

MISSION CONTROL

“Mr. Hawk, you have a special delivery. A rather odd letter. I know I usually open the mail for you, but this is marked personal. And, well . . . I’m not sure what to do with it.”

Brendan Hawk looked up from his drawing table and considered his secretary’s hesitant words. “What kind of letter?”

She held it out to him, and he couldn’t help a grin. The envelope was made of old newspapers, and his name and address were written, in permanent marker, across the front.

Gramps. It had to be. The man recycled everything.

He held out his hand. “I’ll take it, Lisa.”

His secretary eyed the letter as though it were some desiccated rodent, then handed it over. She left the office, and Brendan settled back in his chair and reached for a letter opener. For just a second he let his gaze rest on the logo across the handle of the stylish, acrylic letter opener: “Hawk’s Eye Fine Art.” Another smile. That promotional had worked like a charm. He’d had a host of inquiries from galleries after he’d sent them out with his press kits.

Slitting the top of the letter, he pulled the note free and opened it. A short bark of laughter. The message was pure Gramps. Short, concise, and definite.

Very definite.

“Come see me. Now.”

He reached forward to press the intercom button.

“Yes, sir?” Lisa’s response was as quick as usual.

“Lisa, cancel my appointments for today.” Another smile crept across his lips. “It appears I have another one I’ve got to take.”

“Um . . . Dr. Kylie, a . . . well, I guess it’s a note just came for you.”

Kylie Hawk looked up from the Siberian husky whose teeth she was inspecting. The dog’s owner had the three-year-old ball of energy in a vise grip, doing his best to hold the dog still. “Shelley, I’m a bit busy here. Can it wait?”

The receptionist shrugged. “I suppose, but it came by special delivery, so I thought it might be important.”

Kylie sighed and looked over the Sibe’s head to the owner.

He gave her a sheepish grin. “I could take a break if you could.”

She patted the dog’s head, then she and the owner let loose the hound—who promptly jumped from the table, tail wagging. Kylie followed Shelley out to the empty reception area, then held out her hand. “Let’s take a look at it.”

“What’s in it?”

Kylie turned to find Alan, one of her partner vets, peering over her shoulder at the envelope she now held. “I’ll let you know in a sec.” She turned the so-called envelope over in her hand, then grinned. A taped-up newspaper envelope? Her name and address in crayon?

“Gramps.”

“*He’s* in the envelope?”

She elbowed Alan, and he backed away, feigning injury. “No, but he sent it. I’m sure he did. It’s just the kind of thing he’d do.”

Alan took the handmade envelope and arched his brows. “What, is he senile?”

Kylie laughed out loud at that. “Not at all. He’s just”—her lips twitched—“well, eccentric.”

“That’s a nice way of saying crazy. It happens when people age sometimes.”

"Yeah, well, Gramps was born that way. He's amazing. My mom tells stories about when she was a kid. She thought everyone's parents were like hers."

"Come on, they couldn't have been that unique."

"Oh, yes, they can. It wasn't until Mom was in grade school that she realized it wasn't exactly the norm to have your father rise before the sun every day, brew a strong pot of coffee, and then go climb a ladder to the roof. There he'd sit, drinking the coffee from a thermos and reading the early-morning edition of the paper."

Alan's expression was priceless. "You're kidding me."

She nodded. "Nope. He sat up there every day. According to Mom, he said it was the best place in town to watch the day come to life."

"And your grandmother put up with it?"

"Not only that, she'd toss the paper up to him. And she has her own distinctions. She's always worn these beautiful, bright straw hats and colorful, gauzy dresses that swoosh when she floats by. Oh, yes, and she quotes Shakespeare or Longfellow or Hawthorne or a dozen other classical writers at the slightest provocation." Kylie wiggled her brows. "Sometimes, backward." She shook her head. "It's just Grams's way of carrying on a conversation."

Alan laughed. "OK, you win. They sound like a hoot."

"They are that." Kylie pulled the note from the envelope and four words jumped out at her: *Come see me. Now.* "Hey, Alan, do me a favor?"

"Anytime."

"Finish checking the Siberian's teeth for me, will you?"

His eyes widened. "You're handing off a Siberian? The 'most perfect breed in existence'?"

She batted at him with the note. Leave it to Alan to use her love for Siberians against her.

“Must be something really important. I thought you were here ’til six.”

“I thought I was, too. Fortunately, Dasha was my last scheduled appointment today. So if you’ll be an angel and finish her up, I can check this”—she waved the note in front of his face—“out.”

“You’re lucky to have me, you know that?”

She slipped her white lab coat off, hung it in the closet, and grabbed her jacket and purse. “So you keep telling me. Every day. Several times a day—”

“Sorry, no time to chat.” Alan headed to the exam room. “Dedicated vet on his way to better a dog’s life.”

“You’re my hero.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

She tossed him a cheeky grin. “Ha! Like you’d ever let that happen.” She grabbed her purse, pulled open the outside door, and trotted to her car. She had no idea what this note was about, but had a feeling Gramps’s explanation would be one for the books.

She could hardly wait to hear it.

Brendan pulled into the driveway of his grandparents’ house just in time to see his sister, Kylie, slide out of her car.

He pushed open his car door and stepped out. “Yo, sister mine. I take it you got a letter, too?”

She hurried over to give him a hug. “Newspaper. With crayon.”

“Ditto. But with marker, not crayon.”

“You’ve always been more sophisticated than I.”

They walked up the cobblestone path to the front door.

“Any idea what’s up?”

He glanced at his sister. He’d been pondering that very question during the crazy drive here. “I can only think of one thing.”

She sighed. “Mom?”

“Mom.”

Kylie pressed the doorbell, then grinned. "OK, what's the tune this time?"

He pressed the doorbell, listened, then nodded. "It's one of those golden oldies. . . . Oh yeah!" He swept Kylie into his arms for an impromptu dance, and sang out, "Let me call you *Sweetheart*—"

"I forgot your *naaaaaame*," she chimed in.

"That's not how the song goes, young lady, and you know it."

The siblings stopped their whirling and turned to grin at their grandfather standing in the now-open doorway.

"Come on in, you two." He stepped aside and swept his arm inward. "Grandmother put milk and cookies on the table for us before she went shopping."

"Fresh cookies?" Brendan let go of his sister so fast she almost fell over.

"Hey!"

He ignored Kylie's indignation and headed for the kitchen.

In short order, the three were situated around the kitchen table.

"So, Gramps—" Brendan spoke around a mouthful of still-warm-from-the-oven, melt-in-your-mouth grandma cookies. "What's so important you paid for two special deliveries to get us here?"

All humor left his grandfather's features. His whole body seemed to sag.

Brendan sat forward. "It's Mom, isn't it?"

Gramps's somber gaze said it all.

Kylie released a heavy sigh. "So it's time?"

Gramps inclined his head. "I'm afraid so. We just don't seem to have any other choice." He pulled several folded sheets of paper from his pocket and smoothed them out on the table. "These are your assignments." He handed a sheet of paper to each of them.

Brendan studied his paper, and couldn't restrain the slow grin easing across his mouth. "Brilliant. Devious, but brilliant."

Kylie looked up from hers and regarded her grandfather, new respect showing in her expression. “If I doubted it before, I won’t do so again.” She laid a hand on their grandfather’s arm. “You are a genius.”

“So—” Gramps reached out to cover Brendan’s and Kylie’s hands with his own. “It’s unanimous. Operation Save Your Mom has officially begun.”