plans to check out the town’s two warring diners.

Jo returns with a delicate cup and saucer and heads toward the tea kettle.

A few of the chaperones join the girls, and then the group heads out the front door. The lobby is quiet once more, with the soft strains of violins drifting around us.

Agnes folds her hands in her lap and glances back and forth from Jo to me.

“I saw something the other night on the way home from playing at The Striped Maple. It was huge and dark, with wings and a tail. It swooped over the road, then hovered in the air, above my car like it was following me until it finally turned and veered into the woods.”

Jo and I share a look. Maplewood lore has a resident cryptid, a forest creature we call Mabel.

But she's very tall, thin, leafy, and green.

She doesn't have wings. Vermont may have other cryptids, like the monster living in Lake Champlain, but I've never heard of anything in Maplewood other than Mabel.

"Could've been a shadow cast by a hawk," I offer. "Or a heron? They have large wingspans."

Agnes gives me a withering look. "No, dear. This creature's wingspan had to be at least ten feet wide. When I'm playing a set, I limit myself to one drink. I was sober." She places her hand over her heart. "Scared me so much, I nearly ran off the road."

I hold up my hands in surrender and lean back in my chair. "Fair enough. You know what you saw."

She accepts the cup of tea from Jo. "Exactly. And Eleanor saw something huge and hairy on the edge of the highway two days ago. Rae saw the same thing last week by the fairgrounds."

Jo looks at me, shrugs, then turns to Agnes. "It was probably a bear. Or a moose?"

Agnes raises a brow at her. "Jo, I am eighty-two years old. I've seen quite a few bears and moose in my time. So have the other girls."

I can't help smiling because Agnes always refers to her friends, who are also in their eighties, that way. "Black bears are between five and seven feet tall when standing."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

“This thing was much bigger than a standard black bear. Things are happening here and we need to find out why.” She sips her tea and gives it an approving nod. “This is lovely, Jo. Thank you.”

Confusion about why she came to us for help with this buzzes through my brain. I take a bite of my bar and follow it with another mouthful of coffee. “Did you reach out to Bram? I know he was filming an investigation in Washington state last week. I think he got home today.”

Bram is my best friend, a cryptid enthusiast with a podcast that relays myths and investigates sightings all around the country, and he’s also Agnes’s great-nephew.

“I was going to tell him once he was back home. And there’s more,” she scoots forward in her chair, “I was sharing the story with my gardening club yesterday, and one of them also had a sighting. Something growling and howling like a wolf-man.”

“A wolf-man?” Jo shakes her head in disbelief. “It could’ve been an actual wolf. Or maybe one of their plants is a hallucinogenic?”

My cup halfway to my mouth, I point to her. “That’s happened before. The garden club’s tea party last summer, remember? You called us, convinced you and the girls were giant flowers.”

As she sips her tea, Agnes waves away that suggestion.

“We were thinking, with the rash of sightings, plus our beloved Mabel, the town should capitalize on them. Wouldn’t it be great to have a specific event or festival for

cryptids?

Hosting it in October makes sense, since everyone has Halloween on the brain. ”

I swallow the last of my apple bar. “People love the myths about Mabel. I’m surprised there hasn’t already been a festival for her.”

“I agree.” Agnes gives me a smile. “I think we need to strike while the iron, or should I say, the cryptids, are hot. So I ran the idea by Bo Boyd when I saw him at Red’s diner an hour ago.

And he agrees we should hold one this year.

You know how involved in the festivals he is and how hard he works to make sure the town’s residents are happy. ”

Jo’s brows draw together as she sinks onto the couch. I wonder if she’s thinking what I am, which is how hard did Agnes twist the community development guy’s arm to get him to agree to this. “Okay...”

Agnes sets her cup onto its saucer. “So it’s settled. We’d like you to host the event, Trevor.”

Surprise shoots through me, startling the mug in my hand. Coffee sloshes up the sides. I grip the mug tight as my thoughts whirl. “Me? Look, I believe Mabel is real, but I’m not a host.”

“Nonsense. You host events here all the time.”

“Having spaces for weddings, cooking classes, and corporate retreats, and taking care of hotel guests isn’t the same thing as hosting an event like you’re talking about.

” Though throwing things together at the last minute gives me hives, I could plan an event, but the biggest reason is...

“I’m not the right person for this. Bram is. ”

Agnes clasps her hands over her chest, the hammered-metal ring Bram got her when we toured Italy last summer shines bright against her black sweater.

“I’d love for Bram to be here. I haven’t seen my great-nephew in far too long.

But he’s not a local, dear. He hasn’t lived here in what, twenty-five years?

We need a Maplewoodian involved.” She pauses and her eyebrows wing up.

A slow smile spreads across her ruby-painted lips and she points a bony finger at me. “You and Bram should host it together.”

Together. My mouth goes dry at the thought.

“It would be perfect. The two of you together again.” Agnes claps her hands as though this is the best idea she’s had in her life.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and refrain from reminding her that she also thought having her garden club grow catnip to repel deer was a good idea. Unfortunately, Maplewood ended up with a bunch of stoned cats and a gang of possums with the munchies breaking into everyone’s garbage cans .

Jo stands, then heads for the reception desk and grabs her tablet. “I love it. The event is a good idea. Let’s check which weekend has the most openings.” She returns, pulling up our upcoming reservations as she takes her seat. “The second weekend in October is the best option.”

My fingers tap the sides of the mug. It's been an expensive year, with upgrading the heat and A/C in both the carriage house and here in the mansion, and replacing several of the carriage house's windows.

Thanks to the cost of the heat and A/C, we had to hold off on replacing the mansion's roof, but that should be done sooner rather than later. We need all the bookings we can get.

Okay, so maybe this is one of Agnes's better ideas.

"People might get inspired at the event and want to book again with us if they come back to do more investigations." Possibilities of promotion and marketing and what it could mean for the inn, and for Maplewood, whirl in my head.

"We can offer a package for the inn with some cryptid-related items, and see if some of the restaurants want to take part."

Agnes's smile is pure victory. "So you'll do it?"

There's no way I'll tell Agnes no. If she and her octogenarian cohorts want something done, everyone in town makes it happen.

Bandit nudges my ankle with his nose and I scratch the spot behind his ears that makes his eyes grow heavy until he lies back down, his head resting on my shoe.

"I'll do it. And I'll check in with Bram.

He might be too busy to come. This isn't giving him much notice. "

Leaning back in the chair, Agnes crosses her leg, her leather pants riding up to show off chunky black biker boots, with an air of one who is an expert on a topic. "He'd

never say no to you, dear.”

I don’t know if that’s true. We haven’t asked that much of each other over the years. We’re always there for each other, but is that the same thing? The way she’s looking at me, like she knows a secret I don’t, is unnerving, and I rub at the prickling on the back of my neck.

Agnes tugs her jacket from the back of the chair. “I’ll contact Bo and let him know you’ve agreed to take this on. The house decorating contest starts the following week, so Cryptid Night will be the kickoff event for Halloween. The sooner the festival committee has everything, the better.”

Cup in hand, I stand and pat my thigh so Bandit knows to follow me. “I’ll call Bram now. See if he’s available and what we can put together. And I’ll reach out to Bo with details.”

Settling her jacket over her thin shoulders, Agnes stands. “Ask if Bram will stay for a bit and look into these new sightings too.”

“Will do.” I walk with her toward the front door, Bandit trotting behind us.

Tapping a note into the tablet, Jo looks up from the screen. “You should take some vacation days so you can spend time with him.”

I roll my shoulders and try to ignore the nerves flaring to life in my core. “Yeah, that would be great.”

Agnes kisses me on the cheek, enveloping me in a cloud of her smoky floral perfume, then waves goodbye to Jo. “Thank you, Trevor. I just know good things will come from this.”

I watch her walk down the path toward the sidewalk. As Agnes melts into the people strolling along the street, my thoughts turn to Bram and the call I have to make.

We were attached at the hip from the ages of ten through seventeen, when he lived in Maplewood.

And in the twenty-five years since he left, we've made it a point to get together once a year, though those trips always include the friends he made in college and his days playing pro football.

We haven't had much one-on-one time in person in years.

I'd love more time with him. But the problem is, if he's here, I'm afraid it'll give away the only secret I've ever kept from him .

I'm in love with Bram and I have been for years.

If he comes to Cryptid Night and stays to investigate, I'll have to figure out how to have him here and not give anything away. I won't risk the most important relationship in my life because I caught feelings when I was fifteen and could never shake them.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

brAM

Surrounded by dual monitors, my recording equipment, research books, and my dog Hades, is a good place to be. Add in the comfort of my ergonomic chair, the sight of Philly skyscrapers outside my apartment window, and my brother Charlie making us food in the kitchen, and damn, it's good to be home.

I watch the last minute of myself on screen, wrapping up the Bigfoot investigation in Washington state, add in the end credits, and hit save.

The episode is done, and now it's time for my favorite part of any investigation or research study: doing a recap, with added commentary, for Trevor. I open my recording app and begin. "Sightings of Bigfoot in Washington state have been reported for decades..."

What started as a one-off, with extra stories from an investigation that were too colorful to include in the episode, but I knew he'd appreciate, has turned into a private tradition for the two of us.

Leaning back in my chair, I recount the sightings that brought me there, my gaze on the photo of Trevor and me with our friends taken in front of a giant redwood tree a few summers ago. Our arms are around each other's shoulders and our smiles are wide.

During our group vacation in Italy this past July, he shared that he listens to my stories as he's getting ready for bed.

Picturing him in those plaid shirts he loves, pattering around his bedroom, listening to me, then sliding into his sheets with my voice in his ears, warmth washed into my chest. For all the years I've known Trevor, I've held a deep affection for him, but something changed that day, and the tenderness I had for him seemed to burrow into my core.

That feeling is back now, as I tell my tale. I'm not sure why my feelings for him shifted into more, fiercer, and softer, but it happened, and hell if I know what to do about it.

Hades stirs from his spot on the rug. He pads toward me, his tag jangling from his collar, and noses my lap.

The Belgian sheepdog found me in the woods while I was camping last year, thin and hungry, his black fur matted with mud.

He's been my faithful companion ever since.

I rub the top of his head. "Did you come over to add something to my story?"

He licks my hand in response.

"Bram," Charlie calls from the hallway. He comes into my office, his T-shirt dusted with flour, carrying my phone, which is ringing. "It's Trevor."

Surprise and delight flash into a warm sunbeam, lighting up my body.

"Awesome." I pause the recording and grab the phone, then tap to answer the video call. "Hey."

"Hi." Trevor's smiling face fills the screen.

His short dark brown hair is tousled like he's been running his fingers through it, and I wonder if he's had a stressful day.

The stubble he was sporting the last time we video chatted has grown into a close-cropped beard.

It gives more focus to his lips. I've never paid that much attention to his lips before, but now, I can't stop looking at them.

Would they feel soft against mine? Or firm? Would they be warm?

I lick my lips, then shake my head to clear those thoughts. "How are you?"

He rubs the back of his neck. "Oh, you know... there's always something going on here. How was your trip?"

"Really good. I just finished editing the episode. Spoiler alert, we didn't see Bigfoot during the investigation, but I got some great stories. You'll have your version of it tonight. I'll finish recording after I eat."

His eyes light up with his smile. "I can't wait."

"So..." I focus on the faint line of stress between his brows and the tension in his shoulders I pick up on, even through the screen. "What's wrong?"

Huffing a laugh, he sits back in his chair. He's in his office at the inn, and wearing yet another plaid shirt. Brown this time, like his eyes and hair, with a thin line of orange running through it. He looks good, like a sexy lumberjack. "Can't get anything past you, can I?"

"No." I grin, and he does too. "Tell me."

He rakes his fingers through his hair and rolls his shoulders. “Okay, here goes. Agnes came to see me today.”

“Oh no,” I groan and drop my head back. Nothing good comes from my great-aunt stopping by. I love her, but finding—or as my mom would say, causing—trouble is part of her DNA. And I know Trevor has only shared half of the antics she’s gotten herself into.

“Yeah.” He huffs a knowing laugh. “The short version is, she thinks she saw a winged cryptid flying over her car, two of her bandmates saw something bipedal that’s bigger than a bear, and someone in her gardening club saw what they are calling a wolf-man. ”

“Seriously?” I gape at my friend. I was expecting him to say something along the lines of yet another appliance breaking at the inn, not anything cryptid-related that isn’t about Mabel.

Stroking Hades’s head, I glance at Charlie, who has made himself at home on the small sofa lining the far wall. “I wonder why she didn’t call me.”

Trevor shifts and I catch a glimpse of russet leaves against the blue sky over his shoulder.

No matter how long it’s been since I’ve lived in Maplewood, I know that view from the window over the desk in the office, having spent summers during high school working part-time alongside him in that very spot.

“You were away, but she said she’ll reach out.

There’s more. Agnes talked to the community development guy who’s super involved in the festivals about all of this and they think it’s time we hold an event to honor

Mabel, and whatever other cryptids may be lurking around here.

They want to do it next month to kick off the Halloween events, and volunteered you and me to host it. ”

Sprawled across the sofa, Charlie lets out a low whistle and raises his brows at me. “That’s a lot of information.”

Trevor leans closer to the screen. “Is that Charlie?”

“Yeah.” I turn my phone toward my brother so Charlie and Trevor can wave at each other, then spin it back. “So, new sightings of different cryptids all at once?”

“Over the course of a couple of weeks, from what Agnes says.” He shrugs.

“I suggested the flying thing was a hawk or a heron, and the look she gave me...” He chuckles.

“Anyway, I’m surprised there hasn’t been a festival for Mabel yet, since the stories about her go back decades, and you know how this town loves its festivals.”

“I do.” In the wake of our parents’ divorce, getting lost in the festivals was a distraction for Charlie and me.

Life in Maplewood took some getting used to, but our mom and Aunt Agnes did their best to help us adjust. “I’ve been to Bigfoot festivals in a few cities.

It’s about time Mabel got some of that love too. ”

There’s a whimper, and Trevor slides down to the floor, his back against the oak cabinets.

“We decided to hold the event the second weekend in October.” I hear a jingle of Bandit’s collar as he jumps onto Trevor’s lap before his nose takes up the screen.

Trevor moves the phone, holding it up and out of Bandit’s reach, those soft-looking lips tugging at the corners.

“I know it’s not much notice, but can you come? Will you host it with me?”

“Yes.” The answer is automatic. I’d do anything for him. “I’m not traveling for another investigation until December, and if there’s anything on my calendar that will interfere, I’ll move it. This will be fun.”

The tension in his shoulders eases. “Thanks.” His cheeks tinge pink as he bites his lip. “You can stay with me. And bring Hades.”

Hades’s ears perk up at his name.

I tilt the phone so Trevor gets a full view of the dog. “You sure you want a seventy-five-pound bundle of energy in your house?”

“I’m happy to have him. As long as you think he’ll get along with Bandit. Bandit’s really good with other dogs. Cats, not so much. We think there’s some trauma there from his previous home.”

“I can’t wait to meet the little guy. Hades will be fine with him.”

Focused on the screen, Hades halfway jumps, landing with his front paws digging into my thigh. His tail wagging, he pokes his head against my chest and pushes so he’s in the frame and can see Trevor.

Laughing, I prop the phone on my desk, out of the way of my arm getting bumped.

“The worst thing my dog will do is love someone or something too much. ”

Charlie wanders over and leans down, resting his arm on the back of my chair so he’s also in the frame. “He’s the friendliest guard dog, Trevor. Never met a person or animal he didn’t like.”

I groan, adjusting my goofball dog’s weight, and thinking of some of his more memorable encounters. “Skunks, squirrels, deer, pigeons, mail carriers, random strangers, family members, Hades acts like everyone he meets is his best friend.”

Hades barks like he’s in agreement.

Charlie stands and claps his hand on his thigh. “Come on, boy, I brought you something special from the bakery. Let’s go and get your treat.”

With a yip, Hades takes off for the kitchen. Charlie waves at Trevor, pats me on the shoulder, then walks out.

Without distraction, I let myself look at my friend on the screen.

I miss spending time with him. A few short days a year, with a bunch of other people, isn’t enough.

“I have a lot of questions about those other sightings. The suddenness of it, for one thing, is suspicious. My first guess is a hoax, someone dressing up or something.”

“When Agnes told us about the winged thing, I got the feeling she was more shaken up over it than she wanted to let on.”

“I’ll do as much as I can while I’m there.” I pick up a pen and jot down a couple of notes of things to ask Agnes about the sightings. “So, you’re good? Business is

busy?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

“We’re fully booked up this week, so that’s nice.

And I finished the bookshelf I started last month.

I put it in the guest room, so you’ll see it while you’re here.

” He’s a talented woodworker. His hands, and the corded forearms on display with the sleeves of his plaid shirt rolled up, claim my attention.

During my years playing professional football, I was in countless locker rooms, saw a ton of bodies, but no one has ever captured my attention like Trevor.

When he took off his shirt the first day of our group vacation to Italy in July, I nearly swallowed my tongue.

He’s built. And I started noticing him in a way that I hadn’t before. Or, hadn’t let myself notice.

But he’s my oldest friend and my best friend. I don’t want to do anything that could mess that up.

Clearing my throat, I open my calendar app. “So, the event is the second Saturday in October?”

“Yeah.”

I note it. “I could come up the Saturday before it, and spend a week talking to people,

doing research.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “A whole week?”

“Sure. My encounter with Mabel started off all the cryptid stuff for me. It’s about time I do a full episode on her.

” Saying goodbye to playing football wasn’t easy, but stepping into my cryptid lore podcast, which allows me to embrace my other passion, has helped the transition to life away from the field.

“I’ll do one on Mabel, and if there are enough stories of other encounters, like Agnes and the others have had, I’ll do a second episode focusing on those, and document the investigation.

I can stay for as long as you’ll let me.

Let’s plan on two weeks, could be less, depending on what we find. ”

Trevor brings the phone close enough to his face that I can make out a small crumb at the corner of his mouth.

I’m sure it’s left over from his afternoon pastry break.

And I wonder what sweet treat he had today.

The tip of my tongue slides over the same spot on my own lips as if I could somehow taste it.

“What should the event entail?” The smooth cadence of his voice shakes me out of daydreams of powdered sugar and flaky crusts on delectable lips. “I need to give a

general outline to the Halloween festival committee and we need to start advertising as soon as possible.”

I give myself an internal shake and focus on the business at hand.

Ideas for how to do a search on Cryptid Night pop into my head.

“We’ll spend the week getting stories. Then, the night of the event, we can start with a campfire, food, and then spread out in the woods and look for signs of cryptids.

I’ll bring my equipment and send you a list of suggestions if people want to bring their own.

At the end of the night, everyone meets up and shares their findings.

I’ll analyze any evidence over the next week, maybe send whatever samples we find to a local vet, and we’ll release the results when the episode airs. ”

“I’m glad we have you. Because I’m totally out of my depth with this.” He drags a hand through his hair and his shoulders bunch. “Agnes just sprang this on me, and...” he clamps his mouth shut and his eyes round with guilt.

Chuckling, I hold up my hand to stop him from feeling like he has to explain himself. “Dude, don’t worry. I know my aunt can be a force of nature.”

His shoulders relax and he smiles. “Thanks. You sure you have time to do this?”

“Definitely. I was planning on doing research on a few new legends in October and putting together my travel plans for next year.” A buzz of anticipation zips through me. It’s the same buzz I get when I start a new project, but this time there’s an added tingle that flutters in my stomach.

“You can do that here. If you want. You can record in my office or one of the other rooms.”

It’s been years since I’ve been to his house. Twenty-five years since I left Maplewood at seventeen. It’s long past time for me to go back. The best thing about Maplewood was Trevor.

The tingle in my gut expands until I feel lightheaded. “Can’t wait.”

From the kitchen, Charlie’s voice rises and falls as he talks to my dog.

Trevor looks up at something over the top of his screen, nods, then returns his attention to me. “I have to go. The check-in kiosk is acting up.”

“Go ahead. I’ll see you in a couple weeks.”

He nods, waves, and reaches toward the screen.

I know he’s going for the button to end the chat, but for a second it’s like he’s reaching for me.

I hold my breath, and I swear I can feel the soft touch of his fingertip against my cheek, but it’s only wishful thinking.

The video ends and I sit staring at the screen, a hollowness that wasn’t there before carving deep in my chest.

Charlie wanders in, carrying two beers, with Hades trotting at his side. “Success, he likes the peanut butter cookie. I left a small bag of them on the counter. They’re labeled so you won’t grab them for yourself by mistake.”

“Thanks.” I take the offered bottle. “Remember that time we tasted a dog biscuit to see what it was like? You were, what, six?”

“And you were thirteen. And the biscuit was awful.” Laughing, he leans his hip on my desk. “So, you’re going to Maplewood?”

“Yeah. I’ll drive up the first Saturday in October. Spend the week doing research, then do the cryptid event the following Saturday. Maybe stay longer. Agnes isn’t someone who gets easily spooked, so I want to figure out what’s going on.”

He takes a pull of his beer. “Maybe you’ll see Mabel again. It’s not fair that you had two sightings of her when we lived there, and I never had any.”

Sharing my Mabel stories with him and Trevor sparked my love of storytelling. “You should come up with me.”

“Can’t. We’re too busy at the bakery. Maybe we can take a long weekend there next spring. But you could bring me back some maple syrup, and more of those maple cookies Agnes sent at Christmas.”

Making a mental note to pick up both, I tip my bottle to him. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He claps me on the shoulder. Though he’s seven years younger than me, we’ve always been close. “It’ll be good for you to spend time with Trevor.”

“Yeah. Good.” More than good. It’ll be the most uninterrupted time we’ve had together in over two decades. No other friends around, aside from those that live in Maplewood. I’ll be staying with him. In his house. Just the two of us.

The flutter in my stomach makes another appearance when I think about Trevor and the upcoming trip. It’s like when I’d step onto a football field for a big game or when

I embark on a new cryptid investigation. Anticipation, nerves, and excitement. Only this time it's bigger, and brighter.

I don't want to let myself dwell on why that is, or what it means.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

TREVOR

Today's the day. After three weeks of anticipation, Bram will be here any minute.

Standing on my front lawn, I peer at the road, hyper alert at every black SUV that drives my way.

Having my house on the inn's property is convenient for me to attend to issues that crop up at odd hours of the night, but today, I wish it wasn't so front and center for my reunion with Bram.

I could wait inside for him, but nervous energy pushed me out the door.

With a bark, Bandit races across the grass, the orange tennis ball we've been playing fetch with for the last ten minutes gripped in his teeth. He reaches me and drops it in my hand.

"Good boy." Rubbing his head, I check the road again then lob the ball toward the maple and pine trees at the edge of the property. Bandit takes off with the same boundless energy as when we started.

I suck in a breath and slowly blow it out.

There's a cool breeze blowing, and plenty of people are enjoying the Saturday afternoon sunshine.

Since we've been out here, Bandit and I have said hello to neighbors and to the inn's

guests on their way to the Playhouse, city park, the library, and the restaurants.

A black SUV turns onto the street. As it gets closer, it slows down and makes the turn into the small parking lot for guests behind my house, and I glimpse Bram's profile in the driver's seat.

He's here.

The ball of nerves expands from my stomach and surges through my chest and limbs.

I rub my palms on my jeans and call for Bandit.

He abandons the tennis ball and runs to me.

Since I'm not certain how he and Hades will get along, I clip on his leash and, with my heart pounding, we walk to the parking lot.

Bram crouches beside his SUV, his attention on Hades, petting the dog who is also on a leash.

Hades spots us first, and Bram follows. A smile spreads across his handsome face.

His blond hair gleaming in the sunlight, he stands, unfolding that athletic body.

Clad in blue jeans, worn brown boots, and a gray tee, he looks so good.

My arms tingle with anticipation to hug him.

"Hi, you made it." I want to rush to him, but the dogs haven't been introduced yet, so I walk slowly. Both dogs strain their leashes in their attempts to get closer to each other. No growls, just happy barks and tail wags.

Bram's smile widens, making my knees wobble. "Damn, it's good to see you."

"You too," I croak out because apparently my vocal cords have a hard time working now that Bram is standing before me. It's usually hard to keep my feelings for my friend in check, but knowing he's staying with me, just the two of us, makes it nearly impossible to act normal.

The dogs sniff each other's faces and lean in, attempting to circle, and we shift with them. Bandit is half Hades's size, but he thinks he's a big guy.

Tightening my hold on the leash stops my enthusiastic dog from tunneling under Hades. "How was the drive?"

"Not bad. We hit more traffic than I expected, but Hades is used to long rides, so we did okay."

The urge to hug Bram intensifies, and I wiggle my fingers, but the tingling in my arms continues.

Keeping an eye on the dogs, I raise my free arm and Bram leans in, wrapping his arm around me in a tight embrace.

His woodsy scent fills my lungs and my pulse stutters at the feel of his torso pressed against mine.

At six foot one, I have two inches on him, and bulkier muscles.

Growing up, he was always the taller one, until I surpassed him the summer we turned fifteen.

His eyes, the deep blue of the lake we camped by dozens of times, meet mine as we

draw apart.

I could look into them forever and never lose my fascination.

Though if I gaze for too long, I'm afraid I'll give myself away. He can read me too easily.

Thankfully, the dogs provide a distraction and place to direct my attention.

After making sure their leashes haven't become entangled, I take a few steps back.

A butterfly, probably the last of the season, has caught Hades's attention and Bandit pulls on the leash as he attempts to follow his new friend.

Bram shifts to stand beside me, giving the dogs more space to roam. He places his hand on my shoulder and his gaze travels over me from head to toe. "I like the lumberjack look."

Heat flushes into my cheeks. I glance at my blue and purple plaid button-down. "The shirts fit our guests' image of a New England inn owner."

He strokes his thumb along the material. "It's soft."

My heart rate kicks into overdrive and my neck heats at the contact. Suddenly, I wish I was wearing one of my spring and summer shirts. With the thinner cotton, I could feel his touch even more. "Um, yeah. The weather's turning cooler now, so I brought out the flannel."

With a squeeze, Bram releases me. "I might have to borrow one. Relive our grunge rock era."

“Help yourself to anything you want.” I lead the way up the steps and open the front door, tamping down the bubble of excitement that simmers to the surface with the thought of him wearing something of mine. “Let’s get your stuff inside so you and Hades can get settled.”

He and Hades step across the threshold, and the dog immediately starts sniffing around, pulling Bram farther into the living room. “Is it weird living here again?”

“The first few months after I moved back in were surreal, but then it felt like normal. I’ll point out the places I lived in town later.

” I grew up in this house, moved into my first apartment when I was nineteen, and lived in various rentals around Maplewood during my twenties and thirties.

When my parents retired to travel the country in their RV five years ago, the house became mine.

It feels like mine now with the changes in paint colors and furniture.

“Are you too tired from the drive, or are you still up for taking a walk around town?”

“I’m good to walk. Agnes texted me earlier, asking if we had time to meet up with her and her friends to get their cryptid stories this afternoon. So, you and I are supposed to be at her house in two hours.”

Bandit sits while I unclip his leash. I signal for him to stay and pat his head when he remains at my feet.

“I figured she’d want to see you right away.

She’s mentioned your visit every time I’ve seen her the last few weeks.

I'm going to put Bandit in the side yard while we bring in your stuff.

Hades has a water bowl in the kitchen. Oh, and that dog bed there is his.

"I point to the large, soft bed beside Bandit's smaller one.

Bram's grin widens and warms like sunbeams spreading over the maple trees, highlighting and deepening the brilliant colors of the leaves. "You bought my dog a bowl and a bed?"

"I wanted you both to feel at home." My ears are burning. I hustle Bandit through the hallway and kitchen, then out the back door and into the small fenced-in yard.

When I return, Hades is off his leash and drinking water from his bowl. His hands tucked into the back pockets of his jeans, Bram nods at the dog bed. "You didn't have to do that, but thanks."

I shrug my shoulders, not wanting to make a big deal out of it.

I'd do the same for any guest in my home.

Sure, I may have researched the best kind of dog beds for big dogs, and yes, I may have splurged on a special foam mattress for Hades that costs more than some mattresses for humans.

But I'm sure I would do the same for any of my friends.

Probably. Whatever, it doesn't matter, it's done.

"Let's get your stuff. The smallest guest room is probably the quietest for you to record in. You can sleep in my old room."

Unloading his suitcases and his recording equipment takes two trips. We set the equipment in the guest room at the back of the house and put his luggage in the bedroom that used to be mine. It looks out over the space separating the carriage house and mansion from my house.

Bram slings a duffel bag on the bed, and his quick grin stutters my heartbeat. “This is great, thank you.”

“If recording in the other room doesn’t work out, we can find you someplace else. And, there’s a recording studio in New Island. Ever’s boyfriend used it to make his quartet’s latest album.”

“It’ll be fine. I’m not worried.” Bram’s gaze falls on the bookcase. “This is the one you made?”

“Yeah. Reclaimed wood from a barn that was torn down.”

He traces his fingers along the carvings. “It’s really nice. All the detail. And it’s so smooth.”

“I’m happy with the way it turned out.”

With a soft groan, he stretches his arms over his head. The hem of his shirt rides up, giving a glimpse of toned abs.

I drag my attention from his abs, my gaze colliding with his.

The air around us crackles. Or more likely, the crackling air is just static from low humidity and the lack of rain we’ve had the last several weeks.

I clear my throat and toss my thumb over my shoulder.

“We should go. I think I hear Bandit scratching the door.”

Downstairs, Bram enters the kitchen first so I don't startle Hades.

When I open the back door, Bandit rockets toward me and jumps up.

Cradling him against my chest, I stand, mostly curious and a little worried that he and Hades will have forgotten about each other during the minutes they were separated.

Their tails wagging, Bandit and Hades look at each other, and Hades wanders closer, but Bram detours his path with a single command and we ready them for the walk. I don't want to jump the gun on them becoming comfortable with each other, but so far, so good.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

After a stop by the front door for Bram to grab his leather jacket, we set off on a winding tour of the homes beyond the inn.

I point out the three apartments and two houses I rented over the years.

We loop around the firehouse, then cut through the city park, the trees showing off with vibrant colors of red, orange, and golden yellow.

The last time we walked these streets together, we were seventeen.

Now, we're forty-two. It feels like a lifetime has passed since Bram's been away.

It's so good and weirdly strange to be walking here with him again.

If he hadn't had a football career waiting for him, would he have stayed?

And if he had, what would've become of us?

Bram gazes at the colorful storefronts lining Maple Street. "I don't know what I was expecting. A lot of places still look the same. But a lot is different."

The places that have been here forever, like Sparky's Diner, Red's Diner, The Striped Maple, and the Playhouse on Garnet Avenue near my inn haven't changed much.

The new shops, like the coffee place, the ice cream shop, and Ever's store, are welcome additions to the town.

Across the street, the three are in a row, directly in front of the park.

“I’m looking forward to seeing Ever. But first, I need caffeine.” Bram points to Special Blend, his brows raised in question.

“They make great coffee. Let’s go.”

We jog across the street and I leave him outside with the dogs, promising to return with lattes for the two of us and Ever.

I’m conscious of him every moment I’m inside the coffee shop and I have to force myself to keep my eyes forward instead of constantly peeking out the window to watch my friend.

It’s like part of me still can’t believe he’s here.

Back outside, in the cool autumn air, Bram accepts his latte with a smile and a thanks.

Holding the tray with my latte and Ever’s, I open the door to the Honey Spot. Ever’s never minded when I’ve stopped in with Bandit, and I know he’s looking forward to seeing Bram. “Hello? Ever?”

Footsteps sound from the back of the shop, and then our silver fox friend comes into view. His face breaks into a smile. “Hey, guys.”

“I come bearing lattes.” I set the tray down on the counter. “And longtime friends.”

Ever and Bram exchange hugs, and Ever claps him on the shoulder as they draw apart. “Good to see you, Bram. I couldn’t believe it when Trevor said you were coming.”

“The store looks great.” Bram loops Hades’s leash around his wrist a few times, drawing the dog to his side. “Your grandfather would be proud. Oh, and I need to order more soap, and honey.”

Stooped down, petting the dogs, Ever runs a thumb under his eye before looking up at us. He and his grandfather were close and even after a decade, I know Ever still misses him. “Do you want to take them back to the inn today, or later, when you don’t have your hands full of lattes and dogs?”

Bram grins at Ever’s dry tone. “Later would be great. I’ll stop in toward the end of the week.”

Brushing his hands on his thighs, Ever stands. “Have you started your investigation research?”

“Not on the ground here yet, but over the last week and a half, people have reached out with stories, thanks to the festival committee putting the word out. I talked to Ethan Gallagher a few days ago. Since he’s back in Seattle for hockey season, and couldn’t meet in person to tell me about his Mabel sightings, we did our interview over a video call.

I didn’t know he bought the Montgomery family’s place. ”

“Yeah. He bought it when he was here in the spring.” I sip my latte. The property is thirty acres of mostly woods with a great pond every kid in Maplewood loved playing on in the winter.

“He swears that, as a kid and teen, he and his friends saw Mabel there.” Bram bounces lightly on his toes like he did when he played football and couldn’t wait to get off the sidelines and back in the game.

“Ethan pays Tommy Harrington to leave food for Mabel every couple of weeks during hockey season, carrying on a tradition that the Montgomerys had. He’d helped the Montgomerys build a place for Mabel’s food back when he was a kid.

He said we can investigate on the property if we want. Really nice guy.”

Ever slips behind the counter, pulls out a box of dog treats that he started carrying once I adopted Bandit, and sets it in front of us. “Ethan’s great. Did you hear his moms bought the Playhouse a few years ago?”

“Ethan mentioned they’re showing scary movies this month as part of the Halloween activities.

” Bram digs two bones out of the box, handing one to me and one to Hades.

“I remember Grace and Elena, but with Ethan eight years younger than us, I didn’t know him when I lived here.

It’s nice talking to a fellow athlete, even if we do play different sports. ”

The wistfulness in his tone catches me. I look up from feeding Bandit his treat. “Are you missing football?”

“A little. Sometimes I miss it a lot. I was lucky to play for as long as I did.” He was a cornerback for most of his career then moved positions to safety for his last few seasons.

I want to cheer him up, want to keep him smiling, and think I know how. “You know that spot in the woods we always used to go to after your football games here?”

He grins. “Yeah. Those were good times. We have to go back and see it.”

“We will.” I cast a sly glance at Ever. “Ever took Dmitri there, and things got heated.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

Ever’s eyes grow wide and he sputters his latte.

I continue, “And Mabel interrupted them.”

Bram’s laugh bellows out loud in the small space. With Hades circling his legs, he faces Ever. “Mabel cockblocked you?”

Ever tucks the box of treats underneath the counter and pulls out a box of tissues. “I guess you could put it that way.”

“Oh, man. I need the full story.” Biting his lip can’t hide Bram’s smile. He pats Ever on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, it won’t be in the podcast.”

“Thanks.” Ever swipes a tissue over spatters of brown liquid dotting the counter. “And thanks for sharing that, Trevor. ”

Giving him the most innocent expression I can muster, I sip my drink. “Where is Dmitri?”

“Teaching violin lessons at Harmonic Circus.” He tosses the wet tissues in the trash can, then props his butt on the stool, his arms folded over his Honey Spot T-shirt. “That day in the woods, we saw something move in the trees. I had a feeling it was Mabel.”

“Maybe she’ll reveal herself again. You’re coming to Cryptid Night?” Bram unwinds the leash from his legs.

“We’ll be there,” Ever confirms easily, like there was never any doubt. He’s a good

friend. Always supportive. Though I'm sure he's guessed my feelings for Bram, I know he won't say anything to him.

The door opens and two women enter, one pushing a stroller and the other holding the hands of two toddlers. Hades starts wagging his tail, straining his leash, and Bandit does the same. Bram and I meet each other's gazes.

"Time to go." I angle my head toward the door and he nods his agreement.

We bid Ever goodbye, let the kids pet the dogs, then hustle our furry friends out the door.

Bram touches my shoulder and inclines his head in the direction of Clover Street. "Ever looked good."

"Being in love agrees with him. Dmitri is awesome." We pass Scoops on Maple, the vet clinic, and the town hall before turning down the street where Agnes lives. "Do you know who will be at Agnes's house?"

"The Rocktogenarians. They're sticking around after band practice."

I groan and grin. The five women in their eighties, making up a band whose music is as eclectic as its members, are a force individually, but when they get together, nothing stops them. "We might need a drink after this."

"Oh, I know. I needed two after I met up with them in Philly when they played in that music festival a few years ago. They're great, but overwhelming."

We reach Agnes's house with its sprawling garden. Multiple voices come from the backyard. Bram opens the gate and gestures for Bandit and me to go first. I slide past him, and my stomach flips at the way his eyes twinkle.

Hades's and Bandit's twin barks announce our arrival. Agnes comes around the side of the house, and she lights up upon seeing Bram. "You're here. Come, let me look at you."

Bram ambles over and stoops to hug her. "It's good to be back."

She kisses my cheek, pets the dogs, then links her arm through Bram's. "The girls and I are on the back deck."

We round the corner, and the four women sitting at the bright blue table call out cheery hellos.

Rae, the band's front woman, with her halo of white hair, leather jacket, and oversized sunglasses, raises her glass to us. "About time you got here. Agnes has been going on about you for hours."

Eleanor, the drummer and Rae's partner, sits beside her, elegant in black silk. "Hello, Bram, Trevor."

Celia, who plays the bass guitar, waves a manicured hand that matches her red platforms toward the open chairs on the table's opposite side. "Sit, please."

I drag out a chair for Bram, then one for myself. "Thanks. How was practice?"

"Fun. We're experimenting with death metal.

" Clad in paint-splattered overalls, Celia's partner and the band's keyboard player, Lydia pushes back her chair and welcomes the dogs with open arms. "So handsome, both of you." Then she raises her head to smile at Bram and me.

"Bram, Agnes tells us that Hades found you? "

He drops into the chair at my side. “Yeah. I’d just come back from England, where I did an investigation on the myth of the black shuck in the British Isles.

They’re spectral hounds. Some call them hellhounds.

” Resting his arm on the back of my chair, Bram sits back and stretches out his legs.

“Anyway, I went camping on my own to unwind. A large, shaggy-haired black dog wandered out of the woods and came right up to me. My first thought was of the black shuck. He didn’t have a microchip, and no one in the area reported a missing dog.

I think he’d been on his own for a while. He’s been with me ever since.”

“According to the legends, the black shuck can range from being kind and nurturing to vicious and baneful.” Repeating what I learned from Bram about the myth, I may or may not press into his side a little.

Only to keep warm in the slight chill of the late afternoon, of course.

“Like what people think of Mabel. Some stories are of her helping people and others are of her scaring them.”

Bram shifts in his chair causing his thigh to rest against mine. “You know I’m here for the Mabel stories, but also to investigate what you saw last month. Is it okay with you if I record our conversation?”

“Of course, dear.” Agnes gives him a regal wave.

He takes out his phone, opens the recording app, and sets it on the table. “Tell me about what happened.”

She refills her tumbler with the tawny liquid of her favorite whiskey. “We played our set at The Striped Maple, an homage to eighties punk bands.”

“We rocked the place.” Rae lifts her glass, clinking it to Agnes’s.

“When I was driving home, a massive shadow of something with huge wings was ahead of me on the road. I couldn’t make out what it was, so I turned on my high beams. I looked up and there, darker than the night sky, was this thing .

” She shivers. “Flying, or more like hovering over me. My heart was in my throat. I nearly ran off the road. Then it flew into the woods.” She shakes her hand toward the sky.

“Scariest night of my life. And you know some of the things I’ve seen and done. I’m not easily frazzled.”

Eleanor rubs Agnes’s back in soothing circles and adds, “I saw something huge and hairy in the woods on the edge of the highway last month. Rae saw the same thing a week later by the fairgrounds.”

“And you’re sure it wasn’t a bear?” Bram asks.

Rae lowers her large sunglasses to peer at us over the top. “It didn’t lumber like one. It was quick, on two legs. Moved more like a primate.”

Interest piqued, Bram leans forward, his forearms resting on his thighs while maintaining the contact of our legs. “Have you seen anything since then?”

“We’ve heard things.” Celia glances at Agnes, who nods. “Bram, we’d like you to come to our next gardening club meeting on Thursday afternoon. People there have similar stories. Daniel is convinced there’s a wolf-man in the woods.”

“Sure. I’ll be there.” He leans back, his arm resuming its position draped across the back of my chair.

“My tap dancing class is on Wednesday morning. You can meet me after it. Our instructor saw the winged thing too. He’d like to tell you about it.

” Agnes’s eyes light up and I can’t tell if it’s from the excitement of the sightings or having Bram in town.

“Oh, and my friend Zeke always puts food out for Mabel. Something’s eating it. You should chat with him.”

Sipping my latte, I listen as the Rocktogenarians toss out name after name of people Bram should meet amid tales of their escapades.

The brush of his hand against my shoulder is distracting and comforting, causing an eruption of goose bumps over my too sensitive skin and ramping up my desire to see exactly what the skin beneath his ear tastes like.

Having him back in town is better than I imagined. But I’m beginning to doubt that I’ll be able to keep my feelings hidden. Facing down mythic monsters is less scary than the thought of accidentally blurting out that I love him.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

brAM

The quiet of Trevor's gray and white kitchen, scented by coffee and the faint trace of toasted bread and ham from the sandwiches we shared at lunch before he returned to the inn, turned out to be a good place for me to jot down notes and record the stories of sightings I gathered yesterday.

I've been in here for hours, refueling with coffee and just enjoying being in his space.

From my conversations with Agnes and her friends, and the people I met when we grabbed dinner last night at Sparky's Diner with Ever and Dmitri, I've filled several pages.

And with the interview I have scheduled for later tonight, I know I'll add more.

It's only my second day here, but I hope Trevor and I are able to start most of our mornings together like we did today, sharing coffee and breakfast. I knew I missed him, but I didn't realize how much.

Whenever Trevor and I met up for our group vacations, I always felt lighter, felt like I could breathe, and I figured it was because I was in vacation mode.

But being with him yesterday and this morning confirms that it wasn't the vacations that made my heart feel like it was going to flutter out of my chest. Nor was it hanging out with friends that sharpened my senses so I always knew where Trevor was, even if I couldn't see him.

No, it was the man himself who did all those things and more.

My phone beeps with the alarm I set four hours ago, when I resumed working after lunch. I turn it off, save my document, and glance at Hades, lying on the floor by my chair. “It’s time for us to meet up with Bram and Jo. And Bandit.”

His ears twitch at Bandit’s name, the same way they do when I tell him we’re going on a walk. When Trevor and I came down this morning, we found the dogs curled up together on the couch. I figured they’d get along, and I’m so happy they do.

After closing my laptop, I stand and glance at my jeans, T-shirt, and the black and gray plaid shirt Trevor left hanging on the back of the chair before he went to work.

It’s warm and soft, and smells like him.

Wearing it is like being wrapped in one of his hugs.

He told me I could borrow anything I wanted and I’m taking him at his word.

“Come on, boy, let’s go.”

At the sight of his leash in my hand, Hades dances my way. We grab the key Trevor left so I could lock up, my jacket, and head outside. The air is colder than early October in Philly. Fresher too, without the air pollution that comes with living in a big city.

We cross the lawn, go by the carriage house, and then walk up the steps of the mansion.

Entering is like stepping back in time. Pieces of furniture that are so familiar mix with newer items I’ve only seen in photos Trevor has shared.

The scent is different from when I was a kid too, maple and cinnamon, welcoming us inside.

Jo is behind the desk and Trevor in front, leaning over the polished wood, studying a screen. His burgundy plaid shirt, tighter than the one he wore yesterday, shows off his muscles, as do his jeans, and they have me stumbling to a halt. My gaze lingers on my sexy friend.

“Bram!” Jo spots me first and I tear my gaze from Trevor’s body.

She rushes around the desk, a brunette whirlwind bedecked in purple. Hades pulls me forward, ready to meet a new friend. Trevor, with Bandit trotting beside him, follows at a slower pace.

Jo’s hug is as fierce as I remember. When we separate, she cuddles Hades, her attention split between us. “Seeing you on the socials is nice, but in person is better.”

“Always.” We’ve been friends for almost as long as I’ve known Trevor. “You still like working with this guy?” I clap Trevor on the back and my fingers flex at the combination of soft flannel and hard muscle under my hand. I’m reluctant to let go.

Jo flicks an amused glance at our friend. “Enough that I’m invested in his happiness and well-being. I convinced him to take time off while you’re here. My homecoming gift to you both. You’re welcome.”

“Yeah?” Hand still on Trevor’s back, I slide it up and squeeze his shoulder, my grin growing with the thrill of uninterrupted time with him.

A faint pink tinge colors Trevor’s cheeks. “I’ll still need to come in, but I reduced my hours.”

“Good.” Really good. I’ll take every minute I can get.

Jo retraces her steps to retrieve her long sweater from behind the desk. “Ready for dinner?”

“Starving.” Trevor clips the leash to Bandit’s harness. “I texted Conall to let him know we’re bringing the dogs. He said the patio heaters are on, so we’ll be fine there.”

I ruffle Hades’s hair. “My interview with Alex MacDougall shouldn’t take long. I might have to duck inside the pub for it. ”

Trevor leans over the desk, his shirt stretches with the movement showing off defined muscles in his back, and grabs his puffer vest from the chair.

He slips it on, looking every bit the part of a sexy New England innkeeper.

“No worries, I’ll watch Hades. Jo invited her cousin Alaric and his boyfriend, I think Ever and Dmitri are coming, and, knowing Maplewood, more people will show up.

He’ll have so many new friends to meet, he won’t miss you. ”

“Thanks.”

Trevor and Jo wave to a man with short, bubblegum pink hair who’s stepped behind the desk. Before Hades can decide that he wants to make yet another friend, I guide him outside.

The wind scatters gold and orange leaves over the pathway. I’ve missed the changing of the seasons here, with the mountains in the distance. It’s so peaceful. I suck in a breath, letting the crisp autumn air fill my lungs and wonder again why I stayed away

for so long.

Bandit barrels out the door ahead of Trevor, and our dogs greet each other like it's been days, not minutes, since they parted, entangling their leashes.

Laughing, I change hands, unwinding the straps. "I don't know if The Striped Maple is ready for you two."

"They'll be all right," Trevor assures me, then looks down at the dogs as if he needs his own assurance. "Won't you?"

Ugh, could this man be any more adorable?

In a good friend kind of way, of course.

As we walk the few blocks to the pub, chatting like no time has passed, a wave of nostalgia hits me.

Memories of Halloweens trick-or-treating with Trevor, Jo, and Ever.

Summers exploring the woods looking for Mabel.

Winters sledding and skating. And weekends at the Playhouse watching movies as spring showers battered the streets.

Even now, after decades away, I consider the friends I made in Maplewood to be my closest.

A large banner hanging across Maple Avenue advertises Maplewood's Fun and Fright Fest. I point to it. "What goes on at the Halloween festival? It didn't exist when I lived here."

“There’s costume parades for pets and kids, a corn maze, craft activities, and local vendors selling their wares on the Saturday before Halloween.

” Trevor ticks each one off on his fingers, and I remember he was on the committee for several years.

“A pumpkin carving contest, and music from local bands.”

“Plus a house decorating contest which starts two weeks before Halloween, the week-long haunted house at the inn during the week of Halloween, and adult trick-or-treating on Halloween night, after the kids are finished,” Jo adds.

“That’s a lot.” And it sounds fun. I wonder if I could stretch out my stay so I can experience it.

“And it gets bigger every year. Case in point, Cryptid Night.”

The pub is on the same street as Ever’s shop. After we’re seated at a table on the patio, under rows of fairy lights, Trevor shoots him a text letting him know where we are.

Our table is close to one of the portable heaters. It’s warm enough for me to shrug out of my jacket. I slip the leather over the back of my chair.

Trevor’s gaze rakes over me and for a moment, I swear heat flares in his brown depths. “Nice shirt.”

Oh, right. The flannel. I look down, then smile at him. “You said I could help myself.”

“And I meant it. You look good.” Clearing his throat, he rubs his hand over the back

of his neck. “Ah... Let’s get drinks.”

We leave the dogs with Jo so she can flag down Ever, Alaric, and their significant others.

Stationed at the outdoor bar at the patio’s center, a redheaded bartender gives us a winning smile. Then he winks at my best friend. “Trevor, looking good tonight.”

I can’t stop the fine blade of possessiveness stabbing my gut or the way my hand clamps onto Trevor’s shoulder.

His green eyes twinkling, the guy shifts his attention to me and gives my hand a deliberate stare. “And who’s this?”

“Bram Macleod.” My jaw tight, I keep my hold on Trevor. My tone isn’t as friendly as it should be, considering I don’t personally know this guy and Trevor’s never mentioned being interested in a flirty ginger bartender. But what if he is? I don’t like it. At all.

“Oh, you’re Bram.” He smiles. “I should’ve recognized the Macleod blue eyes. Gorgeous color.”

The muscles under my hand tense. Trevor presses closer to me, edging the barest bit forward. Like maybe he’s trying to block me from Conall’s view?

Conall continues, “You probably don’t remember me. I’m Conall Kelly. My brother Rory is friends with your brother Charlie.”

“Oh. Right. I know Rory.” Come to think of it, Conall resembles his brother, with the green eyes and red hair. “And yeah, I don’t think you and I met when I lived here.”

Conall looks like he's about thirty, so he's five years younger than Charlie and Rory.

His tee with The Striped Maple's logo pulls tight over his chest as he wipes the bar.

"Welcome back to Maplewood. Everyone's talking about your upcoming investigation.

I know we're offering a drink special for your attendees. What can I get you tonight?"

"Whatever you have on tap is fine." I turn my head toward Trevor. He's so close, my lips nearly graze his temple. "Trev, what do you want?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

His gaze darts to my mouth, and I swear I hear the faintest whimper come out on a puff of warm air from his lips before his gaze returns to my eyes. “The same. Thanks. And a hard cider for Jo.”

“Coming right up.” Conall moves away, whistling as he goes, only to stop and compliment the person three seats down.

The tension in Trevor’s muscles eases, though he’s still standing close enough I can see the lighter shades of caramel in his eyes. “He’s like that with everyone.”

I run my thumb back and forth along his shoulder because I have yet to move my hand from it. “Good thing I’m not interested in him. Are you?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve known Rory and Conall forever. We’ve been spending more time together since Alaric started dating Jake. Jake’s older brother is Zach, one of Rory’s partners.”

“So many tangled threads.” I don’t know who any of these people are, and I don’t care, but I would listen to Trevor list everyone who lives in Maplewood if it meant being this close to him.

“You have no idea. Wait till everyone is in one room. Pure chaos.” Gaze still locked on me, he tips his head in Conall’s direction. “Conall’s sweet. He genuinely means the nice things he says. But he’s only interested in one person, though he won’t admit it.”

Ah. Much like me.

Conall returns with our drinks. Trevor claims his and Jo's then his gaze goes past my shoulder toward the other side of the patio. "Alex just arrived and is heading this way. In the green shirt, twelve o'clock."

"Thanks." Drink in hand, I turn in that direction.

A shorter guy with brown hair, hazel eyes, and a smattering of freckles across his nose, waves as he approaches us. "Hi, Trevor. And you're Bram?"

"That's me." I extend my hand and we shake. "Nice to meet you. Thanks for taking the time." I gesture toward the bar. "What can I get you?"

Before Alex can answer, Conall slides in and leans over the bar. "Hey, Alex. Your usual?"

"Sure. Thanks, Conall."

Conall winks at him then gets busy mixing a drink, tossing out compliments to Alex, me, and everyone else in the vicinity as he works.

When Conall sets the glass on the bar, I tap the polished wood. "Add it to my tab."

He gives me a thumbs-up in response before he moves on to the next patron.

"I'll leave you to your interview. Alex, you're welcome to join us for dinner when you're finished." Trevor gestures toward the table with Jo and our other friends.

"Thanks, Trevor. I'd love to, but I'm meeting Cody after this."

"Tell him I said hi." Trevor smiles at us, pats my shoulder, then waves and heads back to our friends.

Alex points out two vacant barstools toward the far end of the bar. “Let’s sit there.”

Holding my drink high to protect it from the throng, I follow him. This section is less crowded and out of the path of foot traffic, less of a chance of getting jostled or interrupted.

He takes a sip of his drink, then leans in so we can hear each other over the din. “How has your investigation been going?”

The scent of fries and burgers wafts toward us.

I press a hand over my rumbling stomach.

Research interview first, food later. “I’m getting a good mix of stories.

Recent sightings, ones that are decades old, and encounters that are positive and negative.

It’s been really interesting.” I hold up my phone.

“Are you okay with me recording the interview?”

“Sure.”

I hit the button and set the phone between us. “How old were you when you thought you saw Mabel?”

“Twelve.”

“Where did it happen?”

“In Finn Hunnicutt’s backyard, early in the morning.

Summer break had just started, and I’d spent the night at Finn’s for a sleepover.

This was at the house he grew up in, not his current home behind the vet clinic.

I got up early and went into the back yard to try out my new camera.

My parents had given me a Canon EOS 350D for my birthday.

And that’s when I saw her. I’ve never spotted her again.

I’ve heard that you think you saw her twice? ”

I down a mouthful of beer. “Yeah, when I first got to Maplewood as a kid and right before I moved away. Other times, I was in the woods and got the feeling that something or someone was watching me, but I didn’t see anything.

Those were probably animals.” Thinking about those moments now, I can easily recall the chill of fear.

“I didn’t have any equipment then. Now, I have night vision mode and cameras that can detect heat signatures.

Good for trying to catch cryptids, but also to look out for wolves, bears, or big cats. ”

He pulls an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and passes it to me. “Here’s a copy of the photo. By the time I got my camera up, I hadn’t had time to account for the low lighting of barely dawn and Mabel was moving fast, so it came out blurry.”

I open the envelope and slide the photo onto the bar. Alex points to a long, leafy blur

amid the trees in the middle of the picture. Their bend and angle look almost like arms and legs captured in mid-motion, but could easily be branches or vines. The image is too fuzzy to make out details. “Hmm.”

He nods. “Right? I guess you get sent a lot of pictures that are inconclusive.”

“I do.” Leaning against the bar, I swipe through my phone’s photo carousel, showing him some of the things people have shared with me.

“Most people who reach out are pretty shaken up by what they experienced. That’s why it’s so important to me to investigate and see if sightings can be explained by something mundane.

” I pick up the photo by the edge so I don’t smudge it with fingerprints.

“Can I include this in my episode about Mabel?”

“Sure, if you want.”

As we finish our drinks, Alex tells me about his experiences photographing the various festivals and confirms he’ll be taking pictures during Cryptid Night.

After he leaves, I reclaim my seat at the table beside Trevor and greet Alaric, Jake, Ever, and Dmitri. Our group has grown in size with the addition of Rory Kelly and his partners Adrian and Zach. The throuple run the pub together.

Hades has enough lead with his leash to visit each of us, accepting pets and watching the floor for any dropped food. Bandit is content to curl up on Trevor’s lap.

Conall brings me a fresh drink and a generous serving of shepherd's pie. He drags over an empty chair and sits, stealing one of Rory’s fries. “I have a Mabel story for

you.”

I drive my fork through the layer of mashed potatoes and into the ground beef. “Hit me with it.”

“The four of us went rock climbing.” He points to himself, then to Jake, Zach, and Alaric. “We were about to attempt a new area, but something in the woods kept drawing us away from it. I swear I saw our leafy green goddess. Zach thinks my eyes were playing tricks on me.”

Zach raises his pint. “I still stand by that.”

Conall waves him away. “All I know is, the next day, we heard that area was damaged by falling boulders, and if we’d been there, there’s a pretty high chance we would’ve been injured. ”

I pass my fork to Trevor so he can try the pie. “You think Mabel saved you?”

He beams a smile. “Of course.”

“People who’ve been lost in the woods credit her for guiding them to safety. So, it’s possible.”

Vindication flaring bright in his green gaze, Conall turns to Zach. “See?”

“I’ll believe in Mabel when I see her.” Zach bites into his burger. He and his brother share the same strong and stocky frame and could be twins except for their haircuts. Short and blond for Jake and a mohawk for Zach.

“Come to Cryptid Night.” Jake’s suggestion holds a thin edge of challenge. “Alaric and I will be there. So will half of the people sitting here.”

Zach rolls his eyes, but the gesture lacks any heat. “Fine. But only because I’m curious. And you might need me.”

Jake snorts. “Says the man who jumped at the sight of a spider the other day.”

“It was two inches from my face. Let’s see you stay calm in that situation.”

Conall leans back, tucking his hands behind his head. “They’ll do this for hours.”

Adrian smirks. “So will you and Rory.”

As we eat and try the pub’s new maple infused beer, the playful jabs continue, layering under multiple conversations ranging from the format for Cryptid Night, Halloween costumes, music lessons, the pub’s seasonal menu, and Jo taking part in the pumpkin carving contest. In a way, this group reminds me of my football teammates and the guys I went to college with.

Close-knit, fun, and though they might argue, they enjoy each other’s company.

I’ve been so immersed in the podcast that I haven’t found many friends in Philly yet, aside from Charlie and a few guys on Philly’s pro football team.

Maybe it’s more of my brother’s city than mine. Maybe Maplewood was my place all along.

Trevor leans into me and his breath feathers over my ear. “Should we get out of here? We need to feed the dogs.”

“Yeah, let’s go home.” I reach for my jacket, but he plucks it up before I can, and hands it to me.

Saying goodbye takes a while with so many people, but soon we're on our way. The night's turned colder now that the sun has set. Goose bumps break out all over my skin as we walk home beneath a sky with more stars than I've seen in a while.

When we get inside Trevor's house, he takes one look at me, tells me that my lips are turning purple at the edges, and insists I take a hot shower while he feeds the dogs.

Warm again, and smelling of his soap, I return to the kitchen. My laptop waits for me on the table.

Trevor finishes adding fresh water to the dogs' bowls. "I'm heading to bed."

"I'll be up soon. I want to get some ideas down." The slide of the chair against the floor seems loud with the rest of the house so quiet.

He nods, then rests his hand on my shoulder. "Don't work too late."

"I won't." I look into those gorgeous brown eyes and want to ask him to stay. Don't go to bed yet. But that's ridiculous. Right?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Biting his lip, he holds my gaze for a beat, then turns away, calling for Bandit to follow.

Hades settles beside me as I work, adding the stories I learned of tonight. The sound of the shower running drifts from upstairs. Picturing Bram under the spray with steam billowing around him is too easy. Then my brain helpfully adds me into the fantasy.

Concentrating on cryptid encounters is impossible. I'm glad he's upstairs. My joggers don't conceal the effect an image of a hot, wet Trevor has on my body. I shift in the chair, palming my hardening dick, but it doesn't help.

I get up and drink a glass of water. The window over the sink shows a view of the side lawn. There's a flash of something dark along the edge of the property. Probably a deer, or someone returning to the inn. They're gone too quick for me to get a better look.

My phone beeps with a text from Charlie, checking in. As I respond to my brother, the shower turns off. I try working again, before giving up.

Hades has fallen asleep, so I ease past him and make my way upstairs.

As I step onto the second level, the sound of a voice that isn't Trevor and resembles mine comes from his bedroom. Curious, I tread careful steps down the hallway. His door is halfway open. His back is to me and he's hanging clothes in the closet.

It is my voice. One of the special stories I send exclusively to him is coming from the phone on his bed. I remember the investigation from last fall. He and I talked about

the stories, so I know he's listened to this before.

Happiness as sweet as the maple drink we sampled at the pub slides through me. I should back away, not infringe on his private time.

The jangle of a dog tag and nails tapping the floor come from my left. "Woof!"

Hades's bark startles me into hitting Trevor's door. It flies open.

Trevor spins in a flash toward the door. Bandit, who'd been asleep in the dog bed in Trevor's room, wakes up, shakes, sees me, and barks.

Busted.

Heat flames my neck, my face, my ears. Even the top of my head is hot with embarrassment. I grab hold of Hades's collar before he can rush into Trevor's room. "I, uh..."

A flush colors his cheeks and ears. He looks from me to his phone, and in two strides, has it in his hand. With the jabbing of his finger, the story falls silent. He slowly lowers his phone to his side then drops it onto the mattress. "Um."

It's one thing for me to be burning red, but I can't bear for him to be embarrassed, especially over me.

I thought he only listened to the new episodes and stories as they arrived, but if he's playing them more than once...

Warmth coils low, snaking through me. I release Hades so he can curl up with Bandit.

My hands tucked into my pockets, I step inside the room. "That was a fun

investigation.”

“It’s one of my favorites.” His face still flushed, he’s looking everywhere but at me.

“Look, I don’t know what to say. Is this weird?”

“Why would it be weird? You said you listen to the stories while you get ready for bed.”

“Yeah, but you know I already listened to this one. We talked about it.” Eyes focused on the floor, he rubs the back of his neck.

I bend at the knees in an attempt to see if I can tell what he’s thinking. My heart pounds because I want to make this right. I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have Trevor. “Hey. It’s not weird. Makes me feel good knowing you really like them.”

He finally raises his gaze to meet mine.

What looks like hope shines in his brown eyes.

And maybe a little relief. “I do. It... makes me feel closer to you.” His focus drops to the floor again, his voice tentative.

“I never told you this, but I struggled a lot after you moved away. Went from seeing you every day for seven years to nothing. Then when we started the yearly vacations, that helped, but it’s?— ”

Not enough,” I finish. “I know. For me either.” I take a step closer.

He plops onto the mattress and peers up through his eyelashes. “I know you had to go. You had football waiting for you.”

“But now, I don’t.” Another step. And another until I’m in front of him. I drop to my knees and rest my fingers on the worn patch of denim where his knee meets his thigh. “I’m sorry I didn’t come back sooner. Sorry I didn’t fly you out to see me more.”

Softness comes into his eyes. He squeezes my shoulder. Once. Twice. The feel of our connection is so right. “It wasn’t all on you. Life got in the way for both of us.”

I want to tug him to me and reassure him with my lips, but the moment feels fragile, and I won’t risk our friendship. It means too much. He means too much. “Things will be different now. I promise. If you don’t mind Hades and me crashing here, I can come up more often.”

“You’re always welcome. Anytime.” His voice is low, smooth, and the upturn of his lips warms me from the inside out.

“You should come with me on an investigation, if you can take time away,” I hedge because for the first time in a long time, I realize how lonely I’ve been.

Sure, I have friends and I’ve been lucky to have not one but two careers that I love.

But being back in Maplewood, back with Trevor, fills a hollow spot in my center I tried to run from.

Those enticing lips spread into a beaming smile, his white teeth on full display. “You want me to come with you? Just the two of us?”

“And the dogs. It would be great. The outdoor company that sponsors my podcast sent me a ton of camping equipment. We could try it out. ”

Eyes gleaming and smile radiating, he bobs his head. “I could do that.”

The tightness in my muscles finally eases. “Good.” I pat his thigh. “Now lie down.”

His brows shoot up. “What?”

“Lie down. You don’t need a recording when you have the real thing. I’ll tell you a story.” I stand, and look at him expectantly while he gapes at me. “Come on. It’s a good one.”

After a few seconds more of gaping, he narrows his eyes, a smirk playing on his lips, but then he slides under the covers.

I turn out the overhead light. Shadows envelop the room. Walking toward the bed, with Trevor waiting there for me, I’m hit with an urge to slip under the covers with him and draw him into my arms. It’s so strong, my steps falter.

The mattress sinks under my weight. My thigh brushes Trevor’s arm, but he doesn’t shift away and neither do I. Leaning against the headboard, I begin the story. “It all started when a bear came across my trail camera and decided to take it with him.”

Sitting here with him in the dark is peaceful, listening to him breathe, his low chuckles, and whispered questions. It’s the most intimate thing I’ve done in a long time.

I hope I get to do it again, and again, every night for as long as I’m here.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

TREVOR

The last remnants of sunset, pink and orange hues, fade as the sun sinks below the trees covering the mountains.

Orange, yellow, and red color the leaves clinging to the trees, creating patches of warmth amid the dark green of the pine trees in the forest around us.

The evening is clear and cold, though the blazing campfire keeps us warm.

Spread out in a wide circle around the fire, wearing the reflective yellow safety vests we passed out to every Cryptid Night attendee along with their choice of flashlight or headlamp, locals and people from out of town enjoy hot chocolate, cider, hot dogs, and roasted marshmallows.

Over sixty people signed up for our event, so we had to call in reinforcements in the form of begging our friends to help out.

Sitting on a wide tree stump with Bram, I draw my roasting stick away from the flames. The marshmallows are more charred than I like, but I don't want to waste them.

Bram, bundled into two of my plaid flannels under his leather jacket, a knit hat, and gloves, bumps my shoulder. "Here. We'll trade. "

He hands me a roasting stick with two golden brown marshmallows then takes the blackened ones from me.

The gesture makes my insides feel as gooey as the sugary treat. “Thanks.”

We eat our toasted marshmallows, leaning against each other, and the press of being shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh, is a thrill.

The sounds of the woods at night, the cold air, warm fire, and sharing snacks with Bram takes me back to so many memories of summers and autumns camping together.

Bram keeps smiling. Seeing him so happy and in his element makes everything seem lighter and brighter, and I’m glad I agreed to take this on.

Selling out all rooms at the mansion and the carriage house is a nice bonus.

For the past hour, people have shared stories of their cryptid encounters.

In a loud, clear voice, Agnes takes her turn, giving us a dramatic reenactment of her winged creature tale.

Eleanor, Lydia, Celia, and Rae are here too, as eccentric as always.

Of course, the five octogenarians are a crowd favorite.

Jo waves from her side of the fire where she’s sitting with Alex MacDougall. She’s in charge of leading one group. Ever and Dmitri agreed to head up another. And Bram and I will take the third.

He and I were busy this past week, meeting with people and documenting their cryptid stories, and mapping out the places where people claimed they had sightings.

We spent two afternoons and one rainy night gathering food and supplies for Cryptid

Night.

And every night before we fall asleep, he tells me a story from his travels, some new and others I've heard before, sometimes in my bedroom like the first night and sometimes stretched out on the couches in the living room before we head upstairs.

It's quickly becoming my favorite part of the day, but a tightness constricts my chest anytime I think of Bram leaving and going back to comforting myself with only recordings of his voice .

When Agnes finishes her story, Bram stands.

“Everyone, we'll get started with the investigation in a few minutes.

Please finish your food and make sure you have the headlamps and flashlights you received when you arrived.

Trevor here,” he points to me, “will be making the rounds, so if you got here late and didn't receive one, let him know. ”

Excited chatter starts up in all directions. I walk the perimeter, checking that everyone has headlamps and flashlights.

Helping pack up the food, Bram chats with Jason Zervudachi. His family owns Moon Meadows Maple Farm, where we've bought our maple syrup for as long as I can remember.

As I pass them, Jason says, “I swear I saw Mabel when I was seven or eight on the far side of the meadow at the northwestern edge of my family's farm.”

So many people have had Mabel encounters, sometimes it feels like I'm the only

Maplewoodian who has yet to see the cryptid. I hope I will one day.

Ever and Dmitri meet me on my second time around the fire. Ever tests his flashlight, turning it on, then off. “These were a good idea, instead of relying on people to bring their own.”

“The outdoor company that sponsors Bram’s podcast sent them, but the safety vests and first aid packs were Bram’s idea. Thanks again for stepping in. We couldn’t have pulled this off without help.”

Dmitri hefts the backpack we gave to the group leaders, which is filled with supplies from a first aid kit to bear spray. “Is anyone else worried about screwing up the safety procedures Bram drilled us on?”

“I am.” I raise my hand. “Bram’s so experienced. But things can still go wrong. And if something happens to him, I don’t want to mess up.”

Ever waves to Jake, Alaric, and Zach who are standing with Jo. “It’s good Jake’s here. I feel better having a paramedic around.”

“Me too.”

After tucking a water bottle into his pack, Dmitri steps closer to me and lowers his voice. “Do you think we’ll see anything? Over sixty people trooping through the woods isn’t going to be quiet.”

“Most animals should steer clear of us unless they’re curious.

I guess that’s also true for potential cryptids.

But with the number of people, we can cover a wider area, which is good for finding

things like foot or paw prints, hair or scat, or evidence that something is feeding, like carcasses or bones. ”

He wrinkles his nose. “I’m not picking up any scat.”

“Same here. I don’t care if we have gloves and bags. I’m leaving that to other people.”

On the other side of the fire, Bram whistles, and the conversations quiet down.

He motions for everyone to gather closer together.

“Anyone who wants to wait here by the fire instead of heading into the woods is welcome to stay and monitor the feed from the trail cameras posted throughout the search area. Agnes and Eleanor will keep you company.”

Agnes waves to the crowd with both hands and Eleanor toasts everyone with her drink.

“We’ll meet up here at the end of the investigation.

For those investigating, if you were given a purple bracelet when you arrived, you’re in Jo’s group.

” Bram points her out and she raises her hand.

“Yellow bracelets, you’re with Ever and Dmitri.

” Ever and Dmitri wave to the group. “And green bracelets, you’re with Trevor and me.

Regardless of your group color, stay with a buddy, don't go off alone.

We'll see everyone back here at ten o'clock. ”

People applaud and cheer then break off, heading to the individual groups.

Our group has twenty people. I hop onto the tree stump so I can see everyone and they can see me.

“We're covering the south side of the woods.

You can fan out and go at your own pace, but please don't go off alone.

Group leaders are staying connected with each other.

If you want to try out calls or generate sounds, we can let the other groups know so those aren't mistaken as possible evidence. ”

Bram nods. “We'll share whatever findings we have back at the campfire. Let's go, team green. Happy searching.”

Dry leaves and twigs crunch beneath our feet as we move between the trees.

In the absence of the campfire's blaze, darkness blankets the forest. The beams from headlights and flashlights help, but even with them, tripping over uneven ground, a tree root, or log, and ending up with a twisted ankle or worse, is a possibility.

To the sound of crickets chirping and the occasional hoot of an owl, we study tree trunks for claw scratches or captured strands of hair and match depressions made in patches of dirt and mud to various animal paw prints.

The camera Bram gave me is in night vision mode, which gives everything a greenish hue. Sticking close to him, I slowly pan the trees, looking for movement or eye shine. “Do you think we’ll see Mabel?”

He scans the same area with his thermal camera. “The majority of the Mabel sightings have been between dawn and dusk. It’s later than that now, so I’m thinking not. But I guess it’s not impossible. Just like it’s not impossible for us to encounter a black bear this time of night.”

“That happened to some hikers last summer. They got lost, the sun went down, and they came too close to its den.” We climb over a fallen tree, then skirt around some small bushes.

I shudder at the thought of meeting a bear, even though I know we’re more likely to see weasels, fishers, foxes, owls, and bats.

“I hope we’ll find something to set Agnes’s mind at ease. ”

“She only had the general area of where she thought the winged thing swept into the woods.” Bram stops walking.

He grabs my arm and pulls me toward a large pine tree, giving us some privacy.

“I still wonder if she saw a great blue heron. They can hunt at night and have a wingspan of six or seven feet.”

“That makes sense. Seeing it at night could affect accurately judging the size.”

He stares at the star-studded sky beyond the tips of the towering pines and sighs.

“I don’t want to dismiss her. One thing I’ve learned is people want to be heard.

They're more likely to accept my findings, even if it's not what they were hoping for, if they feel like you're taking them seriously.

" Lines of frustration fan out from his eyes.

"That's why we need to investigate more. "

The urge to smooth away that tension wells so strong, I need to act.

Careful of our equipment and his backpack, I wrap my arm around his shoulders and give him an encouraging squeeze.

"We will. The original plan was that you might be here for two weeks, so next week, when you're not busy scripting and recording the podcast, we'll go hunting. "

The light emanating from our cameras catches his smile. "Thank you."

Voices carry from members of the green team who think they've found a footprint.

I lower my arm and step back. "We better check that out."

"Yeah." He brushes his hand along my arm. "Let's go."

The section of dirt with the impression isn't a clear print. Edges are muted and smaller paw prints of another animal's tracks cross over it. Bram takes photos and a digital scan.

Another team member finds hairs caught on a low-hanging branch. We bag them, tag them, and photograph the spot. Seeing Bram in action, his thoroughness and attention to detail, should not be a turn-on. Yet here I am sporting a semi while my friend takes pictures from every angle.

“Team purple to team green, come in.” Jo’s voice echoes from the radio.

“Go for green.” Bram holds up his hand, waving for us to gather around him.

“One of my team wants to try a call.”

“We’re ready. Go for it.”

Soon, a screech pierces the air. We all wince, and I tug on my ear trying to silence the ringing. “That sounded more like a scream queen in a horror movie. I’ve never heard an animal sound like that.”

Bram pulls a small device out of his backpack. “This has recordings of all animals that are native to the area, so we could try a few of these calls and see what we get back.”

We radio Jo and Ever and let them know. Bram plays calls of various prey animals, and we wait in silence. I keep scanning the trees and ground.

In the far distance, a wolf howls.

On my camera, I pick up eye shine, low to the ground, and my pulse quickens. “I have something. I think it’s an animal. Keeps popping up then disappearing.”

The others gather around me. Bram returns his animal call device to his backpack, then comes over.

He rests his forearm on my shoulder and leans in, his focus on the screen.

Every cell in my body vibrates with the electricity of his nearness.

The air around us is thick with excitement, but to their credit, our group remains quiet and still.

Soon, a fox emerges from a bush, then freezes in his tracks.

Collectively, we release our breath. Mystery animal solved.

Bram checks the time on his hiking watch. “Okay, I’m gonna tell the others that we’re done with calls. We’ll still keep listening and watching as we explore.”

He slides his forearm along my shoulder until his hand clasps the curve, and he keeps it there, connecting us, as he radios the other groups. I soak up every second of contact, of closeness, of the way his body angles toward mine.

After he finishes, and gives our group the signal, we venture deeper into the woods.

The landscape is rougher here. Trees are closer together, there are dens and caves and cliffs that have deep drops.

And we’re doing this in the dark. The night vision camera helps take away some of the unknowns, but staying close to Bram is where I feel safest. Happiest, too.

We come to a massive tree, cracked down the middle, across a shallow creek. The rocks on either side look shiny and slippery. To say I’m not confident about crossing it would be an understatement.

Bram scrambles up and over it. Then turns to me. “Okay?”

“What if it doesn’t support me?”

“I will.” He extends his hand, palm open and facing up. “I’ve got you.”

My heartbeat ticking faster, I place my hand in his. The tree creaks with my step on the weathered bark, but Bram hauls me up and with two more creaky steps, I clear the hurdle. Back on solid ground, unscathed, relief sweeps through me. “Thanks.”

“Told you.” Instead of letting go, he laces our fingers together, and my heartbeat ticks faster for a totally different reason. This is the first time we’ve ever held hands.

We’re both wearing gloves, there’s no heat of skin to skin. But we’re palm to palm, the press of his fingers is a deliberate hold fusing us together, with mine reinforcing the connection, and that’s a thrill of its own.

Seconds stretch out as we watch each other. My pulse throbs with the pull toward him. His hand feels good wrapped around mine. Better than good, it feels right. So right. Surprise and delight shimmer and shine, brighter than all the stars in the sky.

The wonder in his gaze leaves me breathless. Bram smiles and squeezes my hand.

“Bram! Trevor!” The yell from one of our team members cracks over us like a whip, hard and fast.

Bram startles, then shakes his head as if to clear it. He glances at our joined hands, and a curious mix of apology and yearning flashes across his features before he releases me.

“We found something,” the voice calls again.

He turns toward them, his fingers flexing against his thigh.

The phantom touch of his hand lingers and I close mine into a fist to capture it for as long as possible.

Though our connection lasted mere moments, I can't shake the feeling that it's tilted our friendship on its axis. There was before, and now, we're firmly in the after. I need to find out what that means and how—or what—has changed.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

brAM

What was I thinking, grabbing Trevor's hand like I have a right to hold it?

My hands tighten around my camera and I suck in a deep breath.

Frustration with myself mixes with the lingering sensation of his fingers intertwined with mine.

I need to pull myself together. This is an investigation. I'm a professional. We have a mystery to solve.

This is not the time for romance. And not with my best friend.

Yet, I can't stop thinking about how much I want to kiss Trevor and how his hand fit in mine, how good it felt...

I glance to where he's standing, only a few feet away, next to the log that jumpstarted the whole thing.

It would be so easy to drag him behind a tree and pull him close enough to feel the hard planes of his body pressed against me.

To sample his lips and find out if he tastes of the coffee he's seldom without and the chocolates he keeps out for guests.

The two team members who called out that they'd found something are crouched by a

pile of leaves. They wave me over, interrupting my fantasy.

Investigation. Professional. I'm a professional doing an investigation. And being the professional, I wave over Trevor.

"Trev, let's see what they found." I wait for him to join me before I walk away. We saw evidence of caves and areas that would make good dens, so I don't want anyone left alone. Especially him.

The pair point to thin red strands of hair caught on a tree root.

I hand them an evidence bag from my pack. "Bag it and tag it. My first guess is that it's deer. But we'll have it checked."

A ginger-haired man who looks like he could be another member of the Kelly family raises his hand. "I found what might be stone tools. Can I show you?"

Curiosity and excitement spark along my spine. There are stories of cryptids using stone tools similar to how some primates use rocks to crack or smash open nuts, shellfish, and other food. "Lead the way."

He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. "It's over here."

Not far from the mouth of a cave, he stops and points to the base of a boulder jutting out of the mountainside.

A few rocks the size of a softball lie on the ground amid a handful of pistachio and peanut shells.

"I didn't see them when I went in the cave to explore, but I noticed them right away when I came out. "

Someone behind me gasps. “Wow!”

Crouching beside him, I shine my flashlight over the spot. “No shell or nut remnants are on the rocks, none that I can make out anyway. Without seeing it ourselves, we won’t know if someone or something dropped those shells here, or if they used the rocks. My gut says a hiker left these here.”

His shoulders slump. “Oh. ”

“It’s a good find. You’re really observant.” I clasp him on the shoulder. “What’s your name again?”

“Griffin Kelly. You can call me Grif.”

“Well, good job, Grif. I’d have you on my team again anytime.”

The person who’d gasped pushes past me, knocking me on my ass, and kneels by the shells with her phone’s camera app open. “It could be a cryptid. The only animals who use rocks in this way are primates. And there aren’t any monkeys in Vermont.”

“Pistachios and peanuts aren’t grown here either.

But there are plenty of hikers who eat nuts.

” His voice sharp, Trevor hauls me to my feet.

He meets my gaze and the flare of anger igniting in his brown depths is softened by the concern creasing the corners of his eyes.

I nod to indicate that I’m fine. Glaring at the back of the woman’s head, he steps in front of me and crosses his arms over his chest like a bodyguard.

“You’re probably right about it being a hiker.” Griffin dips his head. “The cave didn’t show any signs of being used. No hair, no scat, no bones. It wouldn’t make sense for something to bring the nuts here to eat if they weren’t also using the cave.”

There’s only one thing to do. “I’ll put a trail camera out here and see what it catches. I have a couple in my pack, backups in case the ones we put up for the investigation malfunction.”

He brightens, and his smiling features resemble Rory and Conall even more. “That’s a good idea.”

Still kneeling by the shells, the woman whips her head up. “I forgot you’d put up cameras.”

“We have eight spread across the search areas. The cameras were noted in the email you received with tonight’s details.

We also mentioned them before everyone set off from the campfire.

” I dig one out and attach it to the trunk of a nearby tree.

“I’ll leave this here for a week. That should be enough to catch anything coming or going. ”

Trevor’s camera catches a weasel moving toward a small stream. We follow it, looking for more tracks. He glances at Griffin, several feet in front of us, studying some leaves. “It’s nice you put up that camera for him.”

“It’s what we’re here to do.”

“I think that woman put those shells there. She seemed too enthusiastic. That ‘wow’

was like bad acting. And she looked guilty when you mentioned the cameras.”

I snort. “I had the same thought. And it’s another reason why I wanted the camera in place. There have been investigators caught faking evidence. People should be able to trust that what they’re seeing in an investigation is completely authentic.”

As the minutes tick by, Trevor and I spend time with each member of the team.

The people from out of town tell us about sightings they’ve had deep in the wilderness of national parks and swampy areas infested with alligators.

The locals talk about their Mabel sightings, and one guy tells us about a winged creature his dance teacher saw.

He’s here because he wants to experience something too.

We see some owls and get the occasional glimpse of a fox, and find tracks and paw prints of bears, wolves, rabbits, and coyotes.

A figure appears on my thermal imager, but most of its body is blocked by the trees. I show it to Trevor, then point toward the area. “I’m gonna check it out.”

He grabs the loop on the top of my backpack. “Buddy system, Bram. We’re gonna check it out.”

I nod, unable to hide my grin as Trevor and I cut through the grove of trees. He shines his flashlight on the ground, illuminating our path, while I continue to scan. The image disappears then reappears .

“Can you check with the night vision camera?” I take the flashlight so he can retrieve the camera.

The image pops up again, and Trevor is able to zoom in with his lens. “Coyote.”

Resting my hand on his shoulder, ready to put myself between him and whatever might be out there, I lean in and look through the camera. “Wow. Okay, well, we’re not going over there.” I tuck my thermal camera in my backpack.

The thing I love about being in the field is the adrenaline rush that comes with not knowing what I’ll be confronted with.

I’ve always been a stickler for safety protocols, especially when others are with me, but this new protectiveness, of wanting to keep someone safe and out of harm’s way is...

not necessarily unwanted, but different.

We retrace our steps. Part of the landscape has an incline that was less noticeable on the way up. My arms braced out for balance, I go first. My boots slip on the thick layer of leaves, and I grab onto every branch, tree, and boulder to slow my descent.

With his hand braced on a tree branch, one foot on a boulder, and the other on the messy ground, Trevor studies the path, then looks at me. “I thought waiting until you finished was safer.”

“Good thinking. Go slow. Tell me if you need more light.” I shine my flashlight’s beam over the area.

He shifts forward and then slides, and can’t grab hold of things fast enough to slow him down. Trevor pitches forward, his arms flail, and I rush up, hoping I can snatch hold of his jacket or arm, slow him down, and prevent a fall. But I slip and slide and he comes at me faster and faster.

“Bram,” his breathless word reaches my ears a millisecond before his body crashes into mine. Our arms band around each other and momentum propels us several stuttered steps into the trees. The backpack throws off my balance as my feet scramble for purchase.

We bang into the tall bare trunk of a towering pine with a thunk.

For a moment, the shock of our scary tumble overtakes everything else.

Trevor and I cling to each other. My heartbeat thunders in my ears.

We draw in gasping breaths, and I drop my head onto his shoulder, hugging him as I get my bearings.

“That’s one way to come down.” His shoulders shake with his laugh and he tightens his hold. “Sorry I took you down with me. You okay?”

My chuckle is softer, shakier, and filled with relief. “I’m fine. Happy to throw myself into your path. You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

His breath teases my ear. “I’m fine, but I think the snack bars in the front of my bag got squished.”

The area is quiet. Hushed. Pretty. Peaceful.

I raise my head and draw back so I can look at him. My breath catches in my lungs. Our faces are so close together. Trevor and I are still hugging each other. The shimmer in his eyes reminds me of starlight. He’s gorgeous, and feels so good in my arms.

The urge to kiss him throbs in every beat of my pulse. I give in to the temptation to

cup his cheek. At the touch of my fingers, his eyes darken and he sucks in a breath. His gaze falls to my lips and his own part.

The seductive slither of desire catches me in its thrall. My cock hardens. Heat expands, licking tiny flames over my skin. My pulse comes faster.

Trevor tilts his head the smallest degree to the right, and I know that angle will slot our mouths together perfectly.

He's close. So close.

I lean in.

His hands tighten on my shoulders. The press of his fingers pulls me closer.

A shrill whistle blows several yards away, followed by a second whistle to our north, signifying the end of the investigation.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Each group leader is supposed to blow their whistle at ten o'clock to call everyone back to the campfire. We need to go. There's still a long trek back.

"Bram?" The rustle of someone kicking up leaves is behind us. "Is it time to leave?"

I shake my head to clear it. "Uh, yeah. We're coming."

"Okay." The steps retreat. But more voices join theirs.

Trevor slides his hands to my forearms. The want misting his gaze has cleared.

I caress his cheek one more time. Desperation to touch him, taste him, know him in a way I haven't allowed myself, clutches me with such force, it threatens to drop me to my knees.

But this isn't the right time, or place, because Trevor deserves more than a quick groping in the woods with dozens of people, including my great-aunt, hanging around.

Maybe holding back is the smartest thing.

I lower my arms. Trevor does the same, and cold air sweeps in, making the loss of his touch more acute.

I stumble back a few steps on shaky legs. Being so close to Trevor has left me reeling. I gesture to the woods and what I hope is the general direction of the other members of the green team. "We have to head back."

His eyes are too bright. His nod and smile are too tight and too quick.

Shit.

“Right. I’ll blow the whistle.” He steps away from me, braces his hand on a tree, and blows the whistle in a prolonged note that reminds me of the ref’s whistle signifying the end of a game.

It feels so... final. But it can’t be. I ignore the tightness of my skin, like all of the sudden it doesn’t fit me anymore, and tuck the camera into the backpack.

I wait for him while he ties his shoe, and know that whatever this is, it’s not the end.

We’re just beginning, and everything in my gut tells me Trevor feels the same.

We walk in silence to rejoin the others.

A few of our team members chatter about photos they took and what those images might reveal. I ask everyone questions about their night during the trek back to the campfire, with half of my attention on Trevor the entire time.

The glow of the campfire comes into view. People mill around, showing each other their phones and cameras. I’m surrounded by people wanting me to listen to sounds captured and see hair and bones collected and lose sight of Trevor in the chaos.

My phone vibrates with the alert that it’s time to wind things down. I jump onto the wide tree stump he and I shared at the start of the evening so everyone can see me. “Did you all have a good investigation?”

The group cheers.

Smiling, I continue, “You’ll all receive an email from me with an address for sending your audio and video files. Please leave any bags of physical evidence with your group leaders. Finn Hunnicutt, our local veterinarian, will analyze them.”

I spy Trevor standing with Ever and Dmitri on the edge of the crowd. Tension radiates from him. Did almost kissing him just fuck up our friendship?

A guy in the front row raises his hand. “When will our investigation be on your podcast?”

“Next Saturday’s podcast episode is devoted to Mabel. Our investigation will be the following Saturday. If you post a photo of tonight on social media, don’t forget to tag me or the podcast. Thanks for trusting me with your stories and for joining the search. Have a good night.”

More cheers and applause ring out .

I hop off the stump and almost bump into Jo. “How was your investigation?”

She tugs her lavender knitted beanie with an enormous pompom over her ears. “We captured some heat signatures and photos, and I got startled by an owl.”

Jake, Alaric, and Zach join us. Alaric, who is wearing a matching beanie, but in rainbow instead of lavender, hugs his cousin. “Jo did a great job keeping charge of us. Our group was more like herding cats.”

“Zach, what did you think?” I ask. “Did you find anything?”

He stuffs his hands into his pockets. “I didn’t see Mabel or anything else, but it was a good time. I’d do it again. You can’t go wrong with the woods at night.”

Nodding, I clap him on the shoulder. “I’m glad you checked it out.”

The crowd thins, and Jake helps someone from the festival committee put out the fire.

Ever and Dmitri stop by to drop off their gear and their group’s evidence.

I’ve lost Trevor again. We drove together so he can’t have gone too far, but I feel itchy not knowing where he is. With Jo’s and Alaric’s help, I stow the gear and evidence in my SUV.

Once all the food is cleared, and the campsite looks the way it did when we arrived, I send my friends and the festival volunteers on their way.

When I turn around again, Trevor is walking back from the parking area. He throws a thumb over his shoulder. “I had to give directions to one of the out-of-towners.”

I watch him as he approaches, searching for any clue on his thoughts about that almost kiss.

His stride’s long and sure. His shoulders are bunched up a little, but that could be because the temperature has dropped and we’ve been out here for hours.

I sigh. The long day is catching up to me and my thoughts are muddled at best. And I have no idea what he’s feeling or thinking.

I want to ask, but also don’t, in case it’s something I’m not ready to hear. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

We climb into the car. I don’t know what to say, and he doesn’t say anything.

Wrestling with whether I should bring anything up, or leave it alone, I drive out of the parking lot. The tension increases with every minute, winding its way around us until I feel like I'm being strangled by it.

Sitting in the static silence is too loud and too much. I start talking about the investigation, then my plan for collecting the trail cameras, and how I'll sort through the evidence. He grunts and gives me monotone syllables in response.

The inn comes into view. I park in the spot closest to his house and he helps me unload the equipment. We leave everything in his woodworking garage. The dogs barking and clawing at the door welcome us inside.

Trevor drops his keys into the bowl by the door. Then he faces me with stiff posture and an unreadable expression. "I'm going to bed."

His words hit me harder than the time I intercepted the ball during a playoff game and was tackled by a massive lineman, leaving me breathless and dazed. "Okay. I'll head up soon."

Calling for Bandit to follow, he takes the stairs at a slower pace than usual. I stand at the base of the stairs, keys in one hand, petting Hades with the other, my gaze glued to his retreating frame.

For the first time in the days I've been here, he closes his bedroom door all the way.

The click of the knob turning sounds so loud. And so final.

TREVOR

The six-foot-tall skeleton sits in my desk chair wearing a permanent grin.

My heartbeat jolting, I huff a sigh at my distracted self and push the door open wide. Although I'm the one who put him here, he's startled me every time I've entered the office today.

A bark comes from the vicinity of my knees. Bandit's not a fan either, he keeps growling at our bony guest. I give my dog a reassuring cuddle, then round my desk to check if the glue I applied to the skeleton's broken pieces this morning has dried.

This haunted house prop isn't the first to need mending, and I doubt he'll be the last.

"Trevor, I finished my walk-through of the late check-outs' rooms. All good." Jo breezes in, holding her mug. She stops short at the sight of me inspecting the cracks in the skeleton's cranium. "Damn it. I keep forgetting he's in here. I almost dropped my mug. Twice."

I wince at the twinge of guilt squeezing my chest. "Sorry. I'm not sure why I carried him over here. I should've just repaired him at the carriage house and left him to dry there. He'll be out of here by the end of the day. "

She frowns, studying my face. "Are you okay? You've seemed preoccupied for the last couple of days."

No kidding. And being preoccupied is probably why I needlessly carried a six-foot

skeleton all the way over to the mansion.

It's been two days since Bram and I almost kissed under the towering pines. Two days of us being carefully polite with each other. Two days of worrying that one moment put a fray in our friendship that will alter it forever.

Did he feel trapped, with my arms around him and the intention to kiss him obvious in my expression?

The way he looked at me, like he was just as desperate for the kiss, just as captivated in the moment... but then he pulled away.

What does it mean? Was it a fluke? Could Bram actually want me too? If he does, then why did he pull away? Second thoughts?

Jo and I share a lot of things, but I don't want to tell her about what happened with Bram. The skeleton in front of me brings to mind one worry I can share. "I want to talk about the haunted house. When we started it, we said we'd reevaluate in five years. This is year five."

"Right. I thought we'd planned to have our evaluation after this Halloween passes."

"We did. But in light of needing the new roof, among other things, I've been running the numbers, so I'd like to discuss it now."

"Sure." She gestures at me to go ahead.

I gently pull my chair out of the way so I can access my desk then bring up the spreadsheet I've been putting together for the last few days.

"Turning the carriage house into the haunted house takes about a week. Turning it

back takes another. And the week that it's a haunted house doesn't make up the difference.

The hours we spend on the transition, the expense of maintaining or replacing the props and effects, and the costs to run everything during the week it's open hasn't balanced out with the amount we collect from ticket sales. ”

Perched on the edge of my desk, she leans over so she can see the screen.

“We thought hosting the haunted house would be a good marketing opportunity. It's generated some business from hotel guests who wouldn't have found us otherwise.

Like the vampire novel book club hosting their retreat here.

The haunted house put us on their radar. ”

“True. But the amount of money coming in from people who've found us through the haunted house isn't anywhere near where we hoped it would be. Look.” I point to the column at the end of the spreadsheet.

The scent of her herbal tea, jasmine today, wafts over me. She sips from her mug as she studies the screen. “The cost of everything is increasing. We've had so many repairs this last year too.”

It's a lot. Stress forms a tight band at my temples. Massaging them and the tension in my neck doesn't alleviate the pain. “Another thing is the ticket prices. We've had to raise them each of the last three years.”

“Ticket sales have been steady since we opened the advance sale at the beginning of the month. Fewer than last year, comparing the columns.” She glances at me. “You've really stepped up your spreadsheet game with this one.”

The amount of columns and rows and color coding would make my mom's organized heart proud. I learned from the best. "Thanks. Keeping prices affordable for everyone was always our goal. We've reached the point where that might no longer be possible."

"Seeing all the figures from the last four years side by side, I understand."

Every year we've held this event, I've heard from families and people on fixed incomes who are grateful we're at a price that makes buying tickets possible. "If we raise the price to what we'd really need, we'd have to charge double our current amount. Maybe more. We can't do that."

She tucks a lock of purple hair behind her ear. "Well, we could. It's not personal, it's business."

My head shake is as automatic as crossing my arms over my chest. "I know it's business, but I feel a responsibility to those people who rely on things being affordable. That kind of increase would end up pricing out half the town. Not happening."

"I wouldn't feel comfortable with that either. So, do you want to stop hosting the haunted house?"

"I don't know what to do. We make more when those rooms function as hotel rooms. But people love coming to the haunted house."

That's really weighing on me. I don't want to let anyone down.

"My thoughts twist into a tornado of worry."

The expenses and the expectations wind around me like tightening chains.

I can't stay still. With my chair blocking the walkway, I'm restricted to pacing the length of my desk.

I don't want to jostle the skeleton, there's only so many times I can put him back together.

Jo returns to her desk, flips the page of her blotter calendar to next month, and scribbles a note in the margin. "Let's talk the first week in November. Whatever you decide, I'll have your back."

"Thanks."

Bandit climbs out of his dog bed and trots toward me. He stops near the skeleton and growls again then runs to me and hides behind my legs.

"Don't worry, boy. The big, scary thing will be out of here soon." I reposition my chair so it, and the skeleton, are behind my desk again. "Jo, I'm gonna head back to the carriage house and continue inventory. I'll take Bandit with me."

"After Mr. Bones finishes drying, can I put him in the reception area? We can tell guests we're working with a skeleton crew."

Laughing, I pat my thigh to signal Bandit. "Go right ahead."

The organized shelves lining the basement walls are a small oasis of order. I move a box of lightbulbs on top of a steamer trunk that houses a fog machine, and check the bolts of fabric that were used in a vampire-themed room last year.

Venting my frustrations and worries about the haunted house helped. Talking to Jo made the weight I've been carrying a little lighter.

Bandit stays by my side, not caring about the three other skeletons I set out to inspect earlier. I don't know what's different about the one in the office. Maybe he didn't like it sitting in my chair.

Footsteps thud down the stairs. Expecting one of the staff members who were cleaning upstairs, I turn with the box of fabric in my arms.

Bram is at the base of the stairs, in a T-shirt, jeans, and one of my flannels, holding two coffees. My heart aches at the sight of him. Uncertainty clouds his blue gaze. He drags his lower lip between his teeth. "Jo said I'd find you here."

"I'm checking the props for the haunted house." I return the box to the shelf. My heart's beating faster. I want to ask so many questions. Why is he here? Has he decided to leave Maplewood early? How do we get past what happened?

"I brought you a maple latte. I was at Special Blend and the guy behind the counter recommended it."

Bandit races over to him, jumps up, noses his knee, then looks past Bram like he's wondering where Hades is, and runs a circle around Bram's legs.

I tap my thigh. "Bandit, come."

Bram's lips lift in a half-smile. "He's fine."

"Are we?" The question trembles past my lips.

His smile falls and his shoulders sag. "Trev..." He takes a step in my direction, then glances at the cups in his hands, and puts them on top of the utility table. "I need to apologize."

“Apologize.” My voice is as hollow as the emptiness at my core. “You don’t need to apologize. I do.”

His eyebrows squish together over his narrowed gaze and he huffs a sigh. “You? No. It was me.”

Frustration and remorse well up, pushing me forward with fast steps over the concrete floor. When I reach Bram, I scrub my hands over my face. “I was the one who almost kissed you.”

“Trev.” His voice is as soft as the press of his fingers to my shoulder.

I lower my hands. Bram stands in front of me, with light warming his gaze and his lips curving into a real smile.

“So was I. Holding on to you as tight as you held on to me. Looking at you, and wanting to kiss you more than anything. I’ve been beating myself up since it happened.

Thought I messed things up. That you didn’t want it like I did. ”

“I wanted it.” My confession comes out in a parched whisper, each word infused with longing. “Then the whistle came, and we were interrupted by that guy. The mood shifted.”

Bram nods. “It made me think I misread the situation and I’d screwed things up with you. That scared me.”

“I thought the same thing. I knew we needed to talk, but wasn’t sure how to bring it up. I didn’t want to make things worse.” My watery chuckle is as bone-weary as I feel. “It’s been a long two days. ”

The press of his fingers slides into a caress. Bram's gaze is full of warm affection. "I missed you. Us."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

The stinging behind my eyes shocks the hell out of me. I brush a nonexistent wrinkle out of his shirt and swallow hard a few times to get myself under control. “Thank you for coming to find me and getting the conversation started.”

His gaze searches mine. “So.”

“Yes?”

“If the interruption hadn’t happened, the night would’ve ended very differently, yeah?”

Tilting my head, I consider his words then nod. “We would’ve kissed.”

He inclines his head in agreement. “What do we want to do with that information?”

We watch each other. And I’m not sure what to say.

Do I ask why he wanted to kiss me? What if he asks me?

I can’t tell him I’ve been in love with him since we were fifteen.

And if we act on that information... I don’t want the most important first kiss of my life to take place in a drafty basement, surrounded by skeletons and Halloween decorations.

I clear my throat, blow out a breath, and take a chance. “Let’s go somewhere else. We need to continue this conversation, but not with my dog staring at us. Come with me.”

Bram grabs the lattes and follows Bandit and me up the stairs. “We can reunite Bandit and Hades. They’ll keep each other occupied.”

I lead the way outside. A brisk wind blows, rustling the leaves and scattering more across the lawn. Bandit bounds through them as he races around us. Bram chuckles, dodging my darting dog during the walk to my house.

Hades must hear the key in the lock because he’s waiting by the door. Bandit rockets past me to greet him. With wagging tails, barks, licks and sniffs, he and Bandit are ecstatic to be with each other .

Leaning his shoulder into mine, Bram gestures at the dogs. “They’re like us, always happy to be together. Do you want to go somewhere in particular?”

“Anywhere outside guarantees nosy people.” After a quick scan of my space, I find the answer. “The living room. We can close the French doors for privacy.”

“Hold that thought.” Bram grabs two puzzle toys from the floor and strides into the kitchen. The dogs follow him. Carrying the lattes, I go too.

He inserts two of the peanut butter dog cookies Charlie baked for Hades into the toys.

The dogs sit by his feet, their tails wagging.

Smiling at me, he rolls one toy across the floor and Hades takes off after it.

He sends Bandit’s ball in the opposite direction.

“That might hold their attention for a while.”

“Good thinking.”

After washing his hands, he turns to me. “Saturday night had another first.”

My gaze falls to his hand, extending toward mine. I suck in a breath as he links our fingers. “Yeah, we’ve never done that.”

His grip tightens. “It was instinctual. And then what I’d done hit me. Very unprofessional, having romantic thoughts when I’m working.”

“Romantic, huh?” I flex my fingers, exploring the feel of his hand in mine. “These thoughts, are they new?”

He opens his mouth, then closes it, and after a moment’s hesitation, glances at the dogs. “We should go into the other room.”

We walk together, side by side, into the living room, then separate to each close a French door and draw the curtains over the multi-paned windows.

I choose the small sofa under the stained-glass window that catches the sunset.

Bram sits beside me and takes my hand between both of his. His expression is as serious as I’ve ever seen him. “I’ve had those thoughts for a while. I don’t know when they started. One day I realized they were just... there.”

I’m stunned and flattered. He’s had feelings. For me . Wow. There’s a tingling over my skin, like every cell in my body is cheering. “I’ve had romantic thoughts about you too.”

Relief flashes across his features before the gleam in his eyes and spreading smile take over. “For how long?”

“Longer than a while.” It’s the truth. It’s also way too early to tell him that my

romantic thoughts run as deep and strong as they do, but I can give him another truth. “I was worried about you coming here, because I didn’t think I’d be able to hide how I felt. And I was right.”

Tracing patterns on my palm, Bram nods. “It’s made for an angsty start for me too. But now that it’s out in the open...”

“Yeah...” I draw the word out, ending it like a question.

He shifts on the cushion, adjusting the angle of his body toward mine, and his blue eyes shimmer with passion. “What do we do about it?”

My heartbeat ticks harder as I gaze at Bram. My best friend, who I’ve known for over half my life, who knows me better than anyone, is about to become even more to me. “I think we have our first kiss.”

He releases his hold on my hand, but not my gaze, and raises his hand to cup my cheek. My eyes flutter closed at the soft press of his fingers, and it takes me back to that moment under the trees in the chilly night air.

His borrowed flannel is open to the fourth button, exposing the graphic tee beneath the layer of plaid.

I lay my hand on his chest, over his heart.

The material is soft under my fingers and the heat of his skin seeps through his T-shirt.

When I trace the edge of his collar and my thumb brushes the skin at the base of his throat, he groans and leans in.

His gaze jumps to my mouth and he slides his other arm around me.

The need to touch more pulses through me. I trace my fingertips over the swell of his lips, his stubbled cheeks and soft blond hair. I know every inch of his face, yet it's like I'm seeing him in a whole new way.

With every breath, we get closer. I tilt my head, he wets his lips, and we watch each other until the image blurs and our lips finally meet.

His lips are soft yet firm, and he tastes like the maple latte. I can't believe I'm kissing my best friend, or that he's holding me like he'll never let go. Wrapping him in my embrace takes the kiss to another level. Bram feels so good in my arms.

The kiss is everything I dreamed it would be. And I've dreamed of it a lot.

Bram raises his head. His whispered, "Trev," is filled with wonder. So is his soft expression and the way he gently brushes his fingers through my hair.

I'm content to hold him, our arms around each other, basking in his embrace.

He rests his forehead against mine. "So what happens now?"

"We reheat our lattes and check on the dogs."

His laugh vibrates into my chest. "I meant with this. Us."

"Whatever you want." I mean that.

Bram draws back so we can see each other clearly. He bites his lip. "And if I want more of what we just did?"

“Then you’re in luck, because I do too.”

A smile lights his face. He presses a kiss to my lips, then my cheek, then my temple, and settles against me, so we’re side by side once more. From this vantage point, we can see the carriage house through the window on the opposite wall.

His focus floats in that direction. “What’s the haunted house like?”

“Each room provides a different experience. Alaric and I built dividers that create mazes in the rooms. They’re foldable so we can change the layout every year.

Our employees wear costumes, but stay in the background, monitoring the rooms in case they need to help someone or guide people to the next rooms. We don’t use jump scares.

It’s more of a psychological experience.

Light frequencies that make people uncomfortable.

Specific types of music and sound effects.

Things like whispering someone’s name while they’re walking through the house and they can’t tell where it’s coming from. ”

“That’s creepy.”

“Exactly.” I can’t stop my fingers from tracing the lines and squares of color in the flannel over his pec.

“We utilize the dark a lot. The unknown is what’s scary.

Cold breezes that seem to come out of nowhere.

Scents. Projected images. Playing with the lights.

There's a trick we do with fishing line, when people walk through, it feels like spider webs. It's really atmospheric."

"Do you keep them set up as bedrooms?" His arm wrapped across my back is a welcome weight and his hand, warm and comfortable on my hip, squeezes and flexes over and over.

"No. We remove the beds, TVs, and the antique furniture. The breakdown and removal takes two days, and then we're ready to start bringing in the props and other furniture and transforming the space, which takes the rest of the week.

It's a lot of lifting and carrying things up and down from the attic and the basement. "

He lets out a low whistle. "It sounds like a big job. I can help."

"I'll take you up on that offer. Thank you." I stretch into him and when he turns his head, take the kiss he offers. "I should probably get back over there. There are a lot of props and equipment to check."

"I'll come, and bring the lattes."

The backbreaking work I'd been dreading doesn't seem as bad knowing Bram will be at my side.

We stand, pulling each other up, smiling as we go. I'm not naive enough to think a kiss is anything more than a kiss.

Except, of course, when it is.

Mine meant more. And maybe I'm a fool to hope that Bram's did too.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

brAM

The guest room has good acoustics. Everywhere I look, I see Trevor's stamp in the furnishings and decor.

And not just in this room. The scent of his soap in the shower, the flavor of his preferred blend of coffee, the softness of the plaid shirt I borrowed against my skin. I'm surrounded by him, and I love it. It's both thrilling and comforting.

My microphone is on and the podcast recording software is open.

The desk's height is perfect and my chair is comfortable.

I glance at the icons of the video clips of people sharing their Mabel encounters, edited and ready to be inserted into the story.

I need to get back to work, but my thoughts keep drifting to Trevor.

I've been in Maplewood for over a week and I'm adjusting to life here with him so easily, it's like we were made to live together. Thinking about that makes me want too much, and I don't want to dwell on it. Not yet. Though, since our first kiss two days ago, I haven't been able to stop.

Memories of times spent together keep popping into my thoughts.

The time I got the flu at an away game and Trevor had chicken noodle soup from the best restaurant in town sent to my hotel room, then insisted on staying on a video call

with me, even while I slept, to make sure I was okay.

How he'd drop everything if I called, just to spend a few minutes with me...

and how I'd always do the same for him. Me planning our group vacations in places I knew he wanted to visit.

All those stories I've recorded just for him.

Each one adds to the realization that I've had feelings for Trevor for a very long time. Much longer than I'd realized.

The clock is ticking down on my podcast episode. I need to focus on Mabel. Trevor is working at the inn and brought both dogs with him so I can get the recording done in peace and quiet. The fact that he's so thoughtful in considering what I needed somehow makes it easier to breathe.

It's not like I don't have support from friends and family, especially Charlie, but Trevor sees things others don't.

He notices the little things, like making sure my favorite shaving cream is in the bathroom, or buying my dog a fancy bed, or sending me a hiking watch when I told him I was thinking about starting this podcast, before I had even left football.

I run my fingertip over the face of the watch.

It has GPS, can withstand below freezing temperatures, has solar charging capabilities, and a ton of other things one might need when out in the middle of nowhere.

The gift was far from little, but the pictures of the sunrise or of Agnes and the

Rocktogenarians playing a gig, or a squirrel sprawled out on its belly that he texts because he knows I'll like them, and the phone calls after every game mean just as much.

If not more. It's how he watches over Agnes, how he looks out for his friends, and his commitment and love of this town that make it impossible not to have feelings for Trevor.

I look into the camera and press record.

“Welcome back to The Cryptid Corner. I'm Bram Macleod, and today we're journeying to central Vermont to hear the story, the myth, the legend that is Mabel.

She's a cryptid native to Maplewood, with stories going back decades, for more than a century.

People who have encountered her describe Mabel as a tall, thin being covered in leaves.

Some think she's a nature goddess, others a guardian spirit of the forest, still others think she's a person who embraced the wild life of being at one with nature, and more who believe Mabel is a cryptid.

I'm here to share their stories and my own. ”

I pause the recording to take a sip of water. Glancing at my notes, I ready for the next part.

“My mom, brother, and I moved to Maplewood when I was ten years old. The first week here, I hated it. I missed my friends and my dad and my neighborhood. I took off on my bike and ended up in the woods, sitting on a log, feeling upset and lonely

and mad at the world. Then something in the trees moved, and everything else, the birds and crickets, grew silent.”

Another pause, so I can more easily slip in some sound effects and background music. On the tablet in front of me, I’ve sketched out where I’d like to insert photos and video I’ve taken of the forest to accompany my story.

“A figure peeked out at me from between the pine trees. She was tall—giant-like to my ten-year-old self—covered in leaves, with iridescent green skin and the clearest green eyes. We looked at each other and I stared, fascinated, for I don’t know how long.

I wasn’t scared. A sense that everything would be all right came over me.

As silently as she came, she retreated, then vanished.

I hopped on my bike and raced home as fast as I could.

When I got there, a kid from down the street knocked on my door and asked if I wanted to play soccer with him.

That day, I made my first friend in Maplewood.

His name is Trevor, and he’s still my best friend. ”

Trevor okayed including a photo of the two of us right here.

Alex sent me one he took of us at the investigation.

We look happy, sitting on that tree stump together, with the glow of the campfire warming us.

And knowing that night was what I'd call a turning point in our friendship, the realization that we both yearned for more, I really want to use it.

“The second time I saw Mabel was seven years later, right before I moved away from Maplewood, anxious about what the future would bring. Same place, same leafy figure. And seeing her, I got the feeling that, just like when I was ten and worried, things would work out.”

Some other things about that day, including my leaving Mabel a present, I've only shared with Trevor, and I'll keep it that way.

“That's enough about me. Now, I'm taking you back one hundred and twenty years to the first documented encounter with our mysterious forest creature...”

I keep talking and recording as shadows lengthen and shift and the sun moves across the sky.

Story after story, encounter after encounter, with photos and videos from my interviews, I do my best to bring the words to life.

As I work, I'm reminded of the books I've read that discuss the role and power of myth.

My encounter with Mabel opened up my world to so much, the search for cryptids, an interest in anthropology and archeology, and through it, I've gotten to meet a diverse range of people and visit amazing places. Doing this episode devoted to her feels like the most important one yet.

After saving the video, I stand and stretch.

The desire to see Trevor propels me down the stairs.

I shouldn't bother him while he's working, but I can at least get the dogs and give him a break.

My lips tingle with the memory of our kiss and I touch my fingers to them.

A shiver of want rolls through me. I want to kiss him, to feel him, so strong and familiar, in my arms again. I just want him, period.

We only planned on me staying for two weeks. So I should be heading home this weekend. But I'm not ready to go. I like being back in town and now that we've kissed and it's opened up a whole new area, I really want to explore it and where that may lead.

Maybe I can cook him dinner and see if he won't mind me staying longer. Show him some of my helpful qualities. The kitchen cabinets and the refrigerator are well stocked. I peer at the items and run through a mental list of things I could make.

I turn my head at the sound of the front door opening, followed by barks and nails clicking on the floor. Hades races into the kitchen and jumps on me. I crouch to pet him, and my excited dog bops Bandit in the face with his wagging tail. Unfazed, Bandit pushes in for his own pets.

Trevor walks into the room, wearing teal and navy plaid and dark jeans. His hair is mussed, but he's smiling. "Hey."

I stand, as Bandit trots toward Trevor and Hades heads for his water bowl. "How are things at the inn?"

"Busy. The last guest who came for Cryptid Night checked out today, I had two meetings with people looking to book our venue space, we had to inventory new toiletries, and I spent a while on social media liking and commenting posts last

weekends' guests tagged us in.

"He opens the refrigerator and grabs a bottle of water, offering another one to me.

I take it, soaking up the feel of our fingers brushing. "Thanks again for keeping Hades with you."

"He was fine. The dogs greeted the guests coming and going and were very popular." Trevor twists open the cap and brings the bottle to his lips.

"I bet..." My mouth goes dry, my gaze glued to the column of his throat. The bob of his Adam's apple is mesmerizing as he guzzles the contents of the bottle.

He wipes a droplet of water clinging to his lip with the back of his hand and sets the bottle on the counter. "How was recording?"

I rip my gaze from Trevor's mouth and focus on answering his question.

"I got through my whole script. Putting the rest of the episode together should take me another day, then I can upload it and it'll be ready to air on Saturday.

"I suck in a shaky breath, because Trevor Casal drinking water is porn-worthy. "I was thinking I could make dinner."

"Sure. I'm done for the night, so I'll help. What do you want?"

You.

I push thoughts of dropping to my knees and taking him in my mouth from my mind. Dinner, I'm making dinner. "You haven't had my pasta alla Bram."

He folds his arms over his chest, muscles straining the fabric, and his mouth quirks to one side. “And what is that?”

“Spaghetti.” I pull a box of it from the cabinet. The tan package is decorated with an illustrated Italian flag.

“Just spaghetti?” The other side of his mouth lifts until I’m treated to a full-on amused smile.

“With sauce.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

He leans his hip against the counter. “You make your own sauce?”

“Sure, if by making it, you mean opening a jar and pouring it into a bowl.”

Trevor laughs. “So... boxed spaghetti and pre-made tomato sauce. What’s with the fancy name then?”

“Well, alla means in the style of.” I puff my chest out and pat it. “I’m the one making it. So, it’s in the style of me.”

Still laughing, Trevor shakes his head and moves toward the coffee maker. “Okay. We’ll have that. Spaghetti in the style of Bram. And while we wait for you to cook it, I’ll have a coffee. In the style of Trevor.”

I grab the creamer from the refrigerator and set it on the counter next to him. “A spoon of sugar, and enough creamer to lighten the color to a pale tan.”

“That’s it.” Trevor nods his thanks, taking the creamer and filling a quarter of his mug with it while his coffee brews. “How’d you remember that?”

“I pay attention.” I open cabinets until I find a stock pot. “Plus, I’ve had coffee with you every day I’ve been here.”

Trevor pulls a jar of sauce from an upper cabinet and puts it next to the box of spaghetti.

The pot clinks against the sink as I set it in place under the faucet. “I know we’ll do

some investigating this week, in between my working on the podcast episodes, but I was thinking... what if I stayed until Halloween?"

That'll give me two additional weeks with him.

"Really?" His smile is immediate, his eyes sparking with what I hope is the same excitement I feel at more time with him. He grabs my wrist. "Yeah, stay. Stay as long as you want."

The pad of his thumb brushes over the pulse point on my wrist, and I close my eyes. "It'll give me more time to investigate. And, gives me more time with you."

Golden flecks spark in eyes I've known and looked to for comfort for most of my life. The heat of those eyes singes me, but I have no intention of running from this fire.

In a beat of my heart, he's on me. Pushing me against the counter, arms on either side, caging me in.

His mouth fuses to mine and I'm lost in him.

Hell, I'm lost to him. His knee pushes between my legs and I spread them, welcoming him closer until his broad chest is plastered to mine.

Heat flares in my gut, and I band my arms around his waist, wanting—no, needing—to keep him close.

Strong hands cup my jaw as he positions my head to better ravish my mouth.

He tastes of coffee and chocolate and I moan as he takes the kiss deeper.

This is what I've craved since our last kiss.

What I've craved for far longer than I've admitted to myself.

His hard body wrapped in soft flannel pressed against me from chest to thigh.

The tickle of his beard on my lips. The hum of approval when I trail my hands to his ass, digging my fingertips into the denim covering hard muscles, urging him closer until I can feel the heat of his stiff length through our jeans.

He rotates his hips, grinding against me, and we both groan at the contact.

I rip my mouth from his to suck on the skin beneath his beard. "We need to keep doing this. Never stop."

"Yes." The word is a rasp, and when he grinds his hips again, I see stars.

But I need more.

His lips move to my neck. My hands tug at his hair.

With every nip and suck, every soothing kiss, my cock stiffens until it's painfully pressing against my zipper.

My trembling fingers find the button on his jeans.

With a pop, they open, and I make quick work of pushing them to his thighs. "This okay?"

"Fuck, yeah." He steps back only far enough to rip open my jeans, yanking them and my boxer briefs down in one swift motion.

Pausing, he roams his gaze over my exposed skin, his chest rising, then falling with each heavy breath. My cock twitches under the heated scrutiny.

This, both of us half undressed, my pants pooled at my ankles and his sagging on his thighs, his hair standing up in every direction, mine probably just as wild, with him looking at me like I'm the answer to every question the universe can pose is the hottest, sexiest, the most arousing thing to happen to me of my sexual life.

He licks his lips, and my aching cock bounces against my stomach. "Take off your shirt."

I take care with unbuttoning the flannel I borrowed from him, then lay it on the counter. With my own tee, I'm far more rough. I yank at the hem, tear it over my head, and toss it to the side. Where it lands, I have no clue, nor do I care. "You too."

But he doesn't. He doesn't move, just stares.

A niggling of discomfort skitters up my spine.

He's still close enough, the heat radiating off his body warms my cooling skin.

The edge of the counter digs into my back.

If he's having second thoughts, I'll drop to the floor and cry right here.

And I'll have to stay with Agnes, because there's no way I can face him after?—

"You're gorgeous." His voice is gruff and gritty. He traces a fingertip down my sternum and up again with such unfettered reverence my eyes sting. He dips his head, placing an open-mouthed kiss on my nipple. "So beautiful."

My head drops back on a moan when he twirls his tongue around the nipple until it pebbles to a pointed peak. He kisses his way over to the next, doing the same thing. I palm the bulge still covered by his black boxers, squeezing slightly. “Need to feel you.”

He pushes the boxers down and takes my mouth again. The kiss is hungry and desperate, exhilarating and transforming. With it, I’m treasured and annihilated at the same time.

I grab the back of his head, holding him in place. He wraps an arm around my waist, tugging with more force than I thought my sweet Trevor had, forcing a surprised breath from my lungs. My cock pulses, leaving a wet spot on my stomach.

Outside, the shriek of an owl slices through our heavy breathing and panting.

Trevor pistons his hips, grinding his cock into my hipbone.

I wrap my fingers around the silky steel, sliding my thumb over the tip of his cockhead and slicking it over his length.

His moans vibrate into my mouth and ricochet into my groin, spurring an avalanche of quivers through my body, and leaving me wanting.

Wanting more of this.

More of him.

Just more.

As though he can read my mind, Trevor takes hold of my cock. His sure hand grips me with certainty while his tongue takes ownership of my mouth. The soft fabric of

his flannel brushes my chest, and is as much a part of him as the tiny red birthmark on his left shoulder.

We jack each other, our grunts muffled by our kiss.

Every slide of his palm and squeeze of his fingers brings me closer and closer to the edge.

And when I think I can't take any more pleasure, he rips his mouth from me, roaring my name.

His release erupts over my fingers and his teeth sink into my shoulder, the sting driving me to the finish.

A current of electricity travels up my spine as my balls draw up, and my eyes roll back in my head. His name falls from my lips, "Trev. Trev. Trev." Pleasure explodes and upends me as I clutch Trevor and he strokes me through the destruction of everything I've known before now.

When the final tingles subside, I drop my head to his shoulder, inhaling his mountain air scent. My legs jelly, he takes my weight, holding me up with the same quiet strength he's always had. "Wow."

The vibration of his chuckle rumbles through his chest, unleashing a torrent of fluttering butterflies in my center. "If this is what it's like to help you cook, sign me up for pasta alla Bram for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Laughing, I tuck my head under his chin and tighten my hold on him, soaking up this moment. "Or we can expand our culinary repertoire."

"I'm happy to explore anything and everything with you." He presses his lips to the

top of my head, and I don't have to look up to know his smile is as wide as mine.

How will I ever be able to leave Maplewood, and more importantly, Trevor, again?

And do I even want to?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

TREVOR

The setting sun paints the sky in shades of pink and orange. I lock the front door of the carriage house and take a moment to draw in a deep breath of fresh cool air.

Six hours dealing with removing water in the carriage house basement thanks to last night's deluge was not how I planned to spend the day.

We haven't had a rain come that hard and fast in years and the hairline crack in the cinderblock was no match for the downpour that came shooting in like an open fire hydrant.

Two distinctive barks come from the direction of the mansion. I jog down the steps and turn toward the sound. Jo, Bandit, and Hades head my way, the dogs straining their leashes.

She keeps them on the sidewalk, away from the soggy lawn. "All finished?"

"Yeah. Finally." I crouch to pet the dogs. "I'm glad you suggested we check the buildings for possible leaks during the storm. If it weren't for that, we'd have had a worse mess."

Because we found the water when we did, I was able to temporarily patch the crack enough to prevent more damage. Bram insisted on spending the morning helping me clean up, and Jo kindly insisted on keeping the dogs at the mansion with her so we could focus on the mess.

“I learned from my basement flooding last year during that hurricane.” She passes their leashes to me.

I walk back a few steps to keep the dogs from the lawn.

Seeing their furry faces the few times I returned to the mansion to check in helped make my stressful day much better.

So did Bram helping me out for hours before I insisted he return to his own work.

He had some podcast recording to do and needed to retrieve the trail cameras. “Thanks for watching the dogs.”

Jo tucks her hair under the collar of her wool jacket. “They were fine. They kept the guests, and me, entertained. I’m off to my knitting group. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Night.” The excitement of spending the evening with Bram eases the ache of my muscles and has me picking up my pace to get home quicker.

The dogs run straight across the path and up the front steps. As soon as I open the door, they bolt for the kitchen. That’s where Bram must be.

For the past few days, he’s worked on the podcast episode about the cryptid night investigation and the new sightings in Maplewood.

When we weren’t working, we hiked through the woods and drove along roads searching for evidence. Investigations with just the two of us, and the dogs, are the best. Being with him is effortless. I’m so happy he’s staying in town through Halloween.

I step out of my shoes and drop my keys in the bowl by the door. “Bram?”

“In the kitchen.”

As I walk, the sound of him talking to the dogs, asking about their day, drifts over me. It’s cute, and, as hard as it is to fathom since I’ve been in love with him forever, I fall for him even more. “Hi. Did you get the trail cameras?”

“Collected them all. Remember that cave with the nut shells? Not a single animal went by it, but a few hikers did.” He’s seated at the table, with his laptop open in front of him, and a dog on each side. His smile grows wider when he looks up at me. “How was the rest of your afternoon?”

“I finished bagging up everything that was ruined.” I stretch my back and the kinks from all the bending and lifting loosen.

“Could’ve been worse. If this had happened while we were doing inventory and checking all the props and equipment, when everything was spread out on the basement floor, we would’ve lost a lot of them. ”

Bram helped me return the props and equipment to the shelves after we inspected everything the other day. Most of the stuff was out of the water’s way, so we won’t be delayed when we begin setup this week.

Standing, he closes his laptop, then, in two steps, eliminates the distance between us. “Let me help.”

He cups my cheek, leans in, and my heart lights up at the flicker of a smile that crosses his lips the moment before they touch mine. The kiss is soft and I sink into it, wrapping my arms around him. He slides his hands to my shoulders and massages the stiff muscles.

Moaning, I let my hands wander. Over his back, along his sides, then under his

borrowed flannel. “That feels good. How is your episode going?”

“I edited the video interviews and recorded the recap of our investigation. I still need to sort out photos and footage from that night, finish recording some stories, and I’m waiting on Finn’s analysis of the hair samples and his opinion of the video.

Once I have those, I can get everything lined up, and the episode will be ready to air on Saturday. ”

I lean into his magic fingers, kneading away all the little aches and pains from the day. “A lot’s going on that day. The Halloween festival, your podcast episode, opening night at the haunted house, the pumpkin carving contest. We’ll be busy from morning till night.”

The blue digits of the clock on the oven catch my eye.

The premiere of his podcast episode about Mabel is an hour and a half away.

“What do you want to do for dinner? Alaric texted, he and Jake are grabbing dinner at a Greek restaurant in New Island. And Ever said he and Dmitri are trying out a sushi place that just opened. We’re invited to both. ”

He slides his hands to rest on my chest and kisses me again. “You’ve had a stressful day, so you pick. Whatever you want.”

Tomorrow will be busy as we start dismantling the beds in the carriage house and moving furniture. “Honestly? I want to relax. How about takeout on the couch while we listen to your new episode?”

“That’s what I was hoping for.” Bram smiles and his hands journey lower, sliding over my stomach as he steps back.

The muscles in my stomach tremble and I force my hands to stay at my sides and fight through the desire to pull him back into my arms. “I don’t care what we eat.

Should we stick with the episode theme and get Mabel’s Meatloaf from Sparky’s?

Or do you want to walk along Maple Street and see what food interests us? ”

“Let’s take a walk. With the meatloaf as a backup.” He grasps my hand and leads me to the coat closet near the front door.

“Deal.”

We pull on our jackets, bid the dogs goodbye, and head out.

On the front lawn of the house across the street, skeletons dressed in sweatbands, tank tops, and shorts are posed around a volleyball net. The house beside it is lined in orange lights with filmy white ghosts suspended from thin wires so it appears they are floating beneath the trees.

The further we walk, the more elaborate the decorations.

In front of a weathered Victorian draped in cobwebs, I point out three animatronic witches surrounding a steaming cauldron like they’re in the midst of making a spell.

Every year it’s always a surprise to see how inventive some people are.

“The house decorating contest opens today.”

“Do you want to take part in it?” He stops to watch as one of the witches pours a potion into the cauldron. A bang sounds from the hidden sound system playing spooky music followed by a flash of green light.

“Not this year. I didn’t participate when I was on the Halloween committee since that would’ve been a conflict of interest. And then with all the work that goes into preparing and decorating the haunted house, I haven’t had the time or energy for the outside of my own place.”

“Do you want me to decorate it? I can buy some pumpkins?—”

“No. You’re super busy too. Maybe I’ll take part next year, if we stop doing the haunted house.” I crack my neck from side to side. “I wish I knew what to do about that. I want what’s best for the inn, but I’m not sure which is the right decision.”

Bram squeezes the back of my neck in a mini-massage. “You’ll figure it out. I don’t think there’s always one right decision. You make your choice, and then adapt. And you’ve always been good at pivoting in a new direction.”

“It’s hard to shake the feeling that the family legacy is on me. You probably felt the same, playing football in the shadow of your dad’s career.”

“I did. But since we played different positions, the shadow didn’t loom as large.

” He slips his arm around me. “Tonight is for fun. We’ll watch the podcast, let me interact with viewers in the comments, and then we’ll get a drink at The Striped Maple.

When I stopped in for lunch the other day, Conall said he was experimenting with drinks to offer for the adult trick-or-treat. We can be his guinea pigs.”

“I like that plan. It’ll be hard to top the Crimson Slasher they offered last year.”

Several of the businesses and restaurants we pass, including The Striped Maple, have fliers in their windows, advertising their participation in the adult trick-or-treat

happening on Halloween night.

Bram slows to a stop outside of Red's Diner. "I want a Mabel's Mint Chocolate Milkshake."

Both diners have items in honor of our resident cryptid. A milkshake sounds good after the day I've had. "Can you get me one? I'll wait here."

"Just come in with me."

"But... Red's..." I gesture at the train dining car turned into a diner then point to myself. "I'll be betraying Sparky's."

I'm a Sparky's supporter, like my parents and grandparents. Tons of Maplewoodians have taken sides, picking allegiances to either Red's or Sparky's in a diner feud that's raged for decades. No one can remember why it started, but there are rumors of a stolen recipe.

He rolls his eyes. "I wouldn't be able to believe the Sparky's-Red's feud is still going strong, but I live in Philly, and people there have very passionate opinions about where they get their cheesesteaks."

"I know you haven't lived here in two decades, but still... as an athlete, you should recognize a good rivalry. You used to be Team Sparky's."

"Because you were." He shrugs. "But that didn't stop either of us from bribing Agnes to bring us stuff from Red's. We weren't the only ones. You know everyone in this town has a supplier for their opposing diner. "

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

“You’re right.” There’s an underground network of passing take-out of the other diner so people aren’t seen defecting.

People like Agnes, who’ve remained neutral in this feud, could make a fortune if they chose to charge for their services.

“But Bram... Going inside is different.” I make a show of giving him the same puppy eyes Bandit is a pro at wearing me down with.

His lips twitch, but when he clamps his hand on my shoulder and pulls me toward the door, I know I’ve lost. “Come on. I’ll protect you.”

He steps in ahead of me and I follow, keeping my head ducked low. Though trying to hide behind him won’t entirely work since I’m bigger and taller. I can only hope that my red plaid shirt helps me blend into the diner’s interior decor.

Bram greets Mickey Brewer, heir to Red’s Diner, and orders two shakes. I take out my phone and pretend to check messages, but the weight of Mickey’s stare is so heavy, I have to meet it. We nod at each other and I wonder if he’s thinking I’m defecting to Red’s side.

The narrow diner is busy, and I’m sure word I’m in here will travel.

The Maplewood blog has a section devoted to who saw who where.

Names are rarely used, but the descriptions leave no doubt about the subject’s identity.

Mine will probably say, a certain inn owner known for supporting Sparky's was seen with a recently returned cryptid podcaster waiting at the counter inside Red's .

Our townspeople are great, but they're a gossipy bunch.

Hovering like Bram's shadow, I will the milkshakes to arrive faster.

Finally, we have our frosty green drinks in hand, and I check that the coast is clear as I bolt outside.

Bram's cheeks hollow as he sucks up a mouthful of milkshake, and his eyes shine with amusement, knowing exactly the good-humored chatter this will cause. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"My heart's pounding like we just pulled off a diamond heist." I grab his free hand and press it to the center of my chest so he can feel the beat. "If word gets back to Sparky's, I don't know how I'll face Amos."

His lips quirk into a smile. "Blame me. You were just accommodating an out-of-towner."

"An out-of-towner I'd do anything for." I squeeze his hand before releasing my hold.

"I like the sound of that." Instead of lowering his hand, he fists the front of my shirt and hauls me in for a kiss. His lips and tongue are cold from the shake. The mint and his unique flavor have me going back for another taste.

This one is longer, and I don't care that we're on the busiest street in Maplewood, I'm taking any and all opportunities I get to kiss him.

His breath fluttering over my lips, Bram rests his forehead against mine. "Do you

want to get the meatloaf special from Sparky's so people won't think you're changing sides?"

"Yes." I draw back enough to see his face clearly. "I knew you got it." I give him a playful shove.

Smiling, he slides his hand down to clasp mine and pulls me onto the sidewalk.

Sparky's is on Maple Street, only a few blocks from Red's. As we walk, we point out Halloween decorations we like on shops and houses, and I get some ideas for what I could do to my place next year if I stop hosting the haunted house.

Bram's phone rings as we reach the diner. He looks at the display. "It's Finn."

"Talk to him. I'll go order our food." Leaving Bram and the evidence that I've been at Red's outside on the bench with him, I stride into Sparky's and wave at the regulars.

Aqua is the dominant color here. It has an art deco style I've always been drawn to. Instead of the cooking happening behind the counter, like at Red's, the kitchen is in a separate space.

I order two meatloaf specials and wait by the window. Amos is busy with a group of tourists, but he waves and smiles at me, so that's a relief. Some days, news in Maplewood travels with lightning speed. But not today.

A couple waiting for their order near me gush about their visit to the haunted house last year. They tell me they've purchased tickets to our opening night next weekend for their entire friend group and how it's their favorite event of all the Halloween festivities.

Outside, Bram still has the phone pressed to his ear. He ends his call as my food arrives, boxed and bagged, and I hurry out to meet him.

He hands me the milkshake before he stands then picks up his own off the wrought-iron bench.

I take a quick sip. “Thanks. What did he say?”

Falling into step beside me, Bram pockets his phone. “I’ll tell you, but first, did anyone mention your visit to Red’s?”

“No. I guess the gossip mill is a little slow today. Plus, Amos was busy, so maybe word didn’t reach him yet.” We pass the town hall, then cut through the public parking lot behind Harmonic Circus.

“That’s good. And when he does, he’ll have seen you in his diner mere minutes after your sighting at Red’s. It’s like you’ve balanced things out.”

“I hope so.”

Bram moves closer to me to skirt around the people entering the Playhouse. Two monster movies are advertised on their marquee. “Finn confirmed the hair samples look like deer, wolf, and bear.”

“That’s what you thought. What about the three heat signatures?”

“Two of them don’t look like animals, but they don’t look like people either.”

The inn comes into view. Another half block until I can lock out nosy neighbors and cuddle on the couch with my best friend and our dogs. I’m not sure how this is my life right now, but I’m enjoying every moment while it lasts. “That’s good, right?”

He shrugs. “It’s not bad. Just inconclusive.

It’s much better than the third heat signature.

He thinks that one was a person. I thought so too, but the swing of the arms looked off to me.

That’s why I sent it to him. We agree it was someone trying to look like they were something else.

” The disgust marring his features is clear.

I press a soft kiss to his cheek, his expression softening the way I intended, then pass him the bag of food so I can unlock the front door. “I don’t get why people would put time and energy into faking a sighting.”

“From what I’ve seen, the main reasons are doing it for attention or as a hoax.

For investigators of those sightings, both are a waste of time and resources.

” He follows me inside, holding the bag up as the dogs charge us in greeting.

“I can sort of understand the motivation behind someone doing it for attention. But what really pisses me off are the people who do it as a prank, regardless of whether they’re trying to be funny or malicious. ”

“Who wouldn’t be angry?” My voice soft, I bend down, giving the dogs love, then take the bag so Bram can do the same.

“That’s really what’s driving me to figure out the new cryptid sightings here. I don’t like seeing Agnes scared.”

We bring the food to the kitchen, and while I plate up our meals, Bram pours the dogs' food into their bowls.

I put the remains of our milkshakes in the refrigerator and get glasses of water for us. "Are you still good with eating in the living room while we watch the episode?"

"The couch has my name on it. Plus, I want to see what you think about the show."

We settle on the cushions, side by side, with our plates on the coffee table.

Bram navigates through the apps on the screen, then to his podcast channel, and the Mabel episode.

The dogs wander over to see what we're up to, but both know better than to try stealing food.

Bandit climbs into Hades's dog bed, and after wandering around the room, Hades plops himself onto Bandit's bed, though his legs and head overhang it.

Bram places his phone beside his plate and opens it to the comments section of the video. His subscribers like the premiere option so people are watching it in real time together.

"Need me to hop on as comments moderator?" I grab my phone from the side table.

"Yeah, if you don't mind. I don't know if Charlie's available tonight. I'll delete trolls as I see them, but having two sets of eyes and hands are better."

"No problem." It's something I've done for years, and has been a way of staying close to and supporting Bram.

He points at the top comment. “There’s one. We’re not wasting time arguing or trying to convince anyone, or let anyone insult my viewers.”

I delete the comment and block the user from the channel. “Done.”

“Thanks.” Rolling his shoulders, he leans into me.

“The ones who are so sure they’re right about cryptids not being real surprise me because scientists discover new species all the time.

And when you have an experience that can’t be explained, it makes you want to be on the forefront of the discovery, at least that’s true for me. ”

My stomach grumbles and I grab my plate, balancing it on one thigh and my phone on the other.

“I get it. Like learning that unicorns were actually rhinos, or goats and antelopes with one horn, or that what people thought of as unicorn horns were really narwhal tusks. Or that the bones attributed to dragons or giants were really dinosaurs. It’s not some gotcha moment when science disproves a myth or we learn better information. ”

“Exactly. Some people think the Loch Ness Monster is a plesiosaur.”

““Plesiosaurs are extinct Mesozoic marine reptiles, but what if some survived and are living in Loch Ness?”” I quote the opening line of his podcast on the subject.

Beaming a smile, he grabs hold of my hand. “You’re amazing. So supportive.”

“I liked the story you sent me from your research trip there, when you talked of diving in that loch.”

“Then that story will be the one I tell you tonight. This summer, we can go to Scotland and look for Nessie together.” He cuts through the meatloaf with his fork, shoveling a piece into his mouth.

“That’d be fun.” Whether he means just the two of us or going as our annual vacation with the guys, I’m game.

He tugs on the hem of my shirt. “You’ll be in a land of tartan. So much plaid. You’ll fit right in.”

Laughing, I fling a fry at him. “Says the guy who’s lived in those plaid shirts since he arrived.”

Bram shrugs and smiles, stealing another fry from my plate. “You said I could.”

We turn our attention to the TV. On screen, Bram introduces himself and the episode, then he talks about the day he saw Mabel for the first time, and met me. There’s a photo of us as kids, taken that first summer, and then another, of us at Cryptid Night.

I bump our shoulders together, and keep contact by leaning into him. “When you told me about seeing Mabel the day we met, I believed you.”

He pauses the video and turns so we’re facing each other and his passionate gaze locks on mine. “You believed me immediately. Without question. Do you know how much that meant to me? You’ve always had my back.”

“Of course I do. You’re...” Mine . I swallow hard and try again. “You’ve had mine.”

“I always will.” His lips meet mine in a kiss so tender, I finally understand what people mean when they refer to a heart-melting kiss.

Leaning back with a smile, he presses play.

The story of the last time he saw Mabel, before he moved away, is heart wrenching.

I move my plate to the coffee table and cover my hand over his, holding him.

So much changed when he left, but I'm not sure I fully understood how much it affected him with my own grief at losing him consuming me at the time.

More Maplewood residents pop up on the screen to share their Mabel stories along with photos and jumpy home videos. Bram weaves them with tales from his research going back decades, and shares stories from those who were camera-shy.

It's a wonderful episode and I'm so proud of him.

And later, when we're lying on my bed and he finishes telling me about his time diving in Loch Ness, I show him how much.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

brAM

I heft up the pack on my back as I follow Trevor through the wooded area I once knew as well as I know every nuanced fleck that colors the brown of his eyes.

The sun hangs bright in the sky, keeping the temperature moderate, even at our higher elevation.

Newly fallen leaves crunch under our hiking boots and the air smells of earth and wood.

“Remember when you, Ever, and I used to come here in high school?” Trevor gestures to a clearing. “How about here?”

I look around, my gaze unfocused as memories of all the times I hung out in these woods pour over me.

Goofing around and being typical kids with Ever and Trevor.

Campouts with Trevor, telling ghost stories to see who could scare the other more.

And the times it was just me, needing space to recenter, not that I had any clue that was what I was doing at the time. “Yeah. This will work.”

I plunk my pack down on the damp ground. This time of year the ground up here always seems to be damp. Pressing my hands to my lower back, I bend backwards until a pop sounds .

“Ugh, I felt that from here.” Trevor scrunches up his face and a shiver runs through his sturdy body.

I roll my eyes, my lips twitching. “Like you don’t crack your neck all the time.”

“Snaps, cracks, and pops, we’re like a talking breakfast cereal.” He bends at the knees and unzips his backpack.

My laughter, loud enough to flush a pair of squawking birds from their perches, rings out over the mountain. And my startled jump thanks to the birds’ surprise flight makes me laugh even harder.

Face alight, he bites his bottom lip, but it doesn’t keep his laughter from falling out. Still chuckling, he pulls out two granola bars and tosses me one.

I unwrap the bar and bite into it.

“Damn, I missed this.” He stands and gestures to the tree line. “Should we take a break before we set up camp and explore?”

I grab my water bottle and follow him to the edge of the trees.

The mountain isn’t particularly high, but this place overlooking the valley has always felt like mine and Trevor’s.

I take up a spot on a flat boulder, warm and dry from the sun, and Trevor sits next to me, close enough our thighs press together.

By this time in October, the leaves in Philly are just beginning to turn, but in Maplewood, they’re coming to the end of their life cycle.

My gaze scans the valley, the majority of trees are bald, preparing to rest for the winter, but the pockets of golds and oranges sprinkling the area are like the M&M's in trail mix.

People want more, but are happy every time they find one.

I lean my head on Trevor's shoulder with a contented sigh. "I've missed this."

"Me too." He rests his cheek on my head.

My gaze follows a hawk gliding along the path of the twisting river below. "I suppose you're not able to get up here as much as you'd like."

"No."

Which is why I'm so grateful that he's taken time off to camp and explore with me, especially with everything he has going on right now.

The haunted house alone would be more than anyone else could handle.

We've been setting it up this week, hours of exhausting, muscle-aching work.

But Trevor makes everything look easy with his quiet strength, good humor, and genuine love for the inn.

"Coming to our spot hasn't been the same since you left. So, I don't."

I gasp at his confession and spin to face him.

"You okay?" His eyes round in question as he scans my face and body, looking for any indication of injury.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. My brain races to catch up with what he's implying. Finally, my voice recovers and I ask, "When was the last time you were here?"

He looks up and to the left, chewing his bottom lip like he's counting. "High school graduation? Ever and I came up after Selwyn's party, but it wasn't the same without you. Ever and I have hiked in the area, but..." He shrugs his shoulders.

All I can do is gape, my chest tight and full simultaneously. This man, this sweet, sensitive, stubborn man. "You never told me."

"What was there to tell?" His focus falls to the blades of grass beneath our feet.

I grab his face in both hands and kiss him, pouring all the love I have for him into it.

Yes, I love Trevor. Those romantic feelings that have been slowly building for years are love.

I know that now. Maybe it seems like something I should have realized years ago.

I don't know why I didn't figure it out earlier.

But the why of it doesn't matter now because I. Love. Trevor.

He slides onto my lap, straddling me like he can't get close enough, and I swear everything I feel for him is being conveyed back to me with each tangle of our tongues.

Realizing my love for my best friend at our spot makes it all the better.

After minutes or maybe hours, I slow the kiss.

I rest my forehead to his, soaking in the weight of him on my lap and absorbing the heat of the rock.

The urge to tell him I love him, to shout it to the world from this spot, is great, but I also don't want to scare him off.

Don't want him to think it's a whim or that my feelings will change when I leave Maplewood.

I need to show him how in love I am with him. Maybe the gift I have for him will be a step in that direction because now that I know, I don't want to leave without him knowing too.

I kiss the tip of his nose. "Ready to set up camp, then do some exploring?"

"Sounds good." He hops off my lap and reaches his hand out to pull me up.

We walk back to the clearing and make quick work of setting up.

The gear my sponsor gave me is state-of-the-art, which makes our work that much easier.

But we also work well together, we always have.

Years of friendship have given us a shorthand for communicating in addition to Trevor being my favorite person in the world.

As soon as we have everything up, we head off into the woods to look for clues of cryptids.

I'm interested in this area specifically because Ever mentioned he and his boyfriend

thought they saw Mabel here, and a couple of Agnes's gardening club members mentioned seeing unexplained things in this vicinity.

Trevor helps me document tracks, a strange marking on a rock, and spies an odd stone formation.

While we search and explore, we share memories of when we were boys running around in these woods and tell stories of our lives while we've been apart.

Talking and texting almost every day, Trevor and I already know most of each other's stories, but there's something about having time to ramble on, knowing I have all day and all night with him that is freeing.

As the sun gets lower and lower on the horizon, we head back to our campsite, gathering kindling along the way. When we reach the clearing, my legs are tired from all the walking, and my cheeks ache from laughing and smiling so much.

"This was a good day." I dump my armful of kindling on top of Trevor's pile, then unscrew my water bottle, drinking down the contents.

Trevor opens the two ultra-light, ultra-portable camping chairs, placing them in front of our designated fire pit, and plops into one with a long sigh. He wiggles around, shifting this way and that. "These are surprisingly comfortable."

"Yeah?" I debated bringing them because we had so much other gear with my investigation stuff, but they were so compact finding space for them was easy. Sitting down, I stretch out my legs. "You're right. Who would have thought?"

"It pays to have good sponsors." But Trevor's appreciative gaze is on my body, not the equipment, journeying from head to toe.

“Literally.” I brush my fingertip along his, hooking our index fingers together.

He chuckles and we sit in companionable silence with our heads back, watching the white clouds turn to pink as the sun prepares to sleep for the night.

“I don’t want to move, but if we want a fire, we should get it going now.” I go to unhook my finger, but he tightens his hook and tugs.

Twisting, he leans over the side of the chair. “Kiss me first.”

Warmth washes through me. I brush my palm over the soft whiskers of his beard, marveling that I can do this now.

I can touch him this way, kiss him. My lips pass over his in a light, almost-there touch, and the growl that rumbles from the back of his throat goes straight to my cock. “Not what you want?”

“More.” He drags my chair until it’s bumped up against his. Those big hands of his, rubbing up and down my thighs, have my body straining toward him.

Trevor’s sexy mono-syllable growls are quickly becoming my favorite thing.

I smile against his lips, and slide the tip of my tongue over the seam.

He groans and opens. As soon as our tongues touch, he takes control.

His fingers press into my legs hard enough to leave marks.

With every lick and nip he takes another piece of me, and I willingly let him have them all.

Needing more contact, I shift, swinging my leg over his thigh, but my chair wobbles.

I grab onto Trevor's shirt for purchase, but instead of helping, the shift catapults me backwards.

The chair collapses, and I hit the damp ground with a thud, yanking Trevor.

His shirt still bunched in my fists, he lands on top of me with a grunt.

Immediately, he pushes up onto his arms. "You okay?"

"Yeah. You?" I release his shirt, smoothing out the wrinkles.

He grins. "I may have something to say to your sponsor about the stability of those chairs. Other than that, I'm fine."

I lift my head and give him a peck. "I'd say you're better than fine."

"Flatterer." He jumps up, helps me stand, then brushes off his jeans. "I'll start the fire and get the water heating. You get the bowls and the food."

"You have yourself a deal."

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Being with him is a heady mix of old and new. I can't wait to add new memories of us around a campfire, huddling together in front of the crackling flames. I'm so grateful to share this time with him now, and I can't wait for the rest of our night together.

Stars dot the night sky, and the fire crackles, warming my side.

My stomach is full and my head rests on Trevor's lap as we lounge on the sleeping bag I laid out.

After the chair fiasco, we decided the ground would be safer.

Now Trevor's fingertips are absently running through my hair as we enjoy the peaceful evening.

"That freeze-dried beef and noodles was better than I thought it would be." He points to a shooting star, one of many we've seen tonight.

"It almost makes up for the chair."

He snorts. "When I have you on your back, I don't want your ass to be bruised."

I sit up in a flourish. "What if I want you on your back?"

We've been getting each other off with our hands and mouths, but we haven't had this conversation yet.

Oddly, in all the years of friendship, Trevor has been closed-lipped about his romantic and sexual relationships.

In fact, I can't remember him talking about hooking up or dating.

Not that I wanted to hear about that. And not that I shared anything with him. It always felt... wrong.

His eyes darken and he pulls me so I'm pinned to his chest. "Whatever you want, I want. You want to top, I'll bottom. You want to bottom, I'll top. If all you want to do is what we've been doing, then I'll be the happiest man alive."

"I have something for you," I blurt out, then get up and run into the tent. If I didn't already love the man, I would after that declaration. I drop to my knees, digging in my pack. When my fingers hit the pointed corner, I pull out the box and rush back out

Remains of the fire smolder as Trevor stirs the ashes with a long stick.

"Here." My teeth grazing my bottom lip, I hand the box to him.

Trevor gives me the stick. He lifts the box's lid, and my heart stutters at the wonder on his face as he studies the gold medallion.

He carefully lifts it from the bed of tissue paper.

"Where did you get this? How? It's been missing since that group vacation to Bermuda..."

"He looks up and I can practically see him doing the math in his head. "Sixteen years ago."

“It’s a replica.” The original had belonged to his grandfather, and Trevor wore it every day.

Every day until he lost it thanks to me tackling him in the ocean during a game of football on the beach.

“When we were in Italy this summer and saw that metal worker, the one I bought the ring for Agnes from, I got the idea of having this made.” He nods, but his gaze stays glued to the medallion hanging from its chain.

“I know how much the medallion meant to you and how upset you were when it got lost. So I reached out to him before we flew home. He had other commissions he had to complete before he could start. It arrived in Philly yesterday. Charlie overnighted it to Ever, and I picked it up from him this morning.”

He traces his fingers over the intricate work.

“I can’t believe it. Both that you’d do this, and that you remembered.

” His voice rasps and his eyelids flutter like he’s fighting back emotion.

He drags his gaze from the medallion. Glassy eyes meet mine.

Tearing my heart from my chest and stomping on it would be less painful than making Trevor cry. “Thank you.”

“Are you upset?” Maybe I overstepped a boundary. Of course a replica can’t make up for losing the real thing. What was I thinking?

Trevor shakes his head, a watery smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Not at all.” He strokes my cheek and I lean into his palm. “This is the most thoughtful gift

anyone has ever given me.”

His cold lips press to mine and I feel him tremble. I hold him close, slowing my breaths until we’re breathing in sync and his trembling quiets.

Resting his cheek against my chest, he continues tracing his fingers over the shiny disc. “We looked for the medallion for days. You were relentless.”

“I was so frustrated that we couldn’t find it. It’s always bothered me.” I felt like him losing it was my fault. But he never blamed me and instead insisted that a weak link on the chain must have snapped, causing the medallion to fall free. It’s probably still somewhere in the ocean.

Trevor sets the medallion in its box and tucks it to his chest. Eyes full of heat, he rises onto his knees and braces his hands on my thighs. “Finish putting out the fire then meet me in the tent.”

I gaze into those gorgeous eyes. “I can do that.”

He stands, long legs wrapped in worn denim, with a bulge that I long to touch. Grasping the box, he starts for the tent, slowing his steps to look over his shoulder. “Because I’m going to thank the hell out of you.”

I have never finished putting out a campfire as fast in my entire life.

When I flip open the flap of the tent, a small lantern sits in the corner, illuminating the compact space.

Trevor lifts open his sleeping bag and my mouth goes dry.

But for the medallion resting on his chest and its chain around his neck, he’s wearing

nothing.

I drop my sleeping bag and strip. Immediately, my nipples pucker. “Shit, it’s cold.”

“Get in.” He has his bag unzipped all the way, so I don’t have to worry about how the two of us will fit into it.

Later, we can zip our two bags together, but right now, all I want is to feel every inch of his skin against every inch of mine.

I want to feel his thick muscles. The hard planes of his stomach and the soft skin behind his ear. I want to be engulfed by him.

I slide in and the warmth of his body heats the down fabric, creating a cocoon of comfort. “Hi.”

“Thank you.” He wraps an arm around my waist, kissing me, tugging until I’m on top of him and my chest is plastered to his chest. “Thank you for the gift.” Kiss. “Thank you for helping me with the haunted house this week.” Kiss. “Thank you for coming when Agnes needed you.” Kiss.

We keep kissing and kissing, and Bram’s hands roam over my back, down to my ass, cupping, stroking, and caressing. Our bodies grind in a sensual dance directed by sighs and moans and pleas for more.

I nuzzle the skin under his beard, inhaling the scent of campfire and clean sweat. “I love the way you smell.”

“I can’t believe we’re here like this.” His voice is a croak and his throat bobs.

I nip his Adam’s apple with my teeth, then kiss it, and revel in the shiver my actions

evoke.

Holding me to him with one hand firmly on my ass, he brings a finger to my mouth, tracing my lips.

I part them and suck in the tip, swirling my tongue around it, teasing as I hollow my cheeks.

His gaze heats and the power that surges, knowing I put that heat there, burns as hot as roaring flames.

He claims my mouth. Power laced with so much tenderness, the kiss is a contrast, and is everything that makes Trevor the amazing man he is.

Thought is forfeited and only sensations exist, a place I'll happily live for as long as I can.

My weight on my forearms, I tease my fingers in his hair, and slide my foot up and down his calf, rubbing our thighs together, our calves, our cocks. I want everything with him. "You feel so good."

With a nip to my lower lip, he pulls back. "Whatever you want."

"I want to feel you inside me." I push up so I'm straddling him and trace my fingers over his sculpted chest. Trevor sucks in a breath and his hands flex on my thighs. I like the way his lips part, the mists of desire in his eyes, and the way he whispers my name.

His fingertips tickle my lower spine, sinking lower and lower. A small bottle of lube and a strip of condoms sit beside the pillow. I grab the bottle, shivering as his hands skate up my thighs.

I pour some lube on his fingers. His wet finger slides over my ass to the crease, and I push my hips back, gripping his cock in my hand. “I need you, Trev.”

The meaning behind my words is more than I’m ready to say, but from the way he’s looking at me, with so much tenderness, I think he may have gotten the message. “You’ve always had me, Bram. You always will.”

Every one of my nerve endings short-circuits as the weight of his declarations encircles the air around us, wrapping us in its meaning. “Get me ready. Now.”

Even in the shadows of the tent, I can make out the tremor under eyes full of desire, and more.

With two slicked fingers, he works his way inside.

Desperation curls around my center and I stroke him from base to tip, slow and tight, watching his face for what brings the most pleasure, unlocking more of his secrets.

His hand clamps on my thigh and he arches into me with a groan. “Yes.”

He pulls my head down, demanding my mouth. As we kiss, he adds a third finger. He pumps them in and out, finding my prostate. A constellation of stars explodes behind my eyelids with each hit.

“Fuck.” I grope for the condom, then tear the wrapper open. Need trembling through me, I slide it down his thick cock. “This isn’t going to last long.”

Trevor grabs my hips, steadying me as I position myself over him and slowly sink down.

Inch by inch, moment after moment, each one bringing us closer and closer together.

The feel of him filling me, the intimacy that joins us, steals my voice and I'm overcome with how amazing it feels to be here, with him, as we are.

His fingertips dig into my skin. The tendons in his neck stand out as he fights to keep his hips still, giving me control.

"You feel so good." His words are strained with that gruff tone I love.

I run my fingers over his chest, then grasp hold of his shoulders and thrust, moving my hips, sliding up until only his tip is in me, then sinking back down.

We both groan and I do it again and again and again. His fingers grip me hard enough I'm sure I'll have marks tomorrow and I groan at the thought of carrying signs of our night together on my skin. Our gazes stay on each other, our connection never wavering.

When I'm close, he fists his hand around my cock, stroking me hard and fast, then pulls himself to sitting. Enveloping me in his arms, his gaze burns into me with every thrust.

Mine.

The thought catapults me over the edge. Mouth fused to mine, Trevor swallows my cries as my release coats our skin. Then he clutches me tighter, banding his arms around me, and stiffens, groaning long and low, filling the condom with muted heat.

Our kisses turn lazy, and we pause them only to smile at each other. I can't stop caressing his skin, and he loosens his tight embrace enough to slide his hands up and down my back in possessive strokes.

Dazzled by what we shared, I claim another kiss and luxuriate in the feel of being

body to body with him. “In the morning, I want the reverse of what we just did. Me sliding inside you as the sun rises, sharing orgasms as the day begins.”

His hands flex on my back and his gaze glitters with heat. “Fuck, yeah.”

I know we need to clean up, but I want to steal another few moments first. “It’s different with you.”

“Sex?”

“Yeah. And the hand-holding. The kissing. All of it.” It means more. And I know why. Love.

He slides a hand up to frame my face. “For me too.”

Those strong fingers shift to the back of my head and he draws me forward. Our lips meet, and I sink into the kiss, sink into Trevor, as owls hoot and crickets chirp and the night comes alive around us.

TREVOR

Hand in hand, Bram and I stroll down Garnet Drive with our dogs on leash leading the way.

Hades and Bandit bark at dogs farther up the block. Every time I look at Hades dressed in his devil costume, and Bandit as a bee, I grin. Getting them into the costumes was easier than I anticipated, but I don't know how long we'll have until they'll want the items off.

Music echoes from Maplewood City Park, and brightly painted signs point the way to the Fun and Fright Fest. So many people are out here, crowding the sidewalk, hurrying past us to get to the event.

Pets, kids, and some adults in costumes, vendors carrying boxes, musicians hefting instruments, everyone is excited and ready for another Maplewood festival.

Bram lets out a low whistle. "So many people. Hades won't know where to look first."

"If he gets overwhelmed, we can duck out for a bit and take him for a walk in a quieter area of town or head back home."

The air is crisp, bordering on cold, and I use the excuse to burrow closer to him.

He's stolen another of my plaid shirts in what's become almost a daily occurrence.

The tails of the blue plaid shirt stick out from the hem of his leather jacket.

Seeing him in my clothes warms my insides and makes me want to puff out my chest. It's like he's announcing to the world he's mine.

I like seeing him in my clothes almost as much as I like waking up with him in my bed. Which is to say, a lot.

We reach the corner of Garnet Drive and Morgan Street. Dozens of balloons in orange, purple, and black arch over the park's entrance. Beyond it, vendors and activity stations spread across the park's green spaces.

A big smile stretching across his face, Bram bumps his shoulder into mine. "I wish they'd held this when we were kids."

"It's my favorite festival." Guiding Bandit around two teens admiring each other's zombie costumes, I walk under the balloon arch and onto the paved path decorated with colorful chalk drawings. "Maybe we should've worn costumes."

Bram draws Hades away from a toddler dropping pieces of her donut on the grass. "We will, for the adult trick-or-treat. For now... I see booths selling witch and wizard hats and headbands with sparkly pumpkins and bats on antennas. Want any of those?"

I like that we can be silly with each other. "We have to go with the sparkles so we match Hades and Bandit. I like the pumpkins."

Hades's costume is a red velour cape with webbed collar, and sparkly red curved devil horns, and Bandit in his yellow and black striped bee costume, has sparkly silver wings and a yellow cap sporting iridescent tinsel balls for antennas.

Bram presses his hand to my lower back, guiding me in the direction of the booth.

“Sparkling headbands, coming right up.”

I hold the dogs while he buys a headband with sparkly purple bats for himself, and one with orange pumpkins for me. After donning his headband, he turns to me and smiles. His blue eyes shining, he slides my pumpkin headband into place with care, and ends his act with a kiss on my lips.

This tiny moment is one memory I'll cherish forever. Something so simple and ordinary, yet shakes my world with the tenderness of it.

The pumpkins bob with my every step as we visit the vendors. The warring diners, Sparky's and Red's are here, along with Harmonic Circus, the gardening club, local artisans, a vendor selling all things maple, and a specialty pie shop serving up slices of maple, apple, pecan, and pumpkin.

At the booth for the specialty pet boutique, we buy treats for the dogs. Hades tugs on the leash, his head turning right and left at all the people passing and possible new friends. Bandit is more interested in the little kids dressed as baseball players tossing a ball back and forth.

Bram points to a row of vendors by one of the paths. “Ever's booth is over there.”

We wind our way in that direction, and at the Honey Spot's booth, find Ever and Dmitri, and Jake and Alaric. Alaric is also sporting a bat antenna headband, with black bats.

As soon as Ever sees Bandit, he grins. “Now, there's a costume.”

Bandit smiles his doggy smile at me like he knows he's the center of attention. I bend and pat his head. “I thought you'd like it.”

“You could use him as a store mascot.” Jake squats down and lets the dogs climb on him.

Dmitri pets Bandit’s head, and brushes his fingers over one of the bee wings. “We already have our costumes for the adult trick-or-treat, but now I know what next year’s costume will be for me.”

I drop Bandit’s leash so he can climb onto Jake's lap better. “What are your costumes?”

Ever holds up a box of dog treats, his eyebrows raised in question. “You’ll have to come by the store that night so you can see.”

“Oh, we’ll be there,” I assure him, and nod that Bandit can have a treat. “Since we were busy setting up the haunted house this past week, Bram and I haven’t picked costumes yet, but we have time.”

Jake stands, brushing dog hair from his pants and hands Bandit’s leash to me. “Are you ready for opening night? A few guys I work with have tickets and plan to be at the haunted house when the doors open tonight.”

“We’re ready. I’ll be there at the start, before going to see Jo at the carving competition.

” I lean into Bram. We worked so hard getting everything ready, and I did a final walk through today while Bram did podcast promo on social media.

“Don’t forget, Bram’s podcast episode about the cryptid investigation airs tonight too. ”

“Our on-screen debut.” Dmitri kisses Ever’s cheek. “We have the premiere video

bookmarked.”

Someone with a bullhorn announces that the kids’ costume parade is about to begin. We line the side of the park’s pathway with the other attendees and clap as the kids come by on their way to the fountain at the park’s center.

On the other side of the path, I spy Hayworth and Felix Spring, dressed in costume. Felix rocks a cowboy look and Hayworth’s an astronaut. Hayworth catches my gaze and we wave at each other.

“Who’s that?” Bram slides his arm around my shoulders.

“Hayworth. He and I go to the same gym. The cowboy next to him is his partner Felix.” I lean into Bram, scanning the parade of costumes. “See the cowgirl walking beside Little Bo Peep? They’re Felix’s kids, Elsa and Aria. ”

The girls light up and wave at Felix and Hayworth, and Bram turns to me. “Toy Story, right? That’s a good group costume.”

“It is. The T-Rex was my favorite character. Maybe Bandit will go as a dinosaur next year.”

Farther down the path, Jason Zervudachi from Moon Meadows Maple Farm stands with his older sister's family. They cheer louder when the next wave of kids comes by, and one of the kids waves back at them. Seeing him reminds me that we need to put in another order for more maple syrup for the inn. I add a note to my phone and am relieved there aren’t any messages from Peter, our other assistant manager, who’s at the helm there today.

My staff is extremely competent, but the worry for things to be well never really goes away.

Bram clasps my shoulder. “It’s time for us to line up.”

“We’ll see you guys later.” I nod at Ever and Dmitri then follow Bram toward the opposite side of the park. Alaric and Jake flank me, promising to take pictures and cheer us on. We leave them to find spots in the crowd lining the parade route. As the kids did, we’ll walk toward the fountain.

We line up behind a Dalmatian dressed as an angel. Bram steps closer to me to allow a golden retriever dressed as a pumpkin, complete with a little stem beret, to pass. Bandit is busy sniffing the Dalmatian, but the large spotted dog is more interested in Hades.

Alex MacDougall approaches us, camera in hand, and captures the angel and devil getting acquainted. “This is going in the photo carousel for sure.”

Laughing, I guide Bandit away from the duo so he’s not in the shot.

Then Alex turns his camera on Bram and me, with Bandit standing between us.

Bram wraps his arm around my waist and leans in, his temple resting against mine.

My heartbeat stutters at how natural this feels.

Like we’re a couple, not two best friends trying to figure out if these last few weeks have been a fling or something more.

“That’s a nice one.” Alex lowers his camera. “I’ll send it to you.”

“Thanks.” Bram keeps his arm around me, like it belongs there, and all I can manage is a nod and a murmured thanks of my own.

Alex walks away, taking more photos as he heads toward the fountain. An announcement comes from the bullhorn that the pet parade is ready to begin.

I crouch beside Bandit and stroke his back. “Good boy. We’ll walk in this, and then get you and Hades a present. Then we’ll go home and you can watch that farm show you like so much.”

Above me, Bram chuckles and holds out his hand to pull me to my feet. “You’re adorable.”

Heat flares into my cheeks. I flick one of my headband antenna and send a pumpkin dancing. “Especially in these pumpkins.”

He links our hands together, then draws them to his lips and presses a kiss to my knuckles. “Even without them.”

Overwhelmed, I don’t know what to say.

The Dalmatian and her owner move forward. Hand in hand, we follow with our dogs. I love the cheers and the smiles, and this town so much. Sharing it with Bram feels right. Holding their phones up, Jake and Alaric let out whoops, calling our names as we pass.

When we reach the fountain, one of the festival volunteers hands us a small bag with various pet treats, toys, and coupons inside. There are so many people and pets roaming around, our dogs are overwhelmed.

Bram points out an empty bench away from the vendors and we hustle to claim it. There are bushes on both sides, secluding us from the bustling activity. We calm the dogs with soft words and pets, and the way Bram interacts with Hades is so sweet, my heart sighs.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

As Bram adjusts Hades's horns, I sort through the bags for the treats we bought from the pet boutique. The dogs gobble them up, then nose the bag, looking for more. I find pumpkin-shaped chew toys in the bags and distract the dogs with them.

Our bench gives us a great view of the stage set up on the side street beside us. Bram taps my arm. "Agnes is over there. Looks like the Rocktogenarians are on next."

"Do you want to move so we're in front of the stage?"

He wraps his arm around my shoulders. "Staying right here is fine."

We can see and hear everything, and don't have to worry about anyone banging into us or the dogs. "Sounds good."

Dressed in various versions of leather and animal print, the ladies take the stage. Led by Rae, they warm up the crowd.

Bram calls out Agnes's name and cheers. Hoisting her beloved blue guitar, she waves to us.

The music starts. The band plays a medley of Halloween-inspired songs, starting with "Monster Mash", delving in and out of various genres, and ending with a cover of "Thriller" that's so good, the crowd's cheers drown out the final notes. Joining hands, the rockers take a bow.

As the applause dies down, I gather our bags. "We need to congratulate Agnes. They were so good."

“I think she’s heading this way.” Bram stands and waves to his aunt. Agnes sees him, nods, and points in our direction. The dogs, lying at our feet, spot her and jump to their paws. Tails wagging, they pull on their leashes, and we let them lead the short distance out of the park.

Agnes meets us on the sidewalk. “Hello, dears. What fetching headbands.”

Smiling, Bram kisses her cheek. “Nice set. You were amazing.”

“Witchy Woman was my favorite,” I add.

“The crowd seemed happy, though I wanted dancers for that final song.” The shoulder of her blue leather jacket rises in a single-arm shrug. “Maybe next year. That will allow plenty of time to learn the choreography. How is the investigation into the new cryptids?”

“We’re still looking, but all we have so far is inconclusive evidence.” His apologetic shrug sets his sparkly bats bopping.

She glances over her shoulder at the crowd by the stage. “I’ve heard that things have been seen around town. Shadows blending into other shadows. Possibly the cryptids Eleanor and Rae saw. Do be careful when you’re out there. You’re always together, yes?”

The comforting weight of Bram’s arm comes around my shoulders. He places a light peck on my cheek. “Yes. We’re together.”

We’re together.

I want to be able to say that, and for it to mean that we are. Permanently. And the longer Bram is here, the longer we do... whatever this is, the more I want it.

Clasping her hands together at her heart, she smiles. “Good. Now, please excuse me. Rae promised us shots at The Striped Maple.”

“Do you need help carrying instruments or equipment anywhere?” Bram releases me so he can redirect Hades away from a melting chocolate ice cream cone smashed on the curb.

She shakes her head. “My friend Zeke arranged help for us. We’re all set.

See you later, dears. Tell Jo I wish her well with the pumpkin carving and I’ll try to stop by and see her tonight.

Good luck with the haunted house, Trevor.

The girls and I have tickets to tour it on Halloween.

” With a wave, she heads toward the stage.

Then she turns back. “Bram, dear, I didn’t forget your podcast. I’ll be sure to watch.

Now I must run, I can’t keep the girls and Zeke waiting. ”

I watch her walk away. “Shadows blending into other shadows around town? You’d think traffic cams or security cameras would catch them.”

“Unless they know which spots to avoid.” Bram sighs.

“I’ll put a call out on my site and socials, ask people to share if they capture anything.

I thought I saw something one night, when I was looking out the kitchen window, but it was gone too quick.

And Conall mentioned something about seeing a shadow when he was coming home from the pub, around three in the morning. ”

I remember Conall telling us about it when we stopped in The Striped Maple the night Bram’s podcast about Mabel aired, to taste-test possible drinks for the adult trick-or-treat. “He thought a streetlight was casting a raccoon shadow to look giant. Not that it was a cryptid.”

He gives a gentle tug on the leash to direct Hades away from a fire hydrant. “So we’re clear, I’m not thinking cryptids for this either. Probably a person or maybe an animal looking for food. But I don’t want to discount anything yet. It’s more to look into.”

“Yeah, it is.” And that could mean even more visits here.

My pulse quickens, but I tamp down the swelling excitement of more time together.

Not just because of the sex—which is off-the-charts amazing—but because I love spending time with my best friend.

It doesn’t do any good to wish for something that may not happen.

Bram has dozens of unexplained sightings to explore all over the world.

There’s no reason to believe he would want to spend more time in Maplewood after this.

Over the bullhorn, the announcer calls out the winners of the house decorating contest. Moon Meadows Maple Farm wins first place.

I tuck my arm through Bram’s. “How about one last detour through the vendors?

Then we can head home.”

“Sure.”

We head inside the park and make our way through the throng of people to the vendors in the section we missed earlier. Bram stops by one booth selling black and white photos of wildlife. Bandit pulls the leash, so I shift with him and we move on to the next vendor.

Several crocheted animals and plants line the table on multi-tiered shelves, including mini versions of Mabel.

They’re cute and I have to buy one for Bram, if for no other reason than to see his smile when I give it to him.

If it happens to be a reminder of his time in Maplewood and our time together, all the better.

I press my palm to where the medallion he gave me lies under my layers of clothing.

The metal is warm against my skin, and it’s weight feels almost protective.

I pick up a green-eyed Mabel with leaves in various shades of green and a pink smile.
“I’ll take this one, please.”

In the corner of my vision, Bram leaves the photographer’s booth.

For a second, I worry he’ll come here and my surprise will be ruined, but led by Hades, he heads toward a vendor selling bubbles.

A machine by the booth sends the rainbow orbs floating through the air, and Hades

can't get enough.

He jumps, trying to catch them, and seems surprised when they break upon hitting his nose.

When I meet up with them there, Bram nods toward the bag. "What did you buy?"

"Something for you."

His eyes light up. "Really?"

"When I saw it, I immediately thought of you."

"Now I'm curious." He takes hold of Bandit's leash, handling both dogs, and grasps my hand. "Do you want to go anywhere else?"

"No. I'm ready to go home."

"Good. Let's go."

The walk home takes longer than usual with the crowd in the park and stopping for everyone who wants to pet or talk to the dogs. They, being the hams they are, love every minute of attention.

As soon as we're inside my house, Bram removes the dogs' leashes and costumes, and they run off to claim their nap spots.

"Can I open my present now?" He rubs his hands together like he's been waiting for days and not twenty minutes.

"Go ahead."

Instead of tearing into the bag, he carefully opens it and peers inside. His brows draw together. “You got me a plant made of yarn?”

I chuckle. “No. You’ll see. Take it out.”

He reaches inside then draws his arm back. Slowly, the mini cryptid is revealed. A surprised huff-laugh puffs from his chest. “Mabel?”

“Yeah. She’s the one who started you on your cryptid adventures, so now, she can accompany you on every one.”

He clutches Mabel to his chest, stroking the top of her leafy head with a finger, then carefully sets her on the center of the table. “This is... I can’t find the right words, but thank you. I love it.”

“She’s cute.” We stand next to each other, admiring her.

“She is. But the meaning behind it is what I’ll remember every time I see her.” He tugs off his headband and lays it beside Mabel.

There’s a sheen in his eyes as he closes the distance between us. He slowly removes my headband. It lands on the counter with a clatter. I don’t check where because I’m too focused on the slow slide of his hand in my hair. His other hand clasps my side and he pulls me against him.

Up close, I can see my reflection in his gaze.

When his lips land on mine, we open for each other, taking the kiss deeper. Every swipe of his tongue is a caress, every stroke of his hand through my hair, a promise, and I lose myself in the sensations. I’m spellbound by his touch and transfixed by his presence.

We come up for air, and I keep him in my embrace, holding him as tenderly as he's holding me. The soft smile and the way his eyes shine is reserved for me alone. I'm sure I'm sharing the same expression because my heart's beaming with the happiness that comes from being with him.

Things feel different now. Like I'm falling deeper and faster with no way to slow my momentum. It's as scary as it is thrilling. All I can do is hold on to Bram and hope that we won't crash and burn.

brAM

Rows upon rows of twinkling lights create an archway over the wide aisles of the festival grounds.

With the dozens of people in line behind us at the food trucks, and more strolling about the grounds, it seems like the entire town is here.

The pumpkin carving contest entries line the lawn along the aisles, grouped by category. Kids, adult amateur, and professional.

With an apple cider donut in one hand and a coffee in the other, I turn to Trevor, Dmitri, and Ever. “There are so many entries. Where do you want to start?”

Trevor sips his coffee. Steam curls from the cup along with the scent of cinnamon. “Jo said she’s somewhere in the middle of the amateurs, and they’re in the center. The kids are on the west side and the pros are on the east.”

Dmitri pops a piece of candied maple bacon in his mouth. “Some of the kids I teach have entries. Let’s start there.”

The festival grounds cover forty acres, three-quarters of a mile long. Shaped like an oval, it’s interspersed with paths leading to different sections. We head west to check out the kids’ pumpkins.

The chill in the night air feels more like winter is coming than when I arrived at the beginning of the month.

Hat, gloves, flannel, hoodie, and my leather jacket, I'm a man of layers tonight.

Trevor rocks his lumberjack look in a red flannel shirt atop a Henley and jeans.

His puffer vest is open, and the phone peeking out of its inside pocket beeps with a text alert.

His hands are as full as mine. I adjust my hold on my donut so I can grab his maple cinnamon cruller and free him up.

His forehead creasing, he swipes his finger across the screen, and as he reads the message, he smiles.

Ever unrolls his bag of pumpkin spice donut holes and the scent of cinnamon and cloves drifts along the breeze. "How is opening night at the haunted house going?"

"Great. Peter texted me a pic of the line waiting to get in. It's stretched down the block.

" Trevor pockets his phone, relieves me of his cruller, then lifts it to my lips, offering me a bite.

He and I were at the carriage house to welcome the night's first guests to the haunted adventure, and stayed for an hour and a half.

We had a steady stream of people the whole time.

"He said it's been going strong since Bram and I left to come here. "

"That's great." Ever tilts the bag to Dmitri before taking a treat for himself. "A lot of people who came to my booth today mentioned it."

I hold up my donut so Trevor can try it. “You were busy every time I looked over. I know your honey is popular, but I guess I underestimated how much people love it.”

“We sold out of almost everything we brought.”

Trevor holds up his hand to Ever for a high five. “Nice.”

We arrive at the kids’ area. Since it’s almost nine o’clock, a lot of the entrants in the under twelve category aren’t here, but several tweens and most of the entrants in the teen category mill around in front of their pumpkins.

Four voices call out Dmitri’s name, and he and Ever head over to speak with the animated group.

The judges chose the winners late this afternoon, during the break between the carving portion of the day and the display opening tonight. All the entries will be displayed here at the festival grounds until the first of November, which gives visitors and Maplewoodians time to view the designs.

Trevor and I pass pumpkins carved by kids with more skill than I’d be able to do. We point out our favorites. A mouse eating cheese. Cats, dogs. A firetruck built out of carvings.

Sipping the hot coffee keeps my hands warm and helps chase away the chill from the wind. “I’m thinking back to my attempts as a kid. Triangle eyes and nose, and a smiling mouth. I wasn’t very creative.”

Trevor laughs. “You, me, and Charlie made a mess of Agnes’s kitchen the year we tried scooping out the pumpkin guts ourselves.”

“Charlie started it. He flicked the first spoonful at me.”

He bumps my shoulder. “He was five.”

“And thought he’d invented a great game. What kind of brother would I be if I didn’t encourage his creativity?” Smiling at the memory of orange goo, strings, and seeds, and our laughing faces as we faced off in the epic pumpkin battle, I tear off another bite of donut.

“Catapulting spoonfuls of guts at each other was pretty fun. Messy to clean up though. Still, I give it a ten out of ten.” He snatches the bite of donut from my fingers and pops it in his mouth with a grin. I give him a shove and he just laughs then offers me more of his cruller.

We reach the section with the teen category. More elaborate and detailed carvings spread out along the aisle. Display lights positioned at each table add an artistic element. But Trevor’s attention is on the large barn-like structure out this way, not the pumpkins.

“Trev, you okay?”

“Hmm? Yeah, just wondering.”

“Wondering what?”

His gaze contemplative, he faces me. “If I stop holding the haunted house, maybe the festival committee could take over. They could move it here.”

I scan the structure. “And hold it in that huge barn?”

“Yeah. The barn is used for other festivals and it’s sitting empty tonight. I could donate the props to get them started. There’s a ton of space out here if they want to expand beyond the barn. And holding it here, they could probably keep the ticket

prices low.”

I know how heavily the haunted house issue has been weighing on him. The rest of my donut is gone in two bites. I wipe my hand on a napkin, then wrap my arm around him. “I think it’s a great solution.”

His forehead puckers with his raised brows. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You get to keep all the inn’s rooms open and available.

And don’t have the extra expenses or work that come with hosting the event.

The festival grounds are a convenient location.

We know this place is equipped for large crowds, lighting and sound, and the committee and town would have more resources if they take it over. Sounds like a win-win to me.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” He sighs. “I still feel like I’m letting people down, but...”

I squeeze him against me and kiss his temple. “It’s okay if you decide to stop hosting the event. You do enough. You don’t have to do it all.”

He tilts his head into mine and melts into my side. The tension in his shoulders eases. “Thanks. That helps. I think I needed to hear that I’m not being a selfish ass.”

“Definitely not.” I place another kiss on his temple. “Now that the decision’s made and you know this year’s haunted house will be the last one at the inn, maybe the stress won’t feel as weighty. You can relax and enjoy it more.”

“That’s true. I do feel better. Like I’ve finally taken off a too tight, itchy sweater. Jo and I have a meeting scheduled to discuss this after Halloween. I’ll tell her first, then reach out to the committee.” He brushes his lips over my jaw. “Thanks.”

That he confided in me makes me feel like a giant among mortals, and I stand a little taller. “Anytime.”

We meet back up with Ever and Dmitri and walk along the twinkling light path to the adult amateur section. There, entries are a mix of scary and cute. The characters and scenes are a lot bigger and more elaborate than the kids’ entries.

“Holy shit. Jo won second place.” Trevor points to the large green ribbon tied to her table.

Her display, a sprawling series of pumpkins in various sizes, depicts the scene in Cinderella when the pumpkin has been transformed into a carriage. It’s whimsical and so detailed, my jaw drops open in awe.

Trevor looks up from the scene, his expression one of pride and excitement for our friend. “I wonder where she is.”

“There.” I spy her a few tables down, and tip my chin in her direction. “Talking with Ever and Dmitri. They’re coming our way now.”

Dressed in a long purple wool coat, Jo sees us and beams. “You made it.”

“Second place! Congratulations, Jo.” Sporting the biggest smile, Trevor hugs her. “I’m so proud of you.”

“So am I.” I lean in for a squeeze. “You’re so talented. It’s unreal.”

“Thanks.”

I pull out my phone, swipe away the notifications of new comments on my Cryptid Night podcast video, and go to the Maplewood blog which is populated with pictures town residents have posted of today’s events.

I turn my phone so everyone can see the one of Jo wielding a chainsaw high, poised over the massive pumpkin.

“Check out the photo Alex took. You look like a total badass.”

She tosses her hair over her shoulder in an exaggerated flip. “I am a total badass.”

“Truth.” A teen walking by, dressed in black fishnet stockings, ripped jeans, and a purple fuzzy sweater with a hoop in their eyebrow, fist bumps Jo, who smiles affectionately.

She’s always been the bravest of us. Watching her live as her authentic self in a world that is often less than kind is an education in courage.

My years in Maplewood gave me an experience I wish every queer person could have.

A place where people are loved, accepted, welcomed, and celebrated for who they are.

I wasn’t ready to leave it when I had to at seventeen. And I’m not ready now. I said I’d stay through Halloween, that’s only a week away. It’s not nearly enough time.

Jo swishes her long coat from side to side. “After six hours of carving, I was covered in pumpkin. Had to go home to shower and change, then come right back here. I

didn't get a chance to listen to your Cryptid Night podcast yet. How was it? What did people think?"

"Premiering my episode tonight, with the haunted house opening and coming here, hadn't been the smartest idea.

I didn't think that through." I shrug. Live and learn.

"I could only steal quick glances at the comments pouring in under the video in between scanning entry tickets. But the feedback I saw was really positive. People asked more questions about the new cryptids. Others asked if there will be follow-up investigations."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Trevor wraps his arm around me. “I really appreciated you being there for me, but I feel bad that we couldn’t watch the video live with everyone.”

“It’s okay. I wanted to help you. We’ll watch it when we get back to your house.” My brother stepped up big time, handling moderator duties solo. I banged out short replies when I had a spare second, but there’s more waiting for me.

“The videos and photos looked good.” Dmitri passes the rest of his candied bacon bites to Jo. “My favorite parts were the interviews with the Rocktogenarians.”

“According to the comments, as of when we left tonight, they’re everyone’s favorites.

Who wouldn’t love that crew?” I shake my head, thinking about the ladies and the tangents they went on that I had to edit out.

Trevor’s going to love those stories. “I wish we’d found something more concrete for Agnes.

Now, she’s talking about shadowy figures roaming Maplewood at night. ”

Ever scratches his jaw, his gaze scanning the area. “A few people at the festival mentioned them too.”

My teeth clamp down and my jaw clenches with irritation. “I think it’s a hoax. Someone trying to scare people.”

“Or, they’re doing it because they know you’re here, Bram.” Dmitri gestures at me

with one long finger, the movement fluid and elegant. “Some of my students listen to your podcast. They love that the monster hunter has come to town. Could be someone giving you something to chase.”

Arms crossed, Jo taps her fingers against her biceps, the motion rattling the bag of bacon bites. “Agnes is unsettled by it. She and Eleanor stopped by about half an hour ago. She mentioned the figures and said she saw something along the edge of the festival grounds.”

“As in tonight? I don’t like that.” I grab my phone and shoot Agnes a text asking if she’s still here and where she saw the figure. “If you see anything, let me know. I want this person unmasked.”

More people arrive, waiting to congratulate Jo.

Ever, Dmitri, Trevor, and I leave her to her fans and continue along the line of displays.

The professionals have the most space and the largest entries and some of the biggest pumpkins I’ve ever seen.

My favorite is a pirate ship, Trevor’s is a coffee shop.

Dmitri and Ever both choose one that has pumpkin people playing in a pumpkin orchestra.

We reach the end of the line and loop our way back toward the parking lot.

My phone buzzes.

Agnes: Hello dear. The figure was behind the fence line near the woods. I’m heading

to Lydia and Celia's.

Bram: I'll check that area now.

Agnes: Thank you dear. Talk soon.

I show Trevor the message. "I need to go there."

He nods. "Let's do it now."

After saying goodnight to Ever and Dmitri, we cut down one of the paths.

The area backing up to the woods is dark. We walk for a few minutes, scanning the fence line.

"I wish I had my gear." My phone has night vision mode, but it isn't as good as my other equipment. Still, I turn it on.

He squeezes my hand. "We can come back with that stuff another night."

At the tree line, branches wave like something is moving between them. I tighten my hold on his hand and pull him forward. Among the shadows, a darker, hairy figure slips between the trees.

"Fuck. There." My boots pounding the grass, I run toward it. "Hey!"

I reach the fence, thrust my phone at Trevor, then start climbing. My gloves prevent the links from biting my fingers, but fear I'll slip slices through me. Up to the top of the fence, I throw one leg over, then the other, and scramble down the opposite side, jumping the last two feet.

Crunching leaves drift from further away. I race after them, my shoes kicking up dirt and leaves and drowning out the sounds I need to follow.

Panting, I slow down, then stop. Crickets chirp. The wind blows. And the footsteps are gone.

I listen for a few minutes. Whoever was here is either as silent and still as a statue or too far away. Walking around the woods in the dark without the aid of my phone's flashlight or night vision isn't smart. Frustration burning through me, I turn back the way I came.

Concern creasing his features, Trevor waits on the other side of the fence. "Anything?"

"They're gone."

"What was it? I didn't get to see your screen."

I heft myself up the fence. "Someone in a hairy costume. Bears don't run like that."

He backs up when I climb over the top. "I think where you were running is part of Zeke Knight's property. He owns a big spread over here."

I drop to the ground. "He's Agnes's friend. I talked to him about Mabel. He leaves food out for her every night."

"He'd probably let us investigate."

"Yeah. I'll text Agnes and tell her to let Zeke know that someone in a costume is trespassing on his property. And have her ask him if he'll let us come back to check things out." When Trevor hands over my phone, I fire off the text.

He slips his arm around my shoulders. “We’ll figure out what’s going on.”

“I hope so.” We’re close, but I need to be closer. I wrap my arm around his waist and feel better when he hugs me to his side and kisses me. “Let’s go home. We have an episode to watch.”

And a monster to find.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

TREVOR

Moody classical music drifts through the carriage house entryway, whisper soft like a ghost's caress. The purple lighting and shadows shifting across the walls, and the raging storm outside further set the scene.

Huddled close to Bram, I gaze out the window. Sheets of rain pound the sidewalk and street. A flash of lightning arcs across the sky, followed by a heavy boom of thunder.

Sprawled on the bench seat, he strokes his hand through my hair. "I'm sorry the weather's keeping people away."

"Me too. Not that I blame them. It's a mess out there."

We're on night four of our seven-day run. Our highest volume is always on Friday and Saturday, so I wasn't expecting large numbers for a Tuesday night, but we've only had ten people. And none in the last two hours.

Bram's been sweet, sitting here with me, waiting to scan tickets.

We've talked about what areas to investigate next, and have passed the time by sorting through the photos we took at Zeke's property two days ago.

We found a full impression of a sneaker sole in the dirt, other partial prints that match up to the same sole pattern, and short, dark synthetic hair strands around the area we saw the costumed figure by the fence.

The sound of a fresh round of raindrops smacking the front window as the wind changes direction and the sight of the very empty street is the cap on the night.

“That’s it, I’m calling it.” I grab my phone off the bench. “I’ll put out a post saying we’re closing early due to the weather. There’s only one hour to go. No one else is coming out in this.”

Another bolt of lightning, another crash of thunder, so loud, it sounds like it’s right over us, is a sign the universe agrees with me.

Bram rubs his hand up and down my back as I type. “I’m sure the people who didn’t make it here tonight will come another day.”

“I hope so.” Leaning into him, I press send. “Let’s close up. The dogs will be happy to see us home early. Bandit doesn’t like storms.”

“Neither does Hades. The four of us can cuddle in your bed and watch that show they like.”

“You can head back now if you want. I can close up alone.”

He shakes his head, then stands, and grasps my hand to pull me to my feet. “I have an idea. A dark and stormy night makes great ambiance. Let’s take advantage of it and walk through the house, experience it together.”

“You want us to pretend we’re ticket holders?”

“No pretending.” He thumbs through screens on his phone. The hotel’s site opens, and he navigates to the page for the haunted house. Then taps the button to purchase tickets.

Swamped by the sweetness of his gesture, I lay my hand on his forearm. “Bram, you don’t have to buy a ticket.”

“Of course I do. There.” He purchases two. “Now that’s twelve tickets for tonight. ”

As soon as he lowers his phone, I pull him into my arms. “That’s incredibly nice of you. I’ll have to make sure you have a good time.”

Splaying his hand on my chest, he brushes his finger over the medallion. “You’re here, so that’s already a given.”

Oh, this man. What am I supposed to do when he says such swoon-worthy things? Warmth spreads throughout my body. The softness of his borrowed flannel gives way to the heat of his skin and then the softness of his hair. Cradling his head, I lower my mouth to his.

Bram kisses me back, slow and thorough. His other hand is on the waistband of my jeans. He hooks his finger through my belt loop, like he wants to keep me against him.

More thunder rumbles over us and the lights flicker.

I raise my head. “That flicker isn’t part of our effects. Come on, let’s walk through. I’m afraid we’re going to lose power.”

We enter the first room, a maze of gray walls and blueish light that flickers and jumps. Creepy violin music plays at an increasingly faster tempo. A cold rush of air hits us at the first turn of the maze, startling us and raising goose bumps.

The low ramp we added to this room changes the floor’s incline by the smallest degrees and the tilt of some of the maze walls adds to further create a funhouse effect.

The projector throws out dark shadows that look like figures peering around every corner.

Though I know we're alone here, they give the impression that we aren't.

Clutching Bram tight, I take each turn of the maze afraid that someone will jump out at us.

His hesitant steps reflect my unease. The fear and worried anticipation of what might be waiting for us around every dark, spooky corner is part of the fun.

Fog greets us in the next room, rolling out along the floor.

Green and purple lights reflect the colors of the fabrics draped on the walls.

This room is much colder, plunging in temperature compared to the last. The spectral figure of a woman forms out of the mist. Clad in white with dark orbs for eyes, she drifts closer, heading right for us.

Beside me, Bram stiffens. Knowing she's created by a two-way mirror doesn't take away from the magic of the effect. A gust of air hits us seconds before the woman vanishes, with her arms outstretched.

Shuddering, Bram wraps his arm around my waist. "Yeah, she was spooky."

That leads us into a room with multiple mirrors, reflecting an infinite number of images of Bram and me. The lights flash on and off with the buzzing hum of an old bulb. The scent of decaying flowers and graveyard dirt add to the discomfort.

Whispers of "this way" drift from the right.

“Come here,” floats from the left.

“We’re waiting...” a sinister voice sounds from deeper in the room.

With Alaric’s contribution of the slow-spinning platform covering the floor, we get turned around, literally. The lights continue to flash. Our reflections meet us in every direction, repeating on and on forever. It seems like we’re stuck in another dimension with no way out.

Muttering a curse, Bram grabs hold of my arm. “This is a mind-fuck.”

“I have you.” I point to the light coming from the emergency exit beyond the mirrored walls. “We’re heading in that direction. Keep holding on to me.”

I follow my mental layout, walk us along the one wall, then the next, and get to the door disguised as another mirror. “This will take us to the hallway. We made it.”

We step into the hall, lit with the same purple as the entry way.

Smiling, Bram shakes his head. “Damn, that was fun. ”

“We can skip the upstairs. It’s more of the same.”

“No, let’s do it. Helping to construct the rooms was one thing. Going through them like this is another.”

We climb the stairs hand in hand. I point to the first room. Bram opens the door to a space steeped in shifting shadows, and we step inside.

The door is set on a timer, and slowly closes behind us, encasing us in darkness. Puffing exhales of someone breathing comes from deeper in the room. Then

footsteps, with matching vibrations on the floor.

Bram's hand tightens around mine, then he pulls me behind him, ready to protect me from an unknown entity.

Another gruff sigh, like a bull before a full charge, roughens the air, followed by the metallic scrape of a knife being unsheathed.

"Hey," a creepy voice whispers behind us.

Bram and I startle and spin around. Of course, nothing's there. Though the darkness prevents us from knowing whether that's true.

Light illuminates one of the walls, showing us the path. We hurry along. The level of brightness glows and fades and flashes of images spring from the darkness, playing tricks on the mind.

We walk into spiderwebs. Dozens of silken fibers catch on our faces and in our hair.

Clawing them away, we're cast into darkness.

The sound of footsteps returns, louder, faster, and coming our way. Harsh breaths accompany warm puffs of air hitting our necks.

"Gotcha," that creepy voice whispers.

Bram and I yell and run like hell. My heart pounding, I grab him. And pull him into the hallway.

Sucking in breaths, he clutches me, his fists tightening on my shirt. "Trev, what the hell? That was actually terrifying."

“It really was, and I knew what was coming.” I want to laugh at how I got caught up in the experience, but I’m still working on calming my heart rate and catching my breath.

“The spider web was fishing lines. We used hidden speakers, and a sound track. The vibrations were a nice touch, I’m glad we added that in. ”

“Those warm puffs of air... I thought someone was breathing down my neck.” He rubs a hand over it.

“Fans and blowers.” I smooth my hand through his hair. “Both of those are on timers.”

He shakes out his arms and twists his neck from one side, then the other, like he’s psyching himself up. It’s freaking adorable. He’s freaking adorable. “What’s next?”

“Smoke, shadows, and mirrors.” With a smile, I open the door to the next room.

We step into a rolling mist. Spooky piano music begins and builds in tempo and volume. Lightning cracks and thunder booms. With the next bolt of lightning, a dark, cloaked figure appears.

Bram grabs my sleeve.

The mist continues rising. Another crack and flash of lightning, and the man appears in a different spot.

The sound of rain overtakes the music. Lights cast swirling patterns in the mist, obscuring the floor.

Hanging, swaying mirrors disorient us, and the man keeps popping up, everywhere

we turn, startling us with every bolt that lights the room.

We stumble out of the fog and into the last room. Dramatic organ music plays from a hidden speaker. The six-foot skeleton who shared my office for a day is seated behind his own desk. A candelabra with flickering red lights sits atop it beside a line of hardback novels.

Two of the other skeletons are here too. One sits in an old-fashioned rocker, and the other is in the lotus position on a yoga mat in the corner. Jo liked the idea of the skeleton doing yoga.

Bram approaches the desk and one of the books slides forward. His head whips in its direction. “That just moved on its own.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

With a creak, the rocking chair tips forward, then back, forward, then back, in controlled small movements. Like the skeleton is actually rocking it.

When Bram walks in front of the yoga skeleton, it turns its head and red lights flash in its eye sockets.

A knock sounds from inside the wardrobe.

He looks at me. “Am I supposed to open that door?”

I try for an innocent smile. “Why don’t you walk toward it and see what happens?”

Shaking his head, he grabs my hand, linking us together. “Not without you.”

With slow footsteps, we get closer to the ornate piece of furniture. The wardrobe’s doors click open, then swing wider and wider, and the third skeleton looms out with hands outstretched, backlit by deep red.

Bram smiles. “Okay, that’s fun. Kind of tame compared to the other rooms?—”

The lights go out, leaving us in total darkness. The music quits.

“Trev,” Bram’s voice is close to me, though I can’t see him. His hand tightens around mine. “Is this part of it, or did we lose power?”

I wait. Three, two, one...

A flash of red lights the room. The strobe light's erratic pattern matches the music which returns full-force, at a louder volume. Other items on the desk, shelves, and walls light up thanks to blacklight paint. And the six-foot skeleton slowly rolls his chair away from the desk .

The door behind him opens, revealing a darkened room with an illusion of various tunnels on the walls.

Bram raises his brows at it, then me. "Let me guess, we're going in there."

"Of course, we are." I tug on his hand. "Let's go."

We slip past the skeleton, which sets off cackling laughter that makes Bram jump, and step into the shadows.

The whispered voices attempting to misdirect us begin. "This way," one breathes, with a rush of cool air.

"Over here," another teases from the other side.

Cold breezes float around us and more spiderwebs trail over our skin. A current of air pushes against our shins, like the room is trying to keep us inside. Then, a mist filters in, slowly rising.

"Stay," a breathy voice begs. A touch tickles my hand, thanks to feathery ribbons attached to the air vent.

"Forever..." a wispy, eerie whisper comes from behind us.

Bram jumps and curses, and in the dim misty light, pulls his hand to his chest. I guess the "ghost" touch got him too. "Trev, how do we get out of here?"

I'm still holding his other hand, so I give it a squeeze. "We just have to walk in a straight line. See the blue safety light? We're going there."

The warm weight of him leans into my side. "Okay."

More voices whisper around us and cobwebs cling as we make our way to the door.

The door handle sticks. I huff and try turning it again. This isn't part of the effects.

Huddling closer, Bram presses against my back. "I'm tense, waiting for that creepy dude's voice."

"Don't worry. He's not in here." I wrench the handle, and it gives way. "I'll leave a note for tomorrow's team to make sure that's fixed before we open."

We step into the hallway, leaving the spooky world behind. Though, outside, the storm still rages.

He wraps his arms around me. "Trev, that was something. Really. Awesome, and scary. I'm so proud of you."

I return his embrace, pressing my nose to his neck, letting his feel and scent wash over me. "You helped put everything together."

"Yeah, but you came up with the concepts and executed them." He kisses me. "Good job."

"Thank you." I've been doing this for years, and every year we get compliments, but hearing Bram's adulations means more than all of them combined.

The lights flicker again. I'm happy we haven't lost power, but don't want to be

caught here in the dark for real. I glance at the window. “Okay, let’s shut it all down and go home.”

Turning everything off doesn’t take long. We work well together and make a good team. I like having him in my life, in my house, and in my bed.

Stepping outside into the rainy night, I reach for his hand. “Ready to make a run for it?”

He links our fingers together and tightens his hold. “I want a hot drink in bed with you and the dogs.”

I want that too, and so much more.

We run down the path, our sneakers pounding the sidewalk, splashing through puddles. Sheets of rain soak through our clothes. I dig my keys from my pocket and Bram crowds my back much like he did when we were trying to escape that last room of the haunted house.

Laughing, I finally get the key in the lock. We hurry through the doorway. The dogs rush to greet us, jumping up and cuddling close.

Bram takes my keys and sets them in the bowl, then lays his phone beside it.

Stepping out of my shoes, I put my phone and wallet on the table and scan the wet clothes plastered to Bram’s skin. “We should take a shower.”

“We didn’t get wet enough outside for you?” He smirks as he tugs off his shoes.

I shove his shoulder. “Ha ha. Warm shower then warm clothes. Now.”

Wrapping his hand around mine, he pulls me toward the stairs. “Let’s go.”

The dogs race ahead of us, darting into my bedroom. I grab the TV remote and turn on the live feed of an animal preserve to give them a distraction from the storm while we shower.

Bram guides me into the bathroom then closes the door behind us. I get the shower going, then turn, with my hands on the buttons of my flannel, to face him.

He knocks my hands away. “Let me.”

“Okay.” I lock my hands on his hips and tease my thumbs in small circles above the waistband of his jeans.

His eyes flash with heat, but he continues diligently opening my shirt. The fabric clings to the shirt I have on underneath, but he peels it down my arms, then tosses it to the floor. We both work my Henley up and over my head. It joins the flannel on the floor.

I take over, working open the buttons of Bram’s borrowed flannel.

I love that he wears my shirts and that he’s taken to pulling on my sweats or pajama bottoms sometimes too.

The flannel joins the pile on the floor, followed by his long sleeve tee.

Goose bumps dot his skin and the edges of his lips have turned purple. “You need to get under the hot water.”

Bram steps into my space and slides his body against mine. “I’d rather get under you.”

My cock throbs at the image that pops into my mind. “That can be arranged. After we’re warm again.”

Steam billows out from the shower. Since we’re undressing each other, I open the button of his jeans, then lower the zipper and slide my hand inside to stroke along his boxer-covered cock.

Groaning, Bram glides his palms up my chest then, with a hand in my hair, directs my mouth to his. As we kiss, I get my jeans open, and Bram pushes them down.

Our boxers follow next. Before we get into too much, I pull him with me under the spray. Hot water beats down on us. I turn, adjusting our positions, making sure Bram’s getting the brunt of it so he’ll warm up.

His skin slowly heats under my hands as we kiss in the misty storm of our own making. We take turns soaping each other up with teasing touches and wandering explorations, then dive back into kissing as we rinse away the bubbles.

I turn off the water and pass him a towel before taking one for myself. We make quick work of drying off.

I pause with my hand on the doorknob. “It’s going to feel cold once I open this. We should’ve brought clothes in with us.”

“No worries.” He pins me in place with a smile and glittering heat in his gaze. “We won’t need clothes right now anyway.”

The thrum of desire pulses through me. “Won’t we?”

He shakes his head. “Remember that thing I said about being under you?”

“I do.”

“What if I was over you instead?”

Clutching my towel at my waist, I groan. “I’ll take you any way at all.”

“Good.” He kisses my shoulder. “Go lie on the bed.”

With him at my back, I open the door. Cool air rushes in.

The TV is on, but the dogs aren’t in the room.

Holding the towel at my waist, I cross the room and listen at the doorway.

The faint sounds of a collar jangling and one of the dogs lapping water in the kitchen drifts my way.

I nudge the door shut and turn to find Bram standing by the bed.

A bottle of lube and a condom in hand, he pats the mattress. “Come here.”

Aching for him, I comply. “How do you want me?”

“Stretch out and get comfortable.”

I climb onto the bed and settle at the center with my head on my pillow. “How’s this?”

“Perfect. You’re perfect.” He rakes his gaze over me from head to toe. Then he climbs on and sits between my legs.

A vision of us positioned like this in the tent the night I had my cock inside him for the first time comes into my mind. Whatever he wants right now, I'll give him.

He places the condom by my hip then pours lube onto his fingers. "I was thinking about this at the haunted house."

"When we were walking through the rooms?" I can't help grinning.

"No. During all that down time in the hallway before we took our tour. I pictured laying you out like this and taking my time with you."

I'm edging toward rock hard from his words alone. "We could've talked about that instead of cryptids."

"I know." He places a warm hand on my knee. "But I thought that if we started talking about it, I'd need to act on it. Couldn't drag you out of there while we were on duty, now could I?"

My fingers itch with the need to touch him. "I'm pretty sure that if you started talking about us being together like this, I would've grabbed you and claimed the nearest horizontal surface."

Bram's smile is quick and devilish. "I'll keep that in mind."

Holding my gaze, he strokes his lubed fingers along my cock. Biting back a groan, I fist the blankets. He smiles and leans in, planting his hand by my shoulder, and kisses me.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

Too soon, he pulls back and settles between my legs again.

Both hands stroke my cock and balls, and he varies his pace.

Then he dips down and kisses my chest, my stomach, and then scoots back and lies between my legs.

Resting his weight on his forearms, he holds my cock at the base, and runs his tongue along the underside, before closing his lips over the crown.

I struggle against the urge to thrust up and into that sucking, wet heat. Bram takes in more of me, bobbing his head. I fist his hair, groaning, panting, and saying his name. He raises his head. Meets my gaze. Then sucks my brains out of my dick.

“Fuck.” The blankets twist under my hands. I rock my hips, unable to keep still.

Bram circles a fingertip around my rim then edges inside. Groaning, I open my legs wider, and slide one foot up the mattress to give him better access.

He moans, driving me wild with vibrations as he pumps his finger in and out of me, only pausing to add more lube and then another finger scissoring me open.

Desperate to feel him inside me, I grab the condom and tear it open. “Bram, need you. Now.”

He pulls his mouth from my cock. “Whatever you want.”

“Want you inside me.” With my hand on the nape of his neck, I urge him forward. He ranges over me, blanketing me with his body as he kisses me. Clamping my hands on his hips, I urge him to thrust against me, and drink down his moans as his cock leaks a wet patch on my skin.

When he sits back, I roll the condom down his cock. His eyes misty with desire, he lines up at my entrance, then holding my gaze, pushes inside.

We both groan. Bram goes as slowly as he did that morning in the tent, when he sank inside me for the first time. He pauses with his cockhead breaching me and waits for my nod before giving me another inch then another before stopping again .

I skate my hands down his sides. “I won’t break, you know.”

“I want to take care with you.” His voice is strained and the muscles in his arms bulge from supporting his weight. “Never want to hurt you.”

“And I want all of you. Come on. I’m ready.” With my heel on his ass, I pull him toward me.

Bram’s eyes roll back as he fills me to the hilt. “So good, Trev.”

It is good. Just what I needed, being so full of him. Joined as we are, it’s difficult to tell where he ends and I begin.

My hands roam his back, his sides, his chest as he starts with shallow thrusts that gradually get bigger. His body is gorgeous, moving over mine, and I pull him in to kiss after kiss.

We move together like a dance, as passion builds and need overtakes finesse. Gasps and sighs and directions, pleas and moans and promises, the minutes spin out and

time stands still. There's only Bram and me, and the pleasure we're giving to each other.

With a muttered curse, Bram bites my lip. "I'm close. Want to take care of you first."

I fist myself, and he covers my hand with his, jacking me harder and faster, dragging me into another dazzling kiss as he sends me careening over the edge. Drowning in a sea of sensations, I cling to him, watching as his expression contorts into one of ecstasy and his body stiffens against mine.

Caressing the soft skin of his back, I press kisses to his temple and smooth back his hair. He smiles at me, dazed and sated, and kisses me long and slow.

Dog whines and the sound of paws scratching at the door announce Bandit's and Hades's return.

"I'll get them in a minute." Bram rolls off me and deals with the condom. He pads to the bathroom. I hear water running, then he returns with a washcloth and settles between my legs again before dragging the warm, wet cloth over my skin.

Having him clean me up is another shared intimacy. He takes another kiss before climbing off the bed. I get up too and dig a pair of boxers from my dresser.

Clad in his boxer briefs, Bram comes over. "Can I borrow some pants?"

I pass him a pair of soft cotton pajama bottoms then grab a pair for myself. We dress side by side, then he lets the dogs into the room. His earlier comment about a hot drink in bed flits into my mind.

"Be right back." I jog downstairs and throw together hot chocolate spiked with whiskey and top the mugs with a dollop of whipped cream.

When I return to the bedroom, Bram is settled on his side of the bed, sitting against the headboard with the blankets pooled at his waist. The dogs are lying at the foot of the bed, and all three have their gazes on the TV, and the farm rescue animal show.

He looks my way and raises his brows. “What’s this?”

“Spiked cocoa.” I pass him a mug before climbing in my side of the bed.

He’s been sharing my bed since we came back from the camping trip, so it’s only been about a week. It’s funny to me how we just gravitated toward specific sides of the bed. I love falling asleep beside him and waking up the same way, and feeling his arm around me if I wake in the night.

I slip my arm around his shoulders, welcome him against my side, and sip my drink.

“You can change the channel. You don’t have to watch the farm show.”

“I don’t mind. The dogs like it.” Bram looks at me. He has a dot of cream on his upper lip. I lean in and lick it off.

Hades and Bandit inch their way up the mattress until Hades lays over Bram’s legs and Bandit settles on my lap.

Cuddling with him and the dogs is the warmest and coziest and most content I’ve ever been. For a moment, I pretend that we’re our own little family, the four of us, and my heart aches with yearning.

I want so many more moments like this. Enough to fill a lifetime.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

brAM

Light from a battery-operated candle flickers inside the jack o’lantern on Trevor’s dresser.

Though he told me not to worry about decorating his house, I couldn’t resist bringing in a few touches of Halloween. A trio of pumpkins in the living room, a witch’s hat on the front door, and a smiling ghost beside the coffee maker in the kitchen. And of course, our bedroom jack o’lantern.

Each time he sees a decoration, he smiles. I love bringing that look to his face.

Standing in front of the mirror hanging on the inside of Trevor’s bedroom closet door, I inspect my reflection. “This is the best idea for a costume.” I rub the flannel’s soft fabric between my thumb and forefinger. Shades of blue from pale to navy cross each other over the material.

Laying it atop a black T-shirt, faded jeans, and my boots completes the look.

We agreed that we wanted to keep our costumes simple and thanks to Trevor’s collection of shirts, we’ve succeeded. Though I worry they’re so simple people may think we didn’t bother doing costumes.

I turn away from the mirror. The jeans are from a thrift store in New Island, but the rest of the outfit is similar to what I’ve been living in since I got here. “What do you think?”

Clad in jeans and nothing else, Trevor pauses with his T-shirt in his hand. My hungry gaze travels over his ripped muscles. He looks me over, nods, and smiles. “Totally passes for ’90’s grunge. You look good. Sexy.”

“Yeah?” Loving that he sees me that way, I swoop in and steal a quick peck. But when I pull back, he bands his arm around my waist and draws me against him. There’s a quick flash of his smile before his mouth claims mine.

This kiss is thorough, a claiming that storms and demands, and I gladly yield.

His tongue licks the seam of my lips, seeking entry.

Grasping his shoulders, I open for him. It’s so easy to lose myself in the feel and taste of him.

No matter how many kisses we’ve shared, I always want more. Each kiss is as exciting as our first.

Breathless, we pull back. Trevor keeps his arm around me and we watch each other as the rise and fall of our chests sync up.

The way his eyes shine when he’s smiling at me makes my chest ache. He’s so good and I want him to be mine.

“I should finish getting ready.” He releases me with the slow slide of his arm returning to his side. His obvious reluctance is sweet, and if we weren’t supposed to meet up with our friends tonight, I’d pull him to the bed this second.

“Yeah. I’ll grab your flannel.”

He pulls his faded gray tee over his head. That tee is part of our shared history. He

bought it at a concert we attended a decade ago. I have one too, tucked in a drawer at home, and whenever I see it, I think of him and the way he looked that night, singing along to the songs beside me.

After taking a black and orange plaid flannel off its hanger, I hold it out so he can slide on the soft shirt. “So how does the trick-or-treat tonight work? Are all the vendors in one place like they were at the festival?”

Trevor leaves the shirt open over his tee.

Though he’s going for a grunge look too, he’s still giving off sexy lumberjack vibes.

“No. It’s more like a pub crawl, we go from shop to shop and they’ll give us food, drinks, or treats.

I thought we could start off at Special Blend. We’ll save The Striped Maple for last.”

I run my palm down his tee, smoothing out the wrinkles and giving myself an excuse to caress his chest. “We don’t have to stay out long. It was a busy day.”

Trevor worked at the inn this morning while I hunkered down at the library mired in research. We spent the afternoon working at the haunted house, then handed out candy to the trick-or-treaters, and grabbed dinner with Agnes before coming back here to get ready for the adult trick-or-treating.

He grabs a pair of battered leather boots from the closet floor and crouches to tug them on. “Tomorrow will be another one. I have to start taking down the haunted house decorations and getting those rooms ready for guests again.”

Sitting on the side of his bed, watching him, waves and swells of want and need wash through me. “I can help with that.”

Those brown eyes round then widen and his fingers pause over the laces he's tying. His mouth works open then closed like he's choosing his words with care. "I don't want to hold you up if you need to get back home."

"I want to be there for you, and..." I'm drowning in all that I feel for him. The thought of leaving strikes panic through my core, a frenzied desperation to latch onto him and never let go. "I'm not ready to say goodbye."

Relief rushes across his features. Trevor surges to his feet and his hand closes around his medallion. "Good. I'm not either. I don't want you to go."

Something inside me releases and in a flash, I'm in front of him, pulling him into my arms. Our lips meet. There's the familiar hunger and sweetness, but layered beneath it now is a more secure, solid foundation.

I raise my head. We gaze at each other, smiling, until Bandit's barks downstairs, quickly echoed by Hades's deeper tones, suggest someone is either walking on the sidewalk in front of the house or cutting across the inn's parking lot.

Tonight's the last night for the haunted house and the dogs have barked at every attendee passing by this week.

Trevor places his hand over my heart. "We should go."

We head downstairs, say goodbye to the dogs, leave the TV show featuring rescue farm animals playing for them, and then are on our way.

The streetlights glow with yellow warmth and twinkling lights in orange and purple are wrapped around the bases. Several people in costumes wander along Maple Street.

We stop by Special Blend first for a free shot of espresso.

The shop's owner, Caspian Lane, whose coffee recommendations have flavored many of my days in Maplewood, passes them out in festive cups imprinted with jack o'lanterns.

The coffee is smooth and delicious and the jolt of caffeine comes on quick.

As we leave the shop, I spy Jason Zervudachi and his boyfriend Bellamy Jordan, who I've learned is a pro hockey player for the Vermont Trailblazers, with a group of friends. We smile and wave. Both men sport hockey jerseys, and I wonder if those were last-minute costumes, like Trevor's and mine.

Ever's shop is next door, but a large group of trick-or-treaters take up all the space inside, so we continue down to Scoops on Maple.

There, Trevor introduces me to the shop's owner, Sam Thatcher, and Sam gives us a trio of ice cream samples.

Of the pumpkin pie, maple brown sugar, and vanilla with a salted caramel swirl, my favorite is the pumpkin. Trevor prefers the salted caramel.

We walk up and down Maple Street and I'm reminded of trick-or-treating with him as a kid. At Harmonic Circus, the music store's owner passes out guitar picks and packs of foam ear plugs that he recommends concertgoers wear.

A detour to Garnet Drive gives us boxes of movie candy from the Playhouse. M&M's for Trevor and Junior Mints for me. Back on Maple Street, we stroll through a series of moody paintings at Wild Palette.

When we leave the gallery, Trevor links his hand with mine and pulls me out of the

path of people entering the space. “Let’s try Ever’s shop again.”

Two shops down the street, the Honey Spot is less crowded now.

The bell on the door chimes as we enter.

Our silver fox friend is dressed as a beekeeper which I know is his genuine outfit for handling his bee hives.

Ever spots us and waves, but is in a conversation with a woman wearing a unicorn costume.

Since he’s busy, we visit Dmitri at the counter.

Wearing a purple witch’s hat and cloak, he points a wand at a large black cauldron filled with individually wrapped honey candies. “Help yourselves.”

“Nice costume.” I reach in for two pieces and pass one to Trevor.

He flicks the side of his cloak so it billows, showing off the satin lining imprinted with stars. “Thanks.”

Ever comes over, scans our outfits, and smirks. “Did you both dress up as Trevor? Or are you supposed to be lumberjacks?”

“Ha, ha.” Trevor narrows his eyes in what I’m guessing is supposed to be a threatening gesture, but the quirk of his lips ruins the effect.

I sling my arm over his shoulder, bumping his hip with mine. “We’re embracing our grunge phase again.”

“Oh. Of course. I see it now.” Ever shakes his head at us.

Dmitri links his arm through Ever’s. “It’s not like you bought a costume either, my sexy beekeeper.”

“Shh.” Smiling at his boyfriend, Ever pulls Dmitri in for a kiss.

I add the candy to the bag we got at Harmonic Circus. “Are you coming to The Striped Maple?”

“We’ll head over as soon as we close up here.” Ever looks past us and waves at the new trick-or-treaters coming in.

“Cool. We’ll see you there.” I tap Trevor’s arm and angle my head toward the door. The shop is getting crowded and we’ll see our friends soon enough, since the trick-or-treating is wrapping up within the hour.

The night is cold, but Trevor’s arm around my shoulders and mine around his waist keep me warm while we walk the half block to The Striped Maple.

Several people in costumes hang around outside the building, some on phones, others vaping, and still more talking and trading candy from earlier stops at shops.

We skirt around them and open the door. The pub is lively, brimming with people and upbeat music.

Most of the patrons and pub employees are dressed in costumes.

Trevor leans in. “Let’s get a drink. We have a better chance at the bar than waiting for a table to open.”

He and I wind a path through the crowd, with Trevor stopping to greet just about everyone we see.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

It takes me a second to recognize Mickey Brewer from Red's Diner under his brown curly wig. My gaze falls to his denim shirt and jeans and the paint palette in his hand. He's chatting with a guy wearing a blond mullet wig, black-rimmed glasses, a flannel shirt and jeans.

Rory, Adrian, and Zach, dressed as Ghostbusters in tan jumpsuits and proton packs, make the rounds, chatting with patrons.

An empty spot opens in front of the bar and we hurry to claim it.

Conall is behind the bar, rocking a pirate costume. His poet-style shirt with a laced front placket lies under a brown vest. Tan and maroon striped pants tuck into black boots, and a long black and red bandanna is tied around his head.

He sees us and saunters over, wearing a saucy smile. "Hey, guys, or should I say, sexy lumberjacks. We're offering samples of a maple-bourbon cocktail called the Smashed Scarecrow. It's similar to the one you taste-tested the other night. Want to try it?"

I nod, not bothering to correct him on our outfits. While he's getting our drinks, I turn to Trevor. "You should've just worn your regular flannel, jeans, and boots, and gone as a lumberjack. You already have that vibe."

Trevor glances at his flannel shirt and shrugs before sliding his hand over the back of my neck. "You could've gone as a biker. In your leather jacket, dark jeans, and those boots, you look like you belong on a motorcycle."

“Here you go.” Conall sets two shot glasses in front of us. He glances into the crowd and his eyes flare and then narrow. “I can’t believe Pierce is here. Tonight of all nights.”

Face like thunder, he stomps to the other end of the bar.

I pick up my drink and raise my brows at Trevor. “What’s that about?”

“Do you remember the night you met Conall, and I said he flirts with everyone, but he’s only interested in one person? That person is Pierce.” Trevor points out a dark-haired man currently eyeing up Conall and takes a sip of the cocktail. “Hmm. It’s good. Try it.”

The bourbon’s sweetness complements the maple syrup. I set the glass down. “Does Pierce feel the same way?”

He gives a scowling Conall a sympathetic wince. “I think he does. Whatever they have going on is too complicated for me.”

Sitting here, secure in the knowledge that we both aren’t ready for me to go back to Philly, I think about how I felt in my apartment the day he called and asked me to come up to Maplewood.

How what I feel for him isn’t just a lot like love.

It is love. After the things we’ve shared, said, and done since I’ve been back, it’s not so farfetched to think he might love me too.

I drain my shot, then lay my hand on top of his. “I don’t want complicated. My parents always described their relationship that way. ‘It’s complicated’ was the reason they gave Charlie and me for their divorce, and for every time they put us in

the middle during the years they shared custody.”

“I remember you being upset back then and me wanting to fix it.” He finishes his shot then slides his hand out from under mine far enough for him to link our fingers together. “I don’t want complicated either.”

The crash of shattering glass jars us apart.

I whip around on the barstool. Two people soaked in spilled drinks stare at broken bottles on the floor, then each other.

One of the servers ushers them away, promising to get them towels and fresh shirts from the collection of Striped Maple merch available near the front of the pub.

A tall woman wearing a Striped Maple uniform tee and elaborate zombie makeup hurries to the mess with a broom and large dustbin. More staff join her to take care of the remnants of alcohol.

Trevor pulls his vibrating phone from his pocket and taps to open the text. “Ever and Dmitri are here. They snagged a table on the other side of the room. Let’s go.”

We squeeze by the cleanup and spot the pair seated at a table large enough to seat six. As we head toward them, Jake and Alaric come from the opposite direction.

Jake’s wearing a rugby uniform. Trevor points to it. “That is Jake’s actual uniform from his rec league team.”

And Alaric, who has a love of puns and fun tees, is wearing a shirt with the image of a jack o’lantern and the words I feel hollow inside. He’s also sporting the bat antenna headband from the Fun and Fright Fest.

We arrive at the table the same time, and exchange hugs and compliments on costumes, before sitting down and getting caught up on recaps of everyone's nights.

Zach comes over and pulls up a chair, spinning it around to straddle it backwards, then settles in place beside me. "How long are you in town?"

"I'm sticking around for a while." My gaze meets Trevor's and his eyes soften as the corners of those gorgeous lips tip upward.

"You and Trevor should come hiking with us. Rory, Adrian, and I try to get out a few times a month." Zach gestures to his husbands who are talking to a group of penguins by the dartboard.

Ever's eyes round and his mouth drops open. "You're staying?" His gaze darts to Trevor, then back to me, and back to Trevor again. "He's staying?"

Under the table, Trevor slips his hand into mine. "Looks that way."

"Dude, you have got to catch me up." Elbows on the table, Ever leans in. "Apparently, I've missed a lot."

I twist in my seat so I can see Trevor head on. "Have you been talking about me?"

"Always," Zach says as he stands. "We want nachos for the table, and what drinks?"

While everyone gives their drink order to Zach, I bring my mouth to Trevor's ear. The apples of his cheeks are rosy from Zach's "always" comment. "So, you talk about me."

Trevor pushes me with his shoulder as he simultaneously tugs my hand to rest on his lap. "You're my best friend. Of course, I talk about you."

“Why do I get the feeling you’re not being completely honest?” I kiss his pink cheek as he chuckles.

Before I can tease him more, there’s a loud whistle. I turn my head to find Conall standing on the bar waving his arms like he’s directing traffic. “Penguins, out of the way.”

He pulls something from his back pocket, and Zach groans. Conall’s brother Rory, yells, “Get down.”

But Conall waves him off. “I have to redeem myself.” He swivels to the guy Trevor identified earlier as Pierce and points a dart at him. “You, don’t move.”

Alaric yanks off his headband then puts his hands over his head and slinks down in his chair. Jake throws his arms over Alaric like he’s throwing himself over a bomb to save his man.

Lips twitching, Trevor murmurs to me, “I’ll tell you about that later.”

The crowd starts chanting, “Con-all, Con-all, Con-all.”

Conall rolls the dart between his fingers.

Rory storms across the room toward the bar, Adrian hurrying after him.

The chanting continues. I hear bets being placed among some of the patrons.

And the Pierce guy stands in the corner, stone still, the only thing moving are his enormous eyes as he watches the chaos unfold.

“What’s going on?” I ask Trevor.

Laughing, he shakes his head. “I wasn’t there, but apparently Conall blames Pierce for distracting him at a bar in New Island when he was trying to do some trick dart shot or something.

Ended up hitting Alaric’s hat while it was on his head instead of the dartboard and pinning it to the wall.

” He bites his lip, but his laughter keeps coming.

“You should have seen Jo. She was pissed. She’d just given Alaric the hat which took her months to knit, or crochet, I can’t remember which.

I’ll take you there and we can get a picture with it. ”

“It’s still there?”

“Still pinned to the wall with Conall’s dart. It’s become quite the social media attraction. Jake and Alaric actually met that night. Jake saw the dart fly and raced over to check if Alaric was okay.”

Conall eyes up the board and the crowd grows quiet. Rory has his head on Adrian’s shoulder and Zach rubs his back. Conall takes a few practice swings, and then lets the dart go.

It sails through the air over tables and trick-or-treaters as we collectively hold our breath. When it hits the board with a thunk dead center of the bullseye, the entire bar erupts.

Conall is lifted from the bar and paraded around on the shoulders of three of the penguins. Money exchanges hands. People pat each other on the back as if their collective energy helped that dart find its mark.

It's loud and ridiculous and I can't imagine being anywhere else.

Once the celebration settles down, some of the people I've interviewed about the old and new cryptids stop by, chatting about the sightings and inviting Trevor and me to other activities in town. A few ask if we have any leads and mention the dark figures seen about town.

Sitting here, in this crowded bar, filled with old and new friends, I feel like I'm slotting in a missing puzzle piece.

Trevor's hand finds mine and he links us together. His eyes shining, he leans into me and I claim a kiss before snuggling under his arm.

I can see myself staying here in Maplewood, with Trevor, for good.

TREVOR

Pieces from our Halloween costumes litter my bedroom floor. Flannels, tees, socks, jeans, and boxers form a trail Bram and I created as we kissed on our way to a shared shower.

Rubbing a towel over my hair, I watch my sexy man pick up the clothes. A pair of my pajama pants hangs low on his hips. He drops the clothes in the hamper then pulls a fresh tee from the space I made for his clothes in my closet the day we returned from our camping trip.

He wrinkles his nose at our costumes in the basket. “I can smell the alcohol and food on them from here. We need to do laundry tomorrow.”

Our night at The Striped Maple ended in a round of shots with our friends and plans for Trevor and me to join most of the same crew tomorrow for dinner at Jake and Alaric’s place, and to go hiking with Rory, Adrian, and Zach next weekend.

I glance at the empty dog beds. “Where are the dogs?”

“Hades settled on the rug in the guest room. Bandit went downstairs. I heard him drinking water.”

The clock by the bed flips its numbers from 11:59 to 12:00. “Halloween’s officially over.”

Bram smiles as he pulls back the covers. “We have a year to come up with better

costumes.”

A year’s a long time. When we sat in this room weeks ago, he told me he’d come up more often. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask him to stay forever, but I hold the words in. That he’s staying for now, indefinitely, is enough.

I hang my towel on the rack above his then pull on boxers and join him in bed. “We can add an extra blanket if you’re cold.”

He leans against me. “Don’t need a blanket. I have you.”

“You do.”

On the bedside table, Bram’s phone buzzes. He picks it up and his forehead creases. “Charlie’s calling.”

Late night phone calls are rarely good.

“Better get it.” I shift away so he has more room.

“What’s wrong?” Bram asks, by way of saying hello to his brother. Then he laughs. “Don’t worry about it.” He glances at me and murmurs, “butt-dialed.”

Smiling, I pick up the architectural design magazine Alaric lent me and turn to the article on restoring antiques.

Charlie’s voice echoes through the speaker, his words coming fast and furious, talking about a cake delivery going wrong and his mad dash to the venue to bring a replacement. He sounds stressed and I’m glad he called. Talking to Bram will help him unwind.

Downstairs, Bandit barks.

The haunted house closed two hours ago, but the pub is open for two more. I saw several of the inn's guests there earlier.

The sound of a jangling collar comes from the hall. Bandit trots into the room and barks again. A deeper "Woof!" comes from Hades seconds before he enters the room. Instead of sniffing Bandit, he looks at Bram and me. Both dogs bark again.

Bram sits up and says into the phone, "Yeah, that's both dogs. I don't know, they don't usually do this."

I tap his forearm. "I'll let them in the yard. If that doesn't settle them, we'll go around the block."

He gives me a smile. "Thanks."

After tugging on sweats and a hoodie, I shove my feet into sneakers in case the trip to the yard doesn't work and the walk around the block is needed.

The dogs run into the hallway and glance back to make sure I'm following. They stop once more at the base of the stairs and bark again.

When I get to the bottom step, they run to the front door.

"No boys. We're going to the yard." I point to the kitchen. Bandit trots in that direction, but then runs back to the front door. Hades doesn't budge, staring and pawing at the wood.

"Fine." I attach their leashes and unlock the door. As soon as I open it, they pull me forward, barking again.

“Boys, quiet.” Tugging the door closed behind me, I step outside. Cold air seeps through my clothes.

A dark creature standing on the lawn in front of the carriage house startles the hell out of me. Short, black, and hairy.

My blood runs cold.

Sharp barks like battle cries, the dogs bolt down the steps, leading the charge, dragging me along so fast I have to jump the last two steps so I don’t take a tumble.

The creature turns and runs, crossing in front of the mansion. The flood lights hit its fur, and the line where the mask meets the collar of the suit.

As we pass the carriage house, Hades veers to the right and Bandit to the left, like they’re planning to take it down from both sides, though we’re still half a block away. Reining them in so they don’t pull my arms from their sockets, I keep my gaze glued to the creature and run faster .

It smashes through the pine trees lining the edge of the inn’s property. Branches catch and drag on its fur. Something dark falls to the grass. The creature doesn’t stop. Tree branches snap back, shaking. A car engine roars to life, then tires squeal as the car peels away.

We reach the tree line and crash through the pines. I catch the tail of a pale blue Mini Cooper rounding the corner.

“Shit.” I know of only one person in Maplewood who has that car in that color.

Bandit pulls me to the trees.

The creature's mask is on the ground.

Dread lying heavy in my stomach, I pick it up. The smoky floral scent and strand of white hair confirm what the car revealed.

Our "creature" is Agnes Peabody.

Shock, anger, and confusion lap over me. Rooted to the spot, I glance from the mask to the dogs to my house at the other end of the street.

Hades rubs his head over my hand. I pet the soft hairs there, and squat down, giving both dogs rubs. "Good job, boys."

The repetition of petting them grounds me. I suck in a breath that does nothing to ease the roiling in my gut. "How do I break this to Bram? He'll be crushed."

I push to my feet. My steps are slow on the walk back. I feel like I've been run over and punched in the gut.

The house is quiet. I lock up, step out of my shoes, leave the mask next to the bowl with our keys, then lead the dogs upstairs.

Though the light on my side of the bed is still on, Bram's light is off and he's asleep. He looks so peaceful, I hate to disturb him. There's nothing he can do this late at night anyway.

After stripping off the hoodie and sweats, I climb into bed. The dogs settle on the floor. I turn off the light, though I doubt I'll sleep anytime soon. My gaze on Bram, I cuddle closer.

Breaking the news to him won't be easy. I hate to see him hurting, and I know this

will cut him deep.

brAM

The scent of coffee rouses me from sleep. I open my eyes to Trevor's sunlit room. Snuggled in the blankets, I'm warm and content and could stay here all day, if Trevor was with me. But the spot beside me is empty.

His voice drifts from the hall, talking to the dogs, then his footsteps get closer. He enters the room carrying a tray with two mugs, a plate with two bagels, and a bowl of strawberries. "Morning."

"Hi, I was just wondering where you were."

In his gray tee, sweats, and with his messy hair, he looks like he just rolled out of bed and could easily be persuaded to roll right back in. "I was up early, so I let the dogs out, fed them, then made us this."

"I can't think of the last time I had breakfast in bed."

He sets the tray on the bed. Shadows darken the area under his eyes, but he smiles. "The coffee on the left is yours."

I take the mug. "This is really nice. Thank you."

After setting his mug on the nightstand, he sits beside me then hauls the tray between us. The bagels are toasted and slathered with cream cheese .

Coffee first, then a bite of the bagel, then a strawberry. I scoot the tray a few inches

forward so I can lean against Trevor as we eat. “We should start more mornings like this.”

He sips his coffee, glancing at me, then the dogs, and lifts his bagel. “Was Charlie okay last night?”

“That’s right, you weren’t back when we hung up.

Yeah, just stressed and needed to vent.” I feed him a strawberry before grabbing another for myself.

“I talked to him until he got home. Then it was like I’d hit a wall, just exhausted.

So he told me to go to sleep. I blame the Smashed Scarecrow shots. ”

“Those were strong.” He eats another bite of bagel.

I lay my hand on his thigh. “You look like you didn’t sleep well.”

He shakes his head. “Not great.”

“If you’re tired, you can supervise at the carriage house, and I’ll do the heavy lifting.” Sipping my coffee, I rub soothing circles on his thigh. He’s quieter than usual today, and looking past the shadows that distracted me, there’s tension in the way he holds himself. “Are you okay?”

His lips tighten and the muscle in his jaw jumps. “There’s something we need to talk about. But we should finish eating first.”

“Why?” I set my coffee on my nightstand.

“Because it’s better to have something in your system.”

Warning bells go off in my head. “Like sugar for cases of shock?”

His brown eyes pleading, he pushes my bagel at me. “Please. I’ve been going around and around about how to handle this. Please eat.”

My stomach doesn’t want food now, but he’s obviously stressed, so if he wants us to eat first, that’s what we’ll do.

The size of our bagels and number of strawberries dwindle between mouthfuls of coffee.

When I finish the last crumb and drop, I put the empty cup on top of the plate and sit against the headboard.

Trevor drains his cup. He takes it, and the tray, and sets it on the foot of the bed. Then he turns to face me, drawing one leg under his body. “The dogs barking last night... I was going to take them to the yard.”

“Right.” I look at our furry friends, lying in their beds. “Did you see what set them off?”

He nods. “They insisted on going out the front door, scratching at it. So we did. Someone in a creature costume was on the lawn in front of the carriage house. The person we were looking for.”

“No way.” I grab his hand. “What happened? Why didn’t you get me?”

“They yanked me out the door before I knew what was going on. And then the person ran. So we chased them.” He huffs a breath, squeezes my hand, then lets go and

pushes off the bed.

“They had a car waiting and got away, but part of the costume caught in the trees. And when we arrived at that spot, I saw the car before it turned the corner.”

I watch him pace in front of the bed, his tense movements, clenched jaw, and the troubled gaze, like he’s warring with himself on what to say. “You know who it is.”

He steps into the hallway and returns with a black, hairy mask. Biting his lip, he walks to the bed and places it beside me. “There’s a strand of white hair inside. The car was a pale blue Mini Cooper.”

My aunt’s hair color and custom car color, and if that wasn’t enough, her signature scent wafts from the ugly mask. There’s a heaviness in my limbs and a knot in my stomach. “Agnes? What the fuck?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense.”

“A lot of things don’t make sense.” Confused, angry, and hurt, I push the covers aside. “Come on. We’re going to Agnes and getting answers.”

I pull the SUV up to the curb of Agnes’s house. Other cars besides hers are in the driveway, and I don’t care what we might be interrupting.

Trevor opens the door and climbs out. By the time I’ve rounded the car, he’s let the dogs out of the back.

Holding both leashes in his one hand, he nods at the house. “You ready?”

I link his other hand with mine. “Now I am.”

Voices carry from the garden. We walk along the side of the house, and I recognize Rae's voice.

The Rocktogenarians are seated around the table, much like when we met them to talk about the cryptid stories.

They look up and the conversation scratches to a halt. Five pairs of eyes turn our way.

Trevor squeezes my hand in silent support. We march to the table. I pull the mask from my back pocket and set it in front of Agnes. "You dropped this last night."

Her eyes grow wide. "Dear, I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" I step back. "Your hair's in it. It smells like you. And your car was seen peeling away like you'd just robbed Moon Meadows Farm of all its maple."

She holds my gaze, steady, unflappable. Then her lips press together in a slight grimace.

Eleanor sets her teacup on its saucer. "Just tell him, Agnes. We were bound to get caught sooner or later."

"Only because certain people can't read a timesheet correctly." Rae sips her tea. A bottle of whiskey is next to the teapot.

Shooting a glare at Rae, Celia continues petting the dogs. "I already apologized for showing up last night too. Got my days confused."

Trevor holds up his hand, his expression incredulous. "Wait. More of you were in on this?"

Rae snorts. “Honey, you have no idea.”

“What’s that mean?” He rubs his thumb along my knuckle, his gaze jumping from Rae to Agnes to Eleanor to Lydia, then Celia. “More people than you five?”

Their guilty expressions say yes. My stomach drops. Is the whole town in on it? Have they been laughing at the jock-turned-podcaster? Shit. I rub my hand over my mouth so I don’t lash out. What does this mean for my podcast? For my sponsors?

Agnes adds a splash of whiskey to her cup, then downs it. “I admit to wearing the costume.”

Eleanor bumps her arm. “Can’t tell them that without telling all of it.”

I look at Trevor. “All?”

Eleanor and Agnes seem to have an entire conversation with just narrowing eyes and meaningful stares.

With a sigh, Agnes tucks her hair behind one ear. “I made up the story about the winged thing flying over my car. Eleanor and Rae didn’t see a hairy creature, and there’s no wolf-man.”

“After learning you were behind the creature in town, I had the suspicion that the rest of the stories weren’t real.” But hearing the admission still guts me. My knees weaken and I lean on Trevor for support. “Why did you do it?”

“I thought cryptids were the best way to get you here. Help you and Trevor see what you mean to each other. And that part worked.” She gives our joined hands a satisfied nod.

“When you’d talk about each other, I could see how you felt.

But you both were too stubborn, too afraid to risk what you already had. You needed a push.”

Pressed against my side, Trevor’s entire body goes taut. “You could’ve just invited Bram up for a visit. And you didn’t have to invent new cryptids. We already have Mabel.”

She pours more whiskey into her cup then tips some into Rae’s tea.

“Coming up for a weekend or a week’s visit wouldn’t be long enough.

You boys needed to spend a lot of time together.

Investigating was the only thing I knew would work.

And Mabel is lovely, but one lone cryptid wouldn’t keep you here like chasing down several. ”

Swinging between shock and disbelief, I pin Agnes with my stare. “You acted scared. Told us you were unsettled and afraid. You manipulated us.”

“You’re not getting any younger, and when you get to be my age, and more of the people you know fade away, you realize how precious and fleeting time is.” Her chin raised at a stubborn angle, she folds her hands. “I acted out of love.”

Eleanor lays her hand over Agnes’s shoulder. “We all did. Agnes needed our help, so we helped. The intention was never malicious.”

Rae nods. “All of the Mabel sightings people told you about were real. We’d never

fake with Mabel. Just the others.”

The reality of those faked cryptids sets in. “I did an entire investigation and episode about those fake cryptids. I spent days researching and talking to people who were lying to my face the entire time.”

The women look at each other.

“If I count the number of people I spoke with, and add in the number of people they probably told, and the way news and gossip spreads in this town, it’s impossible to believe word won’t travel further than that.”

They exchange glances again. Celia and Lydia shrug at each other.

Fresh frustration flares that they still don’t seem to get it. “Since I make money off those podcasts, and I hosted Cryptid Night, people could think I played a part in this hoax.”

Agnes sips her tea-whiskey without a care in the world, while my livelihood could be in jeopardy. “Not anyone who knows.”

“That’s the point. Most people won’t know. Twenty people told me they saw the same five cryptids, which they know is not true. They mention the hoax to other people, and soon, the fact that you did it to trick me, morphs into my being in on it.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

“He’s not wrong,” Rae murmurs. “I didn’t think of that before.”

“I could lose my sponsors over this. I could lose my subscribers, and any faith that people have in my credibility.” Anger bubbles in my gut like molten lava, erupting into my throat and incinerating all the words.

I suck in my cheeks, biting the insides and stare at my aunt.

The betrayal is bitter on my tongue. Even more so because my own family member was at the heart of this.

And too many people in this town went along with it.

Trevor pulls me back, then shifts his weight forward like he wants to protect me from the world.

I glance at him, and a new thought pops into my head. “It affects Trevor too. As co-host, people could think this hoax was a scam to drive more business to the inn. Did any of you think about any possible consequences before forging ahead with this scheme?”

My breath gets caught in my lungs and my world shifts like the garden walls are closing in on me.

Anger pounds in my ears and my muscles twitch at the thought that this could potentially hurt Trevor.

Every cell in my body burns with frustration and the dousing chill of betrayal.

My skin feels too tight. I wrench my hand through my hair.

Hades dances around my legs. “I need to get out of here.”

With a terse command, Trevor calls the dogs to his side.

My keys digging into my palm, I hustle across the side yard to the street. I’m not sure where to go, only that if I don’t move, now , and blow off some of this energy, I’ll explode.

I unlock the car, open the back door, and Hades hops onto the seat.

Trevor stops me with a single touch to my back. “Where do you want to go?”

I scrub my hands over my face. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want company?”

I do... if it’s him. And I don’t... because I’ve never felt this messy and awful and frenzied, and the emotions are too siren-screaming loud for anyone else. “Is it okay if I say no?”

He nods. “Are you okay to drive? If not, I can drop you somewhere, and get out of your way.”

His concern is sweet and if the situation were reversed, I’d offer the same thing. “I’m good. I don’t want to see another Maplewoodian right now. Just want to get the hell out of this town.”

The touch of his hand falls away. Trevor wraps Bandit's leash around his hand and walks them back a few steps.

I jump in the car, put it in drive, and go.

Eyes on the road, not looking at anyone on the street.

No waving. Nothing. I can't shake the hurt that everyone I interacted with about those cryptids lied to my face, that their friends and relations probably knew the truth, and no one had a problem with it.

Houses and businesses give way to trees. I'm heading for the woods. Because, of course I am. Why break a pattern?

I park at the trailhead and open the door for Hades. He jumps out of the car. Instead of running ahead, he stays by my side. Together, we hike the path that's so familiar to me. Trevor and I used to come here all the time as kids.

We walk deeper into the trees. Birds chirp, animals scurry, and the world looks as it did yesterday, but nothing feels the same.

All my life, I've had to prove myself. On the football field, proving that I deserved my opportunity to play and wasn't gifted it simply because of my father.

And in this new career, proving that I wasn't just into cryptid investigating on a whim or for a cash grab with the sponsors.

All the hours of logging stories, doing research, traveling, and investigating, the painstaking detail to produce something authentic.

Damn it, I paid my dues. And now, I could lose it all.

Others have faked evidence or faked creatures, and never recovered their reputation.

Beyond all that, the fact that Agnes lied, that she faked being so afraid, hurts more than anything else. It would have been less painful had she stabbed me in the heart. How can I ever trust her again?

I run my hand over the top of my head, tugging on my hair. What a fool I've been.

A large fallen log juts out into a clearing. Sitting on the rough bark, I hang my head, roll my shoulders, and welcome my dog to my side. Hades lays his head in my lap. The peacefulness of the forest seeps into me.

"I need to fix this. Take down the episode. Contact the sponsors and explain. Try to get out in front of it. Make a statement. And hope that'll be enough. I don't want Trevor hurt by this either."

Hades looks at me, but doesn't move.

Leaning back on my hands, I stare at the canopy of trees and the blue sky.

"Fuck! I'm so fucking pissed." I punch the log with the heel of my hand and relish the sting.

If it didn't mean leaving Trevor, I would just throw my stuff in the car and go back to Philly right now.

The thought of living somewhere he isn't... I can't. I don't want that .

Gradually, the silence sinks into my thoughts. I turn my head, scanning the trees. No birdsong. No crickets chirping. No leaves rustling.

Everything is very still. Unnaturally still. Just as it was the two times I glimpsed Mabel.

Hades lifts his head off my thigh. My skin prickling, I sit up all the way.

My dog stands in front of me, his body rigid, staring at a space in the trees. Amid the stagnant leaves of yellow, orange, red, and brown, shades of green shift. The limbs are tall, spindle thin, and leafy. Definitely not a pine. Definitely moving.

The hair on my arms stands up and all moisture in my mouth dries. My pulse quickens. Afraid I'll miss something, I don't blink. My eyes start to sting and feel gritty, but I still hold them open.

Leaving the shadowy protection of the forest, more of those green leaves shift into the path of a sunbeam.

Green skin not covered by leaves shimmers with an iridescence when it catches the sunlight, and the greenest eyes I've ever seen meet mine.

The hair on the rest of my body stands on end.

The air itself feels charged. But I'm not scared.

Standing at the edge of the trees, less than ten feet away, Mabel stares at me.

Unable to hold out any longer, I blink, then rub my eyes, and she's still there.

Watchful. She looks exactly the same as she did when I was ten years old.

And seventeen. I know what I saw back then was real. And here she is again.

I swallow then clear my throat. “Hello, Mabel.”

I don’t think she’ll answer.

She cocks her head and continues watching me.

Hades backs up until he presses against my shins. His stance is still protective, and I don’t want him charging her. I slide my hand into his hair and take hold of his collar.

Mabel glances at Hades, then focuses back on me. Maybe it’s this moment of connection, or the awe I feel, but my throat thickens and tears prick the backs of my eyes.

I suck in a breath. “I saw you years ago. Though I’m guessing you let me see you.”

She inclines her head in a single nod.

Okay, wow. I’m interacting with Mabel. I can’t believe it. “Seeing you changed my life. It led me to people and places and interests I wouldn’t have found otherwise.”

The leaves around her face seem to gleam as though they’re shimmering with dew.

I think of myself as the upset ten-year-old, and the anxious seventeen-year-old. And now, angry and hurting at the age of forty-two.

“You were there when I needed reassurance. After seeing you, I felt things would be okay. And they were. Now, things are a mess, it feels like everything is upended, and I’m not sure if I can fix it.”

A breeze blows, ruffling my hair, sweeping over me like a cool caress. There’s something otherworldly about her. Something powerful. Maybe it’s the calmness in

her gaze, the way she moves, or the way the forest hushes in fear or respect.

This is real, so were the other two times, and that matters, especially knowing the other cryptids were faked.

Mabel is where everything started for me. It's fitting that she's here now, if this is the end of my cryptid career.

But maybe, like before, her interacting with me is a good omen. I sure as hell hope so. She shifts forward, as silent as the trees. A rock tumbles from one of her hands and rolls across the forest floor, coming right at me. It stops a foot away. Jet black, oval, smooth, and shiny.

I'm staggered by the gift and wonder if she kept the multi-hued green stone I left for her all those years ago, right before I left Maplewood. I bought it from a vendor at the music festival because the colors reminded me of her leaves. "Thank you, Mabel."

She inclines her head again and then glides backward, melting into the shadow of the trees.

I stand, staring at the spot where Mabel was until my vision blurs and I see spots, my heartbeat drumming in an erratic beat. With a shaky hand, I pick up the rock. It's big enough to fill my palm.

Hades's tail thump, thump, thumps against my shin. He jumps up, planting his front paws on my thigh, and licks my cheek. I guess he's recovered from meeting Mabel. Meanwhile, my heart's still pounding.

I'm still not sure what to do about the podcast. Or Agnes. My first inclination is to race back to Trevor and record a statement. Maybe that's a starting point. Because I don't just need to fix things for myself. I need to fix them for him too.

TREVOR

Ever's sherbet-colored cottage is a beacon of happiness in a row of beige, stone, and gray houses. I quicken my steps, and Bandit does the same. He must know something's up because he didn't stop to sniff a million different things like he usually would on a walk.

Taking the long way back from Agnes's gave me more time to think about what happened, and I'm still as fuming, and upset, as I was when I watched Bram drive away from her house, leaving me standing on the sidewalk. Instead of turning toward home, I turned toward Ever's place.

I probably should've texted him first. I hope like hell he's home because I need someone to talk to.

His front door opens when I'm halfway up the path. He's dressed in jeans and a blue pullover I've heard Dmitri compliment. For a second, I worry he's on his way to work, then I remember him saying last night that Asa was opening the shop this morning and he'd head in after lunch.

Ever takes one look at my face and frowns. "What's wrong? "

I huff a laugh that's bitter and sad and gets stuck in my throat.

He raises his brows. "Shit. That bad, huh? Come in."

I step inside his house, and the comforting familiarity calms me. Touches that denote

Dmitri's presence live throughout the space. "Is Dmitri home?"

"He should be back in an hour. He had a violin lesson with a student in New Island." Ever bends to give Bandit the attention he's begging for. "Come into the kitchen."

Bandit trots after him, in hopes of the treats Ever keeps here for my dog. I follow slower, drawing in long breaths. I need to calm down.

When I enter the kitchen, the treat-giving is in progress. Bandit sits very nicely for Ever, then nips the treat from his palm.

Ever turns to the sink and washes his hands. "What's going on?"

I grab the honey-infused whiskey from the liquor cabinet.

He eyes the clock, but doesn't say a word about it being ten in the morning. "Want a mug or a tumbler?"

Even though I'm pissed beyond belief at her, I take a page out of Agnes's book. "I'll take a mug."

I'm as at home in Ever's kitchen as in my own. I press the button on the electric kettle and pluck a tea bag from his collection. "Remember us talking about the dark figures Agnes and a few other people said they'd seen late at night in town?"

"Of course. And you and Bram saw one that night at the festival." He shakes his head. "I still can't believe he hopped a fence to chase after something unknown in the dark."

"I did the same thing last night." I pour the boiling water into the mug.

Then add the splash of whiskey. “We confirmed the night of the festival that it was someone in a costume. They were outside my place last night. The dogs wouldn’t stop barking, so I took them out.

They saw the thing and raced after it.” I take a sip of my tea, wincing when I burn the roof of my mouth, then add another splash of whiskey.

“Long story short, the person dropped their mask. It was Agnes.”

His eyes widen. Resting his forearms on the island, he leans forward. “But Agnes told Jo and you how unsettled the creatures made her feel. Why would she make them up, and then feel the need to run around pretending to be one?”

“Apparently, for love.” Having already burned a layer of skin off, I sip my too-hot tea again. “According to her, Bram and I were hopeless, stubborn cases who wouldn’t act on our feelings for each other.”

“Huh.” To his credit, he doesn’t agree, just waits and listens.

“So she felt compelled to intervene.” I set the mug down. “That involved making up all the new cryptid sightings and getting her friends and other people in town to go along with it.”

“Damn.” He rocks back in his chair. “She never said anything like that around me. No one else did either. I’d have told you if I’d heard something like that.”

“I know you would.”

Ever gets up and pours water from the kettle into his own cup. Then stirs a spoon of honey into it. “I take it Bram knows?”

“Oh, yeah.” There’s that awful bitter laugh again. I sip my tea to soothe it.

“Where is he?”

“Took off.”

He stops stirring, his eyebrows nearly to his hairline. “Took off? As in, he threw his belongings into a bag and bolted?”

“No. As in, he grabbed his dog and drove away.” I puff out a sigh that sends the steam rising from my mug sideways. “He needed to, and I quote, ‘get the hell away from here’ and he ‘didn’t want to see any Maplewoodians.’”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m furious on his behalf. Breaks my heart too.

” I rub my hand over my chest, and my fingers bump my medallion, sending fresh shards of pain through me.

“Because he did the podcast episode and Cryptid Night, when word gets out about the hoax, he’s worried people will twist the details and think he was in on it.

This could fuck with his career. Maybe ruin it. ”

Ever blows out a long, low whistle. “I know Agnes meant well, but wow.”

I turn the mug around, following the looping line of an illustrated bee in flight. “You know how people in this town like to talk. If asked to keep a secret, they don’t. Someone always slips. Then the rumor mill adds new details and turns things around. We’ve seen it happen.”

“We have.”

I blow out a breath and raise my gaze to his. “I’m worried this might make Bram leave.”

Ever ponders the liquid in his mug for a second, then considers me, tipping his head to the side. “Did he seem angry with you?”

“No. Not me. But he might be too disgusted and annoyed with the whole situation and it’ll always be associated with how we got together. Maybe he won’t be able to get past that.”

He taps my foot with his. “You’ve been best friends since you were ten. You talk to each other nearly every day. He’s not going to cut you off.”

Heat sears into my hands. I’m gripping my mug too tight, but I need something to hold on to, something to ground me while my world rips apart. “You didn’t see the anger and anguish on his face. Feel his body stiffen. Hear the pain in his voice.”

The corners of his eyes and mouth turn down. “I’m sorry, Trev.”

If Bram doesn’t want to stay here, but still wants me, could I leave this place? I love Maplewood. My business and my friends, my whole life is here. I’ve never wanted to live anywhere else. But now that I’ve had a taste of what I’ve shared with Bram, I don’t want to lose it.

A stained glass bee on the window catches my attention. Bright and sunny, the exact opposite of how I feel. “How can I fix this for him?”

“I don’t know that you can.” He pats my arm and I can’t tell if it’s in support, sympathy, or resignation.

“I have to try.” I can’t stand the thought of Bram hurting. My fingers drum the side of the mug. “Maybe I can get Agnes to record something, taking full responsibility for what happened and emphasizing that Bram had zero inside knowledge.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Turning his head at the sound of Bandit’s approach, he sits back so he can give my dog scratches.

“If you have enough of the hoaxers do the same thing, saying you and Bram didn’t know, and that they did it for love, that could be pretty convincing.

But then again, I don’t think many people would voluntarily make a public statement admitting that they lied to fool others. ”

“That’s true.”

What Bram said about me, and by extension, the inn, getting dragged into this because I co-hosted Cryptid Night, makes my stomach queasy, but right now, my priority is him.

I need to figure out how to help him, and hope that whatever happens, he’ll still want me.

brAM

With Hades at my heels, I burst into Trevor's house, adrenaline coursing through my body, charging my resolve to fix things. Clutching my gift from Mabel, I drop my keys in the bowl. Hades slips past me and heads for the living room.

Footsteps on the stairs draw my attention to Trevor. He descends the last few steps, then pauses at the bottom, holding on to the newel post. His expression is sympathetic and concerned and he lifts his hand toward me before dropping it to his side. "Hi."

"I saw Mabel," I blurt the words with way too much volume. "She gave me this." I thrust out the black stone.

He gapes at me. "What?"

"In the woods. Needed a hike to clear my head, and ended up on one of the trails we used all the time as kids. She was exactly the same as the two times I saw her before. The atmosphere was the same too."

"You mean with the forest getting eerily still and silent?"

"Yeah. She stood ten feet away from me. The greenest eyes, iridescent skin. I talked to her and she nodded at me. Like she understood what I was saying." Excitement sparks over my skin. I'm breathless and have so much to do.

"Wow, that's incredible." Voice soft, he runs the pads of his fingers over the stone. Then he raises his gaze to hold mine. Sadness shimmers in his brown depths. "This

morning, the mess with Agnes...”

“Sucked. All of it sucks. But we’re going to get a handle on it.

” I grab his hand and pull him toward the kitchen.

My laptop is on the table. I carefully set the stone beside it.

“Deleting the episode isn’t enough. People will have questions and want to know why, so I need to make a video explaining what’s going on. ”

“Do you need to contact your sponsors if you delete a video?”

“I reached out when I got in my car to drive back here. I told them I received new information proving the cryptid stories were faked, and I would be pulling the episode and making a new video ASAP. They’re sticking with me, for now.”

He peers over my shoulder as I boot up my computer.

“That’s good. Uh, before you delete the video, you should check the new comments.

I was watching the video again because I wanted to see the faces of the people who lied, and if they gave anything away while they were spinning their stories. And, well, you’ll see.”

The video is at the top of the content on my podcast channel. Since the video aired, over two thousand people have commented. I try to read everything, but sometimes, interacting and keeping up with each one is tough to do. I sort the comments to most recent.

MaybeInMaplewood: A tipsy tap dance teacher I met last night at The Striped Maple

said he and others were asked to lie about seeing the winged cryptid by a woman who just so happens to be Bram's aunt.

Was this dude drunk and delusional? Or was the smacked scarecrow cocktail a truth serum? Suspicious...

MonsterHunter99: Bram's legit, so I doubt anything shady.

SweetTee: My hair stylist heard the same thing about the wolf-man being faked. Bram needs to address this.

"Oh, damn. Not good." My stomach roils and a chill breaks out over my skin. I drop onto the chair, rubbing my hand over my jaw. My stubble scrapes against my palm and the roughness rouses me from thoughts of worst-case scenarios. "I need to delete it now, before even more people watch."

"I was going to text you as soon as I saw the comments, but wasn't sure if you still needed space, so..." He shuffles closer. "I thought about deleting them myself under my mod status, but didn't want to do that until you'd seen them."

"It's okay." An undercurrent of urgency swirling around me, I navigate to the video, delete it, then do the same with the audio version, my fingers shaking and nearly hitting the wrong keys.

"I need to hop on social media and do a live video, let people know why I took the video down. That will buy me a bit of time to put together another video with a longer explanation, and put together a statement."

He leans his hand on the back of my chair, and his knuckles graze my shirt. "I need to get started on dismantling the haunted house. I'll take Bandit."

Damn it, I told him I'd help with that. "I can?—"

"Record the video. We need to fix that first." His shaky smile matches my own.

I grab my phone, pick the social media app where I have the most followers, and tap the button to go live.

The screen shifts, and then my face takes up the screen.

Notifications pop up on the bottom of the feed with people joining the stream.

I set the phone on the table so it rests at a better angle and I can see Mabel's stone beside it as I talk.

It also lets me see the crocheted version of her that Trevor and I propped up next to a plant on the kitchen windowsill.

"Hi, everyone. I'll wait for another minute as more people are coming in, but I want to address the reason I deleted my most recent podcast episode.

The one about Cryptid Night held here in Maplewood, Vermont earlier this month.

The investigation and stories centered around reports of a slew of cryptids new to Maplewood. "

More people join the stream, and comments about the episode and questions about what's happening fly in one after the next.

The dogs bark a second before the doorbell rings. Trevor's voice, quieting them, is followed by the sound of the door opening.

My heart's pounding and the fluttering in my stomach expands to a tremble in my hands.

"Today, I learned those sightings were made up. I investigate and research under the belief that the stories and sightings people share with me are genuine. Clearly, that's not the case with the Cryptid Night creatures. So I deleted the episode."

The comments explode with people asking how I learned the stories were fake.

I blow out a breath. "I'll record an episode with more details and a longer explanation, but didn't want to wait on talking to you about what happened, or telling you why the episode was taken down. You know I don't do fakes. I'd never waste my time or yours that way."

Two sets of footsteps head toward the kitchen. Trevor comes in first, and whispers, "I'm sorry."

He points over his shoulder. Agnes is behind him, wearing all black and the most contrite expression I've ever seen on her.

She skirts past Trevor and meets me with her hands clasped in front of her. "I clean up my messes, and want to make things right. "

Frustration at her, and at the situation she caused, flashes hot and bright. "I'm in the middle of a video about that mess right now."

"Trevor said that when he answered the door. I'll help." She pulls out a chair and sits beside me, then waves at our images on the screen. "Hello, everyone. I'm Bram's aunt, Agnes Peabody."

A fresh wave of stress crashes over me. I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Agnes, this

isn't..."

"The new cryptids in Maplewood were my invention. I concocted the whole plan as a way to get my nephew to Maplewood, so he and his best friend would spend time together and realize they were in love."

"Agnes..." The warning in my voice doesn't faze her. I've lost control of the situation. Short of grabbing my phone and ending the feed, what can I do? Asking her to leave while we're on camera would be rude.

Her gaze scans the comments popping up. "Yes, MonsterHunter99, they were entirely my creation. I got the idea because my friend who is a real estate agent dressed as a Yeti in promotional photos for a remote cabin he'd listed."

I gape at her. "Seriously?"

She shrugs. "It worked for him. The place sold."

"Wow." Just... wow. She's unbelievable.

In the corner of my vision, Trevor leaves the room with Bandit trailing behind him.

Agnes's attention returns to the screen. "Hello, MaybeInMaplewood, I guess you could say I was playing Maplewood Matchmaker. And I convinced my friends to go along with my scheme. We kept Bram and Trevor in the dark about everything."

A new comment that pops up catches my attention.

OhTheHorror: Agnes creating an epic ruse to bring two people together makes me wish I had an Aunt Agnes in my life. Agnes, adopt me!

I shake my head at that one. But it makes me smile too.

Agnes presses her hand over her heart. “I realize now that the way I went about things wasn’t ideal. I’m sorry if my actions, and those of my friends, have resulted in casting any doubts about Bram’s integrity.”

Most of the new comments rolling in now are from people telling Agnes they understand.

SasquatchWatch: I always thought you were legit, Bram. Glad to see that’s true. Thanks for addressing the speculation, and for the classy way you handled this. I hope people realize the extent of the damage hoaxes can cause.

A lot of these people have been with me from the beginning.

Knowing they believe me helps so much. Some of my stress withers away as hope flutters in my chest. “Thanks for the support, everyone. The only thing I can do is what I’ve been doing, which is talking to people, hearing their stories, doing as much research as possible, and debunking sightings when other explanations are more likely.

Relationships and interactions are built on trust. I appreciate the trust you’ve placed in me. ”

There will still be people who learn about the hoax and think I was in on it and that I’m only making this now because we somehow got caught. Squeezing the stone Mabel gave me, I try to push that worry away. I can’t do anything about those people. Hopefully, enough will believe me.

Agnes turns to me. “I really am sorry. I regret the method I chose to get you here, but not the result of you and Trevor.”

I accept that with a nod.

My attention falls to the continued stream of comments.

MonsterHunter99: You and Trevor look cute together in the investigation photos, and the one from the Halloween pet parade .

I'm happy now that I've shared so many photos of my time here. "Thanks, Monster Hunter. Trevor's a great guy."

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 3:45 am

CryptidKeeper: Is that the guy who's been in your vacation photos for years? Nice! Always wondered if there was something going on between you two.

"Yes, CryptidKeeper, he's the same guy." I try to ignore Agnes's smile.

LoveOfLore: The story of Bram and Trevor meeting as kids in the Mabel episode was cute. Loved the investigation footage of you together too. We need more Trevor content!

Those make me feel better. Then I spy a comment from my brother.

CharlieMacleod: About time. Congrats to you and Trev.

Agnes sits back and smiles bigger. "See? People understand doing things for love."

I fail to hold back my grumble. "I hope so. But still, it doesn't make what you did okay."

She nods. "I realize my actions hurt our relationship and I'm very sorry. I hope we'll be able to repair it. You and Charlie mean the world to me."

Restoring that trust will take time. "I appreciate you saying that, and that you came here and took responsibility."

She turns her attention to the camera. "It was lovely meeting you all. Perhaps I'll see you in another video."

Relieved that most people met this with understanding, I sit tall and get ready to sign off.

“That’s about it, everyone. My next video will be a more coherent and detailed explanation about what happened.

We’ll go through the whole story and also talk about debunking methods and investigation tips.

Thanks for being here today and for visiting The Cryptid Corner. ”

I tap the button to end the live feed and the screen goes black.

Agnes stands and returns the chair to the side of the table. “I’ll get out of your way, dear. Please let me know if I can do anything else, or if you want me to record an explanation again for your next video. The girls would do it too. I want to make amends.”

“I’ll let you know.”

She gives Hades a pat. “Please tell Trevor goodbye for me.”

I walk her to the door, then sprint back to the kitchen.

The video of the live stream is at the top of my feed for anyone to watch the replay.

I type a post directing people to the video and promise to post the follow-up video with the detailed explanation and story soon, then crosspost to my other social media profiles.

Tension swirls through me like the mist in the haunted house rooms. I close my

laptop and push away from the table, huffing a sigh. It's been an emotional roller coaster of a day. All I want to do is hold Trevor.

Hades pads into the kitchen and noses my thigh. I rub his head. "You were so brave today. And who knows, you might be the first dog to have a Mabel sighting."

He barks. I take Mabel's stone and set it on the windowsill beside her crocheted likeness.

On another long expulsion of breath, I glance around the kitchen.

The coffee cups we used this morning are back in the cabinet.

Trevor took such care in preparing me for the shock, just like he takes care in everything else.

I need to see him.

"Want to see Bandit?" I pat my thigh and my dog jumps up on me, then runs to the front door.

After grabbing my phone and keys, I jog across the lawn to the carriage house, with Hades leading the way. We follow the sound of an electric drill down the hallway of the first floor.

In the room with all the mirrors, Trevor sets the drill down and turns to the doorway. He does a double take and his cloudy expression brightens. "Hey. How was the video?"

I step inside and smile at Hades and Bandit reuniting. Daylight changes the room's perspective and uncovers some of the tricks behind the illusions. "I did all I can. The

people watching seem to trust that I'm telling the truth."

He blows out a breath and his shoulders relax. "That's really good."

"Agnes, of course, had people halfway in love with her."

"I tried to stop her from barging in." His brown eyes pleading that I believe him, he bites his lip. "I didn't know what would happen or what she'd say, or if you'd even want to see her. Instead of waiting in the entryway, she followed me."

In four strides, I'm at his side. I rub my hands from his shoulders to his wrists and back again, squeezing and soothing his worry. "Hey, it's okay. I think her explanation helped. There were a lot of comments about her doing it for love."

With the gentlest of caresses, Trevor smooths my hair away from my face. "Will you be okay?"

I lean into his touch. "Me, myself? I think so. You?"

He nods. "Eventually. What about your relationship with Agnes?"

"I know she meant well, but damn, what a clusterfuck. The trust is gone. Repairing the relationship will take time. Right now, it's too fresh and raw. I need space from her."

"That's how I feel. With her and everyone else involved. It'll take time." His words are slow and raw with weary sadness sheathed in hurt. The lines of stress around his eyes emphasize the shadows lurking beneath them.

Anger at everyone who hurt Trevor flares, and I tell myself to cool down.

I glide my thumbs along the soft flannel in a V from his shirt collar to his heart.

“I still think more rational heads should’ve prevented the hoax from happening, but I believe the people who started it and went along with it weren’t thinking about anything beyond getting you and me together. ”

He grasps my hands, the intensity in his gaze as powerful as the pull he always has on me. “Do you still want to be together?”

“Yes.” The answer is immediate. “Do you?”

Trevor pulls me into his arms, then sags against me. “More than ever. I was worried that the shadow of everything would be too big and getting past it would be too difficult for you.”

“The only thing I was sure about all day today was that you and I could count on each other.” I cling to him. Right here, in Trevor’s arms, is where I’m meant to be. “I know I went off on my own. Part of me wanted you with me, but everything was so chaotic inside my head.”

“It’s okay, I understand.”

“And once I saw Mabel, I really wished you were there, so we could’ve shared the experience.” I draw back enough to see his face and slowly brush my knuckles along his cheek. “We’ll have to go back to that spot in the woods.”

His eyes flutter closed while he tilts his head to savor the caress, then his strong hands knead my back. “Does that mean you’re staying? I wasn’t sure if you’d still want to.”

“I’ll be honest. If they pulled that hoax and you weren’t here, I would’ve left this

morning and not looked back. But I want to be where you are. If you want to leave, we'll leave. Go to Philly or somewhere else. If you want to stay, we'll stay."

His entire body stills before his hands fist my shirt, pulling it taut. Trevor dips his head, studying my face, and hope shines in his eyes. "You think you could be happy here?"

"As long as I have you, I'd be happy anywhere." It's the truth. "But yeah, I do. We have friends here. I can see us building a life here."

"So can I." He pulls me against his body, wrapping me up tight, and places a row of kisses along my cheek and lips. "In between our trips to investigate other cryptids."

I grin. "You'll come with me for each one?"

"You, me, and the dogs. I can't wait for all of our adventures." His beard tickles my lips as he plants another kiss.

"Then we'll stay."

We look in the mirrors, at our reflection repeating an infinite number of times.

"For as many images of us there are, that's how much I love you.

" I thread my fingers through his hair, playing with the short, silky strands, gazing at him as warmth and happiness beams out of me like the sun's rays.

"I wanted to tell you since that night we went camping. I don't know when what I felt for you turned to love, but what I do know is it's the best part of me. "

He stares at me in wonder, and I watch as the full realization that I love him sinks in,

and hopefully fills any places in need of tenderness.

Then his body trembles against mine. “I’ve been in love with you since we were fifteen.

That’s a long time to love someone. I have twenty-seven years’ worth of I love you saved up, so get ready to hear it a lot. ”

For a moment, I’m too overwhelmed to speak. To have Trevor love me, for as long as he has, I’m staggered by the knowledge, and incredibly lucky. “How about every night and every day for the rest of our lives?”

“Here’s the first one to start us off.” He lays his hand over my heart. “I love you.”

I revel in the promise and the passion in his words. It’s like being wrapped in one of his flannel shirts. I’m bursting to say it back. “My turn. I love you, Trevor.”

Happiness beams from him. “It’s always been you.”

“For me too.”

We draw each other closer and kiss until the dogs dance around us demanding attention.

When we break apart, Trevor grabs my hand and pulls me to sit on the floor beside him. We welcome the dogs in our laps.

He laughs as Bandit steps on him, turning in a circle, before settling down. “Five-minute break for family time. Then we have a haunted house to dismantle.”

Twisting to avoid Hades’s tail in my face, I lean in and kiss my best friend who’s

turned into my forever. “And a lifetime of happiness to build.”

TREVOR

The chime of the grandfather clock in the corner of the inn's lobby overtakes the classical music drifting through the speakers. I finish updating the new photos of the inn's property on the website, then glance down at Bandit and Hades lying on the rug by my feet.

As if on cue, they look up at me and Bandit barks like he needs to remind me that the three o'clock bell chime is for my coffee break, and their afternoon treat.

Bending down, I ruffle his fur. "I didn't forget. But today, we're having a special break. Bram will be here soon and then we'll have coffee and treats."

He leaps up, planting his front paws on my thigh, and Hades does the same on my other side. Their tails wag, just shy of being in sync.

The front door opens and Bram comes into the lobby, carrying a tray of to-go cups and a bag from Special Blend, and another from the pet boutique. "Hey. There are my three favorite guys."

We've been together for eleven months. No matter how stressful a day I'm having, Bram always brightens it. The dogs do, too. After one last ruffle, I stand, and the dogs bolt toward Bram to greet him.

I hurry across the wide-planked floor and grab the tray and bags before a combined hundred pounds of dog can take them down.

Bram grins at me. “Thanks. I would’ve been here five minutes ago, but I ran into Bo at the coffee shop and he wanted to talk about our plans for Mabel’s festival.”

After the mess with the cryptid faking last year, the people involved in the deception have bent over backward to show Bram and me how sorry they are, and that they value what he does.

One of the ideas, floated by Bo, was to retool Cryptid Night to be exclusively for our resident monster.

He was also understanding about my decision to stop holding the haunted house at the inn.

The Halloween festival committee happily took it on and will be holding the event on the festival grounds.

“What did he say?”

“He asked if we wanted to keep the name as Cryptid Night, or change it to something more Mabel specific. His suggestion is Much Ado About Mabel.”

Biting my lip, I set the tray and bags on the reception desk. “Hmm. I don’t know. I like the Shakespeare vibes, but let’s keep thinking.”

“Agree.” He opens the bag from the boutique and shakes two bone-shaped dog treats onto his palm. In unison, the dogs sit for him. “Such good boys. Here you go, two chicken-flavored treats.”

The sound of their crunching accompanies my opening the bag from the coffee shop. Sugary sweetness wafts from the assortment of muffins inside. Pumpkin, cinnamon spice, blueberry, maple walnut, chocolate, and cranberry orange.

I take the pumpkin muffin. “The Mabel Monster Mash?”

“Sounds like a themed item at the diner, mashed potatoes to go along with the meatloaf.”

Laughing, I peel the wrapper off. “True. We should suggest it to someone at Sparky’s.”

Bram grabs the chocolate muffin. “Mabel Fest? Mabel Madness? Mabel Mania?”

“I like Mabel Fest.” I roll the bag’s top closed and tuck it behind the desk. Jo will want the cranberry orange muffin, and we can take the rest home. “Let’s sit in the bay window.”

We carry our coffee and muffins to the bench seat Alaric and I restored together during the summer. The cushioned seat is a thick pad perfect for sinking in and staying a while.

Outside the window, Maplewoodians are enjoying the warm weather and sunshine.

The early September sky is a gorgeous, cloudless blue.

We have plans to see Ever and Dmitri, Conall, Alaric and Jake, and Rory, Adrian, and Zach tonight for the monthly game night we started last winter.

A board game and card game free-for-all that’s always chaotic and so much fun.

Bram bites into his muffin. “We also have to figure out Halloween costumes. I don’t want a repeat of last year.”

Laughing, I settle against him and sip my coffee. “Yeah, they need to be extremely obvious. Like firemen. Or superheroes.”

He grins. “We should do a group costume with the dogs. Then we can wear it in the pet parade.”

“I love that idea.” I glance at our dogs, lying together at our feet. “When we’re in Philly next weekend, we should ask Charlie to come up for the parade and Halloween. He could join our group costume.”

“He might like that.” Bram takes the bite of muffin I offer him. “Though, since he’s friends with Rory, the trouple could get involved too. So then it’s an eight-costume group. ”

I finish munching my mouthful. “Jake and Alaric might want to get in on it.”

His lips twitch. “And Ever and Dmitri?”

Nodding, I sip more caffeine. “Can’t leave out Conall and Jo.”

“What’s the count up to, fourteen of us? Twelve if we don’t count the dogs. If they all would somehow agree to this, the chaos would be off the charts.”

“Oh, I know.” Laughing, I lean in and kiss him. He tastes like chocolate and coffee, and feels like the best thing in the world. “It would be epic.”

He angles back so he can fish his phone from his pocket. “I’ll send a text to the group chat, see what everyone says.”

Text sent, he drops his phone on the cushion. A notification pings as he reaches for his coffee. He huffs a laugh. “No one could’ve read and responded that fast.”

“Well, it is a good idea. I’d immediately respond with an enthusiastic emoji as soon as I saw the words group costume .”

Chuckling, he picks up the phone. His gaze whips to mine. “The podcast awards are in.”

Nerves and anticipation spike my system.

He was so worried about his reputation after the faked cryptid hoax, but his followers stuck by him and most people believed Agnes and the other hoaxers who came forward had acted on their own.

If anything, them acting out of love has people looking at the Rocktogenarians as being potential matchmakers now.

Of course, the ladies are loving it and have started their own podcast offering advice on romance and relationships.

I abandon my coffee and muffin and grab hold of his free hand. “Open it. Let’s see.”

He taps his screen. Then stares at it, slack-jawed. “I won...”

“Yes!” I pump my arm and then grab my bewildered man and sweep him into a hug. And a very thorough kiss .

When I angle back, he shows me the screen. I scan the categories until I see his name.

I read out the text. “The award for Best Podcast Production, Paranormal Storytelling goes to Bram Macleod of The Cryptid Corner. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

He beams. “I can’t believe it. Then again, I do have the best team.”

“Yes, the dogs and I contribute so much.” Laughing, I shake my head at him.

We travel with Bram on his investigations and go exploring in our off hours, and

have such a good time.

His beaming smile turns softer and Bram grasps my hand. “You do. I love our time together.”

Warmth washes into my chest. “So do I.”

We’ve worked out a balance between our time in Maplewood and our cryptid adventures. The inn is thriving. We’re fully booked more often than not. Jo at the helm when I’m away has been a solid move. Bram and I have a great life together, one that’s so much fuller than where I was a year ago.

In a way, we have Agnes to thank for it.

Maybe we would’ve eventually gotten here, but that could’ve taken years.

We see her for dinners once a month and go to support her and the rest of the Rocktogenarians whenever they have a gig, and over the months our relationship with her has gradually rebuilt.

Bram pulls me into his arms. “I love you.”

Every time I hear those words, my heart smiles. I gaze into blue eyes I have the privilege of waking up to every morning. “Love you too. We have to celebrate. Drinks tonight at The Striped Maple. I’ll text everyone.”

I fire off the text in the group chat, sending everyone the link to the awards.

Both of our phones ping with congratulations coming in from Ever first, followed by Jo, Conall, Dmitri, and the rest.

I read the latest text. “Tonight’s plans are set. We’re meeting everyone at The Striped

Maple at eight o'clock.”

“And then later tonight, you and I will have another celebration, just the two of us.”
He tilts his head up, eliminates the inches separating us, and kisses me.

Every day with him is a celebration of having each other, loving each other, and of our life we've created together in this quirky small town. There's no place like Maplewood. There's no one like Bram. And there's no luckier guy in the world than me.

And maybe someday soon, on one of our adventures or hikes in the woods, I'll finally get my own glimpse of Mabel.