
FACE OFF (RIVALS)

SCOTIA STORMS

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Face Off
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The bell over the door jingles as the last customer of the night exits the premises, and the forced smile I've been wearing all night falls from my face. I glance at my phone and exhale an exaggerated breath, happy it's finally closing time.

Honestly, after this morning's hour commute to college, attending classes all day, and an hour's commute home, only to run Boondocks—our family-owned restaurant/gift shop—until closing, I am officially exhausted. You'd think after burning the candle at both ends for the last year, I'd be used to it. But no, I'm not.

I stifle a yawn, desperate for sleep. Unfortunately, I can't fall into bed and get a good solid eight hours like I need. Midterms will be here before I know it, and if I want to keep my scholarship at Scotia Academy, I need to pull an all-nighter.

The good news is that it's the end of September, which means tourist season in Nova Scotia is slowing, and I won't have to

spend as many late hours in the shop. Good for me, but not good for business.

Fortunately, lobster season begins at the end of November, and selling to local grocers will carry us through to May, to when the tourist season starts all over again. Just thinking about the never-ending cycle makes me tired and dizzy.

But now, with Granddad's decline in his mental health, Mom and Dad need the help, and with the powerful Dunn family trying to destroy our retail fishing business and take our much-coveted oceanfront land, which has been in our family for generations, they don't trust anyone outside our small immediate family. Mom and Dad think everyone in the community is a spy working for the Dunn's multimillion dollar fishing conglomerate with its huge commercial fishing fleet and manufacturing and distribution facility. The company hires most people in this town, so my folks probably aren't wrong, which, of course, is why we're all run off our feet simply trying to keep afloat.

I close out the cash register and remove the fish fillets from the display showcase, putting them in the large fridge in the kitchen out back. I check the burners on the stove and turn off the fryers. We don't do big, fancy meals here at Boon-docks. We're known for our fish and chips and lobster rolls, and they're served in take-out containers customers eat at the picnic tables outside, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Once the place is secure, I gather up my backpack, toss my phone inside, and lock up behind myself. Outside, the cooler night air falls over me, and I take a moment to breathe it in. With any luck, the sea salted breeze will fuel me with a second wind and I won't fall asleep over my books.

A pinging sound rings out at the end of our dock, and I narrow my eyes to see if the local kids are messing around with the buoys again. The light at the end of the dock is burnt out, preventing me from seeing further than two feet in front of my face. Is someone sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs? I make a mental note to bring them in for the season come morning.

I stare for a moment, and when silence reaches my ears, I glance across the water, to where light falls over the golf course. It really is a picturesque community here in Lunenburg, and while I wish I could live in the city, closer to campus or even in a sorority, like my best friend Ocean does, it's out of the question.

Is moving to Miami after college to do a master's degree in marine biology out of the question too?

I groan, not wanting to think about that, but knowing soon I'll have to give it more consideration. There are summer grants and scholarships I can apply for—need to apply for in the next few weeks—but how can I leave my family during the busy summer tourist season?

I hike my backpack up higher on one shoulder and walk along the dark waterfront path leading to the well-lit narrow road, where tourists can catch horse drawn carriage rides and learn the history of our famous fishing village. Our house is just up over the hill, and it's a safe enough community, so I usually take the path instead of walking the long way around the winding streets.

As I'm about to cross the quiet road, a car slows, and my stomach tightens as loud male voices reach my ears. I straighten my shoulders and do a fast glance around. The town is pretty much shut down at this time of night.

Dammit, I'm alone out here. The window on the sports car rolls down and I cautiously peer inside.

"Is that you, fish bait?"

Oh God, no. Is this really happening? Fight or flight instincts kick in, and I back up an inch. Running is out of the question, since there are four college hockey players in that car and my chances of escape are slim to none. Nope, I'm going to have to play it cool here, like I'm not intimidated by them, like the names they call me don't hurt at all.

"What do you want?" I ask, and the front, driver's side door opens. What are these guys doing in Lunenburg this time of night?

"I thought I smelled something fishy," one of the guys quips as he slips from the back seat.

As I stand there facing three of them, my heart thunders. Okay, this isn't good. Not good at all. I do another fast glance around, calculating an escape route if they try to come closer.

"If you're here to buy seafood, we're closed. Come back tomorrow." I start walking, but one of the guys moves in front of me, blocking my path. Real fear gathers in my stomach, and I try to keep my breathing normal.

"What if we want something fishy now?" one of the assholes snaps, and my throat squeezes tight. I grip the straps on my backpack harder. Do I have anything in there I can use to protect myself if they come at me?

"What do you have in there?" the tallest of the three outside the vehicle asks as he towers over me.

"My books. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go home to study." I make a move to push past the guy blocking my way,

but it's like trying to stop an eighteen-wheeler with my pinkie.

"Hey Abigail." I turn at the sound of the fourth man, as he exits the front seat and I know I'm in real trouble when my gaze lands on Sebastian Turner—Scotia Storms' left winger. Sebastian is a local, and I've known him since kindergarten. He's trouble with a capital T, and has always gotten away with things because his father is a powerful provincial politician. For some reason, he's always hated me. Well, maybe not always, but definitely since I reluctantly went to a party with Ocean in high school.

There was a guy she liked, and she begged me to go with her. Sebastian was drunk and hit on me—rumor has it he wants to sleep his way through the alphabet with every girl in our class. I naturally turned him down. Apparently, that pissed him off enough to tell everyone I wanted to fuck him, but he couldn't go through with it because I smelled like fish.

"What do you want, Sebastian?" I start breathing faster. I'm in serious freaking trouble here. I slide my backpack from my shoulders, hoping to get to my phone so I can press the emergency button, but the guy blocking me grabs the bag from my hands before I can get to my phone. He tosses it to his friend as Sebastian stalks closer. He sniffs the air as the other guys kick my backpack around and laugh.

"Still want to fuck me?" he asks, his breath reeking of alcohol.

"Sebastian," I begin. How am I going to talk my way out of this when he's not even in his right mind? "It wasn't like that."

"I can't fuck a girl who smells like fish," he slurs, anger and hate in his voice. What did I ever do to this guy, other than defend myself from his drunken advances? He lifts his head and gazes at the wharf, like he too heard a noise. A cruel smile

parts his lips. “Maybe I’ll have to dunk you in the ocean before I put my dick in you.”

A gasp I have no control over catches in my throat, and seems to please him. Think, Abigail. Think. He takes a step closer, and I move back the same amount of distance. It’s clear he thinks I ruined his reputation and is out for revenge, when the truth is he was the one trying to ruin mine—simply because I said no to him. Apparently, no one has ever said no to Sebastian Turner before. I back up, knowing my only choice here is to run.

With the three other guys distracted, tossing my backpack around and laughing like idiots, I steal a fast glance over my shoulder to see how far I have to run. Sebastian seems a bit unstable on his feet, so maybe I can make it back into the shop, unlock the door and lock it again before they can catch me.

They have my backpack, but right now, getting myself to safety is the priority. I take a step back, and turn to run, but when I do, I hit something so hard and solid, it steals the breath from my lungs. Big hands grip my shoulders as I bend forward and gasp, clamoring for air.

When I can finally breathe again, I push myself up to my full height and when I set eyes on none other than Liam Dunn—Scotia Storms’ toughest defenseman, and a guy I despise—I instantly realize my night has gone from bad to worse. My legs go weak, and my heart thunders in my ears as the world closes in around me.

“Abigail,” he says quietly, and so damn gently, I figure I’m hearing him wrong. He’s probably yelling and the pounding in my ears is softening the noise, making it sound tender, when it really isn’t. He glances over my shoulder to take in his

hockey buddies. It's five against one here, and I'm out of ideas. Okay, maybe not entirely. I could kick Liam between the legs and maybe still make it back to Boondocks. "Are you okay?" he asks.

I freeze, and blink and as much as I'm trying to put on a brave front, I can't stop shaking.

Liam's eyes narrow in on me as I squeak out the word, "No."

"What's going on here?" he asks, his voice deep and hard as he aims his question Sebastian's way. It takes me by surprise, but what surprises me even more is the way he's positioned me behind him, his hand grasping mine. Not in a hurtful way, but in a worried, supportive way.

No way would Liam Dunn be trying to help me here, right? His family hates mine. We're like the Capulets and Montagues in real life. Not that Liam and I are Romeo and Juliet. We are far from star-crossed lovers. Quite the opposite. We hate each other. Why then is he protecting me? I quickly glance at the sky to see if it's falling.

"We were just having some fun with fish bait," Sebastian says with a laugh, and every muscle in Liam's body stiffens.

"Don't call her that," he bites out, and his thick muscles bunch as he inches closer to Sebastian, every movement in his body calculated and threatening.

"Hey, we were just having some fun." I note the way Sebastian stiffens as Liam towers over him.

Liam squares his shoulders, somehow making himself look even taller. "Abigail didn't look like she was having fun at all."

The other guys all stop kicking my bag around.

“What, are you fucking the fish bait or something?” one of them asks.

“No,” Liam snaps so forcefully, so defensively as a hard quiver goes through him—like that’s the most disgusting thing he’s ever heard—he might as well have just sucker punched me. I have no idea why I’m suddenly hurt. I hate the guy and his family, and wouldn’t have anything to do with him if he was the last man on earth and we were responsible for repopulation. “And I said, don’t call her that.”

They all stand still, sizing one another up, until Liam steps forward and picks up my backpack. “This is yours?” I nod and he hands it to me before turning back to Sebastian. “What are you guys doing out here, anyway? A long way off campus, aren’t you?”

“Just out for a joyride, and I thought I’d show the guys my stomping grounds,” he replies. I glance at Liam, and he doesn’t much look like he believes that either. He was there the night of the party, and knew what went down. I assumed he believed Sebastian, like so many others. Was I wrong?

Liam tugs his phone from his pocket and checks the time. “Coach won’t be too happy about this. We have practice first thing tomorrow.”

“Yeah, we’re leaving,” the tall guy responds, and gets back into the car. It’s clear he doesn’t want any trouble from Liam or the coach. The other three grumble under their breaths as they follow.

“Don’t come near Abigail’s dock again,” Liam warns. The car revs and the tires squeal as they take off, and the second they round the corner, I bend forward, fighting back tears as I take deep, gulping breaths.

“Are you okay?” Liam asks after a long moment.

“Adrenaline dump,” I explain my chest so tight it hurts all the way to my throat. “I’ll be okay in a second.” I take a few more breaths and stand. My heart picks up pace again as I take in the dark eyes watching me carefully. “Thank you.”

“Do you want me to call the authorities?”

“No,” I answer quickly. God, that will just cause more trouble for me.

He gives a small nod and gestures with a flick of his chin to his car parked near one of the restaurants across the street. “Let me take you home.”

I’m about to nod, when I remember how defensive he turned when asked if he was sleeping with me. Am I that repulsive to him? I don’t know, but it does remind me we hate each other and I should never get in a car with him. Only problem is, I’m not sure my legs will actually carry me home. Somehow, I’ll have to find a way to make them work. I straighten my shoulders to present strength and confidence, despite the roiling storm inside me. “I can walk.”

He lightly touches my arm and I pull it back. “Let me help you, Abi.”

“It’s Abigail.” No way is this man allowed to give me a nickname.

“Fine, let me help you, Abigail.” He holds his hand out. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

A car horn blares in the distance and my entire body stiffens. Maybe I should go with Liam. We might hate each other, but he did help me tonight. “I...”

“Better the enemy you know,” he murmurs, taking the words right out of my mouth. I nod and silence surrounds us as he leads me to his car.

I’m about to get in when something niggles in the back of my brain. “Wait, was that you out on our dock?”

My heart jumps into my throat as she glares at me, suspicion all over her face. Shit, she's not going to be happy that I was hanging out on her family's dock, and she's probably going to think I was trying to sabotage the place or something equally horrific. I might be a Dunn, from Dunn Industries, but I'm not like my father. I don't hate the Hart family or want anything other than friendship from Abigail.

Christ, I have no idea why my father hates them quite so much. Sure, their land is prime, and we can't expand in Lunenburg without it, but come on, is that any reason to hate them? We have a multi-million-dollar business. How much more do we need? My father swears he's hasn't been behind the trashing of their dock in the past, or responsible for ransacking their lobster storage facility and traps.

I want to believe that—I have to believe that. I'm part of the Dunn family, and have to believe we're not the type of people who'd resort to crime simply because we can't get what we

want. Dad is a man who always gets what he wants, and not securing the Hart's land has eaten him alive for years.

As far as I'm concerned, we have all we need and family is the most important thing in the world to me, which is why I believe were above victimizing a small family business. Honestly, I'd do anything for my family, as long as it fit within my morals and beliefs.

"You have the best sunsets," I respond as she impatiently waits for an answer to her question. Christ, I've snuck down to her dock more times than she ever knew. Okay, maybe I don't just do it to see the sunsets—considering it set hours ago. Maybe I do it to get a glimpse of Abigail. I only surfaced tonight, only showed my face because a bunch of assholes from the hockey team were harassing her. No way was I going to stay in the shadows—even if admitting I was trespassing went against my own best interests and might result in Abigail hating me more. Hey, no one ever accused me of being the sharpest knife in the drawer.

But seriously, bad shit could have happened tonight, and I wasn't going to sit back and let anyone touch one hair on Abigail's head. Sebastian is a douche bag. I've known him forever. I think when push came to shove, he wouldn't have touched Abigail. I hope. I just couldn't take the chance, and after my warning, I don't think he'll bother her again. I'll kick the living shit out of him if he does, and he knows that.

Abigail glances past my shoulders, distrust all over her face. "That's why you were on my dock? The sunset?"

"Have you not noticed the sunsets, Abi...gail?" Right, I can't shorten her name.

"No, Liam. I'm usually inside working when the sun goes down," she shoots back, her words as sharp as a fishing hook.

I nearly wince as they pierce me, but I need to keep things light. She has to be pretty traumatized by what just happened.

“Yeah, well if you ever get a chance, you should join me on the dock.”

“I’d prefer for you not to be on our dock.”

“I wasn’t hurting anything,” I point out softly, and as my stomach tightens, I notice a bit of the fight drain out of her. I stare at her as light from the dashboard spills from the car. Jesus, she looks exhausted and I’m sure she is. Between school, work and the long commute, I bet she doesn’t have a moment to herself. “Let’s get you home, okay?” She hesitates for the briefest of seconds, then glances over her shoulder, no doubt gauging the distance to home. “I’ll have you there in two minutes.”

Shoulders sagging, she nods and climbs in, and I slide in beside her. After a moment, she breaks the quiet. “Why are you here and not in the city?”

“I needed a break,” I tell her as she eyes me suspiciously. “All the noise at Storm House can get to me at times.” It’s not a lie. My first year at Storm House, I tolerated the parties. Now I don’t quite have it in me. My father wants me in the dorm, though. He thinks it’s good for the team for us to be together and since he’s footing my bills, I do what he says. I honestly miss the solitude on the boats. I enjoyed getting up before the sun, the comradery with the other fishermen, and a good hard day’s work on the water.

My parents, however, think such menial work is beneath a Dunn. They wanted more for me and I guess it’s a good thing I excelled at hockey. It’s the only thing I’m good at. If they’d put the pressure on me to be a scholar, they’d have been sadly

disappointed. I struggle in school, a lot. No tutors were ever able to help me in my younger years and now, because I'm on the hockey team, many of the professors give me a pass, which makes me feel that much stupider. I don't need my academic intellect—or lack thereof—rubbed in my face like that. All brawn and no brain is what many wrongly say about the hockey players. In my case, they'd be right.

"You'll have to head in early for practice," she says, dragging my thoughts back.

I shrug, and pull onto the street. "I don't mind. The drive is peaceful." I glance at her as she stares out the window. "You never really sat and watched a sunset from your dock?"

"When I was younger, sure." She exhales, and examines a hole in her backpack. "It's just that I spend so much time on the water, I'd rather look at something else before I go to bed." I eye her, not sure I believe that. "Besides, I prefer sunrises. There's something magical in them, and it helps me put things in perspective."

"Such as?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. I guess it allows me to see the bigger picture and reflect on my place in the cosmos." I angle my head as I listen. "I guess what I'm trying to say is it makes my problems seem miniscule."

"Funny, sunsets do that for me," is all I say, even though I'd like to ask what problems she's talking about. I pull into her driveway, and the house is pitch dark. One porch light illuminates the front door and the cracked stone walkway. She gathers her bag and hugs it to her chest.

"I guess we're different like that."

I nod. Yeah, I get it. We might have grown up in the same small town, but our differences are night and day, like sunsets and sunrises. Does that mean we can't be friends, though? I guess it does, considering she stopped talking to me in elementary school, when their storage facility was ransacked and tension intensified between our families. My dad's hate for her family started long before they accused his company of sabotage.

I glance at her ripped backpack. "I hope your books are okay."

"Thanks."

Her door opens and the dashboard light showcases her blue eyes, which look big and stark against her thin, heart-shaped face. My heart skips a beat. My God, she's so pretty. "Those guys won't bother you again, Abigail," I tell her trying to keep my voice even. "You have my word on that."

Dark lashes fall over tired eyes. "I never...you know...with Sebastian..."

"I know," I agree quickly. "Anyone who believed his lies are nothing but idiots, and not worthy of an explanation."

"I must have damaged his frail male ego when I refused to let him put his tongue down my throat," she says, her body relaxing. "He handled rejection like a three-year-old. I don't think he's ever heard the word no before."

I can't help but laugh, and a small smile turns up the corners of her mouth. Jesus, I'm certain this is the first time I've seen her smile, or even joke—at least since elementary school. And that smile...Fuck, I thought she was pretty before, but wow, she's actually drop-dead gorgeous.

“Men and their fragile male egos. I apologize for all of us.” She stares at me for a moment, probably wanting to call me out on my own ego, but instead closes her mouth and steps from the car.

“Thanks for the lift.”

“See you around.” Seconds before she shuts the door, I say, “Maybe you’d like to give a sunset a try sometime.”

A humorless laugh crawls out of her throat. “Sure, right after you give a sunrise a go.”

The door closes, and I sit there grinning. I guess she doesn’t know how much I love early mornings. While that might not have been an invitation—heck, I’m pretty sure there was an insult in there somewhere—I think I’m going to take her up on it. I also think—and this could be my fragile male ego talking—that we might have actually formed a tiny truce tonight.

I stay in the car until she opens her front door, and just when I’m about to back out, she turns back to look at me. I grin, taking that as a good sign. She gives a little wave and disappears inside. A light turns on in one of the rooms, and I watch her figure walk past. While I’d like to stay, I’m not a creeper—much—so I back out and drive along the shore until I reach our place.

I pull my car into my spot in the four-car garage and kill the ignition. I check the time. It’s late, and I need sleep, but I also had an adrenaline rush tonight. Sebastian is lucky I didn’t tear him a new one right on the spot. My rage was not what Abigail needed at that moment, so I did my best to keep my cool. Maybe a good old fashioned body checking is in order for practice tomorrow, just to drive the point home that Abigail is off limits.

I step into the house and find Dad in his favorite lounge chair, a baseball game blaring from the TV as our black lab, Charlie, sleeps at his feet. It's late, and Mom and my younger sister Ember, who plans to go to Scotia Academy next year, are already in bed.

Dad offers me a smile. "You're out late, son."

"Just driving a friend home."

"Oh," he says, arching a brow. I don't have too many, or any, friends left in Lunenburg. I'm a bit of a loner and spent all my time with my best friend, Josh, until he went to play college baseball for Michigan State. "Anyone I know?"

I hate to lie—nothing good can come from that—and while I expect backlash I truthfully say, "Abigail." His gaze jerks to mine so quickly I'm sure he's given himself whiplash. Anger flashes in his eyes and hits like a puck to the mouth.

"Abigail Hart?"

"Yes."

"I told you to stay away from that family."

I perch on the edge of the sofa, and note the warning in his eyes. "What did they ever do to you, anyway?"

"They're not good people. Stay away from them," he warns, fire blazing in his dark eyes.

"I was just giving her a ride."

Something comes over his face, his anger shifting, morphing into something I don't like. Is he scheming up something that could end up with the Hart property in his hands? If he is, I hope it doesn't involve me.

“If you insist on driving her around, find out what you can about them. See if you can get a look at their books. See if there are any violations at Boondocks that could get them shut down.”

My heart leaps into my throat. “I’m not snooping, Dad.”

He shrugs but the serious look on his face is a reminder that I’m where I am today because of him and I owe him for that. “You either stay away from her, or get me what I ask for.”

My lungs are tight, and breathing is difficult as he turns back to the TV, letting me know the conversation is over and that he’s not fucking around here. Which means I need to keep my distance from Abi because I’m not about to get dirt on her family. Jesus, what a horrible position to put me in.

Honestly, I love my family more than anything and have always respected their wishes and went out of my way to make them proud. I don’t enjoy conflict and outside of the family, I stand up for myself when provoked. I’ve never stood up to my father. He’s always been a hero to me, a man who is bigger than life. A man who has worked hard for his family and provided all we could need and then some. I’d never want to lose his respect. Never want to disappoint him. But this... what the hell?

I take in his profile as he pays me no attention. A part of me wants to ask what he’ll do if I don’t stay away from her, and if I don’t get information. The other part of me already knows the answer. If any employee steps out of line, they’re out, and I fear it could be the same with his family. I can’t even imagine being cut out of my own family.

I glance at my phone. “I’d better get to bed. Early morning tomorrow.”

“Driving back to campus, you mean?” It’s a legit question, but we both know there is hidden meaning. In my younger years, before I had the pressure of college, hockey, and the NHL, I would jump onto one of the fishing boat first thing in the morning before my parents were even out of bed. Sometimes I got away with it, but other times, I wasn’t so lucky. But I was willing to get into a little bit of trouble just to spend the day at sea. I never stood up to Dad, telling him I wanted to be on the fishing boat, demanding he let me. I’d always listen with respect. The sea however, always had a hold on me. I couldn’t seem to stay away.

“Yes, early morning practice.”

“Proud of you, son,” he says and I’m truly happy he is. He’s not an easy man to please. Just as the hundreds of people who work for him, I always try to do my best. He’s an important man in my life.

“Night,” I say and push off the edge of the sofa.

“I’m looking forward to catching one of your games soon.” I glance over my shoulder and nod. It’s nice that he, along with Mom and my sister, come to my home games when they can. Their support means the world to me. I just wish that support was in everything I do. After his warning to stay away from Abigail, it feels like a punch to the gut, because the truth is, I really don’t want to stay away. What does that matter, though? Abigail hates me. It’s not like we’re suddenly going to be besties after tonight. When it comes right down to it, Dad doesn’t have to worry about me staying away. My plan to watch a sunrise with her was a stupid one.

Upstairs, I make a fast trip to the bathroom to wash up, and then head to my bedroom. I turn the lights off and flop down onto my bed. I close my eyes, but I’m unable to get the

events of the night out of my brain. Is Abigail at home, staring at her ceiling too?

Or is she thinking about the laugh we shared? That laugh filled me with a lightness that I haven't felt in a long time. Jesus, I sound like a goddamn greeting card. I resist the urge to shoot a text to Josh. It's late and he's probably asleep. He knows how I feel about Abi, though—the girl who studies marine biology at college and wants to make the sea sustainable. Maybe that's why my dad hates her. He doesn't want anything or anyone to interfere with his fishing. I like that she's trying to balance the ecosystem, and find ways to reverse the existing damage.

I roll to my side, and try to quiet my mind, and after a fitful sleep filled with dreams of Abi—correction, Abigail—I wake, and press my palms to my tired eyes. The sun isn't up yet, and my family is still asleep. I need to scarf down some breakfast and hit the road if I want to make practice on time.

Forgoing a shower—I'll get one after practice—I tug on last night's clothes, and because I'm extra anxious to leave—some deeper need I can't quite identify—I skip breakfast, which is unusual for me, and jump into my car. I drive along the shore and find the quaint town of Lunenburg quiet this time of morning. Without conscious thought, I take my foot off the gas and my car slows in front of Boondocks. That's when it becomes glaringly obvious as to why I was so anxious to leave the house without breakfast.

Not smart, Liam. Not fucking smart.

Again, no one has ever accused me of being smart. I stop my car, and even though my actions might result in a knee to the groin—the knee I'm pretty sure was on the verge of

happening last night—I walk along the wharf. I don't try to be quiet. I don't want to frighten Abigail.

As the long rays of light climb over the golf course and spill over the ocean, Abigail turns, shock widening her big blue eyes. My steps slow as she opens her mouth, but no words form.

I shove my hands in my pockets, glance at her gorgeous face as the morning sun forms an angelic halo around her small frame, and say, "Good morning."