

WRITE NOW

Write Now Flash Writing Contest 2025

Honorable Mentions

	Genre	Character	Object
Prompt A	Mystery	Astronaut	Coffee mug
Prompt B	Romance	Utility worker	Baseball cap

Grades 3 & 4

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“Clyde’s Space Adventure” by Henry H., Iowa (Prompt A)

Once, in the not so distant future, there was an astronaut named Clyde who loved coffee mugs. (He even once put his “mug” on a mug and no kidding, that was the coffee mug that got stolen the time he was mugged!)

When he was about to go to space he was very, very, very, very, very mad he couldn’t fit his favorite coffee mug in his tiny bag. Everyone was confused why he wanted to bring a normal coffee mug to space in the first place. “Are you forgetting the no gravity part, dude?” they asked. When everyone was at lunch, he slipped away to load the spaceship with boxes of regular coffee mugs.

Then when everyone was ready to launch, no one checked the spaceship cargo hold one more time. Launching in 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, go for launch!!! After they were in space in orbit, another astronaut named Billy said, “I’m hungry.” He goes down the stairs...and sees boxes of coffee mugs! “I wonder who would do this? It’s a mystery!”

Billy comes back upstairs and confronts Clyde about the coffee mugs. Clyde responded, “Well, do we have a coffee machine here? I think we should sell them on Mars! It’s been my secret plan to open Clyde’s Coffee Cafe!” (If you don’t know, Mars is a giant human civilization in the not so distant future with a huge dome that has gravity inside.)

The spaceship gently lands on Mars after two days. (Space travel has sped up quite a bit in the not so distant future.) The astronauts are starving from no food on board, but they stop at Martian Marv’s Burgers and make a plan. They open a coffee shop business and it’s a popular hit. Good thing they brought along a lot of coffee mugs!

“The Journal” by Sunvi L., Iowa (Prompt A)

“What am I looking at? What did this person see?” Hana mumbled while flipping through the journal pages.

April 7, 2006: International Space Station

I don't know what I saw...But, last night, as I reviewed images of the Earth, something caught my eye outside the windows.

At first the shape looked like a girl, then a circle. I can't be sure of what I saw because when I blinked the shape was gone. I brushed it off as being tired, but then right before bed I saw the same shape outside the window again.

Last week Hana's employer received a box of unclaimed items from an auction. Hana found a wooden box and when she opened it, there were torn pages from someone's journal. Reading the pages made no sense. “Did this astronaut really see a girl and a circle? What an odd image to see,” Hana thought.

April 10, 2006: International Space Station

After three days of investigating, I found the shape again last night. It still looks like a girl, but this time she was holding a compass. I also heard humming. I know I can't say anything to the rest of the crew. I'm going to keep observing and hopefully I won't see this image or hear the humming again.

“Do I start with NASA to figure out who these pages belong to? Or do I focus on what the astronaut saw?” Talking out loud, “Maybe I should write down what I know?”

Hana made a list:

1. The journal belongs to an astronaut.
2. An image was seen from the International Space Station.
3. The image looks like a girl or a circle.
4. There is a compass.
5. The image was seen multiple times.
6. Only one person has seen this shape.

“Hana, boss wants you!” Hana heard from the hallway. “Okay” Hana said, putting the pages back into the box and hiding it in her desk drawer. “I'll read the rest of the journal tomorrow.”

Hana arrived at work early, favorite coffee mug in one hand, journal in the other, ready to read the rest of the pages.

October 15, 2007: International Space Station

I am back at the Space Station. Today I walked over to the spot where I saw the girl last year. I'll admit, I was scared I may see or hear her. I still can't believe what happened next.

Hana continues to read the journal entry.

Next to the window I heard humming. The sound started to move down the walkway, so I chased it, and then fell into what felt like a hole. That's when I saw someone. I couldn't get a good look at her because she was so bright, but I could make out an orb and the compass she was wearing like a necklace.

I asked, "who are you? What are you?"

"Who or what I am is not important," she said.

"Am I the only person who can see and hear you?"

After some silence, "I am your guide across the skies. The stars will tell you..."

"Wait, the stars will tell her what?" There was a huge black smudge on the page covering the rest of the journal entry. "Will I ever figure this out?"

Months go by, and Hana spends all her free time trying to piece together the journal pages. Little by little, Hana believes she's figured out the writer's name and tracks down her phone number.

One day Hana calls her, "Hi! My name is Hana. I've been trying to contact you for months. I found your journal from your time at the International Space Station. I have so many questions!"

With a fearful tone, "I'm sorry I think you have the wrong woman. I've never been to space before."

"What no, I swear it is you please, just a mi..." and then Hana heard silence.

Putting her cell away, "If this isn't the person then who is? How else will I learn what the stars will tell her?"

More time passes. Hana remained devoted to the journal, learning about mythology, historical findings, and folklore. She studied stars and constellations to figure out who the girl with the orb and compass was. Hana also studied all the NASA astronauts that worked at the International Space Station in hopes of finding the journal owner. But everything was a dead end.

Ready to give up, one day Hana was sitting with the journal pages at a coffee shop, preparing to reread the pages another time to see if she missed anything like a name or object, when someone sat at her table. Hana looked up and saw a cloaked girl wearing a compass necklace and a shoulder bag with an orb. The girl slid Hana's favorite coffee mug across the table, took off her hood showing a ring of light around her face, and said, "I think you have been looking for me."

“A Mug” by Stella M., Iowa (Prompt A)

Reporting: Astro203571-aliens

“Have you recruited anything?”

Astro203571, “Nothing, But I have found this mug. And I’m not sure where it came from. I thought that it was from someone else that landed here. “That’s odd” the recruiter said. “nothing nor’ nobody landed here before us. Anyway’ where have you found this...mug?” “At a palace looking place, why?” “ because that is where you should look” Astro203571 peeks into the palace. He sees everything that earth has reported missing, And right next to them, There were the aliens.

"An Astronauts Mystery" by Beniah F., Iowa (Prompt A)

There was an explosion. A so-called perfect rocket blew up in space. Everything was destroyed except for a coffee mug with the design of an astronaut holding a coffee mug. People around the world are wondering how the rocket blew up if it was perfect. Max, a detective with brown hair is studying this mystery. So far Max has nothing, so he decided to ask around.

"What do you think caused the rocket to explode?" Max asked.

"I think it has something to do with the tanks of the rocket," answered a civilian. Many people had agreed.

"What do you think caused the rocket to explode?" Max asked for what seemed the one hundredth time.

"I think that it has something to do with the coffee mug. I mean why was it the only thing to survive; seems odd doesn't it?" Answered another civilian.

Max was interested now. Maybe it was time to ask an astronaut.

"What do you think caused the rocket to explode?" Max asked.

"I think it was the tanks although the coffee mug surviving does seem odd," answered the astronaut.

Max decided to go to the ruins of the rocket to see if anything was wrong but he would need help from a professional.

"Would you like to go to the ruins of the rocket with me, Robert?" Max asked.

"Sure, seems fun, doesn't it?" Robert answered.

Max and Robert got into their astronaut suits and prepared for launch. When they launched into space, they waited till they got to the ruins of the rocket. Max got out of the rocket and ever so slowly glided to the rocket and to his surprise he saw a living person!

"What do you see?" said Robert through their radio system.

"A person," said Max.

"A person?!" asked Robert surprised.

“Yes, a person.”

“Wow.”

“I’m heading over to them.”

“Ok.”

The astronaut attempted to speak but since no sound travels through space Max didn’t hear.

“I’m going to bring you back to my rocket. Ok?” said Max as he brought the astronaut back to his rocket.

Once they were back in Robert yelled, “You really weren’t lying!”

“What’s your name?” asked Max.

"제 이름은 시우입니다." answered 시우.

“What?” asked Robert.

“He says his name is Si-woo,” said Max.

“Since when do you know Korean?”

“Since I was 14,” answered Max.

"넌 누구냐?" asked Si-woo.

"저는 맥스이고 이 사람은 로버트입니다. He said, ‘Who are you?’," Answered Max. "영어를 아세요? Robert, I know you don’t understand me so I am giving you translations I asked him if he spoke English."

“Ok,” said Robert.

“Yes,” answered Si-woo.

“Perfect,” said Max. ““What do you think caused the rocket to explode?”

“The tanks is what I think,” answered Si-woo.

“Ok,” said Max. Max went back out of the rocket. When he reached the rocket, he went to the tanks and noticed that there was a hole in all three of them. Now, Max had learned a lot about rockets, so he knew that spontaneous combustion must have caused the explosion. When Max got back, they started the rocket to leave but it exploded. They all ended up on the moon.

“What are we going to do now?” asked Robert in distress.

“Well pieces of the rockets are flying at us so maybe we could make something to get us back, but we have limited air,” answered Si-woo.

“That might actually work, or we signal a distress call,” said Max as he held up a distress beacon with a smirk on his face.

“But that might take days for people to receive and arrive,” said Si-woo grimly.

“Good thing we have a week’s worth of air,” said Robert.

“Since when were you good at estimating?” asked Max surprised. Max began to start the distress call when suddenly an asteroid hit the moon right next to them causing the distress beacon to fall out of his hands. Max quickly picks it up and starts the distress call. “We figured out what happened we just need to share it with the world to let them know.”

“Well now we need to wait,” said Robert.

“Yeah, just wait,” said Max. So the three of them waited, and waited, and waited until finally a rocket ship came into view. “Look there!”

“Yay!” yelled Si-woo and Robert at the same time.

“Finally,” said max.

Once the rocket ship landed someone said, “get on! We don’t have enough fuel to get you back now so we go to the Space station.”

“Ok!” yelled all three of them as they ran and hopped toward the Rocket ship. Once they were there, they were told to wait another two days to get home. Once the two days passed, a ship arrived and they all left for Earth. When they arrived, they told everyone about how it exploded. Si-woo went back to South Korea, Robert went to Saudi Arabia, and Max stayed right in the United States where he could visit family and friends.

Before Si-woo left he grabbed his coffee mug saying, “I wanted to be the first person to drink coffee in space.”

“Mystery solved,” Max said to his family.

"Murder on the Moon" by Ava S., Iowa (Prompt A)

“Takeoff in t-minus 5 seconds. 5...4...3...2...1...BLASTOFF!” The rocket soars into the bright blue, cloudless sky. It's destination, the moon. It's mission, to transport five incredibly talented scientists to a research facility in space.

9 MONTHS LATER

I rush into the dining hall just seconds before dinner is served. Even though it had only been nine months the crew already felt like family. “Perfect timing Ella, you just made it! We're having dehydrated pizza rolls with freeze dried strawberries,” Sophie informs me.

“Sounds good, at least as good as fake food can be.” I chuckle as I slide in next to her. “Hey, where's Greg?” I ask the boys.

“I don't know. I didn't see him when I left our room. Did you?” Anthony asks Trevor.

Trevor shakes his head. “He's probably just taking a while in the bathroom.”

Suddenly an ear-splitting shriek fills the air from the living area and we all rush down the hall towards the sound.

Trevor and Sophie emerge from the exam room with grim looks on their faces. “He's gone. Strychnine poisoning. He was drinking his coffee from his favorite mug; you know the white one with the blue stripes.” Sophie's voice breaks as she says this, and I hold her in my arms as she sobs on to my shoulder. Sophie and Greg had been close, he had been like a father to her and I couldn't imagine the heartbreak she must be feeling right now.

Trevor snuffles and clears his throat. “This is going to be hard to hear but Greg's poisoning was a homicide, and before we can grieve, we have to find the killer. It could be anyone of us and I have already contacted NASA about the incident.” I look around, I was best friends with these people. I'd lived with them for nine months and it didn't seem like any one of them was capable of murder. “In a few hours an investigator will Zoom the ship to take our statements and question us. But, in the meantime we will have to do a bit of investigating ourselves.”

Anthony and I had examined the scene for prints and any other evidence, while Trevor and Sophie went to search the rooms. But so far the only thing we had found was a small vial of strychnine with a partial print on the topper, and another partial print on the poisoned coffee

mug. But the prints would be barely any help to us because they were barely half a finger. I study Anthony as we work, with his black curls and cute, innocent smile. It seemed like he would never hurt a fly, let alone kill old Greg.

“I can't find anything else. What about you?” I ask.

“Nope, we should probably go scan the prints and report to the others.”

I nod in agreement, “Let's go.”

Anthony and I return to the dining hall from the exam room to find Trevor and Sophie already there.

“We didn't find anything. How about you guys?” Sophie stays silent as Trevor talks, obviously still in denial.

I look at Anthony to see if he wants me to say it and he nods urging me along. “Well, we found the poison bottle...” I say trailing off as Sophie flinches. “There was a partial print on the bottle and another on his mug,” Sophie flinches again.” But they only eliminate Anthony from the investigation.” Before I can say anything else a loud ringing cuts me off.

“It's the detective!” Trevor exclaims and jumps into action. We all sprint towards the office to answer the call. Trevor gets there first; he slides into the chair and clicks the ANSWER button.

“Hello!” Trevor greets her eagerly, “You do not know what a relief it is to have you here to help us.”

The officer smiles and nods, her long black braids bouncing up and down under her cap. “I'm Maggie and I am the detective who has been assigned to the case. Now before we start, I was hoping you could share anything you found to help us narrow down the investigation, plus exactly what happened this evening.”

Anthony nods and begins to explain what had all happened. I give Sophie a squeeze and whisper in her ear, “We're so close to this all being over.” I give her a reassuring smile and she gives a small one back.

“Great, that's very helpful,” Maggie says. “You weren't the only ones doing the investigating and I found a security tape that I thought was very interesting. I was doing some digging and I found a conversation that one of the cameras filmed a few days ago.” She shares her screen and shows us a video of Greg talking to a hooded person.

“I don't have the money,” Greg says.

“What do you mean you don't have the money?!” The hooded figure responds.

“I just need a few more days!”

“Well, you don't have a few days, you have one.” And with that the hooded figure walks away.

The screen goes dark, “We've analyzed the video and it has to be a girl. And if one of you has that sweatshirt, I'm going to need you to show me right now.” Maggie's face turns serious.

“I don't have that sweatshirt, but Sophie does.” I turned to her, “You killed him?”

“‘Bout time you figured it out. The old bat got what he deserved in the end.” Sophie begins to laugh maniacally as she's dragged away by Trevor and Anthony. “Nobody takes my money!”

I watch her leave in shock and a tear slips down my cheek. I guess I had never really known my best friend.

5 DAYS LATER

“Next on the shocking murder of scientist and astronaut Greg Mcaffery whose coffee had been poisoned by Sophie Bonacello while on the Moon—” I turned off the TV, I already knew the whole story. After all, I had been there.

"Generating Love" by Ryan M., Iowa (Prompt B)

I interlace my fingers and stretch out my arms over the waiting keyboard. The blink of the cursor seems to mock me, almost as if it can sense my writer's block. My professor says that there is no such thing as writer's block, but writer's circle, something that is easy to go around, like the cul-de-sac I live on. Sighing I pick up the seemingly impossible to fulfill rubric. "C'mon Cass." I whisper to myself. This assignment should be simple! "No time like the present Cassandra, chin up, pip pip." I mock in the know-it-all voice of my professor. I shouldn't be struggling with this; after all, it's just a paper on what I want to be or do when I grow up, but instead of jobs, it's intangible things, like being successful, rich, or traveling the world. I should just put rich and call it a night, but the professor's words ring in my ears.

"Cassandra, you're a talented writer, so I'm challenging you." "Really?" I ask suspiciously. "Yes," he says, placing a completely different rubric than all the others in my class on my desk. "You will do something intangible for your future, but I want it to go deep. Reach inside yourself, find the thing you want the most, and put it all down." I stare, dumbfounded, with my mouth hanging wide open. "But—" I start to say. "No buts Cassandra, you will do this." with that, he walks to the next desk. So as I sit at Dad's old, no, ancient, desk, I don't even know how to start. The ringtone of my dad's phone brings me back to my senses.

"DAD!" I shout out the door down the hallway to my parent's bedroom. After a few seconds of just the ringtone, I start to walk down to their room. Opening the door I see my parents fast asleep, both with all their clothes on. It's only nine-thirty. Chuckling, I grab and answer the phone. "Underwood utility, how may I help you?" I'm ready for an old lady to answer, only to be surprised by the voice of a boy my age. "um hello, do you guys

fix power outages?" I'm so taken aback I don't answer at first. "hello?" he asks. "Can you hold on for one moment?" I mute the phone, then shake my dad awake. "Dad, wake up, there's a guy on the phone wondering if we can fix power outages?" He is barely even half awake when he answers, "Sure, as long as it's the generator." I unmute the phone to answer him, "Hello, we can fix outages as long as it has something to do with the generator. So, do you have a generator?" He responds with relief "Yes." "great! So has it kicked on?" "nope," he responds tiredly. I look down at my dad, who has fallen back asleep. "So can you fix it?" he sounds extremely hopeful "Um, could you hold for a moment?" I don't wait for an answer as I put the phone on mute. Shaking my dad awake once again, I start to tell him about the job, but he cuts me off. "Cassandra, you are nineteen, you have been along for so many utility calls, you can fix a generator. Besides, I am completely burnt out, as is your mother." Sighing, I unmute the phone. "Okay, what's your address?" He has no hesitation in answering. "210, Oak Drive." I am surprised at how easily he answers. "Really? You're not even going to complain about me being a girl?" "Well no, you seem to know a lot, so I trust you." he sounds genuine. "Okay, be there in fifteen." Hanging up the phone I place it back on the bedside table and kiss my dad on the forehead. Walking out of the room I close the door softly behind me. I walk back to my room, throw my hair up into a messy bun, and grab the baseball cap with our company's logo. Then I'm out the door, grabbing the keys to the work van on the way out.

I'm pulling up to his driveway in what feels like seconds. As I walk up to the door I barely have time to knock before he opens it. He has jet-black hair and sea-green eyes that seem to go right through me. He's wearing a black shirt with gray sweatpants. I feel my heart skip a beat, but before I can say anything he turns around and starts walking. "the generators this way." but before I can catch up with him, something knocks me down and starts to lick my face. "I'm so sorry, she's just starting to get used to people." I can see he's blushing. "It's ok, I love dogs!" I don't even realize how bright it is till he looks up at the lights. "huh, the powers on." he starts to laugh and before I know it, I'm laughing right along with him. "Well, I guess I should go." he helps me up, apologizing again. When I'm halfway home I realize the hat isn't on my head. Taking a u-turn I fly back to his house.

When I get there I see him standing on the front porch, my hat in his hands, a note attached to it. "Hey," he says, a deep blush working its way up his neck. "Hi, is that my-" he cuts me off before I can finish. "Meet me right here tomorrow, at noon." he places the hat back into my hands and leans against the railing. I look down at the note attached to it. Only it's not a note, but a movie ticket, for tomorrow at twelve-thirty. Looking back up at him I smile, then walk back to the van.

Back at my dad's desk, I stare at the words I've just typed: I want to find true love. But even as I sit and stare, a part of me thinks, I may already have.

"Every Morning" by Silas C., Iowa (Prompt A)

Arnold woke up and took his ritual drink of coffee from his favorite coffee mug, grateful for the artificial gravity that allowed him to do so. The journey to Mars would feel so much longer without it, especially as the sole crew member aboard the ship.

Back on Earth, Arnold had volunteered to be the one sent to Mars. He was so excited to be the first human to set foot there; the first to build a structure and grow food on the barren landscape. But most of all, he wanted to be the first to discover life, if there was any, on Mars. Imagine, being the sole person to discover a subterranean civilization, hidden from our eyes for years. But first, before any of that could happen, there was the long trip there.

Every day, Arnold would go about his assigned tasks. He would wake up, drink coffee from his favorite coffee mug, then he would relay the status of the mission back to ground control.

"All systems are green," he would say, and then head to bed. And so it went.

Drink coffee.

"All systems are green."

Go to bed.

Drink coffee.

“All systems are green.”

Go to bed.

One morning, Arnold felt off.

“This feels like it’s getting out of hand,” he mumbled, “I know living in space is mundane, but this seems like too much. And when I open communications between myself and ground control every day, it takes exactly the same amount of time as the day before. That doesn’t make any sense. Communication should take longer the farther away I am. So either we are wrong about how radio waves travel through space or I am not getting any farther away. But that is impossible. Of course I’m moving.”

And so it went.

Drink coffee.

“All systems are green.”

Go to bed.

Drink coffee.

“All systems are green.”

Go to bed.

Eventually, he started to notice things. Like how that one vent clanked open at one o’clock, Earth time, and closed at two. Or how there was a slight clunking in the ceiling in the afternoon. But Arnold decided to ignore this as just the ship making sounds and continued to drink his coffee and go about his business. However, a few days after heard the clunking overhead, he noticed something very strange.

During a routine cargo check, he walked down the hall to the hold with a notebook in hand, ready to inventory the cargo. But it didn't add up. There was one piece of cargo missing. It was a small box of tools, intended to set up the hab for him to live in while on the surface of Mars. Arnold double checked the cargo in case he had made a mistake, but the manifest still came up one short.

He sat down on one of the nearby crates to ponder what was going on. As he did so, something caught his eye. A faint trail of.. oil? It was black and reflective as it oozed down the wall. Whatever it was, the trail led up the wall to the air vent in the ceiling.

“What in the world is that?” wondered Arnold. “Why would there be black ooze on the wall? Am I going crazy?” But, without any further hesitation, he climbed into the ceiling to fix, what he assumed was, an oil leak.

There was just enough room for Arnold to crouch through. The trail was quite easy to see. He turned on his headlamp and followed the metallic-looking slime through almost the entire length of the ship, when it finally ended in a maintenance room above the mess hall. He had just enough time to remember that it was in the mess hall that he had heard the sounds in the ceiling, when a small creature crawled into view.

The creature was not human, that was for sure. It was smaller than Arnold, had red, rusty skin, and six insect-looking legs. It was nothing like Arnold had ever seen. It turned, took one look at him, and screeched. It then paused, pressed a button on a previously unnoticed headset, and raised its bald head.

“What are you doing here?! How did you find me?!” rasped the alien.

Arnold was dumbstruck. An alien! On the ship! How had he not noticed? “Wha- what are you doing here?” stammered Arnold.

“I will not allow you to reach Mars!” Screeched the alien, its voice going up an octave. “We have watched as your species has polluted and scorched and sapped your own home planet of its life! We will not let the same fate befall our home!”

“But,” said Arnold, “you have to let us come! It’s for science. Our mission is to learn, to further our knowledge, not pollute and destroy.”

“Stupid humans,” chuckled the alien. “We know your ways. So sure of your own technology and place in the universe. Did you not even consider that there could be a species with more advanced ideas and technology than yourselves? Well, we are that species, and we can harness the powers of quantum energy to put you and your whole ship in a time loop. Quite simple, really. All I had to do was find something that you touch every day and infuse it with said quantum energy.”

“My coffee mug...” Arnold realised.

“Ah, so the human has a bit of a brain after all,” mocked the alien. Arnold stood and faced the small creature.

“I won’t let you sabotage the mission!” he yelled and threw himself at the alien. But before he could reach it, the alien pressed a button on a remote previously concealed in its hand.

“I already told you, human, you and your species are not welcome on Mars.”

Arnold woke up and took his ritual drink of coffee from his favorite coffee mug.

"The Fixer Upper" by Mia S., Iowa (Prompt B)

Egg shells, chicken bones, bacon grease from yesterday's breakfast I suppose. What else could possibly break a garbage disposal? I flick the switch. There's a loud whir as the disposal comes to life, and attempts to eat away the trash I have so desperately shoved into it. I glance at the weathered calendar on the fridge, each day as white blank as the next. A satisfying screech brings me back, and the disposal comes to a stop. *Oh dear me* I mutter to myself as I pick up my phone, *I do believe my garbage disposal is broken, whatever will I do.* Pacing from the fridge to sink I dial his number, the only one in my phone, and wait for the tell-tale click. A sigh is heard, and a smile plays on my lips. I tell him about the strange sounds coming out of my garbage disposal, and if maybe, just maybe, he could come over to the apartment tonight and take a look. Only if he has the time of course, I wouldn't want to bother him. He agrees in a monotone voice, but I am sure he is simply teasing. And of course it's only polite to ask if he wants dinner and maybe we could even put on a movie if he doesn't have anything going on, but he says he will just look at the dishwasher, that's his job of course.

The brown dress hugs my waist, and I twist my hair into a pile on top of my head. I apply extra deodorant and vanilla perfume. At 6 o'clock I pull a lasagna out of the oven *just in case* I tell myself. Heat fills the room, and I make myself busy clearing the table, finishing the dishes in the sink, lighting a few candles, and when my phone chimes 8 o'clock I sit on the couch staring at the door. A heavy knock sounds, and butterflies erupt in my stomach. I wipe my hands before I open it to him, and he walks in. A utility belt is slung down around his waist, and a blue baseball cap hangs low, covering eyes I have never seen. I stutter a hello as his boots thump quickly, and comfortably through the apartment to the garbage disposal. He leans down and opens the cupboard underneath, his arms flexing as he twists a pipe. I wave my hands around blabbering about how it was working just fine this morning, and maybe he could fix it like he did the icemaker a week ago, and the oven 2 weeks before that, *and maybe you could fix me too.* I offer a plate of lasagna, but he mutters he's not hungry, he's probably focused on fixing the disposal. I make myself a plate, and sit at the table. Content to simply watch him work.

It always amazes me how he can fix anything with a few screwdrivers, a wrench, and masking tape. How he can immediately find the leak of a faucet, and make it good as new with a few twists here, and there. Everything his strong hands have touched has been healed, and left so much better, and more beautiful than before. My heart aches. If only he could see what needed

fixing right in front of him. If he could take his hands, and somehow piece me back together to be as wonderfully perfect as his other projects. A frustrated grunt escapes him as his tall frame steps back from the cupboard. He makes such an art form of his work. The way he crosses his arms across his chest when he is examining his tools, the way his eyebrows furrow when he first discovers the problem, but I can't see his blasted eyebrows because of that stupid baseball cap. I frown as I scrape the last piece of lasagna off my plate.

He lets out another grunt, this one of disgust, as he pulls fragments of chicken bones out of the pipe and onto the floor. A blush spreads across my cheeks, and I quickly get up and lean down next to him to pick them up. He turns his face away, pulls his cap lower, and explains how chicken bones will destroy any garbage disposal you put them in to. I laugh nervously and explain how silly of me, and I should have known that. As he puts the pipe back in place sweat beads my forehead. I can't ask him to come back to fix another one of my petty mistakes. There have just been too many, but *I need him to keep coming back*. I need him to tell me he can fix anything, not just broken fridges, ovens, and garbage disposals, but that he can fix broken hearts too.

"I need you to fix one more thing," I whisper to him, stepping closer, my heart roaring in my ears.

"And what is that?" he replies just as softly, his face still shadowed.

"Me"

I pull the wretched baseball cap off his head, and stare straight into his eyes. These eyes. These eyes I have been dreaming about. These eyes that are so full of hurt, pain, and suffering that a small breath escapes me. How can someone so astonishingly good at fixing things be so broken?

"I can't," he says, breath hitching in his throat, "I can't even fix myself". Guilt creeps into my brain, but so does an idea. One so beautiful and glorious a warm smile fills my heart.

"You only have to fix me," I say, "and maybe, if you let me... I can fix you too".

He gives me a true smile then, and my face is buried into his chest as I am wrapped in a hug. I share a secret smile with his heart that's beating against my cheek. The heart that I will heal with every depth of love I have to give. Someone has to fix the fixer upper.

"The Lost Cap" by Ethan D., Iowa (Prompt B)

The stadium was quiet now, except for the hum of the big lights overhead and the rustle of a few wrappers that got blown into the corners. A crowd that had cleared out hours earlier left nothing but the smell of popcorn and stale beer. I leaned on my broom, staring at the field. I'd been working here five years now, and whilst I'd stopped giving a damn about the games, I still did like the way the place felt when it was empty, like it held secrets.

I was sweeping near the upper deck when I saw her. She was standing by the third-base dugout, and she looked lost. Every few seconds she'd look around as though she didn't belong. I thought she was just another fan who had too much to drink, but then I saw her start looking under the seats.

"Hey!" I hollered, my voice echoing. She jumped and looked up at me. "You okay?" I shouted. "Yeah, I'm fine," she said in a small voice. "I just... lost my baseball cap during the game. I think it's still here."

I sighed. "Most people would let it go."

"It's not just a cap," she said. Her voice was soft but firm, and she clung to her phone like a lifeline. "It was my dad's."

That cut me off, effectively. "Oh," I said, heading down the stairs toward her. "Let's find it, then." Her lips managed to curve into a small smile. "Thanks. I'm Ellie."

"Jake," I replied, and shook her hand.

We started searching her section. The stadium felt enormous with just the two of us. Every time we raised them, the metal seats creaked, and our footsteps echoed as we moved. As we searched, she told me about her dad-how they came to games together when she was a kid and how the cap, a faded blue one with a worn-out logo was his. He'd died two years ago, and this was her first game without him.

"When they played his favorite walk-up song in the seventh inning, I just..." She paused, rubbing her eyes. "It hit me, you know?"

I nodded, unsure of what to say. My dad had left when I was ten, so it wasn't the same, but I knew what it was like to cling to something that reminded you of someone who wasn't there anymore.

We combed and re-combed through rows and rows, but the cap was nowhere to be seen. I could tell she was growing frustrated; her fists clenching and unclenching.

"Hey," I said, reassuringly, "if we don't find it tonight, I can check tomorrow. Stuff turns up in weird places here."

She turned to me with her eyes watery, but dogged. "Thanks, Jake. I appreciate it."

We decided to check the walkway by the concessions. Sometimes people dropped stuff there or moved it, hoping it would get found. As we walked, some of the tension dissipated, and she started asking me about my job. So I told her all about the weird things I'd found over the years, from phones and wallets to a sign that said, "Will you marry me?"

She laughed, and it lit up her face. "That's crazy. Did anyone claim the sign?"

"Yeah. Nope. Guess they didn't want to risk the rejection twice," I joked.

She chuckled and our hands touched. For the first time in a while, I felt like I wasn't just some random guy with a broom.

When I asked her what she did, she replied, "I am a second-grade teacher." "The parents are exhausting, but the kids are great," she said.

"Sounds like you're good at it," I said.

"Thanks. I try." She whispered.

Down the walkway we saw it now: the cap sat crumpled on a bench.

Ellie gasped and ran to pick it up. "Oh my God, I can't believe it!"

I smiled. "Told you we'd find it."

She turned, holding the cap close to her. "Thank you, I mean it. I don't know what I would've done without you or this cap."

"Anytime," I said. And I did mean it. I could feel my cheeks flush red as she pulled me in for a hug. Her hair smelled like flowers. I breathed it in.

I walked her to the gate, the night air cool against my skin. She turned back to me as she was about to leave, the cap still in her hands. "You know," she said, "this wasn't exactly how I envisioned tonight panning out. But I'm glad it did, anyway."

"Me too," I said—a little softer, perhaps, than I had intended.

She hesitated, then pulled a piece of paper from her bag, scribbled something, and handed it to me. "Maybe you can take me out to a ball game sometime." She smiled.

I stared at the paper. Her number etched onto it. My heart skipped a couple of beats.

"Goodnight, Jake," she said, giving me one last smile before walking into the parking lot.

I stood there, staring at the paper in my hand, then down at the cap. Actually, it was several hours earlier that I had found it, but thinking it was only some other abandoned whatever to toss into the lost-and-found bin, and almost tossed it there. Now I was glad I hadn't.

Sometimes, it isn't just a matter of finding what you've lost.

“World’s Best Dog Mom” by Marc Bona (87BA), Ohio (Prompt A)

Kasey Adler woke in pain.

She could barely lift her left arm and she had blood on her forehead. She quickly managed to take off her helmet and frantically looked at her capsule. Most everything was intact, and she was strapped in, seeing nothing out the cockpit window but gray rocks of all sizes, from pebbles to baseball-sized chunks to boulders you’d find on the corner of a manicured suburban lawn.

Her head throbbed like the morning after Training Completion Day. That’s when she learned she finished atop her class and was selected for launch. She and her colleagues celebrated at Joe’s Bar, and a few beers turned into a few tequila shots turned into a morning of drums in her head and cotton in her mouth.

Her head was fuzzy, but it was all coming back. She remembered pre-flight check and the countdown. She didn’t even have butterflies. Everything was fine. But it wasn’t.

“Tami, where am I,” came her first question.

Tami: “You are in your capsule.”

“Tami, am I on earth.”

Tami: “Unknown.”

That was odd. The computerized assistance system was designed to withstand all sorts of anomalies. She repeated the question. Same answer.

She surveyed the capsule. The treadmill was there, the food cabinet was filled, there didn't seem to be serious damage. Again she took to Tami: Am I on a planet? Are there other humans near me? Are there animals near me? Unknown, unknown, unknown.

Rare questions, though, brought an answer and the only time Kasey could feel anything close to joy, brief as it were.

"Tami, what is the temperature outside?"

Pause.

Tami: "The temperature outside your capsule is 210 degrees Fahrenheit."

Kasey stared across the vastness. She used to visit her uncle's farm in Iowa years ago. She'd sit on the porch, sipping lemonade as she saw nothing but green leafy soybean plants. But this, this was different. Rocks, grayness, coldness. She sank back in her seat and tried to figure out what to do. Then she remembered her mug.

It was there, attached to its hook, the WORLD'S BEST DOG MOM and Ginger's face smiling at her. Jake had given it to her on their first Valentine's Day together. She was allowed one item under 2 pounds to take. The mug, and a small picture of Jake in her pocket, was a small tether to home. Seeing that mug calmed her.

Her days filled with uncertainty.

Kasey passed time - logging miles on the treadmill, eating food-pouch contents, and of course staring at rocks, which never moved and never talked back. She took to naming them. The wide one on the left was "Fatboy." She tabbed a particularly round one in front "Roly." She named one that split into a Y shape "Keuka," like the shape of the New York lake of the same name. But there were no changes. She had no clocks or sense of time; Tami was no help with that, either. But she spent hours every day asking questions. Tami, who knew everything, suddenly knew little. Kasey was on her own, and she knew it from the minute she had woken up.

She was never one for meditation or prayer. The only time she felt good was when she stared at the photo of her husband or held her mug. She read the words on the bottom over and over: "Made in Canada." It had a tiny logo of a hockey stick and puck.

She and Jake used to laugh and wonder what that had to do with being the world's best dog mom.

. . .

At command center, Col. Johnson monitored the screens with a handful of lieutenants. He mindlessly swirled sugar into his coffee. The experiment had gone well. How long could one person take in solitary confinement? Getting clearance for the program was easier than expected; it was tucked into a bill with blurry language. Commander Adler was the best choice. The only time Johnson questioned the program was when they carefully cut Adler's forehead and left weights on her arm to simulate a contusion. He didn't want to hurt one of his own. The simulated capsule was only a few yards away, on camera along with the movie screen showing rocks. Life was so close to Adler, and she didn't know.

Tiny cameras resembling rivets in the cockpit gave Johnson all angles of Kasey Adler. They told Adler during prep time that Tami was the name of the inventor's sister. Tami actually stood for The Astronaut's Mind Inc. The only problem was the end game: How much was too much?

. . .

Kasey had finished working out with resistance weights followed by a fast-paced run, toweling off, breathing hard and staring at the rocks. The same damn rocks. She tore open a pouch of water and poured it into her mug. She looked into it, as if it held tealeaves and her future was being explained. She needed to know her future. Because for a woman who had three college degrees, extensive flight training and beat the boys every step of the way whether they liked it or not, this was getting old. She finished her water and stared at the bottom of the mug. Her grip tightened. The view was the same, all the time, every day, every night, the grayness, the expanse. She looked back at the image of the smiling terrier on the mug.

Suddenly, Kasey Adler reared back and hurled the mug at the front of the cockpit. It shattered as it smashed into a metal rod, shards splitting off like an explosion in space. Ceramic pieces landed on the console, on the floor, on the open manual that provided no help.

Kasey Adler didn't move. She had no reason to.

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Col. Johnson didn't hesitate.

"Pull her out," he said.

"Connected" by John Doetkott (12BA), Illinois (Prompt B)

Marvin Abernathy and Bill Graves worked at the Hiawatha Power Company for 62 years.

They started in the summer of '56, both 18 and fresh out of high school. Line repairmen in their youth, they became desk jockeys as they got older. Now, they're set to retire at the end of the week, both just shy of their 80th birthdays.

The two best friends have been inseparable since they were kids.

Bill, a stocky 5' 8" as a young man (a little shorter now) with a broad chest and booming voice, was the life of the party and everyone's friend. He was always ready with a joke, and an excellent athlete who could still do a back handspring well into his 50s.

Marvin was tall and thin, and the quieter of the two. He loved the outdoors and would often take a book to the park or ride his bike by the lake on the edge of town. He always wore the same beat-up old Red Sox hat. Every day. Rain or shine. Whenever anyone asked him about it, he'd always say the same thing:

"The love of my life gave me this hat."

But Marvin never married. This sparked rumors around the plant that in time, became legends.

What happened to Marv's great love?

Half the men believe she died in a tragic car accident when they were 17. Others swear she two-timed him and skipped town with a young doctor. Still others know the truth: she was kidnapped by a German oil baron and taken to Switzerland.

Whatever the case, Marvin remained a bachelor all his life.

That was about the only thing that separated Bill and Marv. Bill married his high school sweetheart, Cindy Jenkins, and they had two children, Carl and Sarah Anne. Their family's annual 4th of July BBQ was legendary among friends, and Cindy helped often at the church while Bill coached baseball when Carl was young.

Marvin, basically an uncle to Carl and Sarah Anne, was always part of the family. He joined family dinner at least twice a week. And when he and Bill weren't going on hunting and fishing trips together, Marvin would often tag along on family vacations to the cabin or out West skiing.

Cindy sometimes joked it was like having two husbands, with Marvin around so much. But she said she didn't mind because she knew how much Bill and Marvin meant to each other.

"They're two sides of the same coin," she'd say. "They make each other whole."

Marvin was there for Bill when cancer took Cindy from him and the kids nearly a decade ago. Bill actually sold the family home and moved in with Marvin. He said it just didn't feel right to continue living there with so many memories around.

For the last 10 years, Bill and Marv have lived together in a small bungalow on the edge of town. Driving to work together, sitting at desks a few feet apart, eating lunch together, and then driving home to watch the news and read together. It's a simple life, and they're happy.

At the retirement party, someone took their turn at the microphone and said, "The thing I'll miss most about Bill and Marv is just how happy they made everyone. Their energy is infectious, and they always have a smile on their faces. I think it's because even after all these years, they still love working together."

She then made a joke about how she can't stand most of her coworkers by the time Thursday rolls around. But Marv and Bill didn't hear the punchline. They were looking at each other, knowing what she said was true, and smiling.

At 5pm, with the retirement party over, Bill and Marvin drove home together. They changed into more comfortable clothes, and then went to sit out on the porch swing together.

"Well, we're retired now. What do you want to do with all our free time?" Bill asked with a chuckle.

The sun was starting to set beyond the row of trees at the far end of the property.

Marvin thought back to that day in 1954, sitting in the bleachers at Robinson Field, with Bill beside him. Both 16 at the time, they were cheering on their townball Giants against the rival River Rats from Charles City.

The sun was setting over the right field wall, and the light was coming straight into Marvin's eyes. Bill noticed Marv squinting and struggling to see.

"Here, take this," he said, tossing him the brand-new Red Sox cap he had just bought with his summer paper route money.

"Thanks," Marvin said.

They both smiled, and as they looked into each other's eyes, their whole lives changed. A spark and a thrilling realization passed between them. A sudden burst of recognition, of understanding, and acceptance. A deep connection that was pure and true and beautiful, even if they felt powerless to articulate it. Though it was only for a moment, they knew they shared something that would live in their hearts forever.

They went back to watching the game, and Bill went off to meet Cindy when it was over. But that twilight hour, sitting quietly side by side in those bleachers, was the happiest either had ever felt.

Now, a lifetime later, with Bill sitting beside him once again, Marvin felt that same love deep in his heart, beating just as strong as ever.

"You know it doesn't matter what we do, Bill. It never has," Marvin said. "I just want to spend every moment we have left...together."

Bill looked back at the love of his life, both with joyful tears welling in their eyes.

"Here, take this," Bill said.

He reached out his hand, and the two sat on the porch swing, holding hands and sharing the evening together, until the sun dipped behind the trees and it was time for bed.

“Cupids Bell” by Larry Padgett, California (Prompt B)

It was the same every weekday morning. Wake up, grab a coffee, toss on the work boots, and head out to the truck. I’m Lester Studderville, but I’m called Les. I’m a forty-three-year-old bearded, bald utility worker for Lipton, Nebraska, the town where I was born and bred. I spend most of my days involved with various mechanical aspects of removing waste for Lipton’s Department of Sanitation. Yeah, I know, it’s not a glamorous job. But someone’s gotta make sure the muck flows safely and keeps those hog waste lagoons from overflowing. It’s important work, even if most folks can’t get past the stink of it. My three brothers, four sisters, and the passel of nieces and nephews get it—they’re in my world. I love watching the kids blossom and grow, but lately, a hollow ache settles in my chest, when I think of a little Studderville of my own running around.

The problem was, Lipton's dating pool was more like a puddle. I'd known most of the women in town since kindergarten and everyone was married. I'm not one for big city travel or late nights out, I'm a homebody, always have been. So, I'd started getting a little... desperate. I'd finally caved and, with a blush creeping up my neck, sighed up for Cupid's Bell, a dating website my sister had been badgering me about for months. It felt ridiculous, but I was running out of options.

Then, the 'ding' on my phone declared a match. *Emmeline Shuyster*. Her profile picture showed a serious woman with one piercing blue eye, the other a startling shade of green. She was beautiful, a nuclear physicist, no less, living in Duluth, Minnesota. A PHD, she seemed a world away from my life, but something about her bio grabbed me. We emailed a few times and moved to the phone. Her voice was clear, intelligent, and shy when she laughed. We talked for hours about everything imaginable; we both wanted a long-term relationship, not casual dating.

I wasn't interested in moving from Lipton and she wasn't committed to staying in Duluth, so she came to Lipton for our first in-person meeting. I washed my pickup truck, donned a new baseball cap, and waited for her at the town's coffee shop. The moment she stepped out of her rental car, I was completely floored. Emma was even more beautiful in person. Her grey hair glistened in the noontime sun. But then I saw something shift behind that striking gaze — a tightening of her lips, a subtle pursing.

I didn't know it then, but the baseball cap and my truck had already defined me in her eyes. It wasn't a conscious thing for her, but it was a deeply ingrained stereotype she had for men of my ilk. I could feel her pulling away with every word I uttered every time I gestured. The date was a disaster. The conversation had been strained, the air thick with tension I didn't understand.

She left early, and I went home like a lamb freshly slaughtered. I was ready to delete the dating app. My siblings were supportive, telling me to give it another chance.

The next morning, I received an apology email from Emma explaining that she had overreacted to my baseball cap and truck. She'd had unpleasant experiences and was projecting her insecurities. Okay, that's what she said. She wanted to try again, and this time I was to come to Duluth. I couldn't leave my job whenever, but I could get away for a weekend.

I got a motel near Emma's condominium, near Lake Superior. This time, things were different. I left the baseball cap at home and she ditched the preconceived notions. We spent the weekend walking along the Lake Superior shoreline, laughing with great conversations about space, and about my love of my small town. She, being from a military family, had never lived in one place for more than a year or two.

We did a long-distance courtship over the next six months. She would come to Lipton and explore my world... cornfields and livestock. I visited her in Duluth, listening to her talk about the stresses of her job... stresses of metals, and her love for space and the stars. Each time we met, we fell a little more in love. It was like assembling pieces of a puzzle and a feeling I never thought I would have for anyone.

Then one beautiful spring evening in Lipton, I asked Emma to marry me, and she resoundingly said yes. The wedding was a blend of big-city and small-town. A couple of her NASA friends flew in to meet my family. Everyone loved Emma immediately, with her different-colored eyes and kind, expansive heart.

Emma moved to Lipton, and we bought a small house, our castle, on the edge of town. I still see the town's fertilizer runoff and make sure the hog waste doesn't poison the local water supply. She still consults for NASA and is as brilliant as ever, but something changed with her. She started wearing a baseball cap. That started as a joke from one of my nieces. She bedazzled the baseball cap brim with glitter. Now, it's her signature look. And yes, it looks just as ridiculous

on her as it did on me. Now it means something different to her. It is a symbol of her acceptance of me and my world, the community I love and grew up in.

And it is not just her wardrobe that's changed. She's become a fixture at our family gatherings, laughing and playing with the nieces and nephews. And, here's the big news: we're going to have a little one of our own, and we couldn't be happier. Turns out, the maintenance engineer and the nuclear physicist were exactly what each other needed. Cupid's Bell might have matched us for the weirdest reasons, but love, well, love found a way, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"In the Dark Space of a Flicker" by Cora Miller, Iowa (Prompt B)

Humming printers and rustling papers—it was Delaney’s daily homecoming. Delaney Lawson had been working as a library aid at his university for the past three years while he pursued his master’s degree. The library remained a constant as his life circled him tumultuously. One of the many unchanging aspects of his career was the flickering light in his office. The singular fluorescent light had always malfunctioned. He had put in a work request for it, but it was never addressed. Delaney wasn’t one to badger, so he endured the headache.

Today, however, when Delaney went to enter his office, he found the door already ajar. He gently pushed the door further, only for it to collide with something metallic. A rough sound of surprise came from above Delaney’s head. He looked up and was met with the sight of someone in burgundy overalls gripping the sides of a ladder.

“I’m sorry I didn’t—” Delaney started but stopped when something clicked. “You’re... fixing the light.”

Delaney had meant for his words to come out as a question, but despite his extensive knowledge of language and rhetoric he had accidentally said it as a statement. The individual, presumably an electrician, swivelled their worn baseball cap backwards and looked down at Delaney. His mind went silent for once in his life as he took in the woman above him.

“You some type of narrator or?” Delaney snapped back to reality upon hearing the woman’s voice. Delaney stumbled over an incomprehensible string of muttering before the clumsiness of his mouth infected his hands and caused him to drop the binder he had been carrying. Delaney quickly scrambled to coordinate himself.

“Delaney?” The electrician asked. Delaney couldn’t help but stare dumbfounded at the young woman. Based on his expression, the electrician’s next move was to point at the ID card hanging from his lanyard.

“Right,” Delaney spits out, internally scolding himself for his idiocy. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Your door was open when I was working on the hall lights. I noticed the flickering so I asked some gal—Maya, I think—about it, and she told me it’s always been like that. Was kind of expecting a girl when she said it was Delaney’s,” the electrician explained, mumbling the last bit. Delaney didn’t notice the comment, as he was so distracted by her presence before him—the self-bleached hair, the overgrown bangs and short double braids, the set of amber eyes shedding more light than his overhead one ever did, the softly sculpted muscles sneaking out of pushed-up

sleeves...her name tag read "AJ".

"Anyways," AJ started up again. "Looks like the rod was on its way out. I stuck a new one in there, so you should be good now. I'll get things cleaned up and get out of your hair."

"O-Okay," Delaney stuttered. Seriously? He gave lectures in front of packed halls and he was stammering *now*?

"Have you never put in a request for this? I'd think all that flickering would give you a migraine," AJ asked incredulously, gesturing to Delaney's wire-framed glasses as he eyed her descent from the ladder.

"I did a while back," Delaney answered once AJ was grounded.

"Oh? Did someone come in? If they didn't help, you should have filed another report," AJ remarked. Delaney cleared his throat, desperately trying to get his act together.

"No, guess my request got lost in the system," he replied with a forced chuckle as he scratched the back of his neck. "I didn't want to go pestering about it."

"Pestering? You know it's literally our job to fulfill maintenance requests, right? That's what I'm waiting to get everyday," AJ returned with a short laugh.

"I guess I didn't think of it that way," Delaney murmured. He hoped his dark complexion was enough to hide any redness brought to his face.

"You're kind of funny," AJ stated bluntly. Delaney's face contorted in response, which only drew out more amusement from AJ. "You work in a library and you've got crazy smart stuff all over your desk here—I envisioned someone more articulate."

"I—" Delaney was speechless once again. It's not like he could blurt out that he would fully understand why Icarus flew too close to the sun if the sun resembled her radiance in any sort of way. No, he would sound utterly insane. This was real life, not his high school poetry journal.

"It's AJ," AJ proclaimed relatively out of the blue.

"I know," Delaney replied too quickly and immediately loathed himself for it. AJ's unabashed laugh filled the cramped office again.

"Right," AJ huffed with a smirk before gesturing to her name tag and then his ID. "I suppose I'm just as forgetful as you."

"What's—"

"My number?" AJ interrupted with a knowing grin. Delaney choked on air and found himself pondering if he really was that obvious, although that had not been his question.

"No," Delaney corrected AJ with a shake of his head. "I mean, yes, but...that's not—"

AJ's smirk deepened with Delaney's stammering, and she crossed her arms whilst awaiting Delaney to handpick his desired words.

"I was going to ask what 'AJ' stood for," Delaney admitted as he nervously adjusted his glasses.

"Amity Jane," AJ answered.. "Too pretentious sounding for the likes of me, right?"

"It's suiting...Amity, I mean," Delaney found the words slipping out. "Because you have an inviting demeanor."

"Do I now?" AJ teased as she took a step closer.

"I'm usually much better with words," Delaney groaned, fidgeting with a coil of hair.

"Well, I specialize in fixing things that short-circuit," AJ countered. "How about we grab coffee tomorrow and see if I can get your words working again."

“I think I’d like that,” Delaney agreed to AJ’s offer as she scribbled her number down on a sticky note, sticking it to his binder. As AJ walked past Delaney, she flicked the light switch. and the office was aglow with steady light for the first time. Delaney’s eyes, however, had found a better light source—Amity Jane.