

**THE HUNT**

# 1

I WAS HAVING ONE OF THOSE DECEMBERS.

Which seemed to happen to me more and more these days.

I sat up straight, trying to ease my aching back, which hurt because of course I'd forgotten to bring stadium seats. It was a couple of weeks earlier, with not that many shopping days left before Christmas. I took a long pull on my beer to compensate, which would have made for a satisfying moment except for the conversation I was having on the phone just then with my ex-wife. I glanced over at Anne and she frowned back, but not in the way that communicates your girlfriend's concern for your well-being. In a way that suggests she's wondering what the hell she and her daughter have been dragged into and is really starting to resent it.

"Stop shouting," my ex-wife said.

"I'm not shouting. It's just that it's loud in here."

"Where's here?"

"I'm at a roller derby match."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Listen—I told you I'd talk to him."

She'd called about our son, Mike. And it hadn't been to discuss which wrapping paper to use this year.

“But when?” Kym demanded. “You said that last week. And the week before. And then when you went to the hockey game Mike said you spent most of it on the phone and when you weren’t on the phone you were complaining about the jumbotron.”

“Jumbotrons ruin the experience. People don’t watch the actual game anymore—”

“Nobody gives a shit about jumbotrons, Andy. They care about grades. And success that comes from good grades. And right now your son has neither because he’s failing three classes. All he cares about is sports. Like his father. Which is pretty damned ironic. Which is why *you* need to talk to him.”

“I got that part, believe it or not. I’ll speak to him tomorrow afternoon.”

“No, you won’t,” she said angrily. “You aren’t coming tomorrow because you were supposed to come last week and you forgot and tomorrow he’s going to the movies with his friends. Which puts us at Wednesday, and who knows whether that’s too late at this point. What is it with you and remembering shit?”

“I didn’t forget,” I snapped. I knew it was pointless to explain why I’d missed last week’s custody visit. To point out that I’d been offered a last-minute job doing backstage security for a second-tier boy band that unexpectedly sold out an Arena District club. A club whose owners were nervous about the liability posed by a thousand drunken twenty-somethings hoping to relive the band’s glory days from a decade earlier when the now not-so-young squires could actually sing. When the club manager offered me five hundred dollars and I told him to double it or get lost and he accepted, I knew I had no choice. Because I had no money, as usual. I’d told Kym I couldn’t make it, but she said she never got the voice mail.

At least I was pretty sure I’d told her.

“Wednesday, then,” I said. “Promise.”

“Don’t screw this up, Andy. If he has to repeat a grade, it’s on you.”

“I said I’d be there—”

“Heard it before,” she said, and hung up.

“Everything OK?” Anne said, frowning as I pocketed my phone and fumed over the retorts caught in my throat. Which is where they needed to stay, since my ex-wife’s complaints weren’t misplaced. My first ex-wife. I hadn’t heard from my second so far today. But it was barely 6 p.m. Plenty of time.

“Peachy. Fine and dandy.”

“Great,” she said. “So, I don’t know how much longer I can stay. My back is killing me.”

“Stadium seats. Yes, I know.”

Roller derby is not usually a winter sport. The flat-track season starts around March and ends late in the summer. You go a little longer if you make the championships. But this year was different. Columbus’s team, the Arch City Roller Girls, had arranged an exhibition bout against their Ann Arbor counterparts, the Tree Town Skirts, on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. The two teams from the college football rival cities were pairing off against each other in a promotion they billed as “Helliday on Wheels.” It was both a fund-raiser and a chance to recruit new players, dubbed “fresh meat.” The T-shirts and ball caps and coffee mugs at the concession stand all said “Merry Crunchmas.”

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Round up some friends, go see Bonnie skate. Have a couple beers, eat a couple burritos. Make an outing of it. That was before I forgot the stadium seats and Kym called to ask what I was doing about our son and his failing grades. Which was a good question. One I didn’t have an answer to at that moment. Or maybe any other time.

Bonnie—Bonnie Deckard—does what I call part-time IT consulting for me because she refuses to be labeled a hacker. In her spare time she plays roller derby, where she skates as a blocker, which is roughly the equivalent of a defensive lineman in football, although they can also be on offense. She goes by the derby name “Bonshell.” Her job is helping a player called a jammer break through a scrum of opponents and score points by passing skaters from the other team. The blockers also try to stop the

opposing jammer, which was what Bonnie and her teammates were successfully doing at the moment. Ignoring the looks Anne was shooting at me, I clapped and joined the shouts of approval rising up around me in the circular Ohio Building at the State Fairgrounds.

The referee blew her whistle, signaling a foul by one of the Tree Town Skirts. Boos filled the arena. At the break in the action, Lucy, sitting one bleacher below me, pushed her cat's-eye glasses down her nose, leaned over, and whispered something to Roy. He shushed her.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing," Roy said.

"C' mon."

Lowering his voice, Roy said, "She said you and I must be in rear-end heaven, with all that Lycra out there."

"Watch what you say," I said, looking around. The stands were crowded with players' parents, younger siblings, friends, and boyfriends, including Troy, Bonnie's own beau, sitting next to me. If he'd heard Roy, he was ignoring him.

"Do you deny it?" Lucy said, mischief in her eyes.

"Yes," Anne said, glancing at her daughter, Amelia, before glaring at me. "Do you?"

"Pleading the Fifth," I said, and took another pull on my Bud Light.

"Crap," Roy said.

"Nothing of the sort, parson," I said. "It's my constitutional right."

"Not that. *This*." He held up his phone, which showed an incoming call. Roy's phone rings a lot, which I guess happens when you're a minister. He was mostly immune to the demands on his attention. But I knew Lucy, his long-suffering wife, wouldn't have minded an hour off now and then. Roy listened, putting a finger in his ear to drown out the crowd and the announcer's play-by-play, before getting up and making his way down the stands and over to an exit door. I settled back and watched the match

resume, trying to placate Anne. It wasn't easy. Mike wasn't the only person I'd let down recently. I'd missed a long-planned date night with Anne the evening before while staking out two married Ohio State medical school professors meeting up at a Hilton out east. The catch being they weren't married to each other. Like I said, I needed the money. When my efforts to make peace with Anne failed, I turned my attention to the track and tried to focus on the action and not on Lucy's quip. *Rear-end heaven*. Once again, it wasn't easy.

A couple of minutes later Roy walked back inside and signaled me. Suppressing a sigh of gratitude, I hoisted myself off the bleacher and joined him on the floor.

"What's up?"

"What's up is you may need a divorce lawyer, to judge by the way Anne's looking at you right now."

"Excepting the fact we're not married, tell me something I don't already know."

"As if I've got all day. Listen. Guy I think you should talk to," he said, gesturing at the phone.

"What guy?"

"Guy might have a job for you."

"A job?"

"That's what he said."

"But he called you."

"And I'm suggesting you talk to him. You're what, drowning in work?"

I thought about the boy band, about the four or five notes they'd actually hit. "What kind of job?"

"Here," he said, handing me the phone. "I'm going back up. I don't want to miss any Lycra."

"Buy me another beer?" I said to his back.

"I don't buy swill," he replied.