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Amy

“SERIOUSLY?! Please, please, any god or deity, with a few seconds to spare, let me know this is not happening to me...”

I am searching my bag, then my jeans pockets, my blazer pockets, and even my laptop bag, and yet there are no house keys. I find an old lipstick, which I gave up on weeks ago. I also find my old access pass, the one I thought I had misplaced. Plus, there are some dog poop bags and treats. But there are no house keys.

I freeze for a moment, staring at a packet of purple poop bags with little paw prints. Anxiety crashes over me like a cold wave. The ringing in my ears is familiar. Heat creeps from my neck to my temples. A heavy weight in my stomach makes my knees shake. The edges of my vision start pulsating.

I know exactly what is happening. This signals the start of an anxiety attack. I know that. My rational part knows it. My brain knows what to do. I see that the situation isn't serious or life-threatening. But my body refuses to cooperate.

My therapist's words intermingled with the voice of the guy from the Dare app are trying to break through the fog. It's anxiety, they say. Nobody has died from an anxiety attack. It's my body's way of reacting. It always chooses to fight, flee, or freeze.

Why the feck does it have to be freeze?! Why am I standing frozen on my porch, stuck over some misplaced house keys? Have I come so far in the past two years only to have an anxiety attack now because I can't find my keys? Over a simple, typical, disorganised Amelia moment? Stop it, Amelia, stop it! Breathe. In for eight. Hold for four. Out for six. And again.

I move my shaking knees, lower myself into a squat, and plonk my butt on the doorstep. And then I hear a bark and a whine from inside. It's Rory. Tears prickle my eyes, and I find myself about to laugh with hysteria. It's not that I have locked my little dog inside. I've realised, once again, that I'm not crazy. Anxiety doesn't make me stupid. I have a valid reason for freezing up. It's not a life-or-death issue, but my furry friend is stuck inside, and I can't unlock the door. The situation definitely qualifies as, at least, unsettling.

Another bark clears the fog completely. My vision sharpens; I stand up and brush off a tear from my face. "It's okay, Rory! It's okay. You're a good boy. Amy will find a way to get in."

Rory's barking and whining increase, but as I keep on talking, he goes quiet. I pace up and down the front porch, taking a few steps back to see the front of the house in full. Have I left a window open? I walk to the front living room window to see if I can open it when I realise the silliness of the thought. Of course I haven't left any windows open! An anxious person with a history of abuse and a constant fear of her sociopathic ex would not do that.

Exhaling, I search through my TARDIS-like handbag again and pull out my phone. As I start Googling a locksmith near me, excited barks give me a little start. But it isn't Rory this time, although he responds with a bark of his own in zero point three seconds. It is a snow-white, fluffy Bichon Frisé on a red leash, tugging its owner towards me and my house.

"Calm down, Bolek," says the deep, velvety baritone of his owner. I look up and freeze for the second time. My eyes follow the red leash, and I look into a pair of the most vivid blue eyes I have ever seen. I blink and try not to stare. His electric blues watch me from beneath dark eyebrows. He has a tanned face with a five o'clock shadow, a strong chin, and perfect, kissable lips.

A sudden rush of warmth spreads up my neck and ears, and I know I am blushing. I lower my eyes, but the heat spreading across my face intensifies. This is a rare moment when I am neither thankful for nor proud of my Irish heritage. I have porcelain-white skin, freckles on my nose and cheeks, and copper-red curls. A combo that is harsh on those who blush.

Maybe I should think about wearing more make-up, like full-coverage foundation. But no, I'm not going back to that. I'm definitely not thinking about my ex. He always pushed me to cover my freckles daily to seem more polished. No way! Back to the bizarre situation with the blue-eyed stranger and his barking fluff.

Snapping out of my mental gymnastics, I realise I'm still staring a little. But who could blame me? He is a near-perfect male specimen, a hunk of a guy. *Probably a climber.* Again, my brain is full of unhelpful suggestions.

But he might be, my deranged inner voice insists. Look at the broad chest and shoulders.

And I do; I can't help myself. He is tall, at least a foot taller than I am. His broad chest stretches over a faded grey Crystal Viper t-shirt. I snap my eyes back to Manbun Thor's face and try to speak. I fail as his vivid blue eyes watch me with calm intensity.

As the dog on the red leash—Bolek, what a cute name!—and Rory bark from the house, Adonis smiles, and the corners of his eyes crinkle.

"Hi, neighbour. Do you need help?"