

One

“Come on, you guys, *sit*. We have to wait until Curly pees.” Alana Marks used a stern but calm voice to control three of her four charges, Nicolette, Frisky, and Noodles, as they waited for Curly to do her business near a bench in Central Park. “You’ve all had your turn. Now it’s hers.”

The bird-watchers standing nearby shot her an evil look. Alana sighed. She had a feeling they weren’t too happy with her. The bird people never were. Not that she blamed them. After all, there was no chance any of the yellow-bellied sapsuckers or white-throated sparrows they were seeking would come near as long as there were four dogs around—especially four dogs who

were as rambunctious as Nicolette, Frisky, Noodles, and Curly. Alana had been standing there only a few seconds, and already Nicolette (the poodle) was growling angrily under her breath, Frisky (the Jack Russell terrier) was bouncing up and down like a jumping bean, and Noodles (the bulldog) was eyeing a mud puddle with far too much interest for Alana's taste.

She just didn't get it. Other dog walkers always seemed so in charge of their clients. But it seemed like her dogs were always out of control. Then again, maybe it wasn't that the *dogs* were out of control. Maybe it was just that *they* were controlling *her*. Either way, it was not a great position for a dog walker to be in.

Alana held tight to the four leashes and watched as Curly scratched at the gray dirt with her back paws and then looked up at her, ready to walk. Alana smiled. "Good girl," she complimented the golden-haired cocker spaniel. Curly raised her head proudly and glanced in the direction of the other dogs, as though she were making sure they'd heard her being praised. Alana giggled. Curly could be such a diva.

Alana had spent seventeen years—her

whole life—in Manhattan, growing up not far from the park, at Ninety-fifth and Columbus, but the Ramble section of Central Park never ceased to amaze her. The moment she stepped off the main road and into the wooded area, she felt as though she were in the woods. In fact, she often remarked that it “smelled like camp” in the Ramble, particularly right after it rained. It *felt* like a summer camp too—the thick trees, winding dirt paths, and babbling brooks were all like something you’d find in the Poconos or somewhere. In fact, if you didn’t look up, you’d never know you were in New York City anymore. But the minute you did, there was no mistaking the huge skyscrapers that surrounded all of Central Park, towering over the haven like a giant concrete and glass fortress.

“Aroooooo.”

“Grrr!”

Alana was suddenly shaken from her thoughts by some wild jumping on the other end of the leashes. She looked in the dogs’ direction and discovered the impetus for the sudden canine rebellion. A squirrel. A tiny, little gray squirrel. Too small to do any damage to anyone. At least that’s what

you'd think if you weren't a dog walker. But Alana knew better. "Uh-oh," she murmured, fully aware of the effect squirrels had on the dogs.

For a moment all four dogs just stood there, watching. The squirrel stared back, afraid to move. Then, suddenly, it gathered the courage to make a run for it and scampered quickly in the direction of a nearby tree. . . .

Frisky was the first of the dogs to take action. He began bouncing up and down wildly, tugging on his leash in an attempt to run after the squirrel. Not to be outdone, Curly barked wildly and pulled at her leash, trying to get Alana to follow behind as she raced toward the thick tree at the end of the hill, to where the frightened gray squirrel had darted.

Nicolette, however, had spotted a second squirrel off to the right, and she was determined to get *that* one. Noodles didn't care which of the two squirrels he captured, as long as he got to chase something. As far as the bulldog was concerned, the majority ruled.

"WHOAAA!" Alana's voice echoed through the Ramble as the dogs took off in

search of their prey. She could feel the leashes slipping from her grip as the dogs pulled her behind them, but she refused to let go. She was going to hold on to those dogs no matter what. Even if “no matter what” meant losing her footing and sliding headfirst on her stomach down a huge hill. “STOP!” Alana shouted as she slid downhill. “HEEL! NO! PLAY DEAD!” Any command, just to get them to stop.

And they did stop—with such a sudden force that Alana just missed slamming her head into a nearby tree. Still, she was pretty proud of herself. She’d finally gotten the dogs to obey her.

Or not. On closer inspection she discovered that the dogs had stopped only because they’d spotted a hot dog on the ground. At the moment, they were sharing the frankfurter and its accompanying bun with great glee. Alana knew that Mrs. Stanhope, Nicolette’s owner, would be especially upset about the hot dog. Nicolette ate only gourmet dog food, bought at top price from the Barkery, an elite dog shop on Broadway. Actually, Nicolette did sometimes get people food—but even then the prized poodle was fed only the finest cuts of steak. Still, at the

moment, Alana didn't care if Nicolette ate something as pedestrian as a dirty frankfurter. The poodle seemed happy enough. And at least she was standing still. They all were.

But that wouldn't last long, and Alana knew it. Quickly the slender teen leaped to her feet and brushed her long, golden brown hair from her face. Looking down at her grass-stained white T-shirt and dark blue tight "skinny" jeans, she groaned. Darn it! Brand-new jeans, and now they had a huge hole in the knee. She'd probably torn them on a rock as she went down the hill—which would also explain the small trickle of blood coming from the cut on her knee. "Thanks so much, you guys," she grumbled sarcastically. But she couldn't stay angry with them for long. She never could. Alana had a real soft spot when it came to dogs. She adored them for their loyalty, their love, and their uncanny ability to know exactly when she needed a little canine comfort.

In fact, at just that moment, Curly, possibly sensing Alana's dismay, padded over to her and rubbed her soft furry body against Alana's calves. Then she looked up and gave her a smile. A genuine smile; the kind only

a dog can pull off. And of course it melted Alana's heart. "I'm okay, Curly," she said gently as she pulled a leaf from her bangs.

Alana glanced around quickly. No one seemed to be around. That was something anyway. Nobody had actually seen her free-fall down the grassy hill. She wasn't going to wind up in some amateur videographer's joke video on YouTube or anything. Thank goodness for small favors.

"Time to go home," Alana told the dogs as she began walking toward the exit of the park. For once, Nicolette, Curly, Noodles, and Frisky did as they were told, walking in unison toward Central Park West. It was as though their acute canine senses told them that they had gone too far this time and they'd better mind their manners. Alana was able to stroll toward the West Seventy-seventh Street exit of the park without incident.

As she reached the corner of Seventy-seventh and Central Park West, a big red double-decker tour bus pulled up. As it stopped at the red light, Alana could hear the tour guide's voice ringing out from the microphone. "And to your left is the American Museum of Natural History."

Almost immediately the tourists on the top deck pulled out their cameras and began clicking away.

The odd thing was, the tourists were aiming their lenses to the right of the bus, not the left. They weren't shooting the huge stone museum; they were taking shots of Alana. For some reason they seemed to think that a grass-stained dog walker with ripped jeans, a bloody knee, and leaves in her hair was more interesting than the big statue of Teddy Roosevelt outside the museum. *Haven't these people ever seen a dog walker before?*

Apparently not, from the sound of the clicking cameras. Suddenly she'd become a tourist attraction! She could just see the guidebooks now—"Things you can't miss on your trip to New York: the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Empire State Building, and Alana Marks being pulled down the street by four wild and crazy dogs."

"Come on, you guys, let's move a little faster," Alana said as she urged the pups to walk up the block toward West Eighty-first Street. She waved at the tour bus as she and the dogs strolled by. "May as well give them a real show."



A few hours later Alana found herself sitting in her best friend, Stella's, bedroom, with her high school physics book in hand. "As if this day wasn't lousy enough, we've got all this science homework to do by tomorrow," she groaned. "And I don't understand any of it."

"Hang in there," Stella replied. "Just a few more months and we'll be accepted into college. Then we can develop major cases of senioritis."

Alana sighed. "We're seniors. Can you believe it?"

"It's been two weeks already. I think the idea's kind of sunk in," Stella replied.

"It's just not what I thought it would be," Alana explained to her. "I don't feel like a senior. Now, last year's seniors—they were really the kings and queens of the school. But we're just . . . us." Alana frowned slightly as the thought of one of last year's seniors leaped immediately to mind. Sammy Arden had been Alana's boyfriend for three years—they'd met when he was a sophomore and she was just a lowly freshman. But now Sammy had graduated from Lincoln High and was attending Columbia University. Alana suspected his absence at

Lincoln was part of the reason things just didn't seem the way she thought they would during her senior year. Instead of feeling like the queen of the school, she still felt kind of young in comparison.

"Last year's seniors probably felt like they were just *them*, too," Stella suggested. "Nothing changed about them when they became seniors, except the way everyone else in the school thought of them. This year's juniors are probably looking up to us in the same way."

Alana nodded. "I guess," she said. She wiped a few beads of sweat from her forehead. It was the third week in September, but apparently nobody had told New York City that summer was over. The temperature had to be at least eighty today, and it felt even warmer in Stella's small back bedroom. "Can you turn on the air-conditioning?" she asked her friend.

Stella shook her head. "Do you have any idea how much energy that air conditioner uses?"

"But it's so hot out," Alana insisted.

"And do you know *why* it's so hot today?" Stella demanded.

Alana rolled her eyes. *Here it comes.*

“Because of global warming,” Stella continued. “And we have global warming because people in this country can’t stand a little bit of discomfort, even if it means saving the planet. Air conditioners run on electricity, and most electricity is powered by coal. That sends carbon into—”

Just then Alana’s cell phone began to ring. *At the end of the world, you’re the last thing I see. . . .* Alana giggled slightly. Her My Chemical Romance ring tone was completely apropos for this particular conversation. She was thrilled to hear her phone go off in the middle of Stella’s latest environmental tirade. Not that she didn’t appreciate her best friend’s passion for the planet, but after a while . . .

“It’s Sammy,” Alana announced happily, her heart pumping just a little faster as she checked the caller ID.

“Ah, the college man is calling,” Stella teased.

Alana instinctively ran her fingers through her hair and glanced in the mirror above Stella’s desk.

“Relax, it’s the phone, he can’t see you,” Stella joked. “But he’ll hang up if you don’t answer soon.”

Alana blushed, embarrassed to be caught primping for a phone call—even if it was only by her best friend. But she did take Stella’s advice and answered the phone immediately. “Hey, there,” she said, trying to sound sophisticated and calm as she answered his call, even though she felt anything but.

“Hi, hon, how’s it goin’?”

Alana relaxed immediately at the sound of his voice. Talking to Sammy was like slipping into her favorite pair of jeans—it just always felt right. Which was to be expected. Sammy was, after all, her first love. *Probably the love of her life*. She was supposed to feel relaxed and comfortable with him.

“I’ve had better days,” Alana admitted. “The dogs went a little nuts in the park . . .”

“Oh,” Sammy interrupted her, sounding only partly interested. “Well, this should cheer you up. I got an A- on my first persuasive essay for Comp 101!”

“An A-, whoa!” Alana complimented him. “That totally rocks.”

“I used that idea you gave me,” Sammy told her. “You know, the one about the importance of educating the children of immigrants.”

Alana smiled, pleased that she had played a part in Sammy's first collegiate success.

"Of course, I added a lot of information you didn't have. A college paper has to be a lot more intense than a high school essay," Sammy continued.

"I'm sure," Alana agreed. "And I'll bet it helped that the subject was something you really believed in. That always comes through when you're writing a paper."

"Mmm, I guess," Sammy replied non-committally. "But I think it was more important to have my facts straight. The professor didn't really care which side of the argument I took, as long as I could back it up." He paused for a second and then added, "Anyway, I really want to go out and celebrate. Why don't you meet me at The Hole in the Wall on Amsterdam Avenue in about an hour, and we'll toast my success?"

Alana frowned slightly. There was nothing she wanted to do more than see Sammy tonight, but it was a Wednesday. "Can't," she told him reluctantly. "It's a school night. You know my folks would freak if I asked to go out tonight."

"Come on, we've snuck out on school

nights before,” Sammy reminded her. “Remember last spring when we went to that special *Spider-Man* showing down in the Village?”

Alana giggled, recalling how excited Sammy had been to be one of the first in the city to see Spidey save the world once again. He could be such a kid sometimes.

“Or the time we threw Harrison that surprise birthday party at Hunan Grill?” Sammy continued. “What did you tell your parents that time? That you were at the library?”

“Something like that,” Alana admitted.

“So, just tell them you’re at Stella’s studying tonight.”

Alana opened her mouth to protest but stopped herself. She didn’t want to make a big thing about this whole “school night” situation. It sounded so totally high school. And Sammy wasn’t in high school anymore. He was in a dorm at Columbia—a *coed* dorm, with lots of hot college girls wandering the halls in their bathrobes—or less. Any one of them would be thrilled to help Sammy celebrate his success.

Besides, she wouldn’t be completely lying if she told her folks she was studying

at Stella's. She was—at the moment anyway. And if she could get through her physics questions in the next hour, she would definitely be entitled to a little fun, wouldn't she? "Yeah, that's a good idea," she said, hoping she didn't sound as reluctant as she felt. "I'll meet you there."

"Can't wait," Sammy told her. "It feels like months since I saw you."

"It was only three weeks ago," Alana replied. "I helped you move into the dorm, remember?"

"I know, but I'm so used to seeing you in school every day."

Alana knew exactly how he felt. This was the first time she'd ever experienced high school without Sammy. Sure, toward the end of last year Sammy had gotten involved in senior activities and all that, so she hadn't seen him as often, but he had still been around, and she never knew when he would suddenly turn a corner or bump into her on the way out of the gym. Now it felt strange to never see him in the halls or on the steps outside the building. That sense of anticipation she got whenever she entered the cafeteria was gone. School without Sammy was definitely not as much fun.

It was good to hear that he felt the same way. Alana had been worried that once Sammy experienced the freedom of dorm life, he'd move on and dump her for someone more . . . well . . . convenient. But that's not what happened at all. She was still the one Sammy called whenever something wonderful happened. Alana smiled. She was his girl, college or not.

"See you in sixty minutes," she told him happily.

"Three thousand six hundred seconds," Sammy replied. "And I'm counting each one."

Alana could feel Stella's eyes on her as she clicked off the phone and tucked it into her pocket.

"*What's* a good idea?" Stella asked her.

"Huh?"

"I said, 'What's a good idea?'" Stella repeated.

"Oh." Alana blushed a little, embarrassed at having to ask her best friend to cover for her. "Um . . . Sammy wants to meet at The Hole in the Wall for a little bit—to celebrate getting a good grade on a paper."

"You're trippin' if you think your 'rents will go for that on a school night," Stella said.

“That’s why I need you to cover for me,” Alana explained. “They already know I’m here, so I’m just going to let them think we’re going to study until eleven. They’re both gonna be at the office till at least nine, but if they call . . .”

“I’ll tell them you’re in the bathroom and then text your cell so you can call them back,” Stella said.

“Thanks,” Alana replied gratefully. “I would never ask you to do that, except . . .”

“You don’t have to give me any reasons,” Stella assured her. “What’s a best friend for?” She walked over to her closet and pulled out a pale blue tank. “Here, you need to change if you’re going to see Sammy.”

Alana took the shirt from Stella and held it up in front of the mirror for a look. “It’s so soft,” she said.

“It’s made from hemp,” Stella said. “Totally earth friendly material. It takes a lot of pesticides to raise a crop of cotton. But hemp has so few weeds or insects around it, it doesn’t need any pesticides at all to grow. That’s good for the soil and the atmosphere.”

“And it’s a cute shirt too,” Alana added with a giggle.

“That’s what I love most about you,” Stella laughed. “You’ve got your priorities straight.”

Alana nodded. And right now her priority was seeing Sammy. “Let’s get going on these physics questions,” she told Stella. “The sooner I get the homework done, the sooner I can go to The Hole in the Wall.”