

A NOVELLA

the mermaid's, the ex, and
USSS

RACHEL HEROD

For my friend Amy, who believes in me no matter what.

Chapter 1



Who has a dog door on the *front* of their house? All delivery drivers experience run-ins with dogs—it comes with the job. But Braig Sanborn knew a guy who was bitten once. Really bitten. And his Pidgeon, the handheld device issued to each driver, hadn't warned him either. Usually a driver's Pidge flagged houses with dangerous dogs, but this time? Nothing. So, the dude had no warning. He'd verified the address, set the package down, and stepped back to take a picture. That's when he heard the growl and got his keister chomped.

After a doctor visit, multiple shots, and being out of work for more than a week, the driver finally returned—definitely worse for the wear. And after the bandages came off, the rest of the guys at work teased that his tush was lopsided.

That's why Braig wouldn't go near the front door of number one-eleven Agapi Drive.

He leaned between the headrest and the dashboard until he had a clear sight of one-eleven's front door. The biggest dog door he'd ever seen taunted him every time he made this stop. Just because no one had reported a vicious dog didn't mean

there wasn't one. This house had been on Braig's route for months now. One-eleven was his baby. It was *his* responsibility.

He crawled out of driver's seat and into the back of his delivery truck, gazing down at his Pidgeon. Still no flag on this house.

The shipments to this address had been increasing, but today was the most he'd ever seen. If he took a minute to speculate, he might believe something illegal was going on in the house protected by the largest dog known to man.

The barcode scanning could have taken half the morning, but Braig was quick and methodical. Carrying the mound of packages was not so efficient. Six trips later, the steps were covered with fifteen boxes addressed to Ella Morrison, resident of one-eleven Agapi Drive.

Standing a safe distance away, Braig peered at the stacked boxes, then glanced again at the door. He never went near the front door of number one-eleven, except that one time when it was raining. He'd tossed the delivery onto the welcome mat and raced back to the truck with high knees, screaming as quietly as he could. Later, he hoped there was nothing breakable inside that box.

That's a lot to leave so ... out in the open. He cut his eyes to the dog door. It moved, and he jumped, but nothing came out.

Maybe it hadn't really moved.

A ding sounded from his Pidge—a small, unintimidating alarm to alert him that Mr. Mann could tell this delivery was taking longer than anticipated.

"Mann, you micromanager," Braig growled as he hopped back in the truck cab. *I bet the bosses at National Express don't micromanage their drivers.* He froze and gripped the steering wheel, cutting his eyes to the left and right, face hot. What? NatEx? No way. No way it's better over there. If there was one

thing Braig was sure of, it was that he would never leave the United States Shipping Service to transfer to National Express. Not ever.

Still muttering under his breath about Mann's ding, Braig swiped to the screen on his Pidge, showing his next stop. Turner Heat. Anytime a new, swanky steakhouse came to Buskerton, people were intrigued, and Turner Heat was supposed to be the swankiest.

He parked across two spaces at the back of the restaurant. Wondering if the kitchen was as upscale as everything else about the place, Braig rapped on the knobless back door, holding the small package under his other arm. "Delivery," he called.

The door swung open, Braig grabbed it with one hand, and stepped inside. A girl in a black apron stood with arms out, ready to take the box. Braig hesitated, mesmerized by the shiny tile and sleek chrome. The kitchen was definitely as upscale as Turner Heat's reputation.

"Oh, sign here, please." He handed the girl his stylus and turned his Pidge sideways.

A knock on the door he was keeping propped open drew his attention away from the fancy fixtures of the kitchen.

"NatEx," came a cheerful voice from the other side. "Would you hold this door open? Thanks."

Braig stood against the door while the NatEx driver, in his white button-up and pleated pants, strutted past, pushing a dolly. The Pidge dinged, grating in his ears, while simultaneously another sound rang through the kitchen. A lighter, almost pleasant sound—and it came from the straight, pleated pants that had just passed him. Braig glanced down at his gray polo and matching shorts as the Pidge dinged again. *This is my soundtrack, and that's theirs.* He let the door close on his way out.

Two dings. Mann was tracking his every move today. Maybe since he already had two dings, he could just chalk it up to a bad day, and drive by one-eleven one more time. Driving faster wouldn't help him make better time. If Buskerton could be famous for anything, it would be for being one big speed trap. And getting a ticket was way worse than getting dinged.

As he turned off Turner Heat's street, Braig couldn't shake the thought that the delivery at one-eleven should be farther up on the porch. Why did he have to be so afraid of getting attacked by a dog? Oh yeah, uneven cheeks.

He growled a bit as he gave into the temptation to turn onto Agapi Drive. Braig couldn't deny the worry any longer. He would count and see that all the packages were there, and the rest was out of his hands. With a delivery this large, Ella Morrison really should be home waiting for it. *Her absence is not my responsibility.* Braig said to himself. *Delivery is my responsibility.*

USSS had a tagline printed on every truck: United States Shipping Service—Your Country Courier. But around the office, there was another saying, "Delivery is our *only* responsibility." In other words, what happens after the truck leaves is out of the driver's hands.

Mann used that phrase daily, so no way would the boss approve of Braig driving back by one-eleven. Especially since his every move was tracked, always, by his Pidge. Mann observed everything at the garage.

I'm going to get it for this.

He practiced what he would say to the boss. "There's just this huge dog door on the *front* of this house, Mann, and you know what happened to Thompson ... We can't be too careful with large dogs, I mean," he said out loud what he'd been thinking all morning, "Who has a dog door on the front of their house?"

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Braig pulled past one-eleven, past the black car parked on the street two houses down, and drove around the block. Positioning his vehicle where he could see through the backyards to Agapi, he slowed the truck and counted the packages quickly. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Good, they're all—wait, only fourteen?

How would he explain *this* to Mann?