

Chapter One - *Storm Season or Forecast: Unstable?*

Sunday Evening — Trash Talk and Tensions

The clock on the kitchen wall ticked closer to seven as I sank into my favorite chair, remote in one hand, a half-empty soda in the other. The game was on, but my mind was already drifting toward the next day's to-do list—or more accurately, the stuff I was *not* doing.

Enter Veronika D., stage left. She didn't say a word at first. She just stood there by the kitchen doorway, arms crossed, eyes locked on me like I'd committed a federal offense.

The dog, Luna, sensed the tension too. She gave a low whine and retreated under the coffee table, tail tucked firmly between her legs. Finally, Veronika broke the silence with that unmistakable tone—equal parts amused and annoyed.

"Hey, Gordie," she said, voice sharp enough to slice through the quiet, "are you planning to let the trash ferment into a new ecosystem tonight? Because if you are, I need to know so I can prep my hazmat suit."

I threw her a grin, trying to diffuse the situation. "Come on, it's just Sunday trash. One more day won't kill anyone."

Veronika's eyebrow shot up. "One more day? Gordie, the trash doesn't have a calendar. It only knows neglect and smells. Big difference."

Luna peeked out from under the table and gave a tiny whimper, as if to say, *Please don't make me live here anymore.*

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Look, I’m just giving it some breathing room. You know, aging it like fine wine.”

“Fine wine smells better,” she shot back, tapping her foot. “And you know I’m not kidding about the smell. Remember last month? The trash bin almost got evicted.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, setting the soda down. “I’ll take it out. But you’re officially making it sound like a biohazard.”

“Because it is one,” Veronika snapped, then softened just a bit. “You know how I get about cleanliness and order. The trash is piling up? It drives me crazy. Like, I start imagining mold colonies invading the kitchen.”

Luna gave a little shiver at the word *mold*. I swear the dog understands us better than we understand ourselves.

I stood up and grabbed the trash bag, then glanced at Veronika. “Thanks for the reminder, boss lady. You want me to carry the bin out too, or is that one of your special projects?”

Veronika’s eyes flickered with a smile. “I’ll take the bin. I have a system.”

I nodded, shaking my head with a chuckle. “Of course you do. You and your systems.”

As I stepped outside with the bag, Luna followed me hesitantly, sniffing the air as if on high alert. The night air felt fresh, and I breathed it in, feeling lucky that

even with the storms, the little moments—like taking out the trash together—kept us grounded.

When I came back inside, Veronika was wiping down the bin like it was a priceless artifact. Luna trotted after her, tail wagging cautiously, as if to say, *All clear for now.*

I collapsed back on the couch, knowing full well that tomorrow the storm might roll back in. But for tonight, the trash was gone, the air was clear, and the peace held—at least until the next reminder.

I thought the worst of the trash drama was behind us. I was wrong.

About ten minutes after Veronika finished her ritualistic bin cleaning—the kind where every inch gets scrubbed like it owes her money—she paused, a flicker of frustration crossing her face.

“You know where the extra trash bags are?” she asked, eyes narrowing as if I should *of course*, know this by heart.

I nodded confidently. “Top shelf of the pantry, right?”

She gave me a look. “Exactly. And you know how high that is. I can’t reach it without a ladder.”

I sighed, already picturing myself stretching and fumbling around to grab that elusive box.

“Fine,” I said, “I’ll get them.”

Veronika watched with arms folded, feet tapping impatiently, like she was timing how long it would take me to come back down with the sacred trash bags.

I climbed up, grabbed the box, and almost lost my balance coming back down. Luna, ever the alarm system, darted between my legs, barking like I was performing some dangerous stunt instead of a simple chore.

Back on the ground, I handed over the bags and tried to ease into the couch, but no luck. Veronika was already on me.

“Now, the bin. It *needs* to be wiped again.” Her voice had that mix of urgency and exasperation, the one that means, *I know you think I’m crazy, but it has to be done. Now. Right now.*

I threw up my hands, grinning. “I swear, the bin is cleaner than the kitchen floor at this point.”

Her eyes flashed. “It’s not about the floor. It’s about the bin *not* smelling like a landfill. You can’t just say ‘clean enough’ with this stuff.”

I groaned playfully but got up. “Alright, alright. Your obsession is my command.”

Luna followed me to the kitchen, tail wagging cautiously as if she wasn’t sure if this was going to be a showdown or a cleaning party.

As I grabbed the rag and started wiping again, I caught Veronika watching me, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth despite her “I’m serious” face.

I shook my head. “One day, you’re going to wear me out.”

She smirked back. “Good. I need you in shape.”

I laughed, realizing that in this wild dance of cleaning rituals and grumpy reminders, there was something steady and strangely comforting.

Even if the trash bin never really felt clean enough, living with Veronika D. meant never being bored. And maybe, just maybe, never being alone.

Here's that kitchen scene with Gordie struggling and Veronika D. stepping in to show how it's done, with a playful but firm vibe:

So, after what felt like my third wipe-down of the trash bin—because apparently, *clean* is a moving target- I faced the next challenge: putting the trash bag in just right.

Sounds easy, right? Wrong.

I grabbed the new bag and tried to stretch it over the edges of the bin like a pro. But it kept slipping, folding weird, or bunching up in places it wasn't supposed to. Luna sat nearby, watching me like I was performing some kind of slapstick comedy.

“Need some help, Gordie?” Veronika D. asked, appearing out of nowhere like a trash bag ninja.

I gave her my best “I got this” look, but the bag slipped again. “Nah, I'm good.”

She crossed her arms and leaned in, watching me struggle with a barely concealed smirk. “You're doing it all wrong. You've got to get the tie just right. Otherwise, it's a mess.”

“Yeah? And how exactly do you suggest I do that?” I asked, giving the bag another futile yank.

Veronika smiled—kind of the “I’m about to school you” smile—and stepped up to the bin.

“First,” she said, “you fold the edges over the rim nice and tight.” She demonstrated, her fingers working fast and precise. “Then, you tie a knot here.” She pointed at the bag’s drawstrings. “Not too loose, or it’ll sag. Not too tight, or you’ll struggle to lift it later.”

I watched, half impressed, half feeling like I was failing kindergarten.

“Got it?” she asked.

“Mostly,” I admitted, handing the bag back to her to finish.

She gave me a look that said *You’ll get there*—but not today.

Luna wagged her tail like she approved, maybe because the kitchen chaos was finally calming down.

“Thanks, coach,” I muttered.

Veronika just smiled, a little softer now. “Next time, you’ll be the trash bag master.”

I laughed, knowing that living with Veronika D. meant every chore was a lesson—and every lesson came with a little love wrapped in a lot of patience.

With the trash bag finally secured and tucked away, I made my triumphant return to the couch, ready to reclaim my spot in front of the TV.

But no sooner had I settled in than Veronika’s voice rang out sharply and clear from the kitchen:

“Gordie! Let Luna out — she needs to pee.”

I sighed, but I wasn’t about to argue. I got up, grabbed the sliding door handle, and opened it for our little furry alarm system. Luna darted out like she’d been waiting for the chance all evening.

But here’s the thing about where we live: stray coyotes prowl around at night like they’re auditioning for a horror movie, and small animals like Luna are unfortunately high on their menu.

So, there I was, standing guard on the porch with my trusty baseball bat loosely held in one hand, watching Luna circle and squat. My eyes scanned the shadows just beyond the yard’s edge — every rustle a possible threat.

Luna did her business, oblivious to the looming danger, and I felt that familiar mix of protectiveness and quiet pride.

From behind me, Veronika’s voice floated over, calm but playful:

“You want popcorn with the movie we’re going to watch?”

I smiled without turning around. “Yeah, I think I’m gonna need it.”

She was already planning the evening, and I was just glad to be part of the team—even if my “guard duty” sometimes felt more like an impromptu action movie.

As Luna trotted back inside, safe and sound, I leaned against the doorframe and shook my head with a grin.

Living with Veronika D. meant there was always a new adventure... or at least a new reason to keep the bat handy by the sliding door and use it as a door jamb at other times.

Before the *Costco Cart Wars* and the *Parking Spot with Character* showdown, our Sunday started with what Veronika called “a quick early afternoon hike.”

Earlier that day, we had an outdoor adventure hike in this hot Arizona weather. From the parking space to the front entrance of Walmart. Now, in most places, a hike in the early afternoon sounds kind of peaceful: birds chirping, a little breeze, maybe some shade. But not in Phoenix. Not in June.

By 1:00 p.m., the heat was already rising off the black top in wavy little mirages, like the street was trying to disappear. The sidewalks shimmered like they’d been shellacked in molten glass, and the sun—oh, the sun—wasn’t just *shining*. It was *judging*.

This was the kind of heat that made your elbows sweat. The kind that made you question all your life choices, especially the one where you agreed to go hiking without checking the temperature first.

“You’ll love it,” Veronika said cheerfully, pulling on her visor like she was about to conquer Everest.

“Define ‘love,’” I muttered, slathering sunscreen on my ears while wondering if my shoes would actually melt to the pavement.

She had that look in her eye, the one that said *we’re doing this whether you like it or not*. I followed, mostly because turning around would’ve taken more energy than I was willing to spend.

As we trudged along the white lined walking trail to the front entrance, each step felt like we were walking into a pizza oven. Lizards sprinted into the shade like they knew something we didn't.

"I think my eyeballs are sweating," I said.

"You're just not hydrated enough," she replied, sipping from her perfectly chilled water bottle while mine felt like warm bathwater.

We kept going.

By the time we made it to the front entrance, I was half-baked and fully defeated.

"I think I lost five pounds," I groaned.

"That's the spirit," she said, tossing me a paper towel and grabbing a cart like she just won a race.

And that, my friend, was just the *warm-up* for what turned into one of the most chaotic, sweat-soaked Sundays known to man.

It was Sunday. That meant one thing: Costco in the afternoon.

Also—115 degrees. Which meant another thing: misery.

Because in our house, there is a hike to Walmart, and then we make a Costco meat run, and a deep philosophical debate about where to park — that's just how we do weekends.

Now, Luna wasn't with us, because even we know not to fry a dog in a SUV while we shop for bulk toilet paper and rotisserie chicken. She was back at home,

lying belly-up under the ceiling fan, probably judging us for leaving the comfort of air conditioning.

Veronika D. and I, on the other hand, were rolling into the Costco parking lot, a scene that could only be described as senior citizen bumper cars.

It was packed. I mean, elbow-to-elbow Buicks and Subarus. Sunday at Costco attracts every retiree within a 30-mile radius. There were walkers, shopping carts, tennis ball canes, and folks driving five miles an hour in all directions like NASCAR—but slower and somehow more dangerous.

But here's the kicker—we had a handicap sticker—a golden ticket. The parking gods had blessed us.

“There's one!” I pointed, spotting a glorious, blue-signed space just three rows from the entrance—prime real estate.

Veronika glanced at it. “Nah.”

I blinked. “Nah? What do you mean by ‘nah’? It's shaded, it's legal, and it's *right there*.”

She waved a hand. “Too close to the cart return. People scratch your doors. I want something better.”

“Better?” I asked. “This isn't a home purchase. It's a parking spot.”

But she was already easing past it, eyes scanning the lot like she was choosing her seat at a Broadway show.

We passed four more perfectly good spots. Two of them I actually *begged* for. But no—Veronika was on a mission.

“I like a space with some breathing room,” she said. “Some personality. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand,” I muttered. “I understand that my calves are going to get a workout worthy of leg day.”

Finally, she turned into a spot, far, far away from civilization. I swear we passed a guy pitching a tent on the walk back.

I looked toward the store. “That’s gotta be... what? Two hundred yards?”

“Exactly,” she said proudly. “It’s got charm.”

“Charm? It’s got distance. It’s got UV rays. It’s got the makings of a heat stroke.”

Veronika grinned and popped the SUV into park. “Let’s go. Meat’s not gonna buy itself.”

As we stepped out into the blistering sun, the heat smacked me in the face like I owed it money.

I muttered, “Next Sunday, I’m sending you in with a walkie-talkie and a meat checklist.”

She grabbed her purse, eyes already locked on the store. “Fine, but I’ll pick the parking space from wherever I want.”

And just like that, our Sunday meat mission had begun—200 yards, 115 degrees, and absolutely no chance of winning a parking argument with Veronika D.

After hiking through the surface of the sun that morning and hiking *again* from our charming, scenic parking spot, we finally made it inside Costco.

It was 115 degrees outside, but inside? Winter in Alaska.

The air conditioning hit like a cold slap from Mother Nature herself. I swear, I could hear angels singing as my sweat froze mid-drip. My shirt went from swampy to wearable in ten seconds.

Veronika adjusted her hair clip and gave a contented sigh. “See? Worth the walk.”

I didn’t answer. I was too busy trying to defrost my spine and keep my nipples from cutting through my shirt.

But then, like an unexpected plot twist, we turned the corner into the meat department—and walked straight into a human traffic jam.

Hordes of senior citizens, bless their sun-withered hearts, had set up camp around the frozen meats. Some leaned on carts. Others clutched sample cups like communion wafers. And one couple—I kid you not—was arguing over pork chops like they were negotiating a peace treaty.

“This is it,” I muttered. “The place where time stands still and mobility scooters run free.”

Veronika, on a mission, tried weaving through the crowd. “We just need to get to the ground beef,” she said.

“You’ll need a cattle prod and a field guide to get through this herd,” I replied, trying not to get clipped by a stray cart wheel.

A woman in a sun visor was slowly inching forward, examining each package of chicken thighs like she was choosing a wedding dress. Meanwhile, a gentleman

in suspenders had his elbows on the shrimp display, just enjoying the breeze like he was lounging poolside.

I leaned over and whispered, “This isn’t a shopping trip. This is a senior citizen cooling station.”

Veronika rolled her eyes. “Keep your voice down. They’re just trying to stay cool.”

“I’m not judging,” I said, “but if one of them starts unpacking a lawn chair, I’m heading to produce.”

Eventually, she squeezed through a narrow path between the salmon and the bratwurst and snagged a pack of ground beef like a game show prize. I stood back, guarding the rear flank of our cart like it was under siege.

When she turned around, meat in hand, I saluted her. “Mission accomplished.”

She grinned. “Now we just need eggs, milk, and paper towels.”

“Great. Should be out of here by Tuesday.”

We merged back into the current of retirees and weekend warriors, moving one inch at a time toward the front of the store—just another Sunday in the frozen trenches of Costco.

By the time we made it to the front of the store, Veronika and I had survived the senior freeze zone, dodged three near collisions in the juice aisle, and somehow ended up with twice the items we came in for. That’s just how Costco works—come for ground beef, leave with a kayak, 72 rolls of toilet paper, and a quart of industrial-grade pickles.

We scoped out the checkout lanes. All of them were full. Not full like “this’ll be quick.” Full like “go ahead and start planning your retirement.”

“I say we hit Lane 5,” I said, eyeing a line that only had three carts in it.

“No,” Veronika said immediately. “That cashier’s slow. See the way she’s scanning? Too much wrist rotation.”

I blinked. “Wrist rotation? You profiling cashiers now?”

“I know what I’m doing,” she replied with authority, steering us toward Lane 9.

Lane 9 had five carts, including a couple buying enough water to survive a zombie apocalypse. One guy had pallets stacked to his neck.

“I think the other line would’ve had us out by now,” I said.

“Hush. Trust the system,” she said.

As we waited, the family in front of us started haggling with the cashier over whether their coupon had expired last Tuesday or this Tuesday.

Meanwhile, a kid in their cart was singing the *PAW Patrol* theme on loop like it was a form of psychological warfare.

I looked at Veronika. “This is how it ends, isn’t it?”

“Death by checkout line.”

She ignored me and started flipping through the tabloid magazines stacked by the gum. “Did you know two celebrities are pregnant and one might be an alien?”

“I’d believe anything at this point.”

Finally—finally—we got to the front. Our cashier was a teenager who looked like he'd seen some things. He scanned our items with the blank stare of someone who'd emotionally checked out two hours into his shift.

“Do you want a box?” he asked.

I looked at the cart. We had 37 items balanced like Jenga. “What do you think?”

He nodded, slid a single flimsy box onto the cart, and moved on.

Just as he totaled us up, Veronika slapped a jumbo bag of trail mix onto the belt.

“Almost forgot this!”

I looked at her. “Almost forgot or *planned to sneak it in at the buzzer?*”

She smiled. “A girl’s gotta snack.”

I paid.

We packed.

We left.

Well, we *tried* to.

Because now came the next challenge... Loading the SUV in the heat that turns steering wheels into branding irons.

Leaving the ice palace that is Costco is always a gut-punch in summer.

The moment those automatic doors whooshed open, the heat hit us like a slap from the devil’s own hand. It was 115 degrees and climbing, Phoenix at its finest.

The asphalt was radiating waves like a bad desert mirage. I swear I saw a shopping cart bursting into flames across the lot.

We walked back toward our charming, 200-yard-away parking spot, pushing a cart so loaded it looked like a mobile bunker. The rubber on the wheels was half-melted.

My flip-flops stuck to the pavement with every step like someone had poured syrup on the blacktop.

Veronika squinted ahead. “Good, no one parked next to us.”

“Of course not,” I muttered. “It’s the Sahara out here. I think even the vultures are hiding.”

As we reached the SUV, she opened the back hatch with her key fob, then turned to me like a foreman on a job site. “Okay. Boxes go in first, then the soft bags.

I don’t want the bread crushed, and the eggs go on top.

Oh, and don’t put the chicken by the dog food—it’ll get warm too fast.”

“Understood, Captain Logistics,” I saluted.

The hatch groaned open, already radiating heat like a pizza oven. I reached in to move the sunbaked windshield reflector and singed the edge of my palm.

“Ah! SUV’s trying to kill me.”

“It’s your fault for not using a towel,” Veronika said, not looking up as she sorted bags. “You know it’s June.”

“Next time I’m wearing oven mitts just to get in the car.”

I started unloading the cart. Of course, I got the awkward-shaped stuff—three cases of water, a family pack of Kleenex, and some kind of mystery box she swore was essential.

Sweat was dripping down my back like a busted pipe.

Meanwhile, Veronika supervised. “No, no—*that* box goes flat. We don’t want the bananas bruised.”

“Bananas are already cooked,” I grumbled. “They’ve aged ten years in the last three minutes.”

Luna wasn’t even there, and I missed her. At least when she judges me, she does it silently.

Once the last item was crammed in, I slammed the hatch shut and stood back like I’d just finished a round of CrossFit.

Veronika adjusted her sunglasses, cool as ever.

“Okay. Let’s go home, put everything away, and then you can take out the trash.”

I blinked. “Didn’t we just sweat through three circles of hell for this stuff?”

She smiled sweetly. “And now we’ll organize it.”

I opened the SUV door and stared down at the steering wheel, glistening like it had been forged in Mount Doom.

“This is fine,” I said out loud, to no one. “This is all fine.”

By the time we got home, the groceries were sweating, I was sweating, and I'm pretty sure the truck tires had fused with the driveway. It was one of those days that starts simple and ends in a pile of mysterious receipts, reusable bags, and mild marital resentment.

Let's recap:

- **Walmart hike:** 115° furnace stroll through the desert landscape even as suburban as it can be. Great cardio. No survivors.
- **Costco adventure:** Enough seniors to fill a bingo hall, a meat aisle traffic jam, and a checkout lane straight out of a Greek tragedy.
- **Parking lot inferno:** Hotter than a habanero sauna, complete with burnt fingertips and loading instructions from General Veronika.

All I wanted now was to collapse on the couch, flip on the game, and watch the Raiders fumble their way into a fourth-quarter comeback.

Simple. Sacred. A man's right.

But as I sat down, remote in hand, already picturing that sweet kickoff...

"Do you want popcorn with the movie tonight?" Veronika asked from the kitchen like it had already been decided.

I blinked. "Movie?"

"Yeah. I was thinking we'd do a double feature—*The Notebook* and then that documentary on interior design in Scandinavia."

She said it so casually. Like it didn't directly conflict with NFL Sunday.

“I was gonna watch the Raiders game,” I said, trying to sound assertive.

“Ohhh,” she said, as if I’d just told her I planned to wrestle a grizzly bear. “I didn’t know you were still into that. But we *never* watch movies together anymore.”

Cue the guilt.

Cue the stare.

Cue the slow sigh from the depths of my defeated soul.

“Sure,” I said. “Popcorn sounds great.”

Because love isn’t just about compromise, it’s about knowing when you’ve already lost.

The living room was dim, the kind of lighting that says, “This is for feelings, not football.” Veronika had already queued up the movie, curled up in her blanket like a queen awaiting the court jester—me.

I handed her a bowl of popcorn and sat beside her, holding the remote like a hostage negotiator, knowing full well I wouldn’t be using it.

“You’re sulking,” she said, not looking at me.

“I’m simmering,” I corrected. “There’s a difference.”

“You’ll thank me later. That football game would’ve just raised your blood pressure.”

“That’s how I know I’m alive.”

She threw a kernel at me. “Shush. It’s starting.”

So, there we were, side by side, watching a tearjerker about a couple who never argued about parking spots, trash bags, or frozen meat departments.

I glanced at her halfway through the movie. She was smiling at the screen, eyes soft.

And that's when I realized something. Yeah, I missed the Raiders game. But sitting there, with her head leaning on my shoulder and the scent of popcorn lingering in the air, maybe this was the win I didn't see coming.

Don't tell her I said that, though. I have a reputation to maintain.



