

Another Headache

Chapter One

Sid opened his eyes to see a plaid, flannel-covered form beside him. It was the day after Christmas, and he'd received the best present ever. Connie agreed to marry him.

The thought thrilled and terrified him at the same time. He'd better not blow it.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Hey, yourself," she replied, smiling down at him.

"What are you doing?"

Propped up against some pillows, she had a pencil in her hand and a planner in her lap.

"Working on my pre-party planning list."

"Your *pre*-party planning list?" he repeated.

"It's scattershot," she explained, curls dancing with each bob of her head. "Just getting the ideas out of my head. The next list will be more organized."

"Of course it will." He lay and watched her scribble away, frowning in concentration every now and then.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked.

"Because I can," he replied, reaching out to cup her knee with his hand simply because he could.

She placed her left hand over his, and the tiny diamond in her engagement ring winked at him. He knew Gram and Pops would be smiling. "Does anything on that list include making coffee, future wife?"

Connie tapped her pencil against her chin and gave him a cheeky grin. "It could, if you make breakfast while I make the coffee."

"That can be arranged."

She was starting on a new list when Sid delivered the breakfast burritos to the table. "The only person you need to invite is Frank," she said.

"Done," he replied.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I invited him yesterday when I called to say Merry Christmas."

“Excellent.” She checked something off on her list. “I’ll message the others after breakfast. If everyone can make it, we’ll have an even dozen for New Year’s Eve.”

Sid eyed their two-bedroom apartment while eating his breakfast. Hopefully everyone would get along. With twelve people, it was going to be cozy.

Raised voices came to him as he walked down the hallway on the first floor. He cautiously peeked around the open door leading to the courtyard where the compost, recycling, and garbage bins were located, not wanting to get hit by a flying piece of food waste.

Evelyn Land glared at Wanda Woods. The two older women stood beside the sorting table where two open cans of cat food sat. The cans had different brand names on them.

“Butters doesn’t like the tuna loaf,” Mrs. Land said.

“He does if you break it into small pieces,” Wanda argued.

Sid sighed. You would think that caring for a feral cat would be a bonding experience for the two women. But no, if anything, it served to deepen their enmity.

“I saw him sniff the plate and walk off,” Mrs. Land declared. “I told you, he doesn’t like it.”

Wanda gripped the frame of her walker with white-knuckled hands. “You’re making that up. He ate every morsel I gave him yesterday.”

“That’s because you kept him locked in your apartment all day,” Mrs. Land snapped, clutching her cardigan around her.

Butters sat on the courtyard wall, blinking down at the bickering women. He turned his head to look at Sid, who’d later swear that the black cat had rolled his eyes.

“What’s going on?”

Putting a finger over his lips, Sid turned at the sound of Connie’s voice. He stepped away from the open door and whispered, “They’re fighting over what to feed the cat.”

Connie groaned and shot him a narrow-eyed look. “And what are you doing?”

“Hiding. If I go out there, they’ll draw *me* into the argument, and that won’t end well.” Mrs. Land had made her disdain for Sid known, and he had no patience for the bigoted old woman. It was Christmas, and he didn’t want to put up with her sneers and putdowns.

Connie grimaced, then her expression cleared. “I think I have an idea.”

She fixed a smile in place and marched outside to greet the women. Sid followed, ready to whisk her out of the way if things got ugly.

“Good morning. How is everyone today?”

Wanda returned Connie's smile with a "Good morning."

Mrs. Land grunted.

Connie sallied forth as if they'd strewn rose petals in her path. "Is it a special day? Did Butters do something heroic to deserve two cans of cat food?"

Neither woman responded.

"Shall I feed Butters?" Connie asked, reaching for the empty food dish.

"No! It's my day to feed Butters," Mrs. Land said.

"I didn't know you had a schedule. How did you work it out? Does one of you feed him on odd days and the other on even days?"

The two women appeared to struggle with how to answer Connie's questions. She, in turn, waited like she had all the time in the world. Butters, on the other hand, was done with the arguing, leaped down from the wall, and trotted out of sight.

"See what you did?" Mrs. Land hissed. "You chased him off."

Wanda closed her eyes and sighed deeply. After a moment, she opened her eyes and offered, "Since I fed him yesterday, you can feed him today. Moving forward, I'll take the even days."

Mrs. Land pursed her lips and stared at Wanda, then nodded once. "Fine."

"Fine," Wanda replied. She snatched up one can of cat food, placed it in the carrier of her walker, and headed back into the building. "Thank you," she said quietly to Sid and Connie as she passed by.

Mrs. Land harrumphed and set about filling the food dish. The feral cat lived better than Sid when he'd been in the depths of his addiction. Beneath the sorting table was a house with a heated sheepskin pad. On top of the table was a placemat with a bowl for water and one for food.

One morning, Sid came outside to empty the compost bucket and found Butters sitting on the table, staring at his water bowl. A leaf floated in it. Butters looked at Sid, then back at the bowl. Sid sketched a mocking bow. "Shall I get that for you, your highness?"

Butters flicked his tail at Sid.

Sid chuckled, dumped out the water with the offending leaf, and refilled the bowl from a nearby tap. Noticing the crusted-on cat food in the food dish, he scrubbed both bowls in the laundry room sink and wiped down the table and the placemat. Butters must have approved. He butted at Sid's hand before lapping up the water. Sid made a point of keeping the bowls and table clean from that day forward.

Now, Sid took Connie's hand and led her back into the building. "Good job, you," he said, kissing her forehead.

“That was almost too easy,” she replied. “Fingers crossed, no one else wants to feed the cat.”

They walked up the stairs hand in hand. At the door of their apartment, Sid asked, “Were you looking for me?”

Connie scrunched up her nose. “We’ve got a bit of a problem.”

Everyone she’d invited had responded in the affirmative. Then her mother asked if Connie’s sisters, Teresa and Samantha, were invited. Of course, Connie replied, mentally shuffling around her seating arrangement. Then she’d gotten a video call from Kevin and Delia.

They sat shoulder to shoulder, staring at the screen and arguing.

“You tell her,” Delia said.

“Uh uh,” Kevin replied. “You’re the one who did it.”

“It’s your fault because you were the one who brought it up. Therefore, you have to tell her,” Delia insisted.

“Would one of you please tell me what’s going on?” Connie asked. She had a million things to take care of and no time for their Mutt and Jeff routine.

“Jane and Beth want to come to your party,” Kevin said.

“And bring Liam and Chuck,” Delia added.

Connie felt a headache coming on and rubbed her forehead. “How did they find out?” Jane and Beth Beckett were the founders and Kevin’s partners in Grand Gestures, an event-planning company in Seattle. Beth oversaw the cooking while Jane and Kevin met with clients and handled the events.

“Jane walked in while I was talking to my mom in the kitchen at the church,” Kevin said. Grand Gestures had arranged with First African Methodist Episcopal Church to use their kitchens. The arrangement gave Grand Gestures access to a commercial kitchen in a good location while the church profited from renting out its facilities. “Mom and I were looking up mocktail recipes, and Mom asked Jane what she was bringing. Jane said she hadn’t been invited, and even if she was, she couldn’t go because a party was booked for that night.”

Delia picked up the story. “Chuck and I were having coffee when he got a text from Beth saying that their New Year’s Eve party was canceled, and for the first time in years, she and Jane didn’t have any obligations that night. So Chuck was panicking, thinking he needed to take Beth out somewhere, and he asked me what I was doing. I told him about the great party you and Sid are hosting and ...” she sighed, looking apologetic.

“You invited a professional chef to our party?” Connie’s voice rose an octave as she processed the information. She wanted to reach through the screen and throttle her friend.

Delia replied, “I didn’t know that Chuck would latch on to it like a life raft. He looked at me with these big puppy dog eyes—”

“You mean like the ones you just gave Connie?” Kevin interrupted.

Delia glared at him. “What was I supposed to do?”

It didn’t matter who did what. Connie had more people to fit into their small apartment. “Sid’s gonna kill me,” she moaned. “We’ve been engaged for two days, and he’s going to want the ring back.”

“You got engaged?” Delia squealed.

Connie grinned and held up her hand to the camera.

“Ahh,” Kevin and Delia chorused.

“What did he say? How did he do it?” Delia demanded.

Kevin swatted her arm. “Never mind that. We have to help Connie with her party. I suggest making it a potluck. Grand Gestures can bring the serving ware. Do you need tables and chairs?”

“No to the potluck,” Connie said. “That was my original plan, and Sid shot that down. He likes to cook and is looking forward to it. He can add another potato to the pot.” She counted on her fingers. They were adding another six people. “Or three. Anyway, we’ll take care of the food. We’re getting tables and chairs from Mom’s church, but Kevin, it would be awesome if you supplied the serving ware.”

“Consider it done,” he said, scribbling a note. “I’ll bring tablecloths and napkins, too.”

“Ooh! I can do centerpieces,” Delia offered.

She had looked so guilt-stricken, Connie agreed.

“Where are we going to put them?” Sid’s eyebrows furrowed together into one thick dark line.

Connie twisted her fingers together, looking at his disgruntled expression. “We’ll move the coffee table into the bedroom and set up a card table with four chairs, and two people can sit on the couch.”

“Fine,” Sid huffed. “As long as you don’t put me at the kiddie table.”

“It will be fine,” Connie said, crossing her fingers behind her back.

Muttering to himself about measurements, Sid made adjustments to his recipe notes. Connie brought him a mug of tea and pecked his cheek. He mock-scowled at her and pulled her in for a proper kiss. She sighed, glad he wasn't angry at her.

Her phone rang, and she looked at the screen. "It's Fred." Their landlord was wintering in Hawaii while Sid and Connie managed the apartment building in his absence. "Happy holidays," Connie said into the phone.

"And to you as well," Fred replied. "How are things going?"

"Nothing to report." Connie didn't want to tell him about the argument between his former mother-in-law, Evelyn Land, and their favorite reclusive neighbor, Wanda Woods. He could do nothing about it; if the two older women would behave like adults, they could share custody of the feral cat.

"Glad to hear it," Fred said, then cleared his throat. "I'm hoping you'll do me a favor."

"What do you need?" Connie asked, looking at Sid's narrowed eyes. He was clearly remembering the last time they'd done a favor for Fred. Mrs. Land had fallen, and they'd had to wrestle her out from between the wall and the bed.

"I bought a new putter, and it's not working worth a damn. Would you please call a shipping company and arrange delivery of my old one? It's in the front closet of the apartment."

"I can do that," Connie replied.

"Thank you," Fred said, sounding relieved. "You two are great. Let me know when I can return the favor, and have a Happy New Year."

She found a notepad and took down the details before hanging up and explaining them to Sid.

"Sounds good," Sid said, pushing a hand through his long, dark hair. "I think I've got my shopping list figured out. Multiplying a recipe is easy. Division, not so much. That being said, do not invite anyone else."

"I promise." She kissed him again and headed out the door.

She took the stairs up to Fred's penthouse. He owned the building and occupied the only apartment on the fourth floor. Connie entered and marveled again at the openness. Her footsteps echoed on the wooden floors as she went to the closet and opened the door to retrieve the golf club. When she'd been a concierge at an exclusive apartment building, she'd arranged deliveries for many people. She sat on a stool at the big kitchen island and called Fred's preferred delivery service. Someone would arrive in an hour to pick up the putter, package it, and expedite shipping. Done, she glanced around the space one more time. It held a large dining table and a seating area before the expansive windows that could accommodate many people. Fred was divorced, and his only daughter lived on her own. Did one man get lonely in all that space?

Chapter Two

Sid dipped a spoon into the salad dressing to taste it. Not bad. He added a bit more salt. Better. He opened the cupboard above the fridge and pulled down a notebook that Connie didn't know about. He'd never say it aloud, but he thought she was on to something with her organized list-making. He didn't see himself ever using colored pens or stickers to decorate the book, but writing down his thoughts and organizing what needed to be done was calming. Now, he made a note about seasoning his salad dressing.

Feeding eighteen people wasn't that big of a deal. He'd learned to cook when living with Cal's parents and had worked in restaurant kitchens off and on. For tonight's dinner, he was keeping it simple. Three types of pasta, a meatless tomato sauce, a white clam sauce, and a vodka pesto sauce, salad, breadsticks, and Nanaimo bars for dessert. No one would go hungry.

He put the salad dressing in the fridge, wiped down the counter, and looked over the list to see what was next. Their guests weren't due to arrive for another seven hours, and everything was on schedule. Connie's laughter came to him from the bedroom, and he smiled. She was so damn excited she practically vibrated. He didn't know who she was on the phone with, probably someone offering to bring something. Sid had said no to every offer of food. He knew they meant well, but it was his turn to give back. It was just to a larger group than he'd anticipated.

Voices came to him from the hallway, and he tensed, waiting for a knock on the door and praying it wouldn't happen. Neither he nor Connie had time to deal with a tenant complaint today. The knock didn't come, but the voices got louder. Curiosity compelled him to go to the door and see what's up.

"I don't have him," Wanda told Mrs. Land. Her walker was planted in the open doorway of her apartment, and she loomed over the shorter, rounder woman. "I fed Butters yesterday morning and haven't seen him since."

"I bet you've got him locked in your bathroom, trying to keep him from me." Mrs. Land grabbed Wanda's walker and tried to shove it aside.

"What the hell?" Sid shouted.

Wanda looked annoyed, while Mrs. Land looked desperate, with mottled cheeks, watery eyes, and trembling lips. She lurched across the hallway to clutch onto Sid's arm. "She's taken Butters and won't give him back," she said.

Sid looked down at Mrs. Land then up at Wanda for an explanation.

"Evelyn, you can come inside and look, but I don't have Butters." Wanda moved aside, and Mrs. Land darted past her, calling the cat's name.

Connie came up behind Sid. "What's going on?" she asked.

Wanda frowned. "I saw Butters yesterday morning when I fed him, but he didn't show up for his evening meal. Evelyn says he wasn't there this morning, which isn't like him."

"He's a cat," Sid stated with a shrug. "He'll show up when he's hungry."

Wanda looked at him like he was an idiot. "I know that. However, Butters is the only thing Evelyn cares about, and she will raise holy hell until she finds him."

Connie ducked back into the apartment. She reappeared and thrust a coat at Sid. "Don't worry, Wanda, we'll find him."

Two hours later, Sid squatted beside a soggy, partially collapsed cardboard box on its side. Was it moving? He'd given it a cursory glance the first time he saw it beside the dumpster at a construction site. When he passed it again, he thought it had shifted a few feet from its original location. He'd gone back to the apartment to grab a broom. Now, he poked the broom handle into the box's opening and lifted it. A meow greeted him from the dark recesses. He sighed with relief before calling out, "Over here!"

Connie was beside him shortly, closely followed by Mrs. Land and Clarice.

"Butters!" Mrs. Land bent over to open the box.

"Don't!" Sid ordered. "It might be another cat who won't be as friendly as Butters."

Mrs. Land nodded and stepped behind him to clutch onto Clarice. Sid really hoped it was Butters, time was ticking, and he had other things to do.

Using the broom, Sid slowly opened the box for Connie to shine a flashlight inside. Two sets of eyes stared at them.

Butters stretched, yawned, butted his head against the other animal, and strolled out of the box to rub against Sid's legs.

"Butters has a friend," Connie said, staring at the huddled form of a scrawny-looking dog. The mangled remains of a rat lay in front of it. Connie made a face. "And it looks like Butters has been feeding it."

Butters had moved on from Sid to twine himself around Mrs. Land, who lavished him with pets.

Clarice got closer and squatted to look closer at the dog. "Poor thing," she said. "Do you think it's injured? Maybe it can't walk."

Connie stopped Clarice before she could reach inside. "That's not a good idea. The dog doesn't know us and is probably scared."

Sid rose and dropped the broom to the ground. "Let me cut open the box to see what we're dealing with." He pulled out a pocket knife, sliced open the box, and spread the wet cardboard on the ground. The dog whimpered but didn't move. On closer inspection, Sid saw

that it couldn't move. A rope was tied around its neck, and the dog had one paw caught up inside it. The skin was raw and bloody where the dog had tried to pull his paw out from the rope.

"Can you cut the rope off too?" Connie asked.

"Yeah, but if I do it here, the dog will probably take off, and that wound will get infected."

"What if you cover the dog with a blanket and carry it back to The Firs? Put the dog in the laundry room sink and then cut the rope off," Clarice suggested.

Sid removed his jacket. "That's a great idea. This will work just as well." Standing behind the dog, he slowly laid the jacket over the animal and wrapped it up snugly. The dog didn't protest when he picked it up and started back to the apartment building. The animal barely weighed a thing.

Walking quickly beside him, Connie hustled ahead to open doors when they reached the courtyard. Sid placed the shivering animal inside the laundry tub, pulled the jacket off, and tossed it aside. The frightened dog had peed all over it.

"This should distract him for you," Clarice said, lowering a bowl of water in front of the dog, who hesitantly lapped at it, then buried his nose in the water and drank noisily.

"Thanks." Sid pulled out his knife. He sawed through the old rope until it fell apart and dropped into the tub.

The dog stood on trembling legs, turned its head, and bit Sid's hand.

Five stitches and a tetanus shot later, they were back in Connie's car and headed home. Sid stopped her before she could apologize again. "You didn't do anything wrong, and no, we aren't canceling the party."

She chewed on her lip and shot him a worried look. "But you can't cook like that."

Sid raised his bandaged hand and wiggled his fingers. "I'll be fine. Besides, when your mom and Aunt Angie hear about my heroic deeds, they'll treat me like a king. Maybe hand feed me grapes."

Connie snorted, feeling relieved and thinking he was probably right.

She parked at the curb by the front entrance of their building and scooted around the car to open the door for Sid.

"Seriously, I'm fine," he said. When he pulled her in for a kiss, she knew he wasn't lying.

The trip to urgent care had thrown her completely off schedule, and neither remembered to bring their phones. They couldn't call their guests, and some would be on their way by this time. Connie tossed aside the idea of folding napkins into intricate arrangements and focused

instead on what needed to be done. Light spilling from the open door to their apartment brought her out of her thoughts. “I’m not sure if I locked it, but I definitely closed it.”

Laughter burst forth, and Sid grinned down at her. “If it’s burglars, they’re having a damn good time.”

Edward Ortega sat at the table with Cal and Delia. Connie’s sisters were on the couch, scrolling through their phones while her mom, Julia, stood at the stove.

“There you are!” Connie’s mom greeted her with a hug. “You weren’t here and didn’t answer your phones. I was getting worried and—” She broke off and tenderly took Sid’s hand into her own. “Oh, honey, does it hurt?”

Sid grinned. “I’m fine, but I’ll need some help with the cooking.”

“Whatever you need, sweetheart,” Julia reassured him. “You sit down and tell me what to do.”

He took the vacant seat at the table and smirked at Connie. Rolling her eyes, she went to hang up her coat up and opened the door when a knock sounded. Fred’s daughter, and Mrs. Land’s granddaughter, Vivian, stood in the hallway, shifting from one foot to the other.

“Oh, good, you’re home,” Vivian sighed. “I was here when Cal and your parents showed up, and I let them into your apartment. I have a key to Dad’s apartment and know where he keeps his master key.”

Connie smiled. “I was wondering how they got in.”

“How’s Sid doing? Clarice told me—”

The elevator door opened, and Clarice herself, clutching a casserole, hustled toward them. “How’s he doing?” Not waiting for an answer, she pushed past Connie to enter the apartment.

Connie looked at Clarice’s retreating back and then at Vivian. “Why don’t you come in?”

The volume level increased dramatically as Clarice clucked over Sid. Samantha and Teresa had gathered around as well to hear the details.

“So, where’s the dog?” Cal asked.

She and Sid looked at each other and shrugged before turning to Clarice. The older woman was nosily inspecting the kitchen and Cal’s notebook.

“Clarice,” Connie raised her voice to get her attention, “do you know where the dog is?”

“In Mona Tseng’s apartment,” she replied. “She ran a doggie daycare and obedience school years ago.”

That didn’t surprise Connie. The women who lived in The Firs all had interesting life stories. It wouldn’t surprise her to discover that one of them had been a spy.

“Mona held Boxer while I examined him,” Clarice went on. “He’s definitely a male and has quite the set of testicles on him.”

A snort came from Cal, who stifled it when Delia swatted his arm.

“Why did you name him Boxer?” Sid asked.

“Because he was found in a cardboard box.” She lifted up Sid’s notebook. “It looks like you’re having a party tonight. Your menu looks enticing. I haven’t had a decent clam sauce in forever.” She put the notebook down with a dramatic sigh. “I’ll put the casserole in the fridge. Your guests won’t want to eat that when they have more delicious options in front of them.”

Nobody spoke, but multiple sets of eyes stared at Connie. The words were out of her mouth before she even thought about them. “Why don’t you stay? You too, Vivian. There will be more than enough food.”

Sid glared at her then glanced meaningfully around the room.

“We’ll be cozy.” Connie glared back at him. If she had to stand in the kitchen to eat her dinner, she would do so. They’d make it work.

Vivian smiled and shook her head. “Thank you, but—”

“We’d love to,” Clarice interrupted. “I’ll go tell the others.”

Chapter Three

Taking her by the elbow, Sid guided Connie out of the noisy living room, past his old bedroom, and into the bedroom he now shared with Connie. He sighed and rubbed absently at his bandaged hand. “Your generous heart is one of the many things I love about you. However...”

She’d closed her eyes and scrunched up her face.

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting for you to go ballistic.” She opened one eye to peer at him.

He gaped at her. “Have I ever gone ballistic on you?”

“No, but it’s bound to happen sooner or later, and inviting close to thirty people for dinner certainly merits it.”

That took the wind out of his sails. “I guess we eat in shifts. And do it quickly,” he mumbled.

Connie kissed him soundly on the lips.

“And everyone gets small portions,” he warned. He’d anticipated eighteen but cooked for twenty. Even with Clarice’s casserole, there wasn’t enough to go around. A bark interrupted his dismal thoughts.

“A puppy!” The happy shout of Tommy Federov came to them.

“It sounds like the rest of our guests have arrived.” Connie kissed him again before leading Sid back into the melee.

Vivian Thompson and her two great aunts were wedged on the sofa with Wanda and Clarice. Connie’s family, Delia, Cal, and his parents clustered around the table. Kevin and his mother Eleanor, Beth Beckett and Chuck Duncan, Liam Cross, and Jane Beckett were clumped in the hallway between the front door and the living room. Frank, Sid’s mentor, loomed at the back of the pack, waving a hand in greeting.

All eyes were on the diminutive form of Mona Tseng and Boxer. Having been bathed and his paw wrapped in a clean bandage, the dog pressed against Mrs. Tseng’s leg, looking back and forth between her and Tommy. On his knees, Tommy spoke softly to the dog and tentatively held out a hand. The dog licked his hand and sat back on his haunches as a collective sigh went up.

Tommy beamed.

Sid harrumphed.

Connie held his uninjured hand and bumped his shoulder before addressing the group. “Welcome, everyone. This wasn’t exactly what Sid and I had planned, but we’re glad you could

join us today. We're a bit crowded, so I think we'll set up the extra tables in the apartment hallway, and to make sure there's enough food, I'm going to order some pizzas."

"Actually, we can help with the food," Beth spoke up. "I know you told us not to bring anything, but I have trays of appetizers down in the van."

Eleanor Armstrong chimed in, "I brought a lasagne."

Aunt Angie and Julia Ortega raised their hands. "We each made a pan of ziti," Aunt Angie said. "It's not that we doubted your cooking, Sid, but people have a way of showing up at the last minute, and we didn't want you to run out of food."

"And don't forget my casserole," Clarice called out, looking proud of herself.

Connie let out a sigh and slumped against him. That was one problem down. "Thank you," he said, smiling at each generous person in turn. It would be foolish to reject their offerings. "Frank can help me bring up the stacking chairs from the laundry room, and Edward, if you give your keys to Chuck, he and Liam can unload the folding tables and chairs from your vehicle and set them up."

The Grand Gestures crew headed out the door to retrieve food while Eleanor, Aunt Angie, and Julia conferred with Connie about how to set up the food. The sauces just needed to be heated, but the pasta hadn't been cooked. Sid trusted the women to take care of that detail.

"Excuse me," Vivian's voice rose above the noise. "My dad's apartment is big enough to accommodate everyone. Would you like to hold the party up there? I texted him and asked. He thinks it's a great idea."

Sid had been in Fred's apartment only a few times but knew it was big. The kitchen opened into a dining area and living room with French doors leading onto a big deck. Best of all, the huge kitchen island was perfect for holding the food.

"That would be awesome!" Relief flooded through him. Everyone would be able to sit down and enjoy the meal together.

A new plan was put into motion after a brief summit. Food preparation was moved from Sid and Connie's kitchen up to Fred's. Eleanor mixed mocktails while Samantha and Teresa poured sparkling cider for the tenants of The Firs, who'd spread out in Sid and Connie's living room. Tommy alternated between playing with Boxer, serving appetizers, and keeping the ladies entertained.

Clarice had a grand time playing elevator operator as food, tables, chairs, serving ware, and centerpieces were hauled up to the penthouse. Inside, Jane instructed Cal, Liam, and Chuck on rearranging Fred's furniture and setting up the additional tables and chairs. Kevin and Delia

followed behind with tablecloths and centerpieces. Then Connie and Vivian set the tables. When they were finished, they had four beautifully set tables for six and one for seven.

“I know I’m an intrusive busybody, but may I make a suggestion?” Clarice asked Connie.

Connie stepped back from the table and looked down at the diminutive gray-haired woman. Clarice had given her more than one headache since Connie’d moved into the building. However, there wasn’t a malicious bone in her body. She just wanted to be involved. “Sure. What is it?”

“I think assigned seating would be a good idea. That way, people get a chance to know each other.” Following her gaze, Connie saw she was focused on Frank and didn’t blame her. Barrel-chested like Uncle Dan, Sid’s mentor was almost as tall as Cal. He wore his silver-gray hair pulled back in a braid, and a slight smile played on his weather-worn face as he stood with the group of men out on the deck.

Jane had heard Clarice’s suggestion and joined them. “I agree, and maybe write an icebreaker question on each card to start conversations.”

The two women looked at Connie. It was a great idea, but there was still so much that needed to be done. “Thank you, but—”

“Please,” Clarice said. “I’ve got index cards and beautiful penmanship.”

“I’ll work with her,” Jane offered. “There’s a list of icebreaker questions on my phone and glitter pens in my bag. We did crash your party. Let us help, please?”

Connie knew they were right. They weren’t freeloaders. These people were friends and family who weren’t used to sitting around and truly wanted to be useful. Wanted to make things easier for her and Sid. “Go for it,” she said.

Jane and Clarice hurried off, and Connie went over to join Sid at the kitchen island. On the other side, Beth, Aunt Angie, and Connie’s mom worked as a well-oiled machine. The older women deferred to Beth, who supervised with quiet authority. Connie had eaten some of the appetizers they’d brought and understood why Grand Gestures had such a good reputation.

“Did they kick you out of the kitchen?” Connie asked. Sid’s cooking was excellent. Hopefully, the professional chef hadn’t found it lacking.

Sid winked at her. “Not exactly. I’m the taste tester today. Nothing leaves the kitchen without my say-so.”

Aunt Angie threw a potholder at him. “And you’ll be washing all these dishes when we’re done.”

“Can’t.” Sid held up his bandaged hand. “I’m injured.”

“That’s what God invented rubber gloves for,” Connie’s mom chimed in.

Aunt Angie laughed and held out her hand for a fist bump. It warmed Connie's heart to see the women getting along so well.

"Sid, will you share your recipe for vodka pesto sauce?" Beth asked, holding a spoonful of the sauce and tasting it. "Yours is different than mine, and I like it better."

His cheeks pinking up, Sid replied, "I've been experimenting with my pesto sauce. I'm glad you like it and happy to share."

Beth came around the island and gave him her business card. "And your salad dressing, too, if you wouldn't mind."

Sid blushed even more. Beth may have made the request out of politeness, but she'd made Sid's day, which made Connie's day. She leaned into Sid and surveyed the room. It looked lovely, and she was thankful Fred had allowed them to use it. A sinuous movement caught her eye. Butters strolled in through the open front door and made straight for Sid, leaping up and landing gracefully on the empty stool beside him.

Blinking big yellow eyes, he rubbed his face against Sid's bandaged hand and purred.

"I think he's apologizing," Connie said.

"I think he's a troublemaker," Sid replied but reached out to stroke the black cat's big head.

Another movement drew Connie's attention. Mrs. Land hovered in the doorway with her granddaughter Vivian standing behind her, looking very determined. Connie didn't think the old woman was there by choice.

Her lips pinched so tightly they practically disappeared; Mrs. Land stomped toward Sid and Connie. She stopped just short of the island, saying, "Thanks for finding Butters." Her hard gaze softened as it landed on the cat. Butters blinked slowly and nudged Sid's injury again. Mrs. Land rolled her eyes and huffed. "Give me the medical bills, and I'll pay for them."

Connie opened her mouth to protest but closed it and nodded when Sid cut her a look. He said simply, "Thank you."

Butters jumped down and walked off, stopping by the door to look back at Mrs. Land, who dutifully followed.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" Connie called after her. "We've got plenty."

Mrs. Land looked horrified when she turned back. "No." Vivian must have nudged her because she added, "Thanks," before leaving.

Shaking her head, Vivian watched her grandmother close the door behind her. "I'll, um, get her settled and then come back."

"If she changes her mind, she *is* welcome," Sid said.

Vivian smiled. “That’s very kind of you. But she won’t, and honestly? It’s better that she’s not here,” she said before leaving.

As much as she’d like to believe otherwise, Connie knew Vivian was right. Her grandmother, a functioning alcoholic, barely got along with anyone in the apartment building, including Fred, her former son-in-law. She tolerated Clarice, who lived across the hall and checked on her regularly. The grudging custody arrangement with Wanda over Butters worked because the cat was in charge.

A laugh went up from out on the deck. Connie twisted around to see the men laughing at something Kevin had said. They were a disparate group that probably wouldn’t have come together on their own. A CFO and COO for a commercial real estate firm, two retired fishermen, a fiction writer, a former janitor turned business owner, and an event planner. She was pleased that her dad looked relaxed, standing beside Sid’s Uncle Dan.

“If I had listened to you and we only invited my parents and your aunt and uncle, we could be enjoying a lovely meal in our apartment right now.”

Sid chuckled and put his arm around her. “Next time. This is exactly what we needed today.”

Connie looked at him. Had he lost his mind? “Really?”

“Well, except for the dog bite,” he replied. “I mean, they’re clearly enjoying themselves.”

That seemed to be the case with the women in the kitchen. They were smiling and talking away like old friends.

Vivian reappeared in the entryway with her two great aunts. Behind them were Mrs. Dubchek, Wanda, Teresa, Samantha, Tommy, Eleanor, and Mrs. Tseng. They looked like they’d been having a great time and wanted to continue.

Wanda broke off from the group and pushed her walker toward Sid and Connie. The old woman had been a recluse when they’d first moved in across the hall from her. She still preferred her own company to that of others, but she’d gained a lot of ground in the past few weeks. “How are you doing, Sid?” she asked, worry etched across her lined face.

“I’m good, Wanda. Thanks,” he answered. He tilted his head toward Mrs. Tseng and Mrs. Dubchek, gazing at a collection of photographs hanging on one wall. “What did they do with the dog?”

“Mona said Boxer had too much excitement today, so she has him in her apartment.” Wanda curled her lip.

“You don’t like dogs?” Connie asked.

“It’s not that I don’t like dogs, it’s that…” She looked away for a moment, then back at Sid and Connie with a rueful expression. “It’s bad enough I have to share Butters with Evelyn, but now I have to share him with Boxer. God knows what *he’s* going to expect from me.”

Mrs. Tseng walked up, nodded at Connie and Wanda, and addressed Sid, “Would you be able to stop by my apartment tomorrow? Boxer wants to apologize but doesn’t want to do it with so many people around. He’s not comfortable with crowds.”

“I would be happy to meet with Boxer,” Sid replied. “Is there a time that works best for him?”

Mrs. Tseng looked thoughtful before replying, “We haven’t settled into a schedule yet, but I think four o’clock should work. It’s after our nap and before our walk. Don’t stay too long, and don’t expect to join us on our walk. We will work up to that.”

“Of course,” Sid said.

Connie wondered how he was keeping a straight face. Perhaps it was because he was avoiding looking directly at her.

Mrs. Tseng extended an inviting hand to Wanda. “Come join us. We are preparing a letter to send to Fred. We want our doors fitted with entry flaps for Butters and Boxer. It will work best if we use the same design for uniformity. The animals will appreciate that.”

Looking dubious, Wanda nodded but didn’t say anything as she followed Mrs. Tseng. Tommy sat between Vivian and Mrs. Dubchek, showing them something on his phone. Connie was sure it was the fanciest doggy door on the market. “Do you think we’ll be expected to put one on our door?”

Sid’s eyes bugged out. “God, I hope not. No doubt Clarice will use it.” He crossed his arms over his chest and winced. He uncrossed them and stared at his bandaged hand. “If I hadn’t been bitten by Boxer, this would not be happening today.”

Connie followed his gaze as he looked around the apartment.

Cal and Delia had been drawn into the conversation about doggy doors and laughing at something Mrs. Dubchek said.

Ms. Thompson and Mrs. Sinclair were showing a display of photographs to Chuck and Liam, who seemed thoroughly engaged.

Beth was peppering Aunt Angie, her mom, and Eleanor with questions about their dishes. An animated discussion started up over which pasta was best for which sauce.

A hum of happy energy hung in the air.

“The day is a little bit brighter because we got to gather together.” Sid rose from his seat and kissed her on the forehead. “I’ll be back,” he said.

Carrying a plate covered with a tea towel, Sid exited the stairwell and then ducked back inside. Clarice and Jane were standing by the elevator.

“Are you sure that’s something you’d like to do for Grand Gestures? It won’t be too much for you?” Jane asked.

Clarice made a scoffing sound. “Handwriting place cards isn’t difficult. I can do that while the soaps are on. Tell me what ink color you want, spell the names correctly, and don’t rush me, and I’ll be fine.”

“That should work. I have a supply of pens and cardstock at the shop. Would you like to stop by and pick some up?”

“I’d love to see your shop,” Clarice said.

“Great. Between now and then, think about how much you want to charge,” Jane replied. “Beth makes lunch for Kevin and me on Wednesdays to test new recipes. Would you like to join us?”

“Absolutely!”

The elevator arrived, and the two women stepped inside. When the doors closed, Sid entered the hallway and approached the last apartment. He put the plate on the doormat, walked away, stopped halfway down the hallway, and turned back. Before he could chicken out, he knocked loudly on the door and picked up the plate.

The door opened after a few moments, and Mrs. Land glared up at him. “What?”

Why had he bothered? Sid stared at her belligerent expression, thinking that he was an idiot. “Here.” He thrust the plate at her. The heady fragrance of garlic, butter, and tomato sauce filled the air.

She sniffed and looked down at the plate suspiciously. “What is it?”

“Ziti, lasagne and bread sticks.”

Her lip curled. “Did you make it?”

“Just the breadsticks.”

Flicking his tail, Butters strolled past her and settled beside Sid. He looked up at Mrs. Land. She sighed and muttered to herself before taking the plate. “Are you happy now?” she asked the cat.

Butters yawned and walked back into her apartment.

“Happy New Year’s,” Sid said, fighting hard to keep a straight face.

“Yeah, yeah,” she replied, “and, um, thank you,” she looked back at the cat and up at Sid, “for everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

Feeling lighter, he took the stairs two at a time back to the penthouse. Inside, people were finding their names and sitting at the tables. Connie gestured him over, and he took the chair beside her.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

He took her hand and smiled down at her. “Everything is just fine.”

The End