

Hero Search & Rescue

a sweet romcom series



Small Town Style



JENNA BRANDT

SMALL TOWN STYLE

A Sweet Christmas K9 Handler RomCom

Hero Search and Rescue Series

Book 4

JENNA BRANDT



Copyright

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Locale and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual events, or actual locations is purely coincidental. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email jenna@jennabrandt.com.

Text copyright © Jenna Brandt 2023.

Cover copyright by Jenna Brandt

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[A Note from the Author](#)

[Sneak Peek of Arresting Her Heart](#)

[Sneak Peak of The Girlfriend Rescue](#)

[Also by Jenna Brandt/Jennifer Branson](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Join My Mailing List and Reader's Groups](#)

Praise for Jenna Brandt

I am always excited when I see a new book by Jenna Brandt.

Lori Dykes, Amazon Customer

Jenna Brandt is, in my estimation, the most gifted author of Christian fiction in this generation!

Paula Rose Michelson, Fellow Author

Ms. Brandt writes from the heart and you can feel it in every page turned.

Sandra Sewell White, Longtime Reader

For more information about Jenna Brandt visit her on any of her websites.

Signup for Jenna Brandt's [Newsletter](#)

Visit her on Social Media:

www.JennaBrandt.com

www.facebook.com/JennaBrandtAuthor

[Jenna Brandt's Reader Group](#)

www.twitter.com/JennaDBrandt

<http://www.instagram.com/Jennnathewriter>

*Dedicated to
my husband, Dustin, Badge #5654,
who inspired me to create this series.
You're not only my heart and soul,
but my own personal lawkeeper.*

Chapter One



Hero Search and Rescue

Candace Kealy, black hair cascading down her tan, curvy frame, stood in her Dallas apartment, staring blankly at the dress form before her. The mannequin mocked her with its nakedness as if daring her to drape it in a gown worthy of Hollywood's hottest "It" girl, Scarlett St. Claire.

"Come on, Candace," she muttered to herself, hazel eyes narrowing with irritation. "You can do this."

Inspiration was elusive, like a scarf snatched away by the wind, and she knew why. Chad. Ugh, the self-obsessed model she'd met after her last runway show. Their whirlwind romance had left her heartbroken and now, somehow, creatively bankrupt.

"Stupid, gorgeous Chad," she grumbled, pacing around her worktable littered with sketches and fabric swatches, all of which weren't nearly good enough for someone of Scarlett's caliber.

"Who needs him, anyway?" She tried to convince herself, but her thoughts kept drifting back to their breakup. How he'd tossed his perfect brown hair and told her she just wasn't "high-fashion" enough for him.

"Right," she scoffed. "Because you're the epitome of sophistication, Chad."

Lace, her new labradoodle puppy, barked twice from the nearby couch as if letting her know that she agreed with her master. "See, even Lace knows what a phony you are, Chad."

It wasn't like Candace didn't do everything in her power to break into the industry. She'd gone to the right fashion school, got hired by one of the best fashion houses in the world where she learned to hone her craft even further, and only struck out on her own when she had the blessing of her former boss. Yet, here she was, struggling to make one simple dress.

Correction, it wasn't a simple dress. It was *the* dress. The most important dress of her career, and she had to get it just right.

Her phone buzzed—an incoming text from her best friend, Isabella. “Any progress on Scarlett’s gown?”

“Ugh, not yet,” she typed back. “Can’t get stupid Chad out of my head. I was thinking about going and confronting him about how he treated me.”

“Girl, you need to move on,” Isabella chastised gently. “Find some new inspiration. Don’t let a guy like that hold you back.”

Candace sighed with frustration. Easier said than done. “Fine,” she texted, turning back to the mannequin. “I’m doing this. For Scarlett. Not for Chad.”

The only problem was, no matter how hard she tried, nothing was coming. She'd never had a creative block like this and didn't know what to do. She thought about contacting her mentor back at her old fashion house, but that would mean admitting defeat. The last thing she wanted to hear was disappointment in his voice when she told him what was going on.

Candace scowled and stepped away from the dress form. She knew what she had to do. Confront Chad. First, she needed to clear up her own thoughts, and the best way to do that was to take Lace for a long walk.

She grabbed her keys, coat, and dog purse and headed out into the cool winter air with Lace. The sun was just at the top of the tall Dallas buildings. Candace paused for a moment to take it all in—the rustle of empty tree branches, the smell of

gasoline, and the low hum of an engine coming from somewhere nearby.

Taking a deep breath, she began her journey through Dallas' winding side streets, letting her mind wander freely as she walked. Lace didn't make it far before she started whining, clearly done with her exercise. Candace scooped up the tiny canine and placed her in the dog purse. "Is that what you wanted, sweetie," she cooed to the fluffy, white creature as she patted her head before continuing on her way.

Everywhere she looked, there were reminders of what happened between her and Chad. A coffee shop where they'd shared their first kiss, an alleyway where they'd laughed until 1 a.m., a park bench where he'd confessed he was falling for her.

Candace shook her head vigorously to dispel the memories like cobwebs caught in her long, black hair. It hurt too much to think about him now. She stopped walking for a minute and looked up at the bright, blue sky. "I won't let him keep me from doing what I love," she said aloud. It was as if talking to herself was enough to steel her senses against being derailed by Chad's memory one more time. After a few more moments, she turned around to head back to her apartment with newfound resolve.

Before she could reach her destination, however, another text came in from Isabella. "Why don't you come join me for lunch? I'm heading to Smitten. You know they have your favorite salad..."

Candace's fingers hovered over her phone while she debated whether she was up to being social. Deciding it could be a welcome distraction, she messaged back. "Sure. I'll see you soon."

Twenty minutes later, she arrived at the local café. The walls were lined with displays of artwork by local artists and shelves full of books for browsing. With bright yellow walls, colorful furnishings, and plenty of natural light streaming in from outside, the place was warm and welcoming.

As she stepped inside and took in the crowded lunch spot, she instantly regretted her decision. She hadn't seen any of her friends since the breakup, and she wasn't sure if she was ready to be around anyone yet.

The café smelled of freshly brewed coffee and baking bread, with a hint of something sweet and tangy in the air. As she made her way inside, the place was alive with the chatter of customers, the clinking of dishes, and bursts of laughter. With a deep breath to steady herself, she glanced around, looking for her friend.

Isabella was already seated at one of the tables, tucked away in a corner. She waved Candace over with a warm smile. "Hey there," she said as Candace approached. "Glad you could make it."

Candace smiled back weakly as she took a seat opposite Isabella and placed Lace on her lap. "Thanks for inviting me," she said, her voice shaking slightly.

Isabella's eyes widened slightly, but before she could ask what was wrong, their waiter appeared with menus in hand. He quickly took their order, then went over to a nearby work station to retrieve two glasses of water along with a basket of bread. He placed them on the table before retreating into the kitchen, leaving them alone again in awkward silence.

Candace cleared her throat and forced an unsure smile onto her face. "So...how have you been?" She asked finally, knowing that small talk was probably the best way to get things started between them.

Isabella sighed softly before responding. "I've been all right." She paused thoughtfully before continuing, "It's been tough not having your presence around, though—you always did bring such positivity to our group gatherings."

Candace nodded and looked away; she wasn't sure what to say after that. Instead, she focused on picking at the bread in front of her while Isabella continued speaking about mundane topics like work and her latest bad date until their food arrived.

“So, are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?” Isabella finally questioned.

“Chad?”

“Heck no, we aren’t wasting our time talking about that jerk,” she said with a dismissive flip of her hair. “I want to talk about the dress you’re going to make for Scarlett St. Claire.”

“Shhh,” Candace warned as she looked around to make sure no one heard her friend. “I signed a strict NDA. I shouldn’t have even told you about it, but her manager had me sign it after I told you Scarlett reached out to me.”

“See, it’s not your fault her people are incompetent,” Isabella pointed out. “Besides, you know I would never tell anyone. I’ve had your back since we were in junior high.”

“I know, and I’ve always been grateful for that,” Candace told her friend with an appreciative smile.

“Okay, enough of that mushy stuff. Out with it. What’s going on?”

“Ugh, I just can’t seem to be able to get past this creative block,” she complained, her hazel eyes narrowing with frustration. “It feels like there’s a giant wall between me and inspiration. Do you think I have already used up my allotted supply? Did I top out when I was working for Bianca Frigaro?”

Isabella rolled her eyes, saying, “Nonsense. You’re the best fashion designer I know, and I’m a fashion critic.”

“A biased one,” Candace pointed out. “But the best none the less.”

“See, it goes both ways,” her friend stated with a chuckle. Isabella, ever the optimist, grinned and offered her own solution. “Why not look for inspiration online? There’s a world of ideas out there just waiting to be discovered.”

“Maybe,” Candace mused, unconvinced. She fiddled with her fork, poking through her salad with little enthusiasm.

Just then, Lace stirred on Candace’s lap, ears perked up. A small growl rumbled in her throat before she erupted into

frantic high-pitched barking. Another dog had strolled onto the patio, and Lace was determined to make her presence known.

“Hey, Lace, that’s enough,” Candace hissed, trying to hush her furry companion. It was no use. Lace squirmed and wriggled, eager to leap down and join the commotion.

“Don’t be upset with her. She’s just trying to make friends,” Isabella teased with a chuckle.

“Friends?” Candace raised an eyebrow as she glanced at the other, much bigger, dog. “More like causing chaos. The last thing I want is that giant bulldog sniffing around my leg.”

The moment Candace was distracted and loosened her grip, Lace leaped from her lap, bounding toward the other dog. The two canine whirlwinds danced around each other, barking and wagging their tails, their newfound friendship turning heads in the restaurant.

“Great,” Candace muttered under her breath, feeling every pair of eyes on her. “Just what I need.”

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” Isabella offered with a sympathetic smile. “Besides, now you’ve got a funny story to tell on your next date.”

“Not gonna happen,” Candace seethed out in anger as her cheeks burned from embarrassment. “I’m never dating again.” She collected her purse and scooped Lace up into her arms. “For now, I think it’s time we make a graceful exit.”

“Good luck, girl,” Isabella called after her as Candace hurried toward the exit, Lace still wriggling in her arms.

“Thanks,” Candace said over her shoulder. “I’ll need it.”

Just as her hand came in contact with the door, she noticed through the glass the last person on earth she wanted to see. Chad. She had just managed to get him out of her head, and there he was, walking with a new woman clinging tightly to his arm.

Candace froze for a moment, staring through the glass at Chad and his new girlfriend. A wave of anger washed over her as she thought about how quickly he had moved on from their

relationship. She could feel Lace squirming in her arms, trying to lick her face and comfort her.

“Let’s go,” Candace muttered, pushing the door open and striding purposefully toward the exit. She didn’t want to give Chad the satisfaction of seeing her upset.

Just as she was about to turn the corner, Chad turned and caught sight of her. His eyes widened in surprise, and he tugged his girlfriend’s arm to get her attention.

“Candace,” Chad said, stepping forward. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

She had to bite back her reply that he very well knew this was her go-to place, which she frequented multiple times a week. Instead, she forced herself to keep her composure, even though she could feel her heart racing in her chest. “Yeah, well, I didn’t expect to see you with someone else so soon either.”

Chad’s girlfriend glared at Candace, clearly not happy with the interruption. “Who is this?” she asked with a frown. “And why does she have a giant cotton ball in her arms?” she questioned further as she gestured to Lace.

“This is Lace,” Candace said, pulling her close to her protectively. “She’s my new canine companion.”

Chad laughed with a shrug. “Looks like you’ve moved on, too.”

Candace felt a flash of anger. “That’s none of your business,” she snapped. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get going.”

Once Candace was a safe block away, she could finally breathe easy again. She placed Lace back in her purse and hurried back home, more determined than ever to prove to everyone, especially Chad, that she wasn’t broken because he dumped her. She still had a good dress in her. No, make that an exceptional one. The kind that would not only turn heads but make the press go crazy.

“Okay, Lace,” Candace said sternly as she opened the door and stepped inside her apartment, “we need to have a talk

about being a good girl.”

She took Lace out of the purse and set her down, pointing an accusing finger at her. “No more misbehaving, okay?”

Lace tilted her head quizzically before sauntering off to her favorite spot by the window, tail wagging. Clearly, she wasn’t taking the lecture seriously.

“Ugh, never mind,” Candace grumbled, rolling her eyes. She flopped down onto her plush velvet couch and opened her laptop. “Let’s see if Isabella’s idea works.”

Candace began her search for inspiration, scrolling through endless images of elegant gowns, avant-garde designs, and haute couture creations. Nothing, however, seemed to spark her imagination.

“Come on, Candace,” she muttered, tapping her fingers impatiently on the keyboard. “Scarlett’s counting on you.”

Like a punch in the gut, suddenly pictures of Chad and his new girlfriend appeared on her social media feed. They were laughing, sharing an intimate moment at Smitten, the very café she had introduced him to when they first started dating. His arm was draped possessively around the other woman’s slender shoulders, and they were sitting at...their table. Their table. Of all the meanest and cruel things he could do, this had to be at the top. Why would he pick that place and that exact table other than to hurt Candace?

“Ugh, Chad, you’re the worst,” Candace groaned, gritting her teeth as she choked back tears. She hovered over the power button of her laptop, tempted to escape the painful reminder of her failed relationship. She hesitated, worry gnawing at her insides.

“Scarlett might go elsewhere if I don’t come up with something soon. I can’t let Chad derail me.”

Resolute, Candace continued her search, scrolling past the infuriating images of her ex. With every click and swipe, she ventured further into the vast world of fashion, hoping to find that elusive spark of inspiration that would save her career from disaster.

A half-hour later, and a 1920s rabbit-hole later, Candace's fingers flew across the keyboard, her eyes scanning image after image on prohibition Pinterest boards. "Come on, where are you?" she whispered to herself, feeling a growing sense of urgency. "I feel like I'm so close."

"Ah-ha," she gasped out in delight as she stumbled upon a series of photos featuring a charming bed and breakfast in Hero, Texas. "The Bumblebee," she murmured to herself. The quaint inn was surrounded by lush gardens and decorated with vintage furnishings—it was like stepping into a scene from *The Great Gatsby*.

"Maybe this is what I need." Candace pondered, her hazel eyes lighting up. "A change of scenery to inspire me."

"Hey, Lace," she called out to her indifferent labradoodle. "Guess what? We're going on a little adventure."

Lace tilted her head to the side for a split second but otherwise didn't seem to care about the news, choosing instead to return her gaze to whatever amused her outside the window.

"Fine, be that way," Candace huffed, grabbing a suitcase from her closet and tossing clothes and essentials inside. She quickly packed a bag for Lace as well, making sure to include her favorite chew toys and treats.

"All right, let's get going." With bags in hand, Candace scooped up the unimpressed Lace and headed out the door. As they made their way to Candace's silver Toyota Corolla, she couldn't help but feel a renewed sense of hope and determination.

"Hero, here we come," she declared, starting the engine and pulling away from the curb.

One thing was for certain: she'd do whatever it took to create a gown worthy of Scarlett St. Claire, even if it meant journeying to a small town in the middle of nowhere with a stubborn labradoodle in tow.

Chapter Two



Hero Search and Rescue

Luke Rancourt stood tall on the training field of the Hero Search and Rescue Academy. His Scottish terrier partner, Blitz, sat attentively by his side. The sun beat down as they awaited directions from their instructors.

“All right, Rancourt,” Instructor Danny Bowman, the founder of the academy, called out. “You’re up.”

“Let’s go, Blitz,” Luke muttered, suppressing his self-doubt and the urge to adjust his eyepatch. He knew he’d overcome so much already, but the nagging thought that his disability could hold him back lingered in his mind.

“Blitz, search,” Luke commanded, sending his K9 partner bounding across the field to locate a hidden target. As Blitz sniffed and scurried around, Luke’s one green eye followed intently, his heart pounding with anticipation.

“Good boy,” Luke praised as Blitz signaled the location of the target. They moved on, completing each task with determination and precision.

“Time,” Instructor Hunter Oakley shouted, signaling the end of the run-through. Luke and Blitz returned, panting slightly from their efforts.

“Nice job, Rancourt,” Instructor Charlie Buckworth offered with a casual grin, though his words didn’t match the seriousness in his brown eyes.

“Thanks,” Luke responded, trying not to let his uncertainty show. From the look of the three men in front of him, he knew

he hadn't finished the course as quickly as the other trainees. Did they think it was because of his missing eye? He knew he could do better, but he worried they thought his eye limited him. Did they think it was a mistake to give him a spot in the class?

"Your control over Blitz is impressive," Bowman chimed in, nodding approvingly. "However, your response time needs work."

"Right," Luke agreed, but he couldn't help the disappointment from creeping into his voice. "I'll work on it."

He hated the idea that they thought his disability might be the cause of his shortcomings. Even worse, part of him couldn't help but worry about the same thing. Was he just fooling himself that it didn't matter?

"Keep at it," Buckworth encouraged. "Everyone has potential; just look at me. I almost got kicked out myself there for a while, but I pulled it together. I not only graduated at the top of my class but I got offered a job here at the academy."

"That wasn't your fault though, Buckworth, that was your dog," Oakley pointed out. "And that's not the case here. Blitz is a great K9 partner."

What was he trying to imply by that? Did he mean that Luke was the problem?

"Okay, class is dismissed," Bowman announced to the group. "Take the weekend to rest up and study. Next week is going to be even harder than this one."

With a sigh, Luke ran his hand through his blond hair as he led Blitz off the field, determined to prove his worth and achieve his dreams, no matter the obstacles in his way. As he cleaned up and grabbed his bag from the locker room, Luke couldn't shake his concerns. Was he good enough? Could he ever truly excel with just one eye? His first week at the academy was officially over, and he hadn't managed to impress his instructors. How long would they let him stay in before they decided he wasn't going to measure up to their standards?

“Hey, don’t worry about them, man,” Will Fairfax called out to him, sensing his distress. “We all have our off days.”

“Thanks, Will,” Luke said, smiling as his fellow trainee patted him on the back.

“Just remember, it’s their job to press us, to make sure we don’t break under the pressure,” Will reminded him as they left the academy.

“I know you’re right,” Luke said with a nod. Deep down, he couldn’t help but question if he’d ever truly overcome the limitations of his disability.

“See you on Monday,” Will told him before turning in the opposite direction and sauntering down the street.

Even though he tried his best, Luke couldn’t manage to stop going over and over his work performance, trying to figure out what he could do better to improve. His shoulders slumped as he approached the Bumblebee Bed and Breakfast, the sound of laughter spilling out from its open windows. He could already feel the weight of his self-doubt settling in, like a dark cloud hovering just overhead, and the last thing he wanted was to be around a bunch of joyful B&B guests.

“Ah, there you are, Luke,” Jenesa, the tall and willowy owner, called out to him as soon as he stepped through the door. She was arranging a stack of board games on a nearby table, her chestnut hair bouncing with each movement. “We’re just about to start game night. Care to join?”

“Thanks, but I’m beat,” Luke replied, hoping she wouldn’t notice the strain in his voice.

“Aw, come on,” Avery chimed in, appearing from the kitchen with a tray of mouthwatering appetizers. Her green eyes twinkled with mischief beneath her auburn-highlighted bangs. “At least have a bite to eat first.”

Luke hesitated, wavering between his desire for solitude and the tempting aroma of Avery’s five-star cooking. Just as he was about to concede, the front door swung open again, revealing his instructors, Bowman and Oakley, their expressions relaxed and jovial.

“Hey, look who decided to join the party,” Oakley hollered as they entered the cozy lobby. He made his way over and slung his muscular arm casually around Avery’s shoulders.

“I’m surprised you’re not down at the bar with Jeff,” Avery teased with a chuckle.

“You know better than that. Ever since we got together, I left that old life behind,” Oakley told Avery as he leaned over and kissed her.

“Hi, Danny,” Jenesa greeted her fiancé, her hazel eyes lighting up at his arrival.

“Hey, Jenny,” he responded, using the nickname he gave her, the corners of his mouth turning upward in a warm smile. “Ready to lose at Monopoly?”

“Ha, don’t get your hopes up,” she teased, poking him playfully in the side.

Both men casually glanced over at Luke as if sizing up whether he was going to stay. Luke couldn’t figure out if they wanted him there or not and felt an awkward knot form in the pit of his stomach. The last thing he wanted was to spend the evening with the very people who had witnessed his less-than-impressive performance earlier that day. He needed to escape and fast.

Several of the guests piled into the room, giving Luke the perfect opportunity to escape. “Actually, I think I’ll just head to my room,” he muttered, trying to sound as casual as possible. “Long day, you know?”

“Of course, Luke,” Jenesa replied, her expression softening with understanding as she looked over at him. “Get some rest. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled, offering a weak half-smile before hurrying up the stairs, his faithful companion Blitz trailing behind him.

As he closed the door to his room, Luke couldn’t help but wonder if his instructors saw through his façade. Did they suspect he was struggling? That beneath his determined exterior, did they sense he was drowning in self-doubt? If they

did, they sure didn't seem to care. Of course, that wasn't their job. He needed to figure out a way to handle it on his own.

"Guess we're on our own, huh, Blitz?" he whispered, ruffling the terrier's black and dark tan fur affectionately. With that, Luke collapsed onto his bed, praying that next week would go better.

Maybe things would turn around if only he could find a way to make adjustments or workarounds for everyday tasks that he used to perform with ease before becoming blind. Or maybe he just needed more time for himself—time to figure out how to find inner strength once again. Whatever it was, Luke knew it was something he had to find on his own...and quickly before things got any worse than they already were.

After a quick shower and change into fresh clothes, Luke flipped open his laptop and navigated to his support group for blind people. He had been a part of this online family since his blindness had started, and they were like a second family to him.

He was warmly welcomed by familiar faces, usernames, and the same comforting words of advice that he had grown accustomed to. Today, their words didn't offer the comfort they usually did. It felt like he was being pushed away from them instead of closer as he opened up about his struggles. A few of them pointed out that at least he had one eye, making him feel like even in the world of the blind, he didn't fit in. He realized it wasn't their intention to make him feel like an outsider, but it still stung him deeply.

"Come on, Blitz," Luke said, feeling restless. "Let's go for a walk."

The Scottish terrier wagged his tail excitedly and bounded down the stairs with Luke close behind. As they stepped out of the B&B, Luke took a deep breath, hoping the fresh air would clear his thoughts.

"There you are, Luke Rancourt," boomed a voice, stopping him in his tracks. Mrs. Matilda Shomacker stood before them, her hands on her ample hips and an inquisitive gleam in her eyes. "I was wanting to talk to you."

“Good evening, Mrs. Shomacker,” Luke replied, trying to keep his tone polite, even though he’d witnessed several ambushes by the busybody around town and wasn’t looking forward to being the victim of one himself. “I’m just taking Blitz for a walk right now. Maybe another time?”

“Ah, don’t be shy. I’ve been dying to ask you about that eyepatch of yours,” she persisted, stepping closer. “How did it happen? Was it a tragic accident? A heroic deed?”

“Really, Mrs. Shomacker, I’d rather not discuss it,” Luke said, feeling his cheeks redden with embarrassment.

“Everyone has a story, dear,” she insisted, her piercing eyes narrowing as she studied him. “And I won’t rest until I know yours.”

Just as Luke was about to respond to Mrs. Shomacker, Jenesa appeared from behind him. “Mrs. Shomacker,” Jenesa interjected, a tight smile on her lips. “I think it’s time you leave our guest alone. Can’t you see he doesn’t want to talk about it?” She crossed her arms and fixed Mrs. Shomacker with a steely glare.

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Shomacker scoffed, her nostrils flaring. “This is a public place, and I have every right to be here.”

“Your curiosity is unwelcome,” Jenesa snapped back, her hazel eyes fierce. “And this is my private property, which I have told you time and again. Do I need to call the sheriff again?”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Mrs. Shomacker grumbled, but before she could continue, a small, furry whirlwind burst onto the scene.

Hershey, Jenesa’s mischievous spider monkey, darted directly under Mrs. Shomacker’s dress, his tiny hands gripping the fabric.

“Get him out. Get him out,” Mrs. Shomacker shrieked, hopping from one foot to the other in a frantic jig. Her face turned beet red as she swatted at her skirt, attempting to dislodge the monkey.

Blitz's ears perked up as he caught sight of the commotion, his tail raised in excitement. He lunged forward, barking loudly at Mrs. Shomacker's frantic movements, but his attempts at helping only made everything worse.

"Blitz, stop," Luke commanded, trying to maintain control of his K9 partner. The terrier was stubborn, but Luke knew he had to be unyielding. "Heel."

"Hershey, come here now," Jenesa called out in a firm tone. When her furry beast didn't comply, she added in a warning tone, "Or you won't get your treat tonight."

This got the little creature's attention, and he came scurrying out from under the dress, casting an apologetic glance toward Jenesa.

"Gotcha," Jenesa exclaimed, successfully capturing Hershey. She held onto him tightly, stroking his fur in an attempt to calm him down, all the while keeping a stern gaze upon Mrs. Shomacker. Luke took the opening to grab Blitz by the collar and pull him to his side.

"Let this be a lesson," Jenesa warned the older woman. "Leave our guests alone, or you'll have to deal with Hershey again."

"Fine," Mrs. Shomacker huffed, smoothing down her ruffled skirt. "But mark my words, I'll find out what happened to his eye."

"Good luck with that," Jenesa responded, her voice dripping with sarcasm as Mrs. Shomacker stormed away with a final glare at both Luke and Jenesa.

"Your monkey certainly knows how to make an entrance," Luke observed.

"Indeed," she replied, biting her lip to suppress a grin.

"Thanks, Jenesa," Luke said, relief washing over him. He patted Blitz on the head. "I didn't know what I was going to do before you showed up."

"You're welcome. Why don't you go and enjoy that walk now," she told him and gestured with a free hand toward the

sidewalk.

Hershey waved, copying his owner as he grinned.

“Let’s get you inside before you cause any more trouble.” Jenesa turned around and headed back into the B&B.

“Actually, why don’t I help you with Hershey before I go,” Luke offered. “It’s the least I can do since you just saved me from Mrs. Shomacker.”

“Suit yourself,” Jenesa said with a shrug before turning around to go inside.

Inside, Luke assisted Jenesa in securing Hershey back in his enclosure, making sure there were no easy escape routes this time.

“Sorry about all that,” Jenesa apologized, brushing a strand of chestnut hair behind her ear. “Hershey’s been acting out lately. Normally, Danny is here to help me with Hershey, but he and Hunter had to take off to help his family with something.”

“Is everything okay?” Luke asked with genuine concern in his voice.

Jenesa sighed, leaning against the enclosure. “Yes, I’m sure it’s just his sister being dramatic like usual. I would’ve gone with them, but the Bumblebee has a full house tonight.”

“How did you end up with Hershey anyway?” Luke questioned.

“My sister, Bridget, was his original owner. She disappeared about a month ago with her on-and-off boyfriend, Neal. We’re not sure why they left exactly, but I think Hershey misses her.”

“Must be tough on both of you,” Luke empathized. “If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Luke.” Jenesa offered a small, grateful smile before glancing at the clock. “You should probably get back to your walk with Blitz.”

“Right.” Luke nodded. “I’ll just be on my way then.”

With the house now quiet since all the guests had gone to bed, Luke clipped Blitz's leash onto his collar. The Scottish terrier wagged his tail excitedly, ready for their walk. "All right, buddy. Let's try this again."

The moment Luke opened the B&B's front door, the cold evening breeze brushed against his face. As he stepped outside, he suddenly collided with someone, causing them both to stumble back in surprise.

"Whoa, sorry," Luke blurted out, gripping Blitz's leash tighter as the dog barked in confusion.

"Ouch," the person exclaimed, rubbing their arm. "No harm done, I guess."

Luke squinted at the figure before him, recognizing the voice but unable to see their face clearly in the dim light. "Will? Is that you?"

"Yep, it's me," Will confirmed with a chuckle. "And what brings you out here, one-eyed wonder?"

"Very original," Luke replied dryly, self-consciously touching his eyepatch. "Blitz needed a walk."

"Ah, gotcha." Will nodded, then grinned mischievously. "So, how'd you like our little welcoming committee earlier?"

"Mrs. Shomacker? She's a real peach," Luke answered sarcastically, rolling his one good eye. "I wonder how the town puts up with her?"

"My guess, by avoiding her whenever possible," his fellow trainee admitted with a shrug. "She's like a bad penny—always turning up when you least expect it."

"Great." Luke sighed, already dreading future encounters with the nosy neighbor.

"Hey, don't let her get to you," Will reassured him, clapping a hand on Luke's shoulder. "She's just a harmless, old busybody."

"Easy for you to say. She isn't obsessed with the one thing you don't want to talk about." Blitz barked impatiently, eager

to get moving. “All right, all right,” Luke relented, giving his dog a gentle pat. “We’re going.”

“Have a good walk,” Will said with a wave as they parted ways.

“Thanks,” Luke replied, trying to shake off the uneasy feeling that had settled over him all day. Turning back around, he started to head down the steps of the porch and ran smack into someone else. His eyes widened, shocked by the second encounter in a matter of minutes.

His eyes then took in the pretty black haired woman who was bent over, attempting to gather her luggage with one hand while she clutched a tiny white furball in her other.

Chapter Three



Hero Search and Rescue

In complete shock, Candace grumbled under her breath as she stumbled, clutching Lace protectively. Her luggage tumbled to the ground, contents spilling out like confetti. Of course, this would happen now.

“Hey, I’m really sorry,” said the man she’d collided with, a hint of embarrassment on his face. “Here, let me help you.” He stooped down to gather her things, careful not to crush the delicate fabrics.

“Thanks,” Candace muttered, cheeks flushed. She tried to hide the annoyance from her voice as she scanned the stranger. She couldn’t deny that he was easy on the eyes. Tall, muscular, blond hair, and one captivating green eye—the other hidden behind an eye patch.

“No problem,” he replied, glancing at her puppy and smiling. “I’m Luke, by the way. Luke Rancourt. And this little troublemaker is Blitz.” He nodded at the Scottish Terrier wagging its tail beside him, clearly smitten with Lace.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Candace Kealy,” she said, trying to mask her curiosity about his eye patch. “And this is Lace.”

“Nice to meet you, Candace,” Luke said warmly, extending a hand to help her up. “Do you need any help carrying your luggage in?”

“Uh, no, it’s fine,” she stammered, feeling her face heat up even more. “It’s only two pieces that stack on each other, after all.”

“Are you sure?” Luke asked, his single green eye twinkling with amusement. “I don’t mind,” Luke said, reaching for one of the bags at the same time she did. Their hands brushed against each other, and a spark seemed to crackle between them. Candace couldn’t help but inhale sharply at the sudden jolt.

“Sorry,” she muttered, pulling her hand away quickly, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. From the look on his face, she could tell he felt it, too.

“Uh, no problem,” Luke replied, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’ll see you around, maybe?”

“Maybe,” Candace agreed. Still flustered, she scooped up her belongings with one hand while cradling Lace in her free arm. The dogs barked happily at each other, their tails wagging in sync. Traitor, she thought to herself as she glared at Lace with a look of betrayal.

“All right then,” Luke conceded, grinning. “But if you change your mind, just holler.”

“Deal,” Candace agreed, her heart fluttering at the sight of his dimples. What was it about this man? She shook her head, reminding herself to focus. “Well, I’d better get checked in.”

“See you around, Candace,” Luke said, waving goodbye as he and Blitz disappeared down the pathway.

“Definitely,” she whispered under her breath, watching him go with a mixture of annoyance and fascination. She had a feeling their paths would cross again soon—and she wasn’t sure whether to be excited or terrified by the prospect.

As she stepped inside the lobby, she was greeted by a crackling fire in the hearth and plush armchairs scattered about. A pretty brown-haired woman stood behind the check-in desk, her smile as bright as her hazel eyes.

“Hi there. Welcome to the Bumblebee. I’m Jenesa Olson,” the other woman greeted her. “You must be Candace.”

“How do you know that?” Candace asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“Because you’re the last guest to arrive, and we’re sold out,” Jenesa explained. Looking her up and down, she followed up by asking, “Are you okay? You look a little frazzled.”

“Fine, I’m fine,” Candace assured her, trying to shake off the lingering effects of her encounter with Luke. “I just bumped into a guy outside, that’s all.”

“Ah, that must’ve been Luke,” Jenesa said with a knowing laugh. “He’s a K9 handler trainee at the local search and rescue academy. My fiancé runs it.”

“Really?” Candace tried to sound nonchalant, but her curiosity was piqued. “That’s...interesting.”

“Isn’t it?” Jenesa agreed, handing over the key to Candace’s room. “Well, enjoy your stay here. You have fresh towels in your room and a mini-fridge at your disposal. We also have homemade muffins and lemonade in the lobby anytime you want some. If you need anything else, just let me know.”

“Thank you,” Candace said with a smile, her mind already racing with questions about Luke and his K9 partner. What had brought him to the search and rescue academy? What was behind that spark they’d felt?

Almost forgetting, Candace asked, “Oh, I have a dress form in my car along with a sewing kit and machine. Is there any way I can have one of your bellhops bring them to my room after they valet my car?”

“Valet? Bellhop?” Jenesa asked with a quirk of an eyebrow. “Let me guess, you haven’t stayed at many bed and breakfasts, have you?”

Candace shook her head as her cheeks burned red, embarrassed that it was so obvious she’d never been out of the city. “No, this is my first one.”

“Well, we don’t have any of those things, but I can have my fiancé get your stuff since he’s in the other room.”

“Oh, he doesn’t have to do that. I can just make a second trip,” Candace quickly corrected.

“Honestly, he won’t mind. He’s basically the handyman around here anyway,” Jenesa explained with a smile.

“Then again, thank you,” Candace returned with a smile of her own.

“Have a great evening,” Jenesa called after her as Candace made her way to her room.

“Thanks, you too,” Candace replied absentmindedly, wondering if fate had more surprises in store for her during her stay in Hero.

The moment Candace stepped away from the check-in desk, a sudden shriek pierced the air, making her jump. A monkey in a nearby cage was staring at her with beady eyes, his tiny hands gripping the bars.

“Whoa,” Candace blurted out, wide-eyed. “There’s a monkey in here?”

“Sorry,” Jenesa chuckled, noticing Candace’s reaction. “That’s Hershey—he’s harmless, I promise.”

“Uh, okay.” Candace shook her head, still trying to process the unexpected primate presence. “Interesting choice of pet.”

“I know, but I inherited him, and over time, we became pals,” Jenesa grinned. “Well, have a great evening. Your room is just upstairs at the end of the hall.”

“Thanks.” Candace turned around and headed to her room, the echo of Hershey’s chattering fading behind her. She couldn’t help but wonder if this place was full of surprises.

Once inside her room, Candace set down her luggage and glanced around. The cozy space was decorated in warm hues of yellow with a comfortable bed that beckoned. Lace, her puppy, wagged her tail excitedly as she sniffed the unfamiliar surroundings.

“All right, girl,” Candace said, patting Lace’s head. “Let’s see if we can find some inspiration for that dress we need to design.”

She pulled out her sketchbook and settled into a plush armchair by the window, pencil poised over the blank pages.

Nothing came—the spark she’d felt when touching Luke’s hand seemed to have short-circuited her creative flow.

“Ugh, great. Just what I need. Another man getting in the way of my career,” Candace sighed as she stood up. “I need a change of scenery. Come on, Lace, let’s go for a walk and find something to eat.”

With that, Candace grabbed her coat and set out with her canine companion, hoping the charming town of Hero would offer up more than just quaint distractions. Candace strolled down the narrow streets, Lace prancing at her side as they glanced in the different storefronts. She hoped it would refuel the creativity within her, and it would come bursting forth at any moment.

“Okay, Lace, you ready to find something to eat,” Candace said, her eyes falling upon a cozy diner nestled in the corner of the Town Square. “Time to fuel up.”

She made her way over and pushed open the door, the bell jingling overhead. A friendly server greeted her with a smile. “Take any spot at the counter, hon.”

“Actually, do you have anything more private?” Candace inquired, hoping for a quiet space to mull over her ideas.

“Sorry, we’re packed tonight. Only counter seats left,” the server replied, motioning to the row of swiveling stools.

Candace hesitated, but her growling stomach made the decision for her. “All right, counter it is.”

“Right this way,” the server led them to the last vacant barstool and to her surprise, right next to Luke.

He looked genuinely surprised to see her. “Hey there.”

“I guess it’s what I get for visiting a small town,” Candace shrugged, trying to play it cool despite the butterflies flitting about in her chest.

“True, true,” he chuckled. “You should try the cheeseburger—one of the best I’ve ever had.”

“Thanks for the tip,” she replied, smiling as the server appeared to take her order. “I’ll take the cheeseburger special,

please. I hear it's the best."

"Got that right," the server stated with a nod as she scribbled on a pad, then placed a glass of water in front of her. "Coming right up."

Meanwhile, Blitz and Lace sniffed each other curiously, tails wagging furiously. Their reunion seemed to be going even better than Candace and Luke's.

"Looks like they're getting along," Luke observed, a warm smile playing on his lips.

"Seems like it," Candace agreed, her gaze flicking between the dogs and Luke's green eye. "You know, I never did ask—what brings you to Hero?"

Even though Jenesa had told her a bit, she hoped he might elaborate.

"Training at the search and rescue academy," he replied, rubbing Blitz's head affectionately. "With my K9 partner here."

"Ah, that sounds exciting."

"Sometimes," he chuckled. Candace waited for him to give more detail, but nothing was forthcoming. "So, what about you? What's your story?"

"Trying to find inspiration for a dress design," she admitted, tracing invisible patterns on the countertop. "But so far, no luck."

"Maybe you just need to look in the right places," Luke suggested.

"Perhaps," she murmured, her gaze drifting back to him. Was that a hint? Did he want to show her the right places? Was he going to ask her out on a date?

Before it could happen, though, the server returned with her meal. She placed the cheeseburger and fries on the counter next to her water. "Anything else, hon?"

Candace shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm good." She bit into her cheeseburger, the flavors exploding in her mouth.

“Wow, Luke. This is amazing,” she said, smiling at him.

“Right? Told you,” he replied with a grin.

“Thanks for suggesting it.” Candace took another bite, savoring the delicious taste. She glanced at their dogs, who seemed to be having a great time together. “I’m only here for a couple of days—”

Before she could finish what she was saying, another man came up and slapped Luke on the back. “You ready to go? You wanted some help studying, so right now is as good as time as any.” Then, noticing Candace for the first time, he said, “Oh, sorry, am I interrupting something?”

Luke shook his head. “We met earlier. She’s staying at the B&B like us.”

The other man nodded. “Cool.” Giving her a smile, he added, “I’m Will Fairfax, by the way.”

“Candace Kealy,” she returned.

Luke pulled out his wallet and put a twenty on the counter. “Sorry, we’ve gotta go.” Luke looked apologetic as he quickly stood up, leaving Candace alone at the counter. She watched him hurry away, confusion etching itself across her face. What just happened?

“Did I say something wrong?” Candace mumbled to herself, feeling slightly embarrassed. She shook her head and returned her attention to her dwindling cheeseburger. Whatever it was, she couldn’t for the life of her figure out what it was.

After paying for her meal, Candace decided to continue exploring the town. She made her way over to the Town Square, found an empty bench nearby, and sat down, pulling out her sketchbook that she brought along with her. Maybe the picturesque scene before her could spark some inspiration for her dress design.

She sketched furiously, trying to capture the essence of Hero. But each stroke of her pencil refused to translate into the perfect dress. Frustration mounted within her chest, and she sighed heavily.

“Still no luck, Lace,” she murmured. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

As she put away her sketchbook, the sound of music drifted through the air. Candace perked up, her head following the melody. “What’s that?” She stood and began to follow the sound, Lace in her arms. Maybe it would lead her somewhere new—or at least distract her from her current predicament.

As Candace rounded the corner behind the quaint coffee shop, a lively scene unfolded before her eyes. A garden had been transformed into an impromptu dance floor, with people of all ages line-dancing to a catchy country tune.

“Hey there,” called out a woman in cowboy boots, noticing Candace’s interest. “Come on in and join us.”

Candace hesitated, glancing down at Lace, who wagged her tail encouragingly. She’d never been much of a dancer, but the laughter and joy radiating from the group were contagious. Maybe trying something different could help clear her mind?

“All right,” she said, stepping into the garden and placing Lace back in her purse. “But I should warn you, I have two left feet.”

The woman laughed. “Don’t worry. We’ll teach you the steps. You’ll be boot-scootin’ booging in no time.”

Nervousness took hold of Candace’s stomach as she joined the line. The woman introduced herself as Michelle Kenney, the owner of the coffee shop. She guided Candace through the basic steps, her patience and enthusiasm infectious.

“Ready?” Michelle asked, grinning.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Candace replied, bracing herself for potential embarrassment. As the music picked up, she moved along with the crowd, and her nerves melted away like ice cream in the sun.

“See? Not so bad,” Michelle said, laughing as they moved to the beat of the music along with the dozen other people around them.

“Actually...this is fun,” Candace admitted, feeling more relaxed than she had since arriving in Hero.

She danced to several more songs, applauding between each one. While the experience hadn't given her the inspiration she craved for her dress design, it had brought her a sense of joy and camaraderie she hadn't realized she needed.

“Thanks for inviting me in,” she told Michelle as they caught their breath. “That was just what I needed.”

“Anytime,” the other woman beamed. “You're always welcome here, Candace. And stop by for a cup of coffee on me.”

“I just might do that,” she told Michelle with a nod.

Candace left the garden with a lighter heart. The line dancing hadn't solved her design problem, but it had reminded her of the importance of stepping outside her comfort zone and embracing new experiences. The best inspiration often came that way.

“Let's head back to the B&B, Lace,” she said as she glanced down at her canine companion, that was lounging in her purse. “Tomorrow's a new day, and I'll tackle that dress design after a fresh night's rest.”

The evening air was cold against Candace's flushed cheeks as she approached the B&B, humming the tune of the last song from the line dancing. “Home, sweet temporary home,” Candace muttered as she entered the old Victorian. The familiar scent of beeswax candles and freshly brewed coffee enveloped her like a warm hug.

“Evening, Candace,” Jenesa called from the front counter. “Did you have a good time out tonight?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Candace replied with a chuckle. “I stumbled upon some line dancing after having a cheeseburger at the diner.”

“So you must have met Michelle. I highly recommend you grab a cup of her famous java. The Coffee Loft has the best blend I've ever tasted, and that's coming from a former New Yorker.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Candace told her as she headed for her room.

“Anytime, dear.” Jenesa’s voice floated after her as Candace ascended the stairs to her room.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she spotted Luke just as he was about to slip into his own room. His blond hair glinted in the soft light, and there was a hint of tension in his tall, muscular frame.

She raised a hand in greeting, which he curtly returned without saying a word. Just as quickly as he appeared, he disappeared behind his door, leaving her to wonder why he seemed so distant. Was it something she had said or done? Or maybe it had something to do with the accident earlier? Did the spark bother him? Was he avoiding her because of it?

“Stop it, Candace,” she scolded herself, shaking her head. “You’re not here to date anyone, especially not a K9 handler trainee who doesn’t seem to want to be anything more than casual acquaintances.”

She sighed, unlocked her room, and placed Lace on the bed. “Time to focus on work. No more distractions.” Glancing down at her puppy, she asked for confirmation from her furry friend, “Right, Lace?”

Lace just wagged her tail, her dark eyes clearly uninterested, leaving Candace’s mind to dwell on thoughts of Luke until she finally fell asleep.

Chapter Four



Textbooks and notes were scattered about as Luke sat at his small desk in his room. He'd been studying all Saturday morning, but it didn't seem to do him any good. Blitz curled up next to him on the floor, a comforting presence. He attempted to focus on the K9 handler procedures again, but the words seemed to blur together.

"Blitz, I just can't concentrate," Luke muttered, rubbing his one eye with the back of his hand. Blitz tilted his head, looking sympathetic. "It's Candace. She's got me all twisted up inside."

He couldn't shake the memory of their hands touching, the warmth and spark that jolted through him at the brief contact. The way her hazel eyes seemed to dance with laughter and her black hair framed her face. Her tan skin glowed under the sun, and her petite, curvy frame had him feeling more than a little breathless.

"I know I'm being ridiculous," he groaned, burying his face in his hands. Even when studying earlier with Will, he found himself zoning out, daydreaming about Candace's smile. "I need to focus on my studies, not get distracted by some woman I just met."

"Ruff," Blitz barked in agreement.

"Right, you're absolutely right," he told his canine companion. "Besides, she probably wouldn't want anything romantic with me. Not with my...disability."

“Ruff, ruff,” Blitz protested, nuzzling against Luke’s leg.

“Thanks, buddy. But it’s true. I can barely handle the academy as it is because of my eyes. If I don’t figure out a way to do so, they’re going to kick me out.”

Luke sighed and stood up, and paced around the room. After a bit, he stopped and looked in the mirror on the wall, where his reflection in the mirror showed only one green eye staring back at him. The other eye was covered by a patch, a constant reminder of the injury that had changed everything. Disgusted with his own image, he looked away.

Deciding he had enough self-pitying for one day, he decided to go back to his studies. “Okay, no more distractions. It’s time to get serious again,” he declared, forcing himself to sit and stare at the textbook in front of him. Blitz let out a low whine and settled down again, resting his head on Luke’s foot.

“Right, so...K9 handler procedures for acclimate weather,” he read aloud, trying to ignore the lingering thoughts of Candace. “I can do this. I don’t need any distractions,” he repeated to himself like a mantra.

With that, Luke tried to force himself to focus on his studies, determined to put thoughts of Candace aside, for now, at least.

The sun spilled into Luke’s room, casting a warm glow on the pages of his textbook. He squinted at the text, trying to absorb the information but Blitz was distracting him by whining by the door.

“Okay, boy. I know you want to go out, and we will in just a bit,” Luke promised his pooch as he tossed him a treat.

He knew that outside the four walls of his room, there was a chance he might encounter Candace. So far, his determination to avoid Candace was only matched by his inability to keep her from popping into his mind. He’d planned his day around dodging her, eating lunch in his room, and sneaking downstairs when he thought she’d be elsewhere.

Still, Blitz needed to go outside, and Luke knew it. “I know. It’s time for some hands-on practice,” he sighed, closing

the book. Maybe getting outside would help clear his head.

Luke and Blitz ventured out into the backyard, the crisp autumn air invigorating them as they ran through their drills. The smell of fallen leaves mingled with the earthy scent of damp soil, bringing a rare smile to Luke's face.

"All right, Blitz, let's work on tracking," he instructed, hiding a toy for Blitz to find. As the dog sniffed the ground, Luke allowed himself a moment to soak in the peaceful atmosphere. That is, until he spotted Candace through her window with the same captivating smile that haunted his thoughts.

He stiffened, not sure what to do. When she waved to him, he raised his hand hesitantly in return. The last thing he wanted was to encourage anything between them; he needed all his focus on his studies. As he turned away, her enticing smile crept back into his mind, refusing to leave.

"You got it, boy," Luke cheered, trying to distract himself as Blitz triumphantly retrieved the hidden toy. Even as he praised his K9 partner, Candace's presence seemed to linger like a persistent melody in his head.

"Ruff," Blitz barked, snapping Luke back to reality.

"You're right, boy. I need to focus," he told himself, returning to their training session with renewed vigor.

An hour later, the sun dipped below the horizon, and shadows stretched across the yard. Luke reluctantly called it a day. As he made his way to his room, he couldn't shake Candace's image from his mind. Even as he lay in bed, fighting for sleep, his thoughts betrayed him, replaying each of their encounters over and over.

"Tomorrow's a new day," he whispered into the darkness, hoping it would bring reprieve from his relentless thoughts of Candace.

Little good it did him. Her face chased him into his dreams and didn't let him go all through the night.



THE NEXT MORNING, sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows of the Hero Church, casting a kaleidoscope of colors across the wooden pews. Luke settled into a spot near the front with Blitz at his feet, his fingers fidgeting with the pages of the hymnal. The scent of old wood and candle wax filled the air as Pastor Bowman stepped up to the pulpit.

“Good morning, everyone,” he began, his voice strong and comforting. “Today, I want to talk about perseverance in the face of adversity.”

Luke’s ears perked up, struck by how much the message aligned with his current struggles. As Pastor Bowman spoke, he found himself nodding along, feeling inspired not to give up despite the challenges he faced at the academy.

“When life brings about a difficult situation, it has the potential to be devastating. But never forget that out of the ashes of adversity can rise something beautiful.” The pastor’s voice echoed throughout the church as he continued, “No matter what life throws at us, no matter how hard it may seem and how far we may fall, there is always an opportunity to rise up stronger and wiser than before. Life has its challenges, but know that it isn’t the end but rather the beginning of something new. That with God’s help, it’s a chance of becoming something greater than we ever thought possible.”

As Luke listened to the pastor, a storm of emotions built up inside of him. His heart was filled with hope, as the pastor’s words were exactly what he needed to hear. They reignited his sense of purpose and made him even more determined than ever not to give up on his dream of becoming a K9 handler.

“Can I get an amen?” Pastor Bowman asked, the congregation responding in kind.

Warmth spread through Luke’s chest as he echoed the affirmations around him.

“All right, now let’s all turn to page 131 for our closing hymn,” instructed Pastor Bowman.

As Luke flipped through the hymnal, a familiar flash of black hair caught his eye. He glanced up, surprised to find Candace sitting alone in a pew next to him, her puppy quietly sleeping on her lap. Her eyes were wide open as she sang along, her voice soft but sincere.

“Didn’t expect to see her here,” thought Luke, curiosity piquing. Had she been there the whole time? Did that mean she was a woman of faith?

Once the service was over, his heart urged him to approach her in the hope of striking up a conversation and learning more about this enigmatic woman who had so thoroughly invaded his thoughts. Before that could happen, however, a booming voice called out to him.

“Hey, Luke,” Pastor Bowman called over, pulling him from his reverie. “Mind helping me put away the hymnals?”

“Sure thing, Pastor,” Luke replied, forcing a smile. He glanced back at Candace, but she was already gone. He tried to hide his disappointment at missing his chance to connect with her.

As Luke gathered the hymnals, his mind raced with possibilities and doubts. If given another chance, should he talk to Candace? Was it worth risking his focus on the academy?

“I noticed you were paying extra close attention to my sermon today,” Pastor Bowman observed as he came up beside him.

Luke nodded. “It really spoke to me, Pastor,” he replied honestly. “I’ve been feeling a little lost lately, and your words helped me refocus.”

“I’m glad to hear that, son,” the pastor said with a warm smile. “But I also want to remind you that sometimes it’s okay to take a break and let life take its course. You can’t control everything, even when you want to.”

Luke knew the pastor was right, but it didn't mean it was easy to hear. He tried to keep his expression neutral as he pushed out, "Um, thanks for the advice."

The pastor seemed to sense his discomfort and patted him on the back. "Don't worry too much about it, son. Just focus on doing your best and trusting God to work out the rest."

With that, the pastor walked away, leaving Luke alone with his thoughts. As he finished putting away the hymnals, he couldn't help but think about Candace again. Maybe it was worth taking a chance and talking to her.

Before he could make a decision, he heard another voice behind him. "Hey, Rancourt. Good service today, huh?"

He spun around to find Instructor Bowman behind him. "Definitely," Luke agreed.

"Listen," Bowman said, his voice low and serious. "I know you've been struggling lately, but I want you to understand something. I think the real problem is that you need to stop doubting yourself."

"That's easier said than done," Luke grumbled with a shrug.

"It doesn't have to be. All you have to do is embrace what makes you different, Luke. Your missing eye is a unique aspect of who you are. Don't let it build walls around you, but lean into it."

Luke looked at him, surprised by the sincerity written across his face. He'd always thought of the other man as a tough instructor, someone hard to impress. Maybe he'd misjudged him. "Thanks, Instructor Bowman," he said, touched by the unexpected encouragement.

"Anytime." Bowman clapped him on the back before walking away. "Get some rest, and I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

With a deep breath, Luke decided to take his instructor's advice to heart when it came to his work. As far as Candace went, even though he didn't get a chance to speak to her after

church, he made a mental note to reach out to her the next time he saw her.

A few minutes later, Luke found himself at the local diner, stomach rumbling as he waited for his usual burger. Blitz barked beside him, letting him know that he also wanted something to eat.

“I know. I’ll make sure you get fed, too.”

A sudden burst of laughter caught his attention as he saw Mrs. Shomacker and another local woman engaged in an animated conversation.

“Matilda, you can’t be serious,” the other woman exclaimed, clutching her sides.

“Oh, but I am,” Mrs. Shomacker replied, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “I used to do secret ghost tours of the Bumblebee,” she began. “At first, I did it within the walls of the B&B itself, but then I discovered that doing it outside was even better. People enjoyed themselves even more when they weren’t too close to the actual hauntings.”

“I heard it was because Jenesa caught you and ran you off,” the other woman questioned with a raised eyebrow.

Mrs. Shomacker shook her head. “It was quite discreet; no one knew what I was up to except for me and the participants,” she said with a sly wink.

“Only in Hero,” Luke mused, shaking his head with disbelief.

Sure, he’d heard rumblings about the Bumblebee being haunted, but he’d never noticed anything out of the ordinary himself. Why did this woman think she had a right to further such rumors, let alone profit from them?

As he waited for his burger, Luke’s gaze trailed the countertop, taking in the stacks of paper napkins and salt speckled surface when the diner door swung open with a jingle. In walked Candace, her black hair swishing with each step, hazel eyes scanning for an empty seat. His heart skipped a beat as she settled into a booth by herself, placing Lace on her lap.

“Okay, Luke,” he muttered to himself. “Time to break down some walls.”

Gathering his courage, he picked up his soda and approached her table with Blitz by his side. He slid into the seat across from her, making her jump slightly.

“Luke?” Candace’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“Ah, well,” he stammered, trying to sound casual. “No sense in both of us taking up two tables when the place is packed, right?”

“True,” she conceded, her lips curving into a smile. “Good thinking.”

“Have you ordered yet?” he asked, hoping to fill the silence.

“Actually, no.” She flagged down the server, ordering a soup and sandwich combo with confidence. Luke couldn’t help but admire her decisiveness.

As they waited for their food, they chatted about everything and nothing: the weather, their favorite movies, the latest gossip around town. He found her easy to talk to despite his initial reservations.

“Here you go, hon,” the server set down Luke’s burger, making his mouth water.

“Another burger?” Candace teased. “You must be a creature of habit.”

He laughed, wiping his hands on a napkin before picking it up. “I guess so. Can’t resist a good burger.”

“Fair enough.” She took a bite of her sandwich, nodding approvingly at the taste. “This is pretty good, too.”

As they ate, a comfortable silence settled over them. Luke found it refreshing—he didn’t feel the need to fill every moment with conversation. He could simply enjoy her presence.

Maybe Instructor Bowman was right, he thought, stealing glances at Candace as she savored her soup. Maybe I shouldn't let my disability hold me back from connecting with others, especially someone like her.

After they had finished eating, the server cleared their plates, leaving behind the remnants of their shared meal. Luke could see a smudge of mustard on the corner of Candace's mouth and couldn't help but smile at the sight.

"Got a little something there," he gestured to his own mouth, and she wiped it away from her own with a laugh.

"Thanks." She met his gaze and smiled. "So, what are your plans for the rest of the day?"

He hesitated, tempted to invite her along to go hiking or catch a movie. The looming pressure of his studies suddenly crept back into his mind, reminding him of his responsibilities.

"Uh, I have to get back to the B&B and study," he said, trying to keep his voice light. "K9 handler stuff...you know how it is."

Candace nodded, disappointment flickering across her face before she composed herself. "I understand. Maybe we can do this again sometime?"

"Maybe," he replied noncommittally, unsure if he should encourage anything more between them. He needed to focus on his work, not get distracted by the beautiful woman sitting across from him, enticing as she might be.

"All right then," she smiled, placing Lace back in her purse and standing up from the table. "I guess I'll see you around later, Luke."

"See you around, Candace," he echoed, watching her walk away with a mix of longing and uncertainty. He knew he needed to concentrate on his training, but the pull toward Candace was proving harder to resist than he'd ever imagined.

"Focus, Luke," he muttered to himself as he left the diner with Blitz by his side, determined to bury himself in his studies. The image of Candace's enticing smile lingered in his

mind, daring him to break down the walls he'd built around himself once and for all.

Chapter Five



Hero Search and Rescue

Shaking her head in disbelief, Candace stepped out of the diner. One moment, Luke seemed interested, and the next, he was distant. Why did she have to be so attracted to him? It would be so much easier if she could just stop caring how he behaved.

“Ugh, men,” she muttered, clutching Lace tightly in her arms. The tiny dog looked up at her with sympathetic eyes as they made their way back to the Bumblebee. “I sure know how to pick ‘em, don’t I, Lace?”

Back in her room, Candace tried to focus on her dress design, but she seemed to be just as blocked as she had been before she got there. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she figure out this one blasted thing?

With a huff, she threw down her sketchpad on her bed. “What am I going to do, Lace?”

She needed inspiration, something that would make her forget about Luke’s confusing behavior and help her get back on track with her dress. “Who knows? Maybe the perfect dress idea is hiding right under our noses, and we’re too distracted to see it.” Carrying Lace, she wandered through the old Victorian, searching for anything to spark her creativity.

“Look at this, Lace,” Candace said, running her fingers over an antique sewing machine. “Isn’t it amazing? I wonder what beautiful items were created on it.”

“Arf,” Lace barked, wagging her tail.

“Too bad it doesn’t help me with my dress,” Candace sighed, moving on to the next room.

Rows of beautifully bound books filled the shelves of the library, but again, it didn’t give her the inspiration she needed. Lace nuzzled her neck, sensing her mood, as she continued from room to room, hoping something would do the trick.

Candace’s frustration only mounted further, however, as her eyes flitted from one fascinating artifact to another with no luck. Even though every corner of the B&B held a treasure trove of interesting items, nothing inspired her dress design.

“Come on, Lace,” she said, feeling defeated. “We’re not getting anywhere here. Let’s head back to our room and regroup.”

“Arf,” Lace agreed, snuggling closer.

Candace trudged through the hallway of the B & B, surrounded by a cloud of frustration. With each step, she felt more and more discouraged until finally, her heart sank at the sight of Luke standing at the far end of the hallway. He had Blitz on a leash and gave her a half-hearted wave before turning away.

The warmth she’d felt in their previous encounter quickly vanished, leaving her feeling hurt and annoyed. “Ugh,” she groaned, entering her room and gently setting Lace down. “I can’t take this hot-and-cold nonsense anymore.”

“Arf,” Lace barked in agreement, hopping around on the bed.

She sunk into one of the chairs by the window and let out another sigh. “Isabella will know what to do.” Candace pulled out her phone and dialed her best friend’s number. “Hey, Izzy. I need your advice.”

“Shoot,” Isabella said, her voice light and ready for gossip.

“Remember that guy, Luke, I told you about?” Candace asked, absentmindedly playing with a strand of her black hair.

“Ooh, the handsome K9 trainer with the mysterious eye injury? What about him?”

“Well...” Candace hesitated, trying to find the right words. “He’s driving me up the wall with his mixed signals. One minute he’s sweet and attentive; the next he’s distant and aloof. I can’t figure him out.”

“Sounds like he’s got some baggage,” Isabella mused. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“Beats me,” Candace grumbled with a frown. “I like him, but I don’t know if it’s worth the headache.”

“Look, Candace,” Isabella said, her tone turning serious. “Give it time. You’re both in an unfamiliar situation and who knows what he’s going through. If it’s meant to be, things will work out.”

“Arf,” Lace barked from the bed as if agreeing with Isabella.

“Thanks, Izzy,” Candace smiled, feeling reassured. “I’ll try to be patient and see what happens.”

“Good girl,” Isabella teased. “Call me if you need more sage advice from your wise best friend.”

“Will do,” Candace laughed, ending the call. She looked over at Lace, now curled up on the bed. “All right, girl. Let’s give Luke some time and focus on our dress design.”

Candace spent the next few hours sketching and designing her newest creation - a stunning floor-length gown with intricate lace detailing and a flowing tulle skirt. It was beautiful, and for any other client, it would be more than good enough. The problem was, this was for Scarlett St. Claire, and she didn’t do “good enough.”

“What am I going to do, Lace?” she asked her canine companion as she looked over at her on the bed. “I have to have my design ready to show Scarlett by the end of the week.”

Lace gave her an indifferent look, which only frustrated Candace more. Deciding she needed a change of scenery, she picked up Lace and placed her in her purse. “I need to get out of this room before I scream with frustration.”

As Candace stepped out of the B&B, the crisp winter air brushed against her cheeks. “Let’s go to The Coffee Loft, girl. I could use a pick-me-up,” she said, feeling slightly deflated after the frustrating encounter with Luke earlier.

“Arf,” Lace barked in agreement as they began their stroll through Hero’s quaint streets.

To Candace’s dismay, when they reached the coffee shop, it was closed. A handwritten sign hung on the door reading, “Closed on Sundays.”

“Seriously?” Candace groaned, peering through the window longingly. “I guess small-town life is really different from the city.”

Lace whined softly from her purse, clearly sharing her master’s disappointment.

“All right, let’s just walk around and see if we can find something else to do,” Candace suggested, trying to make the best of the situation.

Across the street, Candace spotted a group of children playing at the park. Her eyes were immediately drawn to a little girl wearing a fairy-like dress that danced in the breeze as she twirled around. Intrigued, Candace decided to head to the park.

“Maybe this is it, Lace,” she said, feeling a spark of excitement.

Candace made her way over to the park and found an empty bench facing the children at play. She pulled out her sketchbook and began drawing her own version of the fairy dress. Lace whined from her purse, prompting Candace to pull her out to let her scamper off to explore the grassy area nearby.

“Hey there,” said a friendly-looking mom pushing her toddler on a swing nearby. “Are you new in town?”

“Kinda,” Candace replied, glancing up from her sketchbook. “Just visiting for a bit. I’m a fashion designer from Dallas, and I’m working on a dress for a client.”

“Wow, that’s so cool,” the mom exclaimed as she pushed her blonde hair behind her ear. “I’m Tilly Howard, by the way. I own the dress shop across the street.”

“Nice to meet you, Tilly. I’m Candace Kealy,” she said, extending her hand, which the other woman reached over and shook. “I’ll have to come check out your shop while I’m here.”

“That would be great. I stock a lot of one-of-a-kind dresses, along with some vintage and special occasion pieces. Nothing like what I’m sure you’re used to from the city, but I’m pretty proud of it.”

“You should be,” Candace told her with a smile. “It’s a big deal running your own successful store.”

“Thanks.” Then, pointing at Candace’s labradoodle, she asked, “Is that your dog?”

“Yes, that’s Lace,” Candace smiled. “She’s my little sidekick.”

“She’s adorable,” the little girl announced from her spot on the swing.

“Oh, this is my daughter Mora,” Tilly added.

“Pleased to meet you both,” Candace told the pair.

“Your sketch looks beautiful,” Tilly commented, peeking at Candace’s drawing on her lap. “But is it the right look for your client? It doesn’t seem like something an adult would wear.”

Candace sighed, looking down at her sketchbook. “No, you’re right. It’s not quite what my client would wear. She needs something...more sophisticated.”

“Good luck finding the perfect design,” Tilly said warmly, giving Candace a reassuring pat on the shoulder before returning her attention to her daughter.

“Thanks,” Candace muttered, feeling a mixture of gratitude and frustration. She called out to Lace, who bounded over obediently. “All right, girl. Let’s keep searching for that inspiration.”

With a sigh, Candace put away her sketchbook and left the park behind. She rubbed her temples, feeling the frustration bubble up inside her as she searched for any source of inspiration.

“Come on, Candace, think,” she muttered to herself, turning down a couple of unfamiliar streets. The buildings in the area were older and more weathered than the ones on Main Street, clearly not kept up the same way as the ones in the tourist section of town.

Lace looked up at her from her purse and whined.

“Sorry, girl, we’re just a little lost,” she admitted, both literally and figuratively. “But you never know where we might find some inspiration.”

Continuing down the street, she spotted a large abandoned building looming ahead. Its faded brick walls and broken windows called to her like a strange beacon of possibility.

“Maybe there’s something interesting in there,” Candace pondered aloud and approached the entrance cautiously. The door creaked open, revealing a dimly lit interior. As she stepped inside, the musty smell of old wood and dust filled her nostrils. Shadows danced along the walls, creating eerie shapes and patterns that piqued her curiosity.

“Hello?” she whispered into the darkness, wanting to make sure she wasn’t intruding where she didn’t belong.

Then, out of nowhere, there was movement that scurried across the floor, eliciting a scream from Candace.

Lace barked furiously from her purse, ready to protect her owner.

“Meow,” a small black cat cried out as it came back and walked across the top of her feet.

“Ugh, it’s just a cat,” Candace scolded herself, catching her breath as the feline slunk away. “Get a grip.”

As she ventured further into the building, she held out hope that there would be something that could help her with her design. The graffiti-covered walls provided a stark contrast

to the quaint town outside. Bold colors and intricate designs swirled before her, each telling a story of their own.

“Wow,” she breathed, pulling out her sketchbook and flipping to a fresh page. She began to draw, incorporating elements of the graffiti into her design. The dress took shape quickly, its lines flowing with an edgy elegance she hadn’t anticipated. As she added additional touches to her drawing, Candace felt a renewed sense of purpose and excitement.

A rustling and clinking noise pulled Candace from her sketch, and she glanced around nervously. “It’s just that silly cat again,” she murmured, willing herself to believe it.

“Hey, hey, what do we have here?” a voice drawled, and Candace’s heart dropped. A group of young men emerged from the shadows, smirking as they held bottles of beer.

“Didn’t expect to see you in our hangout spot, gorgeous,” another one said with a sneer.

“Uh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” Candace stammered, clutching her sketchbook to her chest. “I’ll be going now.”

“Aw, stay a while,” the first man said, grabbing her arm. His grip was tight and unyielding. “We could have some fun together.”

“Let go,” Candace gasped, her face flushing with anger and fear.

Lace barked protectively from her purse, straining against the constraints of it, clearly wanting to protect her master.

“Feisty, huh?” a third one teased.

The men laughed, ridiculing her and her tiny dog. Candace’s mind raced, searching for an escape plan, but she had no idea how she was going to get away from the trio.

“Enough,” the sound of Luke’s commanding voice cut through the air like a knife. He stepped into the dim light, his one green eye blazing with anger. Blitz stood by his side, growling lowly.

“Who do you think you are?” one hooligan spat, but Luke didn’t flinch.

“I’ll be telling the sheriff about your little party here,” he warned, his gaze steely. “Now, get out of here before I call him right now.”

The men exchanged glances before slinking away, defeated. As soon as they were gone, Candace crumpled with relief into his arms. “Thank you, Luke,” she whispered, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked, genuine concern etched on his face. “How’d you even end up here?”

“Got lost,” Candace admitted sheepishly. “I was looking for inspiration.”

“Remind me to give you a map,” Luke said with a hint of a smile.

“How did you even find me?”

“I got permission to use the academy grounds for practice. It’s nearby, and I was heading there when I heard a scream from the building. I came to check it out and then heard Lace barking and rushed in. I’m just glad I found you in time.”

“Me too,” Candace murmured, feeling an odd mixture of gratitude and irritation bubble inside her chest. Touched by his intervention, Candace couldn’t help but feel that maybe, just maybe, there was more to Luke Rancourt than met the eye. Why did Luke have to be so infuriatingly confusing?

“Come on,” he said softly. “Let’s get you back to the Bumblebee.”

The soft glow of the street lamps illuminated their path as they walked in companionable silence back to the B&B. Lace, now calm, was asleep in her purse.

“Thank you again,” Candace said, turning to Luke with a warm smile as they stood outside their rooms. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

“Hey, no problem,” he replied, his voice gentle. “Just glad I got there before anything bad happened.”

Candace paused, one hand on the doorknob. “Well, good night, Luke.”

“Good night, Candace.” His one eye twinkled in the dim light, and for a brief moment, she forgot about his hot-and-cold behavior.

As she closed the door behind her, Candace let out a long breath. What a day. She had thought she was only going to stay in Hero for the weekend, but now...something about this small town was drawing her in, surprising her. Maybe, just maybe, if she admitted it to herself, she wanted to figure out the enigma that was Luke Rancourt.

“Maybe it’s not so bad here,” she whispered to herself, feeling a strange sense of contentment wash over her as she placed Lace on the bed. “What do you think, girl? Should we stick around a bit longer?”

Lace let out a little snuffle as she curled up into a ball, clearly wanting to go to sleep.

Candace chuckled. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

As Candace crawled into bed herself a little while later, she decided she would give Hero the rest of the week, even if it meant dealing with Luke’s maddeningly confusing emotions. She believed that, in the process, she would find the inspiration she desperately needed.

“Good night, Lace,” she whispered before drifting off to sleep, ready to embrace whatever new adventures awaited her in this charming little town.

Chapter Six



Hero Search and Rescue

“All right, trainees, time for the bomb detection test,” Bowman announced to the group, his voice echoing across the K9 training ground.

“This is going to put all of your newly learned skills to the test,” Buckworth added.

“So don’t let us down,” Oakley warned.

Luke’s heart pounded in his chest as he stood with his K9 partner. He could feel a bead of sweat trickling down his temple while his single green eye squinted in concentration. The fake bombs were scattered throughout the field, and it was up to him and Blitz to locate them all.

“Ready, boy?” Luke whispered, giving Blitz a reassuring pat. The Scottish terrier wagged his tail enthusiastically.

“Go,” Bowman yelled, and Luke took off with Blitz by his side. They sprinted across the field, stopping briefly at each suspicious item. Luke’s vision, hindered by the eye patch, made it difficult to fully assess each object.

“Found one,” he shouted, picking up the first fake bomb triumphantly.

“Good job, buddy,” Luke muttered, mostly to himself. His thoughts kept drifting to Candace, her black hair and hazel eyes. Her laughter from their encounter the day before still rang in his ears, and he found himself smiling despite the high stakes of the test.

“Pay attention, man,” he scolded himself under his breath. Noticing for the first time, that he was being outpaced by the other trainees.

As he reached down for what he believed to be another prop, his hand met something soft and warm—a furry body instead of a cold surface.

“Meow,” the cat yowled, and it wasn’t until that moment that Luke realized he’d grabbed a stray tabby cat instead of a fake bomb.

“Ah, sorry,” he stammered, releasing the cat, which darted off into the distance. He felt the heat rise in his cheeks as laughter erupted around him.

“Rancourt, focus,” Oakley barked, and Luke snapped his attention back to the task at hand.

“Right, sorry,” he mumbled, scanning the field for the remaining fake bombs while trying to remain calm.

Blitz, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying this far too much, almost as if he had planned the feline mishap.

“Is it because of Candace?” Luke wondered to himself, his heart sinking at the thought. His distraction had cost him during the test, and now his future as a K9 handler was in jeopardy. He had wanted to be a real-life superhero ever since he could remember, but his limited vision and thoughts of Candace were getting in the way.

“Time’s up,” Bowman called out, and with a heavy sigh, Luke knew he hadn’t found enough fake bombs to pass.

“Better luck next time, Rancourt. It’s looking like you might not be cut out for this after all,” Oakley said gruffly.

As Luke walked off the field, feeling defeated, he couldn’t help but think about Candace again. Why couldn’t he shake her from his thoughts? He hadn’t been this intrigued by a woman since he was in high school, and it wasn’t like him. He was usually so single-minded and able to concentrate without interruption.

“Maybe I should’ve kissed her when I had the chance, Blitz,” he whispered, his voice barely audible as they headed to the locker rooms. “Considering I might not be here in the academy much longer, I might be leaving Hero really soon.”

With a heavy sigh, he opened his locker and pulled out his clothes to change. He was midway when Will showed up and took a seat on the bench next to him. “Luke, my man, you just need to relax and focus.”

“Everyone keeps telling me that, but for some reason, I just can’t seem to do it when it counts.”

“That’s because you’re putting too much pressure on yourself,” Will pointed out.

“I know, but I just can’t believe I messed up so badly today,” Luke said, slamming his locker door shut with a thud.

“Hey, it happens to the best of us. But you’ll nail it next time, I’m sure of it.” Will grinned at him, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Besides, I’ve come up with a foolproof plan to help you pass that retest.”

“Really?” Luke raised an eyebrow, curious about what this plan might be.

“Absolutely. Get ready for some top-notch role-playing scenarios, my friend.” Will theatrically whipped out a pair of sunglasses and placed them on his face, striking a pose. “Now, let’s get you trained up like the ace K9 handler you were born to be,”

Despite himself, Luke chuckled. “All right, lay it on me.”

As they practiced, Will came up with increasingly ridiculous scenarios, from fake bombs hidden in teddy bears to criminals disguising themselves as seniors on motorized scooters. Luke couldn’t help but laugh as he tried to keep up with Will’s antics.

“All right, Rancourt, you ready for the scenario of all scenarios?” Will asked, wiping the sweat from his brow. “This one will test your skills to the max.”

“Bring it on,” Luke replied, feeling more confident than he had in days. They worked long into the evening, pushing each other and honing their skills. Luke knew he was improving, and it was all thanks to Will’s unwavering encouragement.

The next day, Luke faced the retest with renewed determination. Sure enough, everything went smoothly. He found each fake bomb with ease, his K9 partner by his side. Blitz seemed proud of him, too, wagging his tail and barking excitedly as they completed the course.

“Congratulations, Rancourt,” Bowman called out supportively.

“Yeah, you passed with flying colors,” Oakley added with a hint of surprise in his voice.

“Well, done,” Buckworth chimed in with a proud smile.

“Thank you, sirs,” Luke replied, beaming with pride. He turned to Will and clapped him on the shoulder. “And thank you, Will. I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

“Hey, what are friends for? Now let’s go celebrate,” Will exclaimed, slinging his arm around Luke’s shoulders.

An hour later, after they dropped their K9 partners off at the academy kennels, they were both claiming stools at the local bar. “Cheers to passing the retest,” Will raised his glass with a grin, the dim lights of the bar casting a warm glow on their faces.

“Cheers,” Luke agreed, clinking his glass against Will’s. They took a swig of their drinks, the burn of the alcohol momentarily taking his mind off his insecurities.

Jeff, the tall bartender with a fighter’s nose, gave them both a nod as he wiped down the counter, his muscular arms flexing with each swipe. “Let me know when you want another one. I know how hard the academy can be,” he told them with a knowing smile.

“And how is that?” Will asked with confusion as he glanced from the bartender to the counter and back again.

“I grew up with Danny and Hunter, so I know they run a tight ship,” Jeff explained.

“Will Fairfax, as I live and breathe,” a woman cooed as she sidled up to Will, her long, blonde hair cascading over one shoulder. She batted her eyelashes at him, her body language unmistakable. “I’m so glad to see you here again.”

“Hey, Melissa,” Will replied, the corners of his mouth twitching upward. “This is my friend, Luke. We’re celebrating his big win today.”

Melissa’s attention flickered over to Luke for a moment, but as quickly as it did, it left when she noticed the eye patch. She placed her hand on Will’s arm and squeezed as she moved closer. “You want some company, Will? I’ve been lonely since the last time we hung out.”

“Well, like I said, I’m here with my friend...” Will explained as he awkwardly glanced between Melissa and Luke.

Before she could respond, a brunette approached them. “Is this the guy you told me about, Melissa?” she asked, looking at Will in a way that made it clear she was sizing him up.

The blonde nodded, gesturing between them, she said, “Will, this is my friend Lindsay.”

It wasn’t lost on Luke that they weren’t giving him the time of day, but he was used to it after he lost his eye. People tended to avoid him rather than deal with his disability. He was debating leaving when Will suggested, “Well, since there’s two of you and two of us, we could make it a party.”

For the first time, Lindsay looked over at Luke. The moment her eyes landed on his eye patch, however, she hesitated, her smile faltering as she averted her eyes. “Oh... hi,” she mumbled, her enthusiasm waning.

“Hi,” Luke replied back awkwardly. It wasn’t the first time a woman had recoiled at the sight of his missing eye, but it still stung.

“Anyway,” Lindsay said quickly, turning her attention back to Will, “Melissa mentioned you might have another

friend that's more...my type."

At that moment, Luke couldn't help but think of Candace and how different she was from these women. She refused to be scared away by his eye patch. No matter how many times she was around him, she didn't flinch. She stared right into him with a gaze that seemed like it could penetrate his soul and really understand who he was. Every look, every touch, made him feel alive, giving him a sense of worth that no one else ever had before.

"Earth to Luke," Will snapped his fingers in front of his friend's face. "You all right, buddy?"

"Uh, yeah," Luke mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. "I think I'm gonna call it a night."

"Really?" Will frowned. "But the party's just getting started."

"Sorry, man," he replied, avoiding eye contact with the women. "Just not feeling it tonight."

"Suit yourself." Will shrugged, turning back to the conversation.

As Luke pushed through the crowd towards the exit, he couldn't get out of the bar fast enough. Once outside, he took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp evening air. The neon lights of the bar's sign, reading "The Rusty Hinge," cast a surreal glow on the street. He began walking aimlessly, trying to clear his head. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop thinking about Candace.

"Should I ask her out?" he mumbled to himself, kicking a pebble along the sidewalk. "Or would she just say no like everyone else?"

"Talking to yourself, are we?" a familiar voice interrupted his thoughts. Mrs. Shomacker waddled up to him, her beady eyes glinting in the dim light. "So, tell me, young man, is it true what they're saying?"

"Uh, what do you mean?" Luke stammered, already dreading the inevitable interrogation.

“Are you dating that new fashion designer in town? Candace, is it?” Mrs. Shomacker leaned in, her curiosity insatiable.

“Er, no, I—” he hesitated, desperately searching for an excuse to escape her prying gaze.

“And what about your eye?” she continued relentlessly, pointing at his eye patch. “You never did tell me what happened. Did you lose it in some accident?”

“Mrs. Shomacker, I really need to go,” Luke blurted, sidestepping her and picking up the pace.

“Running away again?” she huffed. “Well, fine. But don’t think you can avoid my questions forever.”

“Of course not,” he muttered under his breath, leaving the persistent Mrs. Shomacker behind. “Because you always manage to turn up like a bad penny.”

As he continued walking, Luke’s thoughts returned to Candace. His heart beat faster at the idea of asking her out, but the fear of rejection still weighed heavily on him. He sighed, wondering if taking that chance was worth the risk.

Not wanting to return to the B&B just yet, he made his way to The Coffee Loft. As he entered the quaint shop, he let out a heavy sigh, glad for the change of scenery. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee enveloped him, already easing his tense muscles.

“Hey, Luke,” Michelle greeted him with a friendly smile. “What can I get you?”

“Large black coffee, please.” He tried to muster up a smile in return but couldn’t quite manage it.

“Coming right up.” She noticed his mood and added, “You know what? Have a pastry on the house.”

“Really?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Why?”

“New academy trainees get a treat.” Michelle winked. “Choose anything you like.”

“Thanks, Michelle,” he said, finally managing a weak smile. “I’ll take the Asiago pesto twist.”

“Good choice,” she replied, handing over the warm, flaky pastry along with his coffee. “Enjoy.”

Luke made his way to a table by the window, taking in the view of the Town Square outside. He sipped his coffee and took a bite of the Asiago twist, reveling in the buttery layers and sharp cheese.

As people walked past, he spotted Candace approaching the coffee shop. His heart leaped, and he waved, hoping she’d see him. She seemed preoccupied, her gaze focused elsewhere. He slumped back into his seat, disappointed but not surprised.

“Figures,” he muttered, taking another sip of his coffee. “Just my luck.”

He forced himself to focus on the delicious pastry, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his chest. Even as he chewed, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he should have rushed outside and gone after Candace.

“Chalk it up to another epic fail,” he grumbled to himself. When was he going to muster up the courage and make a move? He knew he’d allowed himself to be paralyzed by fear for too long, but he wasn’t sure how to fix it.

Then, almost as if it were a sign, Candace strode into the coffee shop, her black hair bouncing in rhythm with her confident steps. Luke’s pulse quickened as she approached the counter, chatting animatedly with Michelle.

“Hey, Candace. What can I get you?” Michelle asked cheerfully.

“Medium iced hazelnut latte, please,” Candace replied, flashing a bright smile that made Luke’s heart skip a beat.

“Coming right up.” As Michelle prepared the drink, she gestured toward the back of the shop. “You should check out the karaoke stage while you wait. It’s a lot of fun.”

“Really? Karaoke?” Candace’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Sounds like the perfect way to find some new

inspiration. Thanks, Michelle.”

Luke hadn't even realized there was a karaoke stage at The Coffee Loft. As Candace moved to investigate, he couldn't resist following with his gaze. A young woman he didn't recognize stepped onto the stage, grabbing the microphone with enthusiasm. The first notes of a lively pop song filled the air, and the small crowd sitting on couches and chairs began clapping and laughing along.

“Didn't think I'd see karaoke here,” Luke mused, his disappointment fading as he watched everyone enjoying themselves. He let the music wash over him, tapping his foot absentmindedly to the beat.

A few more songs passed, each one drawing more laughter and applause from the audience. It must have finally been Candace's turn. She stepped onto the stage, her hazel eyes shining with anticipation. “Hi, everyone,” Candace greeted the audience with a grin. “I'm going to sing a sweet little song for you all. Hope you enjoy it.” She winked, and the room fell silent.

As the melody began, Luke found himself entranced. Her voice was velvety smooth and soulful, weaving through the notes with ease. Luke felt an inexplicable urge to be closer, so he abandoned his table and drifted toward a couch near the stage. Plopping down, he leaned forward, captivated by her presence. Time seemed to slow as he hung on every word, his heart swelling with each lyric.

When the song ended, Luke couldn't help but clap enthusiastically, feeling a connection to her performance. Candace scanned the room, her eyes locking into his for a brief moment. She smiled in acknowledgment, leaving him breathless and craving more.

“Wow, Candace,” Luke called out as she descended the stage, his one green eye sparkling with admiration. “That was amazing.”

“Thank you,” she replied, her cheeks flushed with a mixture of excitement and modesty. “I didn't expect to see you here tonight.”

“Needed a treat after a good day at the academy,” he explained with a smile. “My own little celebration.”

“Congratulations.” Her face lit up with genuine joy. “I’m glad things are going well for you.”

“Thanks.” He hesitated, his heart pounding in his chest as he considered asking her out. The connection they shared seemed undeniable, but a nagging doubt held him back. What if she didn’t feel the same way? Or worse, what if she did, only to be put off by his missing eye later on?

“Anyway,” he said finally, trying to hide his internal struggle behind a casual grin, “I should get going. Good night, Candace.”

“Good night, Luke.” She waved, watching him leave with a hint of curiosity and, dare he hope, interest in her gaze.

As he stepped back into the cold evening air, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of regret for not taking the chance. For now, it was safer to hold his cards close and savor the memory of her enchanting voice.

Chapter Seven



Hero Search and Rescue

Candace's fingers wrapped around the door handle of "Vintage Heaven" with eager anticipation. She pulled it open with a sense of adventure, and the bell jingled merrily, announcing her arrival at the thrift store. She breathed in deeply, her nose filled with the musty scent of old fabrics, worn leather, and expired perfumes that had been trapped inside for years. Candace filled her lungs with the intoxicating aroma, feeling an excitement bubbling up inside her like sparkling champagne. Dust particles floated through the air in front of her eyes, catching on the streams of sunlight pushing through cobwebbed windows and round skylights overhead.

"Time to find some inspiration," she whispered to herself, eyes darting over the racks of aged clothing.

Faint whispers seemed to dance around her ears as she walked down rows of vintage clothes, furniture, and collectibles. Her fingers brushed along the edges of distressed denim, satin dresses, and decades of long-forgotten prom dresses.

"Ooh, a vintage shoe collection," she exclaimed, trying on a pair in her size. "What do you think, Lace?"

"Arf, arf," the labradoodle told Candace from her spot in the pooch purse.

"Right, not quite what I'm looking for." Candace put the shoes back and continued her search.

“Ooh, look at this,” Candace held up a frilly, polka-dotted blouse for Lace to inspect through the side of her purse. “Very 1950s.”

“Uh-huh,” said a voice from behind her. Candace turned to see an older woman eyeing the blouse skeptically. “Sure, if you can pull off that look.”

“Thanks for the input,” Candace muttered, returning the blouse to its hanger.

She roamed the aisles, fingers skimming across intricate beading and worn leather. Plucking a few garments off their hangers, she piled them onto her free arm. A hot pink '80s halter dress here, a paisley maxi skirt there.

“Maybe it’s not about finding one perfect piece,” Candace thought aloud. “Maybe I need a whole ensemble to inspire me.”

In a corner far removed from judging eyes, Candace placed Lace’s purse on the ground before layering the items on herself. Skirt atop the dress, belt cinching the waist, scarf draped around her neck, and a hat to top off the ensemble. Each addition felt like a new chance at inspiration.

“Voila.” She spun around, arms outstretched, as if modeling the creation to her canine companion. “What do you think?”

“About what?” the older woman had reappeared, hands on her hips and a frown on her face.

“Never mind,” Candace sighed with a shake of her head. None of these pieces were speaking to her anyway.

“You know, we do have a dressing room in the back.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Candace quickly apologized. “I didn’t mean to be a bother.”

“And for your information, if you rip anything while you’re trying it on, you have to buy it,” the older woman added for good measure.

“Got it,” Candace told the other woman as she casually moved in front of her purse, hoping the other woman didn’t

notice Lace in it. From her sour disposition to her strict rules, she seemed just the type of person who would be irate to find out a customer had the “audacity” to bring a dog into her store.

After eyeing her for a couple of more seconds, the older woman disappeared again, leaving Candace to continue to look through the vintage offerings.

“Hey, did you hear about the search and rescue academy recruits?” a voice carried from the other side of the rack. Candace’s ears perked up.

“Ooh, tell me more,” another, high-pitched voice chimed in. “I heard there’s a whole batch of handsome newbies.”

“Yep, and there’s a couple that are just...yum,” the first voice continued. “Plus, there’s the mysterious one that wears an eye patch, which only adds to his rugged charm.”

“You know, I’ve always had a thing for pirates,” the second one said with a giggle. “I wonder if he’s single?”

Candace’s heart leaped as she heard someone mention an eye patch—they had to be talking about Luke. Against her will, she felt a twinge of envy as the two women discussed him, even though she knew he wasn’t hers to be jealous of. She tried her best to stay still and not let them know that she was listening, but the more she heard, the sharper the ache in her chest became.

“Excuse me,” she mumbled, hastily pushing past the women who were blocking her path to escape.

She needed to get out of there, away from the whispering voices and her own confusing emotions. The door jingled behind her as she burst onto the sidewalk, gulping in the fresh air.

“Hey,” the older woman shouted from the doorway several seconds later. “You forgot to pay for those clothes.”

Candace glanced down, mortified. In her hurry, she hadn’t noticed that she still wore the layers of clothing from her impromptu runaway show for Lace. “Sorry. I’m so sorry,” Candace called out, rushing back into the store. She quickly disrobed, handing over the garments with an apologetic smile.

“I didn’t mean to—I completely forgot.” She was too embarrassed to explain further why she had done what she did.

The older woman looked at her skeptically before turning back inside the store and gesturing for her to follow. “You’d be surprised how often this happens in my store,” the older woman told her.

“Really?” Candace asked in surprise, her cheeks still burning from the humiliation.

“Sure, but it’s mostly teenagers trying to get away with shoplifting,” the shop owner sighed with a roll of her eyes. “That isn’t what you were doing, was it? I mean, I heard about that actress who did it to get attention, but you don’t seem like that type. Though you are some fancy designer from the big city and all, so who knows.”

Candace’s eyebrows shot up in shock. “Oh, you know who I am?”

“Sweetie, it’s a small town. Everyone knows who everyone is, and if you stay here more than a day as a guest, we know that, too.”

“I see,” Candace murmured as she bit her lip and took off the layers of clothes. The last thing she needed was for someone to post about this online. She valued her good reputation and protected it at all costs, knowing that many designers got labeled as divas, and that was the last thing she needed. “I really am sorry about the mix-up regarding the clothes.”

“Maybe you should buy something to make up for it,” the older woman suggested.

“Right, of course.” Candace scanned the nearby shelves, her gaze landing on a 1920s black and white hat. She picked it up, admiring the delicate feather detail. “I’ll take this.”

“Excellent choice,” the shop owner said, her lips quirking into a knowing smile. “It’s perfect for someone as unique as you.”

“Thanks,” Candace replied sheepishly, handing over her money. She wasn’t sure if it was exactly a compliment, but she

decided to take it as one.

“Oh, and for future reference, I don’t allow dogs in my store.”

Ah, so Candace had pegged the older woman exactly right. With a nod of her head, she replied, “I’ll remember that.”

As she left the store again, hat in hand, she couldn’t help but think of the gossipy voices and the mention of Luke. Even though she didn’t want them to, the same feelings of jealousy came flooding back. Why did it bother her so much that someone was showing an interest in Luke? He wasn’t hers to claim, and yet, that was exactly what she wanted to do. It had taken all her strength not to march right over to those women and tell them that Luke was already spoken for, even though, technically, he wasn’t.

“Get a grip, Candace,” she muttered to herself. Deep down, though, she knew it wasn’t quite that easy.

Wanting to take her mind off of Luke, she headed back to her room to focus on her design for Scarlett’s dress. Fifteen minutes later, she was placing the black and white hat atop the dress form in her room. Stepping back, she let out a sigh of satisfaction. The hat had an elegance to it that demanded attention. She could already envision the perfect dress to accompany it.

“Black and white,” she murmured, her eyes narrowing in concentration. Then, with a nod, she added, “Flapper style, for sure.”

Inspiration ignited within her as she grabbed her sketchpad and began drawing. A flurry of beads, feathers, and fringe danced on the page as she designed a glamorous 1920s ensemble. As she completed the sketch, something didn’t feel right.

“Ugh.” Candace tossed the sketchpad onto her bed. Frustration etched into her features. “Why can’t I get this right?”

“Maybe some mindless TV will help,” she muttered to herself, grabbing the remote.

As she flipped through the channels, her plan for distraction failed miserably. Each show seemed to be a cruel reminder of what occupied her thoughts: love. Dramas filled with tearful goodbyes, romcoms bursting with flirtatious banter - every scene only served to bring Luke's image to the forefront of her mind.

"Seriously?" Candace groaned, throwing the remote onto the bed. "Is there nothing else on?"

She slumped against her headboard. Her mind was racing with thoughts of Luke, his quiet, reserved nature, the undeniable air of uncertainty that surrounded him, and his quirky sense of humor. Everything about him drew her in, like a moth to a flame.

"Get it together, Candace," she chastised herself. "He's just a guy." Letting out a heavy sigh, she contradicted herself. "Right, just a guy with one green eye and an eye patch that makes my heart race," she grumbled, rolling her eyes at her own ridiculousness.

"Okay, focus." Determined to shake off her thoughts of Luke, Candace picked up her sketchpad once more. "Scarlett's dress needs to be perfect, and even though my last sketch was good, it wasn't good enough."

As she stared at the blank page, she couldn't figure out what to change. It was like there were missing pieces of the puzzle, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't figure out what they were. "Ugh, what's wrong with me?" Candace threw her hands in the air and tossed the sketchpad aside again.

As her frustration grew, she couldn't help but wonder if her feelings for Luke were clouding her creativity. "Why is this so hard? Why can't I stop thinking about Luke?"

Tired of being trapped in her room with her runaway thoughts, she huffed as she slipped on her shoes and picked up Lace. "I need a break from all this...thinking."

She stomped her way downstairs, hoping to run into some B&B guests who might offer a welcome distraction. The

laughter and chatter coming from the living room confirmed she was in luck. As she approached, she found several guests gathered around a table, deeply engaged in a fierce game of charades.

“Perfect.” Candace grinned, feeling the tension in her shoulders ease. “Mind if I join?”

“Of course not,” a middle-aged woman replied, waving her in. “The more, the merrier.”

Candace took her place among the players, feeling a smile tugging at her lips as she watched the team guessing away. The laughter and camaraderie of the group filled the room, pushing all thoughts of Luke from her mind, providing an ideal escape.

“Okay, okay,” Candace chuckled, trying to decipher the wild gesticulations of her teammate. “Is it...a fish? A dancing fish?”

“Got it,” her teammate shouted triumphantly, and the room erupted in cheers.

After another couple of rounds, someone pointed to her. “Your turn, Candace.”

She nodded eagerly, ready to take up the challenge. She handed Lace to the middle-aged woman, who was more than eager to hold the labradoodle. It took Candace a few seconds to get in the groove, but she quickly thought of a creative way to act out the word on her slip of paper. When they finally guessed correctly, everyone cheered and clapped in appreciation for her creative portrayal. Candace couldn’t help but feel proud and excited; if only designing Scarlett’s dress was this easy.

“Nicely done,” Candace’s teammates gave her a high five as she took her seat and picked Lace back up, feeling genuinely lighthearted for the first time since her thrift store debacle.

It was in that moment of pure joy that Luke walked in, fresh from the academy, with Blitz by his side. His eyes scanned the room, momentarily pausing when they met

Candace's. Her heart skipped a beat, and she knew precisely what she needed to do.

Jumping to her feet, she told the group, "I'll be back in a few minutes. Go ahead and play without me," before taking off across the room.

"Hey, um, Luke?" Candace stammered, pulling him aside before she could second-guess herself. She felt her cheeks flush as she stumbled over her words. "I was wondering, you know, if maybe...you and me...like, we could hang out sometime?"

Luke's expression was unreadable as he looked down at her, and Candace couldn't tell if he was annoyed or amused by her nervousness. She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt as she waited for his answer, acutely aware of the eyes on them from across the room.

"Uh, sure. That sounds nice," he replied, a smile spreading across his face, his eye crinkling at the corners.

Candace felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. "How about tomorrow night? I hear the Italian place in town is really good. I've been dying to try it."

Luke nodded. "Sounds great. How about we meet here after I'm done at the academy? We can walk over together," he suggested.

"Absolutely," she told him, her smile never faltering. "Looking forward to it."

"Me too," Luke agreed.

The laughter and chatter in the room quickly faded as Hershey burst through the door, tail wagging, and eyes wild. Jenesa followed closely behind, yelling at the furry monkey, "Get back here."

Everyone instinctively recoiled as Hershey scampered around the room, searching desperately for an escape route. Behind him, Blitz took off after his new friend, barking excitedly. Lace must have seen them running and added her own bark to the chorus before leaping out of Candace's hands and joining in on the chase. In no time, all three animals were

careening around the room, their owners desperately trying to catch up to them.

As they ran around in circles trying to grab collars and red band vests, their laughter echoed throughout the B&B until finally - miraculously - everyone managed to get their animals under control again.

“Whew,” Jenesa said breathlessly as she finally got a hold of Hershey’s collar. She ruffled his fur fondly before giving him a stern look. “This is why I don’t let you run free in public,” she said teasingly as she scooped him up into her arms. The other guests chuckled knowingly, as this wasn’t the first time the monkey had gotten free from his cage. “Guess I’m going to have to ask Danny to reinforce your cage again,” she grumbled as she took the monkey away.

Once Candace and Luke got their own pets settled down again, Candace glanced over at Luke with a smirk. “Well, that was quite the roller coaster,” she quipped.

Luke chuckled, his eyes twinkling. “Just another day at the Bumblebee, I suppose.”

Candace nodded in agreement before glancing down at Lace, who was now lying contentedly in her arms. “I’m glad Lace has made some new friends here,” she said, scratching behind her labradoodle’s ears. “Crazy as they might be.”

“Me too,” Luke agreed. “And speaking of friends, I feel like we’re becoming pretty good ones ourselves.”

Candace felt a warm blush spread across her cheeks at Luke’s words. “I think so, too,” she said softly.

Luke hesitated for a moment before taking a deep breath. “Candace...there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you ___”

Before he could finish what he was about to say, the group called over to tell Candace it was her turn again.

“I guess I have to go,” she told Luke, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice. “Can we continue this conversation tomorrow over dinner?”

He nodded. "Of course. See you after work."

As she rejoined the game, she couldn't help but smile, feeling grateful for the unexpected turn her night had taken.

"What were you talking to Luke about when I got back?" Jenesa asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

"Nothing," Candace quickly told her, not quite ready to tell anyone around town about her upcoming date. She knew word would spread after it happened, but until then, she wanted to keep it to herself. "Who's turn is it?" she asked, hoping to redirect the attention back to the game.

After the game ended a half hour later, Candace made her way back to her room. She flopped down onto her bed, feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over her. The night had been filled with unexpected turns, and she was excited for the possibilities that lay ahead.

Suddenly, her phone buzzed from the nightstand. Isabella had sent her a text message. "How did your day go? Any progress on the dress?"

Candace couldn't help but smile as she typed out a response, deciding to confide in her best friend about her upcoming date with Luke.

"Still stuck where the dress is concerned, but have big news where the hot K9 handler is concerned."

When she finished typing out the details, Candace hit send and waited for a response.

A few moments later, one came through. "That's amazing. I'm so happy for you. Go out there and have fun, and tell me all about it after."

Candace smiled and thanked Isabella before setting down her phone and lying back against the pillows with a contented sigh. Candace couldn't believe it. After all the obstacles she had faced over the last few weeks, things were finally looking up. She was filled with a sense of hope and possibility, and for the first time in a long time, she had something to look forward to. She could hardly wait for tomorrow night to come around. She couldn't help but feel as if she had finally found

that missing piece to her puzzle. Maybe - just maybe - her creativity would soon follow suit.

Chapter Eight



Hero Search and Rescue

Luke strode into the academy training field, head held high, a bounce in his step. The sun shone brightly, casting a bright glow over the area. Dogs barked, and handlers shouted instructions, but Luke felt invincible.

As Luke warmed up Blitz, he felt the familiar excitement of pushing himself and his K9 partner to their limits. He focused on the tasks ahead and drove any doubts from his mind; he had trained hard for this moment.

Luke and Blitz moved together through the obstacle course, each task completed quickly and efficiently. They leaped over hurdles, crawled under obstacles, and stopped exactly on command. They finished in record time to a roar of applause from his fellow classmates and instructors. Luke smiled triumphantly.

“Rancourt,” called out Instructor Oakley. “You really nailed that last exercise. Good job.”

“Thank you, sir,” Luke replied, beaming. He’d never received such high praise from the toughest academy instructor, and it felt good.

“Keep it up,” he added, nodding before walking away.

“Wow, man,” Will chuckled, clapping Luke on the shoulder. “You’re on fire today. What’s gotten into you?”

Luke hesitated, suddenly feeling vulnerable. He glanced around to ensure no one was eavesdropping. “I, uh...I’m spending time with Candace tonight.”

“Really?” Will raised an eyebrow, impressed. “Nice. But, hey, just be careful, okay?”

“Careful?” Luke blinked, confused by the warning.

“Yeah, you know...” Will lowered his voice, “Girls like that can be into superficial stuff. Looks and all that jazz. I don’t want you getting hurt because of your eye.”

“Hey now,” Luke protested, jerking his head away self-consciously. “Candace isn’t like that.”

“Maybe not,” Will conceded. “But better safe than sorry, right? Just watch your back and don’t get too involved with her until you make sure she’s really into you as much as you think she is.”

“Thanks for the advice, I guess,” Luke muttered, trying not to let Will’s words bring him down.

He didn’t believe that Candace was shallow, but Will’s words echoed in his mind all the way through the rest of his day. Was he setting himself up for disappointment by spending more time with her? As he pondered that possibility, doubt crept back into his heart against his will. He didn’t want to be a fool, and he’d been hurt already more times than he could count by women who couldn’t handle being with a guy with only one eye.

At the end of the day, Luke dropped off Blitz at the kennel. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing by going out with Candace, Blitz?” he asked his Scottish terrier partner.

“Ruff,” Blitz barked back as he reassuringly rubbed his head against his leg.

“I hope you’re right, Blitz,” he murmured as he bent down and rubbed the dog’s head.

The energetic canine wagged his tail and licked Luke’s face before trotting off to join the other dogs. With a heavy heart, Luke walked back to the B&B, unable to shake Will’s warning from his thoughts.

“Come on, you’ve got this,” he muttered to himself as he entered his room. He glanced in the mirror, smoothing his hair

and adjusting his eye patch before slipping on a pair of tan slacks and a blue button-up. “She wouldn’t have asked you out on this date if she cared that much about looks.”

He paced back and forth, replaying their past interactions in his mind. He felt as if they got each other in a way he’d never experienced with anyone else. Despite her career as a fashion designer, Candace had always been kind and genuine with him, never making him feel self-conscious or out of place. She seemed to want to get to know him through their conversations rather than interrogate him with questions peppered with veiled judgments. She even laughed at his terrible jokes.

“Please, let this go well,” he whispered, sending up a prayer before taking a deep breath and heading downstairs.

“Luke,” Candace greeted him, her hazel eyes sparkling as she descended the staircase in a beautiful floral dress that hugged all her curves in the right places. “You clean up nice,” she complimented.

“Th-thanks,” Luke stammered, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Rubbing his lips together, he added, “You look amazing yourself.”

“Thank you,” Candace gushed. Then, looking around, she asked, “By the way, where’s your partner in crime?”

“Blitz? Oh, I dropped him off at the kennel for the night,” he explained. “And Lace?”

“Jenesa offered to watch her,” Candace replied with a smile. “Isn’t that sweet?”

“Wow, that’s really kind of her,” Luke said, grateful for the other woman’s help.

As they stood there, smiling at each other, Luke felt a wave of relief wash over him. Maybe he was worrying over nothing. Maybe Candace truly was different from the superficial people Will had warned him about. Tonight, he was determined to find out for sure.

“Shall we?” Luke asked, offering his arm.

“Absolutely,” Candace replied, linking her arm with his as they stepped into the cool evening air, ready to embark on their adventure together.

It only took a few minutes, but soon, they were sharing in banter and laughter. The weight of Will’s warning was forgotten. As Luke and Candace strolled through the quaint streets toward Luigi’s, the sun dipped low in the sky, casting an orange-golden hue that reflected in Candace’s hazel eyes.

“Such a beautiful evening,” she mused with a happy smile.

“Perfect for our...outing,” Luke replied hesitantly, still unsure if they were officially on a date or not.

Just as they reached the entrance of the cozy Italian bistro, Mrs. Shomacker appeared out of nowhere like a nosy phantom. Her beady eyes locked onto them, and she waddled over with a grin that spelled trouble.

“Ah, if it isn’t young Luke and the lovely Candace. And here everyone thought you two were just friends,” she cackled, her voice grating like nails on a chalkboard. “Well, except me, that is. I knew there was something going on between the two of you.”

“Mrs. Shomacker, we’re just—” Luke began, trying to sidestep the question, but the older woman was relentless.

“Come now, you don’t have to be coy with me,” she insisted, arching a brow in anticipation. “So, you can tell me; this is a romantic rendezvous, isn’t it?”

“Okay, yes, it’s a date,” Candace blurted out, causing Mrs. Shomacker’s eyes to light up with glee.

Well, there was his confirmation. According to Candace, this was definitely a date. At least he didn’t have to wonder about that anymore.

“Haha, I knew it,” Mrs. Shomacker crowed triumphantly, already turning away. “Can’t wait to share this juicy tidbit.”

“Wait, please don’t—” Luke called after her, but she was already sauntering off, mumbling excitedly to herself.

“Luke, I’m so sorry,” Candace said, biting her lip. “I hope my admission doesn’t bother you. You know how small towns can be, and by morning, everyone is going to know our personal business.”

He sighed but smiled at her. “Honestly, it doesn’t. I have nothing to hide,” he reassured her. “Do you?”

“Nothing at all,” she replied, returning his smile. “I’m just happy to be spending time with you.”

“Same here,” Luke agreed, feeling a warmth spread through him that had nothing to do with the setting sun. It felt good to know that they were finally on the same page.

Arm in arm, they walked into Luigi’s, ready to enjoy their evening together despite the certainty that Mrs. Shomacker would soon have the whole town talking.

The rich aroma of garlic and freshly baked bread enveloped them as they waited to be seated. Candace’s hazel eyes sparkled in the dim lighting, and Luke couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm.

“Wow,” she breathed, taking it all in. “This place is great.”

“It sure is,” Luke agreed as they were led to a cozy table in the corner, surrounded by flickering candles and soft music. They sank into the cushioned chairs, their arms barely grazing as they nestled close together in the secluded corner.

Candace glanced around, an approving grin on her face. “I never thought I’d be here with you, Luke Rancourt.”

“Is that so?” he asked, intrigued. “Why?”

“Because,” she said, fiddling with her napkin, “you’re just too...mysterious. And handsome.”

“Really?” Luke blushed, uncertain how to react. A woman hadn’t said that to him since after his accident, and he didn’t even realize how much he missed it until he heard the words fall from Candace’s lush lips.

“Absolutely,” she replied, her eyes fixed on his.

“Thanks, but you should know, you’re the pretty one. Ever since I first saw you, I couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

She let out a small laugh and shook her head. “You could have fooled me. After all the times you bolted, I thought you couldn’t stand being around me.”

“Just the opposite. I was frightened by how much I was attracted to you,” he confessed. Candace’s eyebrows raised in surprise, but she didn’t say a word. “Anyway,” Luke said, eager to change the subject because of how vulnerable he felt, “tell me about your decision to go into fashion. What inspired you?”

“Growing up, I always used clothes to express myself,” Candace began, her eyes shining with passion. “My dream is to create a line that helps others do the same.”

“Sounds amazing,” Luke murmured, genuinely impressed.

“What about you?” Candace asked. “What made you want to become a K9 handler?”

“I’ve always loved dogs,” Luke admitted. “And after my accident, I wanted to find something meaningful to do with my life.”

“Your accident?” Candace’s brow furrowed with concern. “What happened?”

Luke hesitated, then decided that if he wanted a real shot with Candace, he needed to tell her about what had happened. “I lost my eye while saving someone’s life. It was a car accident.”

Candace gasped and reached out to take his hand. “Oh, Luke,” she murmured. “That must have been so hard for you.”

“It was,” Luke admitted. He hadn’t talked much about the accident since it happened, but now it felt strangely cathartic to finally open up about it with someone who cared.

“I was traveling home from college when two cars were involved in a head-on collision right in front of me. I rushed in to help a stranger trapped in one of the vehicles and managed to get him out just before it exploded, but a piece of shrapnel

hit me.” Little did he know that his first attempt at heroism would be shattered by the cruelest reward. The experience had scarred him down to his soul, leaving him disfigured and broken inside. As he sat there retelling his unforgettable tale, his voice was laced with deep pain. “By the time the paramedics got there, it was already too late to save my eye.”

Candace listened intently, her gaze never wavering from his own as he spoke. When he finished talking, she smiled reassuringly at him. “Luke, it sounds like you’re already a real-life hero,” Candace praised, placing her hand on his and squeezing. “The fact that you turned your pain into something positive by becoming a K9 handler is admirable.”

Luke couldn’t help but blush at the compliment. He let out a small laugh of embarrassment as their waiter arrived with drinks and the rest of the food they had ordered.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, feeling a surge of pride. “I just... did what I had to.”

“Still,” she insisted, her gaze unwavering, “it takes a special kind of person to do that.”

“Maybe we’re both special,” Luke suggested, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Maybe we are,” Candace agreed, her smile radiant as they continued to share their dreams and fears over plates of steaming pasta.

The conversation shifted away from Luke’s accident after that point, filling instead with easy banter and stories from their pasts—stories that made them both laugh and gain more understanding of each other.

By the time they finished their meal, Luke realized how happy Candace made him feel—how safe he felt when she was around. He knew without a doubt that he made the right decision opening up to her.

“You want to get some dessert? I hear there’s a new ice cream parlor next door?” Luke suggested.

“You had me at ice cream,” Candace teased as Luke paid for the meal.

As they entered the pink and white establishment, the sweet aroma of waffle cones drifted out to greet them. They couldn't help but smile as they made their way to the counter.

"I have no idea what I'm going to pick," Candace said, her eyes lighting up at the sight of the colorful array of flavors.

"You don't have a favorite?" Luke asked with surprise.

She shook her head. "I like to try a new one every time," she admitted.

"Then can I suggest Monster Cookie," the woman behind the counter interjected. "It's our special flavor this week."

"Sold," Candace said, prompting the woman to scoop a big serving of the blue ice cream onto a cone before handing it to her.

"Vanilla for me," Luke told the woman behind the counter.

"Vanilla, plain noodles with butter, and burgers? You really do like your food simple, don't you?"

"What can I say? I'm a plain Jane kind of guy," he teased with a chuckle. "I hope it's not a problem."

"Not as long as you let me have all the spice I like," she told him with a wink. "I am Latina, after all."

"It must be from your mother's side, right?" Luke observed as the woman handed him his ice cream cone.

"Why do you think that?" she questioned with a quirk of her eyebrow.

"Kealy seems pretty Irish to me," Luke noted.

"Impressive," Candace said with a nod. "Correct on both counts."

Armed with their frozen treats, they walked along the tree-lined streets, laughing and reminiscing about their childhoods. Candace's hazel eyes sparkled as she recounted how her passion for fashion started with her doll collection and how she had to have at least five outfits for each one.

“Can you believe I used to dress up my dog in homemade outfits, too?” she giggled, taking another lick of her ice cream.

“Actually, I can,” Luke grinned, imagining a patient pup draped in fabric, “I bet he was the most stylish dog on the block.”

“I’d put clothes on Lace if she’d let me, but she cries whenever I try,” Candace admitted. “I hope to wear her down one day, though.”

“Poor thing. Her naked fur days are numbered, and she doesn’t even know it,” Luke teased with a chuckle.

As they continued walking, the B&B came into view. Luke noticed the old tire swing hanging from a sturdy oak tree in the backyard, and an idea struck him.

“Hey, want to go for a spin on the tire swing?” he asked, raising an eyebrow playfully.

“Are you kidding? I haven’t been on one of those since I was a kid,” Candace giddily agreed, her laughter contagious as she climbed onboard.

Luke reached out for Candace’s delicate waist and gave her a gentle push, sending her soaring through the air. Each time she returned to him, she gave him a loving smile, and his heart swelled with joy. Her laughter rang out like music as her hair swished back and forth with each additional push.

“Ready for a jump?” she shouted, a mischievous glint in her eye.

“Go for it,” he encouraged, stepping back to give her room.

When Candace leaped from the swing, however, she stumbled on her landing and nearly fell. Luke sprang forward, catching her in his arms just in time. The force of her momentum was too much, and they both went tumbling to the ground. Candace landed right on top of him, their faces inches apart.

“Are you okay?” he asked with concern.

“Thanks to you breaking my fall,” she gasped, her breath warm on his face. “I’m not hurting you, am I?”

He shook his head as their eyes locked. Unable to help himself, Luke leaned in. The urge to kiss her overwhelming. Just as their lips were about to meet, the sprinklers burst to life, dousing them both in a cold shower.

“Ahhh,” Candace squealed, quickly scrambling off of him.

“Talk about bad timing,” Luke grumbled, wiping water from his face.

Despite the interruption, they couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. Shivering and soaked, they shared a knowing look that said there would be another chance for that almost kiss.

Together, they dashed toward the back entrance of the B&B, their laughter echoing in the night. As they reached the door, Candace paused and looked at Luke, her eyes sparkling with joy.

“Thanks for catching me,” she said softly.

“Anytime,” he replied, trying to sound casual but feeling his heart rate increase.

Hand in hand, they made their way upstairs. They stopped just outside her room.

Candace pulled the key from her purse, saying, “I had a really good time tonight.”

“So did I,” he admitted as he leaned against the wall. “We should do it again.”

“I’d like that,” she told him right before unlocking her door. “Good night, Luke.”

“Good night, Candace,” he called after her, watching as she disappeared into her room.

Luke stood there for several seconds before turning around to head to his room. Inside, he peeled off his wet clothes and wrapped a towel around himself. Leaning on the windowsill, he couldn’t help but replay the evening in his mind. Their easy

conversations, shared laughter, and that almost kiss all combined into a perfect first date.

“Wow,” he muttered to himself, realizing how much he genuinely liked Candace. She was so much more than just a beautiful face; she was passionate, kind, and fun-loving. Every conversation with her felt like a breath of fresh air, and the warmth of her presence made him feel alive for the first time in years. With a contented sigh, he climbed into bed and closed his eyes, thinking of the woman who had captured his heart until he finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine



Hero Search and Rescue

Candace awoke with the morning sun warming her face as if confirming that she was, indeed, floating on Cloud 9. Her mind replayed flashes of her date with Luke - his warm green eye, his crooked smile, the way he'd listened so intently to her ramblings about fashion. She sighed, hugging her pillow tighter. He was unlike any man she'd ever dated before, and it felt refreshing.

"Luke Rancourt," she whispered, testing out the name like a child with a shiny new toy. "I think you're exactly what I need."

Reluctantly, Candace untangled herself from the sheets, got ready for the day, and headed downstairs for breakfast with Lace in her arms. The clinking of silverware and soft chatter greeted her as she entered the dining area of the B&B.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Jenesa called out, her voice full of energy. She looked the part of a sophisticated hostess in her crisp suit and pearls, her chestnut hair cascading down her back. "You look like you're walking on sunshine."

"More like dancing on clouds," Avery chimed in as she brought out a basket of fresh croissants.

Candace couldn't contain her grin as she took a seat at the table and filled her plate with scrambled eggs and bacon. "That's because I had an amazing date last night."

"Ah, with Luke?" Jenesa raised her eyebrows knowingly. "I knew there was something special going on between the

two of you.”

“I know, I was just telling Hunter that last night,” Avery added with a nod of her head.

“Danny and I agree,” Jenesa confirmed. “Everyone sees it.”

Candace wasn’t sure what to make of that. Would Luke be upset to find out that his instructors and their significant others were talking about their relationship or whatever it was? She wasn’t really sure if it was a relationship yet, but it felt like it was headed that way.

“Okay, enough about that,” Jenesa said with a flip of her hand. “Tilly Howard came by earlier. She said she needs to talk to you, Candace.”

“Me? Really?” Candace chewed thoughtfully on a piece of bacon, then handed a piece to Lace, who was contently sitting in her lap. “Wonder what she wants.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Jenesa winked and topped off Candace’s coffee. “But first, eat up. No sense facing the world on an empty stomach.”

“Sound advice,” Candace agreed, digging into her breakfast with renewed vigor. Whatever Tilly wanted, it could wait a few more minutes. For now, she’d simply bask in the afterglow of her incredible date while she enjoyed her plate of delicious bacon and eggs.

A half-hour later, with a contented sigh, Candace pushed through the door of Tilly’s dress shop, her thoughts still swirling with memories of Luke. The scent of lavender and fine fabrics filled her nose as she took in the neatly organized racks of dresses lining the walls.

“Ah, Candace,” Tilly beamed from behind the counter, her blonde curls bouncing with each exclamation. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’m in a bit of a pickle.”

“Jenesa mentioned you needed to talk?” Candace asked, tilting her head curiously.

Tilly let out a deep breath, the worry lines on her forehead becoming more pronounced. “My father’s fallen ill—it’s serious. Mora and I have to fly out East tonight so I can take care of him until I can make other arrangements.”

“Wow, Tilly, I’m sorry to hear that,” Candace said, concern evident in her voice.

“Thank you, but this is why I asked to speak with you.” Tilly wrung her hands as she continued, “I have a wedding party coming in this afternoon, and I can’t postpone it since the dresses won’t get altered and back in time if they don’t get fitted today.”

“I’m not sure what that has to do with me,” Candace murmured in confusion.

“Listen, I hate to ask, but would you be able to watch the shop for me? Just for a few days. I’ll make it worth your while, I promise.”

Candace hesitated, thinking about Scarlett’s dress deadline looming over her head. She bit her lip, conflicting emotions warring within her. One look at Tilly’s pleading eyes, and she knew she couldn’t say no. “All right, Tilly. I’ll help you out.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Tilly breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Let’s just hope I don’t botch things up too badly,” Candace quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

“Never,” Tilly assured her, a grateful smile playing on her lips. “Come on, let me show you what needs to be done.”

As Tilly led her around the shop, explaining the intricacies of managing appointments and alterations, Candace felt a sense of camaraderie with the dress shop owner. Tilly’s passion for her business was infectious, and Candace found herself increasingly excited about the days ahead.

“All right,” Tilly said, clapping her hands together as they finished their tour. “I think that’s everything. Again, thank you so much, Candace. I don’t know what I would do if you hadn’t shown up in town when you did.”

“Family comes first, Tilly. And hey, maybe this will be good for my creative block,” Candace joked, though she couldn’t help but wonder if there was some truth to her words.

“Whatever helps,” Tilly laughed, giving Candace a quick hug before rushing out the door to catch her flight.

Alone in the shop with only Lace as a companion, Candace took a deep breath, steeling herself for the challenge ahead. She’d never run a store before, but with Tilly counting on her, she was determined to make it work. “I can do this, can’t I, Lace?”

“Arf,” Lace encouraged as Candace pulled her out of her purse and let the tiny white furball sit beside her on the floor.

For the first half hour or so, Candace stood at the counter, her eyes scanning the carefully arranged displays of silk and lace. As the day progressed, she enjoyed greeting each customer with a warm smile and, to her surprise, found herself enjoying the hustle and bustle of running the shop. It was almost as much fun as designing dresses.

“Good afternoon,” she called out to an older woman who entered the store. “Looking for something special?”

“Anniversary dress,” the woman said, her cheeks flushed with excitement. “My husband has a special dinner planned for us tonight, so it needs to fit off the rack.”

“Congratulations,” Candace replied, genuinely thrilled for her. “How many years?”

“Thirty,” the woman gushed with pride. “And I pray to have another thirty with him.”

Candace was touched by the woman’s love for her husband, and for a moment, Luke came to mind.

It had only been a few hours since she had seen him, but it felt like forever, and she couldn’t wait to see him again. Was it possible that one day, she might end up talking this way about Luke to some woman in a shop?

Candace shook her head, pushing the thought aside. She had work to do, and she couldn’t afford to get distracted and

let Tilly down. “Let’s see what we have,” she said, leading the woman to a rack of dresses. As they flipped through the hangers, Candace glanced several times at the woman.

“Ah, this one might work,” Candace said, pulling out a red dress with a cinched waist. “It’s a classic cut, and it’ll flatter your figure.”

The woman held the dress up to her body, studying herself in the mirror. “What do you think, my dear?” she asked, turning to Candace with a grin.

“I think you’ll look stunning in it,” Candace replied with a smile. “It would be perfect for your anniversary.”

“Let me just try it on to be sure.”

As the woman headed to the changing room, Candace leaned against the counter, watching her. There was something about helping people find the perfect outfit that gave her a sense of fulfillment she had never experienced before. Maybe this was what she needed—a change of pace, a new challenge.

The woman emerged from the changing room, and Candace couldn’t help but gasp. The dress fit her like a glove, accentuating her curves and giving her a glow that made her look years younger.

“It’s perfect,” the woman said, twirling around as she looked in the nearby mirror. “Thank you so much, dear. I feel like a million bucks.”

As the customer paid for the dress, and Candace slipped a bag over it, she realized that there was something deeply satisfying about helping others find their perfect dress. It was like playing fairy godmother to countless Cinderellas, and the feeling was intoxicating.

“I hope you have a wonderful anniversary,” Candace called out after the woman.

“I’m sure I will,” the older woman said over her shoulder before exiting. “And I’ll have you to thank for it.”

A few minutes later, the bell above the door jingled again. Candace looked up to see Jenesa and Avery entering the shop,

chatting animatedly.

“Jenesa, Avery,” she greeted them, grinning from ear to ear. “What brings you two here today?”

“Final fitting for my wedding dress,” Jenesa said, her eyes dancing with delight. “And Avery’s here for moral support.”

“Of course,” Avery chimed in, flashing a grin. “Wouldn’t miss it. I’m just glad my Maid of Honor dress is already done.”

This was the bride that Tilly had mentioned before leaving. It was funny that she had forgotten to mention who it was. It must have been all the chaos of the situation.

“Let me grab your dress from the back,” Candace told Jenesa before disappearing behind the curtain to retrieve the exquisite gown.

When she returned, the women were in mid-discussion. “I just wish my sister could be here. I know it’s not your brother’s fault she decided to take off with him, but it still hurts she won’t be here for my wedding,” Jenesa bemoaned.

“Goodness knows where they are,” Avery sighed, a touch of concern in her voice.

“Ah, here is your dress,” Candace announced as she held up the white satin and lace gown, not wanting to get involved in their private discussion. “Ready to try it on?”

“Definitely,” Jenesa replied, excitement practically radiating from her.

As the bride-to-be slipped into the dressing room, Candace couldn’t help but feel grateful for this unexpected opportunity. Running Tilly’s shop had shown her a new side of the fashion world, one that she couldn’t wait to explore further.

“All right, let’s see it,” Avery encouraged as Jenesa stepped out of the dressing room.

The sight of her new friend in the stunning gown brought a smile to Candace’s face. It was a reminder of why she’d fallen in love with designing in the first place. “You look breathtaking,” Candace praised with a wide smile. “But here,

let me do a couple of things.” Candace smoothed the delicate fabric of Jenesa’s wedding dress, her eyes flicking between the bride-to-be and the mirror. “It fits you perfectly,” she said, admiring Tilly’s attention to detail.

“Speaking of perfect fits,” Avery interjected playfully, wagging her eyebrows at Candace. “You never did give us any details about your date with Luke last night?”

Candace felt her cheeks warm, and she busied herself with adjusting a stray thread on the gown. “It was...nice,” she replied, avoiding their gazes.

“Nice?” Jenesa echoed, arching an eyebrow. “Come on, Candace. We need more than that.”

“Really, it was just a lovely evening,” Candace insisted, trying to maintain her composure. Their expectant stares, however, made her cave. “All right, fine. It was great, okay? He’s sweet, funny, and so different from anyone I’ve ever dated. And yes, he wants a second date.”

“See, was that so hard?” Avery teased, clapping her hands together in excitement. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Candace mumbled, feeling her face grow even hotter.

“Hey, how long are you staying in town?” Jenesa asked suddenly, genuine curiosity in her voice. “And no, I’m not asking because I want your room back.”

This elicited a laugh from all three women, but once the merriment died down, Candace realized that she wasn’t as eager to leave as she’d initially thought. “I have to head back to Dallas by the end of the week for my career.”

“Aw, that stinks,” Avery sympathized. “What does that mean for you and Luke?”

“I don’t know,” Candace admitted, biting her lip. “We haven’t talked about long distance or anything like that yet.”

“Give it time,” Avery reassured her, patting her shoulder. “You never know what might happen.”

“Right,” Candace nodded, trying to convince herself. As she watched Jenesa twirl around in her wedding dress, happiness radiating from her, Candace couldn’t shake the feeling that she was leaving something special behind if things didn’t work out between her and Luke.

A half-hour later, Jenesa was back in her business suit. “See you back at the Bumblebee later, Candace,” Jenesa called out over her shoulder. The door closed behind them with a soft jingle, leaving Candace alone with her thoughts.

She sighed, her mind drifting back to Luke and their uncertain future. What was she going to do at the end of the week? More importantly, what was Luke going to do? Did he like her enough to pursue something long-distance? If he did, what did that look like?

Pushing the troubling thoughts away, Candace decided to focus on her dress instead. She scanned the store, hoping that being surrounded by beautiful gowns might spark some inspiration. After several minutes of fruitless searching, she felt no closer to a breakthrough.

“Excuse me,” a woman’s voice pulled Candace from her reverie. “Could you help me find a dress for my birthday party?”

“Of course,” Candace said, eager for the distraction. Together, they browsed through racks of elegant dresses, laughing and chatting as they went.

“Thank you so much,” the woman said, hugging a stunning emerald gown to her chest. “This is perfect.”

“Happy to help,” Candace replied, smiling genuinely. “I hope you have a wonderful fortieth birthday.”

After closing up the shop for the day, Candace wandered over to The Coffee Loft, craving a caffeine pick-me-up. As she walked in, Michelle greeted her with a sly grin. “Hey, Candace. How was your date with Luke last night?” she asked, leaning on the counter.

Candace blinked in surprise. “How did you—” She stopped mid-sentence when Michelle subtly gestured toward

Mrs. Shomacker, who was holding court in the corner of the coffee shop. The older woman seemed to be regaling a captive audience with tales of...well, probably everyone else's business.

"Ah," Candace said, rolling her eyes. "That makes sense."

"Never a dull moment around here," Michelle chuckled, handing Candace a steaming cup of coffee. "Just remember, it's all part of the charm."

"Charm," Candace repeated, taking a sip and trying not to let Mrs. Shomacker's gossip get to her. The longer she watched the busybody, the more frustrated she got.

Fueled by annoyance and curiosity, Candace marched over to Mrs. Shomacker's corner. She caught snatches of conversation involving her date with Luke, his eye patch, and even their shared dessert.

"Mrs. Shomacker," Candace snapped, crossing her arms. "Why are you discussing my private life?"

"Sweetie, this is a small town. There's no such thing as privacy here." Mrs. Shomacker smirked, unfazed by Candace's irritation.

The onlookers scattered like startled birds, leaving Candace and the nosy neighbor in a tense standoff.

"You really should learn to mind your own business," Candace warned. "One day, you're going to irritate the wrong person."

"Are you threatening me?" Mrs. Shomacker asked in a raised tone as she looked around as if wanting a witness to her accusation.

"That's not what I meant," Candace scrambled, frustrated that the older woman wanted to make a scene when there didn't need to be one.

"Then you should watch what you say and how you say it," Mrs. Shomacker chastised. "And perhaps be on your way if you can't manage both."

Candace's mouth dropped open, but before she could form a rebuttal, Michelle appeared at her side. "Mrs. Shomacker," Michelle said firmly, "if you're bothering my paying customers, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Fine," the older woman huffed, gathering her things and storming out with one last dirty look at Candace.

"Thanks, Michelle," Candace sighed, grateful for the support.

"Anytime," Michelle replied, giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

Candace took her coffee to go, heading back to the B&B in an attempt to escape any further gossip. Once inside her room, she stared at the half-finished gown draped on the form. Images of Luke flashed through her mind—his shy smile, the way he spoke about his work, and his resilience despite losing an eye. As the creative gears in her head began turning for the first time in weeks.

"Luke deserves a story," she murmured, grabbing her sketchbook and pencil. Her hand moved with purpose, lines flowing together like a visual symphony. She could almost hear the rustle of silk and the gasps of awe from the fashion world.

Candace knew she had found her muse but decided to keep this newfound inspiration a secret, tucking her sketchbook away with a determined glint in her eyes. As she worked on her gown late into the night, she couldn't help but smile at the thought of Luke and their unexpected connection.

Chapter Ten



Hero Search and Rescue

Luke shifted uncomfortably in his seat, trying to find the best angle for his missing eye. He glanced over at Candace, her black hair shimmering under the sunlight and hazel eyes focused on Pastor Bowman.

“Love is not just an emotion,” Pastor Bowman began, his voice strong and warm, “It’s an action: patient, kind, long-suffering,” he continued.

Luke couldn’t help but feel a sense of peace wash over him as Pastor Bowman spoke. He closed his remaining eye and took a deep breath, feeling grateful for the way his life had taken a turn recently.

Candace nodded along, her petite, curvy frame swaying slightly to the rhythm of Pastor Bowman’s words. She reached over and took his hand, intertwining her fingers with his and giving it a gentle squeeze. Luke looked over at her and felt a surge of gratitude fill his heart.

As Pastor Bowman continued to speak, Luke couldn’t help but reflect on how far he had come since the accident that took his eye. He had struggled with feelings of anger and despair for months, but through the love and support of those around him at his church back home, he had found the strength to keep going. Now, sitting here with Candace by his side, he knew that there was a chance he was finding the beginning of what could be love, and he was equally grateful for that.

After Pastor Bowman finished his sermon, a few people stopped them to talk and exchange pleasantries. It was clear

that Candace was well-liked by the congregation, and it made Luke proud to know that he had found someone who shared his faith and values.

Candace smiled at each of them graciously, her manner warm and inviting. She spoke with an easy confidence, her words brightening the mood of those around her. Every time she looked over at him with a gentle smile, Luke felt his heart swell with admiration for her.

Once the small crowd dispersed, they both said their goodbyes to Pastor Bowman before heading out into the bright afternoon sunshine.

“Did you enjoy the sermon today?” Candace asked as they walked across the street hand in hand.

He nodded. “It was good to hear how God views love and how we should inspire to demonstrate it.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she said, squeezing his hand.

Luke couldn’t help but think about how lucky he was. He had found someone who accepted him for all of his flaws, someone who cared for him despite his disability, and most importantly—someone who shared his faith and beliefs.

“You ready for lunch?” Candace asked. “I was thinking we could head over to the diner.”

“That sounds good to me,” he said as they made their way across the street.

Once inside the diner, they were immediately welcomed by one of the smiling servers. “You guys want to sit at the counter, or do you want a booth?”

“Booth,” they both said in unison, causing them to laugh lightly.

“Follow me,” the server told them as she guided them to the back, then handed them menus. She returned a couple of moments later with two glasses of water.

“What can I get you?”

Candace ordered a Cobb salad while Luke ordered his usual burger.

Conversation was easy between them as they shared stories about their lives back home and laughed over funny memories from their childhoods.

The server returned with their food and set the plates on the table. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Thanks, we’re good,” Luke replied, his green eye flicking between her and Candace. He took a bite of his burger, savoring the juicy beef and melted cheese.

“Pastor Bowman really knows how to deliver a sermon, huh?” Candace said, twirling a curly fry around her fork. “I have to admit, I never really took to the pastor at the church I attend in Dallas.”

“Not every pastor can be as uplifting as Pastor Bowman,” Luke admitted. “I have a good church in Wilmont, but there’s something special about the Hero Church.”

“You know, Luke,” Candace started, hazel eyes flicking up to meet his gaze, “I haven’t always been this outgoing and friendly.”

“Really?” Luke asked, genuinely surprised. He couldn’t imagine Candace being anything other than the vibrant woman he’d come to know.

“Yeah, I had a tough time up until recently,” she confessed as a sadness settled into her eyes. “My ex, Chad, always compared me to other designers. Made me feel like I wasn’t good enough.”

“Chad’s an idiot,” Luke declared without hesitation. “You’re incredibly talented, Candace.”

“Thanks,” she smiled, a hint of pink creeping into her tan cheeks. “But how do you even know that? It’s not like you’ve seen any of my designs.”

“That isn’t exactly true,” he confessed. “I looked you up after we first met, and I saw some of your work online.”

Her eyes rounded as a small smile curved her lips. “Really? You were that interested in me?”

He nodded. “I was scared, not uninterested.”

“And for the record, I saw some interviews with that Chad guy, and you could do a lot better. He seems like a complete jerk,” Luke pointed out.

“Yeah, I know. It took me a while to see that. And it still left some scars, you know?”

“I understand,” Luke nodded, taking a slow sip of his milkshake. “Can I tell you something, too?”

“Of course,” Candace encouraged, leaning in slightly.

“Most of my dates haven’t lasted more than an hour,” he admitted, running a hand through his blond hair. “I’ve had some real disasters.”

“Like what?” Candace asked with curiosity.

“This one time,” Luke chuckled with a shake of his head, “a woman screamed when she saw my eye patch and threw her drink in my face.”

“Yikes,” Candace winced, shaking her head. “You deserve so much better than that, Luke.”

“Thanks,” he smiled, warmth blooming in his chest as he reached out and squeezed her hand in his own. In that moment, with their shared vulnerability, Luke felt closer to Candace than he’d ever felt to anyone else.

“Ready for the check?” the server asked, appearing at their table with a friendly smile.

“Sure,” Luke replied, handing her his credit card. He turned to Candace and hesitated for a moment before asking, “Would you like to go out tonight? On an official second date?”

Candace’s eyes lit up, and she grinned. “I’d love that.”

“Great,” Luke beamed, feeling a surge of excitement. “And make sure to bring Lace. Our dogs get to come along on this one.”

After they left the diner, they headed back to the B&B to get ready for their date. The anticipation built as they prepared separately, each eager to see the other again in a more intimate setting.

In his room, Luke stood in front of the mirror, adjusting his shirt collar. Even though this was their second date, he couldn't shake the nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach. Was it always going to be like this? Was this how it felt to fall in love?

As the sun began to set, Luke waited for Candace in the B&B's cozy living room. When she appeared at the top of the stairs in a pair of black jeans and a plum sweater, he felt his breath catch in his throat. "Wow," he breathed, taking in her stunning appearance. "You look great in that color."

"Thanks," Candace blushed, making her way down the stairs with Lace tucked away under one arm. Her eyes landed on the wicker basket in his hand as she asked, "What's that?"

"I had Avery make us dinner so we could take it along with us." Offering his arm, he asked, "Shall we?"

"Where are we headed?" Candace asked, her curiosity piqued as they made their way out of the B&B with Blitz by Luke's side.

"You'll see," he smirked, keeping their destination a secret as he led Candace to his truck. "I've got something special planned," he said, opening the door for her.

"Really?" Candace replied, eyebrows raised as she climbed inside and placed Lace on her lap. "I can't wait."

Luke let Blitz jump in from his side, then deposited himself into the driver's seat. As they drove through town, the dogs wagged their tails in anticipation of the adventure that lay ahead for all of them.

"Here we are," Luke announced, pulling up to the edge of a serene lake. Moonlight shimmered on the water's surface, casting a magical glow over everything.

"Wow, it's beautiful," Candace breathed, stepping down from the truck.

“Let’s find a spot,” he suggested, his one eye twinkling with excitement.

They spread a cozy blanket near the water, the dogs roaming happily nearby.

“You thought of everything,” Candace praised.

“Wait until you see what’s in this,” Luke said, revealing the contents of the picnic basket. “Only the best for tonight.”

“Aw, you had her make all my favorites,” Candace exclaimed, clearly touched by the thoughtful gesture. “How did you know?”

“Like I said, I looked you up. One of your interviews mentioned some of your favorite foods.”

Inside, there was a strawberry and pecan salad, a pastrami on rye sandwich, and a dark chocolate cake along with a bottle of champagne.

Once they both had a plate of food and a glass filled with the bubbly, they enjoyed their meal.

After several bites, Candace declared, “Everything’s delicious. Avery really outdid herself.”

“Agreed,” Luke concurred, mouth full of salad. “Avery’s a culinary genius. I’ve never would’ve tried any of this before, but she’s converted me.”

“So no more, just burgers and vanilla ice cream?” Candace joked.

“Hey now, don’t take away what I love just because I said this isn’t all bad,” Luke chuckled, feigning offense.

“Okay, you’re right. I’m just glad you agreed to try something new.”

“That’s because you bring that out in me. Every moment I spend with you, I’m ready for a new adventure,” he admitted.

“Good, because I feel the same way with you,” she agreed with an enticing smile.

As they ate and chatted, the moon climbed higher in the sky, casting luminous beams everywhere. Finishing their meal, they decided to walk along the water's edge, the dogs splashing playfully in the shallows.

"Being here with you, it's hard to believe all that's happened in the past," Candace confessed, her eyes searching his.

"Me too," Luke admitted. "It's like...everything worked together so we would be here right in this moment, together."

"Who would've thought?" Candace said softly, her gaze locked with his.

At that moment, as if drawn by an invisible force, their lips met under the moonlight. The pull between them was undeniable; their kiss was passionate and electric, full of promise for their future.

Candace's eyes fluttered shut as Luke swept her up into his arms, his heart pounding so fast he thought it might explode from the intensity of their connection.

The couple slowly pulled away after several moments, looking into each other's eyes with an unspoken understanding. They didn't need words to express how they felt; everything was said with just a look.

Candace smiled up at him, her heart overflowing with emotion. "Better than I could have ever imagined," she whispered softly, reaching up to caress his face.

"No kidding," he replied gruffly, his voice husky with emotion. He bent down and kissed her again, this time with more passion than before.

The dogs barked excitedly around them as if they knew something special was happening, but Luke couldn't focus on anything more than the woman he was falling for hard and fast.

After a little more time passed, they pulled apart and decided to continue their walk. As the moon's reflection shimmered on the lake, casting a mesmerizing glow, Candace let out a small chuckle. "I have to tell you, it's refreshing to

actually go on a date that isn't awful. Did I ever tell you about that time Chad accidentally spilled wine all over me?" Candace asked, her hazel eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Really?" Luke chuckled. "That sounds awful."

"It was. Picture this. A candlelit dinner, fancy Mediterranean restaurant...and then—" She mimed a glass getting knocked over and splashing imaginary liquid everywhere. "Red wine all over the first dress I ever designed under my own design label—and it happened to be white."

"Oh no, I can't believe that," Luke said, wincing at the thought.

"It was mortifying," Candace sighed with a frown. "And the worst part, Chad said at least my basic dress got a much-needed makeover."

Luke shook his head as he growled out, "What a creep. I know you don't probably want to hear this, but he did you a favor by breaking up with you."

"I didn't think so at the time, but come to think of it, you're right. He was awful."

"Speaking of makeovers, I'm thinking of getting a new eye patch," Luke gestured to the black one he was currently wearing.

"Really?" She looked at him with curiosity. "Any particular reason?"

"Ah, just figured it's time for a change," he shrugged. "Maybe something more...fashionable? What do you think?"

"Interesting idea," Candace mused. "I mean, why not turn it into a statement piece?"

"Exactly," Luke exclaimed, his excitement evident. "Maybe you can help me pick one out?"

"Better yet, what if I design you a couple?" she offered, extending her hand to seal the agreement.

"That would be awesome," he said, taking her hand in his. As they sat there, their hands intertwined, Luke felt a warmth

spread through his chest. He swallowed hard, realizing that their relationship had become so much more important to him than he'd ever thought possible. He looked at Candace, her black hair framed against the night sky, and realized with startling clarity that he was falling for this woman. Hard.

“Hey, Candace?” he said hesitantly.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For tonight and for everything,” he confessed, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Luke,” she replied softly, her gaze meeting his. “You don’t need to thank me. I’m just as grateful for you.”

“Still,” he insisted, “I wanted you to know that I’m so glad you came into my life.”

“I do, and it goes both ways,” she said, her smile lighting up her face. “Now, come on, let’s race back before the dogs eat all the leftovers.”

“Challenge accepted,” Luke declared, and they sprinted along the shoreline, laughter filling the air.

As they collapsed onto the blanket, Luke knew this was a night he’d never forget—a night that marked the beginning of something wonderful between them. For the first time in a long while, his heart soared with the hope that he wasn’t going to be alone for the rest of his life. That despite his missing eye, he could find happiness and love. All it took was the right woman, and he found her when he met Candace.

Chapter Eleven



Hero Search and Rescue

Bells chimed as the dress shop door opened, sunlight flooding in like a warm hug. Candace smiled, her fingers working with practiced ease on a delicate seam for a dress that was being picked up later that day. She glanced up as a customer slipped inside, her eyes widening with recognition.

“Michelle,” she exclaimed, quickly setting aside her work. “What brings you here?”

“Hey, Candace,” Michelle greeted as she came up to the counter. “I was just checking in to see how it’s been going since you’ve been watching the place.”

“Busy, but great. Everyone’s missed Tilly, though, including me. It’ll be nice to have her back tomorrow.”

“That’s good. That’s good,” Michelle mumbled as she glanced around the room awkwardly.

“Is there anything else? Something I can help you with?” Candace pressed.

Fidgeting with the edge of her purse strap, she finally admitted, “I need a dress for something coming up tonight.”

“Oh really? What’s the occasion?” Candace questioned with an arch of her eye.

“I have a...date,” Michelle confessed. “Normally, I would just wear a pair of jeans and a blouse I had lying around, but that hasn’t seemed to be so successful the last few times, so I thought maybe I’d try a dress this time.”

Candace grinned, delighted to hear that her friend was putting in such an effort. “Well then, we’re going to have to pick out something perfect for you.” She led Michelle over to a rack of dresses, pulling out a few options to try on. Michelle looked hesitant, but Candace could see the excitement bubbling just under the surface.

As they worked through the dresses, Candace couldn’t help but probe about the date. “So, how did you meet the lucky guy?”

Michelle blushed with a shrug. “Just from a dating app. No big deal.”

“You never know. He could be the one,” Candace challenged.

“Like you and Luke?” Michelle challenged back. “Everyone in town is talking about it.”

“It’s still pretty new,” Candace told her friend, but even as she tried to minimize what was going on, she knew that it didn’t matter how fresh the relationship was. She was falling for Luke, and deep down, she knew whatever was going on between them was special.

“Well, like you said, you never know,” Michelle pointed out.

“How about this one?” Candace suggested as she held up a little black dress. “Everyone should have one of these in their wardrobe.”

“Sure, why don’t I try it on.” Michelle took the garment and headed into the dressing room.

When Michelle came out of the room, it was clear that the dress was just right. It flattered Michelle’s curves and made her blonde hair and hazel eyes pop. Michelle twirled in front of the mirror, grinning from ear to ear. “I feel amazing,” she said, her confidence soaring.

As Michelle left the shop with her new dress in hand, Candace felt a sense of satisfaction wash over her. “I think I did a really good job for Michelle, Lace. Don’t you?” she asked as she glanced down at her labradoodle.

“Arf,” her canine companion replied back.

“I’m glad you agree,” Candace said with a smile.

It was moments like these - helping her friends feel beautiful and confident - that made her love her job even more. Who knew? Maybe this date would be the one for Michelle. Candace went back to her sewing, her heart full of hope and optimism for the future.

After a couple of hours, Candace sighed with relief as she watched the young woman take the red dress away, pleased with its fit and style. She smiled to herself, feeling a sense of accomplishment that she had been able to please Tilly’s customer so well.

Now that the customer was gone, she returned to her sketches, taking one final look at them before sending them off for Scarlett’s approval. She ran her fingertips over the fabric samples and drawings, remembering how much time and effort it had taken to get just the right combination of colors and textures.

Then there was Luke—his kind eyes and gentle smile were never far from her mind when working on this design. He inspired this dress, a mix of playfulness and elegance that Candace knew would make any woman feel beautiful. With a smile, she hit send on the email containing the sketches, hoping that Scarlett would find it as perfect as she did, and explained that the samples would arrive the next day.

She allowed herself a few moments to bask in the glow of satisfaction before getting back to work.

As Candace put the finishing touches on her last alteration, the bell above the door chimed. She looked up to see none other than Luke himself walking through the threshold. Her heart thumped in her chest as she took in his tall, muscular frame and easy grin.

“Candace,” he said, his voice deep and smooth. “I had a break and decided to come by and see how you’re doing.”

“That’s sweet of you. I’m about to wrap up for lunch. Care to join me over at the diner?”

“That sounds nice,” he told her as she closed up the shop and put Lace in her purse.

As they walked toward the diner, Candace couldn't help but steal glances at Luke. She had been crushing on him for days now, and every time he was around her, she felt her heart skip a beat. She had never felt this way about anyone before - the way his strong hand felt when it took hers in his, the way his rich and masculine scent enveloped her - it was intoxicating, to say the least.

They entered the diner and took a seat in a booth near the window, and Candace placed Lace on her lap. She ordered a chicken Caesar salad, and Luke went with a burger and fries.

“So, how's your top-secret design coming along?” he asked as he took a sip of his Coke.

“I actually just sent the sketches to the client for approval.”

“I'm sure it'll be amazing,” he said, flashing her a grin.

Candace blushed at the compliment, her feelings for him growing stronger by the second.

As they chatted over their lunch, Candace found herself hanging on Luke's every word. He had a way of making her feel like the only person in the room, like nothing else mattered except their conversation. As the meal passed, she found herself enjoying every small moment between them - a slight brush of his hand against hers, a lingering gaze that made her toes curl.

Candace and Luke's lunch was coming to a close, and they finished off their meal with warm smiles and meaningful glances.

“I guess it's time to go,” Luke stated reluctantly as he paid the bill, then stood to leave.

Even though she didn't want to, Candace knew he was right. She placed Lace back in her purse as she teased with a laugh, “I guess work waits for no one.”

They walked back to Tilly's shop arm in arm, Candace relishing in the warmth of his touch as they made their way to

the dress shop.

He smiled at her and stepped back. "I'll see you tonight back at the B&B."

She nodded. "Looking forward to it."

He gave her a wave goodbye before turning around and walking away towards the academy, leaving Candace standing there feeling like she was floating on air.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly as a couple more customers drifted in and out of the shop. Candace was just getting ready to close up when Tilly arrived.

"I'm glad to see you're back. How did everything go with your father?" Candace asked as she finished up the last of her work.

"He's doing much better now, and I was able to arrange for his care for the time being," Tilly said with a nod. "Thank you so much for all your help, Candace. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I have to admit, I really enjoyed it."

"That makes me feel so much better about having had to ask you," Tilly stated with relief. "If you ever need anything from me, like a free place to display and sell your dresses, I would be more than happy to oblige."

"I'll keep that in mind."

After finishing at the shop, Candace walked back to the B&B, barely able to contain the excitement she felt at the thought of seeing him later that evening. When she arrived at the B&B, however, Luke wasn't there yet.

Part of her was glad because it gave her time to go and freshen up before their date. She hurried upstairs and let Lace out of her purse, then started getting ready in her bathroom.

There was a ding from her laptop that drew her attention, and she rushed over to open it. There was a reply from her email to Scarlett St. Claire. Her heart raced, anxiety gnawing at the pit of her stomach like a feral beast. "Please, Scarlett. Love it," she murmured to herself. Her finger hovered over the

keyboard, and with a deep breath, she clicked the button to open.

“Scarlett has changed her mind about the gown after seeing the final design. We regret to inform you that we will not be moving forward with your creation.”

The words were a dagger to Candace’s heart, slicing through her hopes and dreams with ruthless precision. Tears welled in her hazel eyes, spilling over uncontrollably as her world crumbled around her. She could hardly believe them, reading them over and over as if it would make a bit of difference.

“What am I going to do, Lace?” she asked with despair. “Everything was riding on this, and now it’s all gone.”

There was a buzz on her phone, and a message from Luke popped up. “I thought we were meeting downstairs? Did I misunderstand?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’m up to going out tonight,” she texted back.

“What’s wrong?” Luke typed back.

The last thing she wanted to do was admit to Luke what was going on, so she simply texted back. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Candace threw herself onto her bed and let out a gasp of despair. Tears streamed down her face as she curled up into a ball, letting the pain wash over her like a tidal wave. She couldn’t believe it; all of her hard work, all of the time she had spent searching for the right inspiration and then perfecting the design—all for nothing. What was she going to do?

Just then, there was a knock at the door. “Candace?” called Luke’s voice from outside. “Are you in there? Is everything okay?” When she didn’t respond right away, he added, “Can you please answer me? I’m really worried about you.”

Candace reluctantly rose to answer the door, wiping away tears as she went. She opened it to find Luke standing there, looking concerned.

“What’s wrong?” he asked gently.

Candace hesitated before replying, not wanting to burden him with her troubles. When she saw his kind expression, she couldn’t help but tell him the truth.

“Scarlett...she doesn’t want my dress,” Candace choked out between sobs. “My career...it’s over.”

“Hey, no,” Luke said, stepping closer and wrapping a strong arm around her trembling shoulders, holding her close while she continued to cry against his chest. He brushed away her tears with his fingertips and stroked her hair until, finally, Candace regained some composure and pulled away from him slightly. “One rejection doesn’t define your whole career. You’re an amazing designer, Candace. You’ll bounce back from this.”

“I don’t think I will. Everything was riding on this,” she lamented with a shake of her head.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured softly. “This must be really hard for you.”

“It is,” Candace said with a sniffle as she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue he had picked up from the nightstand. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. You’ll figure this out, I’m sure,” he insisted, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly.

She wanted to believe he was right, but she just couldn’t. “Luke, I have to go,” Candace blurted out, her mind racing as she pushed away from his embrace.

“Wait, what? Go where?” he asked, his green eye wide with confusion.

“Back to Dallas,” she said, tears streaming down her face, her hands trembling as they wiped them away. “I need to fix this mess, and I can’t do it while I’m here.”

“Let me help you,” Luke pleaded, reaching for her hand. “We can figure it out together.”

Candace's eyes darted around the room, searching for an answer that wouldn't come. Panic bubbled up inside her. "No, Luke," she said sharply, a harsh edge in her voice. "This is because I got distracted. If I had been focused solely on designing that dress like I should have, maybe it would have come out better. Instead, I let myself get caught up helping Tilly and spending time with you."

"Wait, what? You're blaming me." Luke's face fell, hurt etched in every line of his brow.

"Ever since we met, I've been distracted. I've let my guard down," Candace accused, more at herself than even him. "And now look what's happened. My career...it's ruined."

"Hey, I never wanted to be a burden," Luke stammered, his voice cracking. "You can't just blame me for everything."

"I know, I know," Candace sobbed, clutching her head in frustration. "But I just can't do this anymore. I need to focus on fixing my life."

"Is that really what you want?" Luke asked, his voice barely audible.

"Please, Luke," she whispered, her heart breaking at the pain she was causing him, but unable to stop herself because nothing made sense at the moment. "Just...understand. I need to go."

"Fine," he said quietly, stepping back, and averting his gaze. "Go. I won't stand in your way. Do what you have to."

"Thank you," she managed to choke out as she gestured for him to leave. "I have to pack."

She didn't let herself dwell on how it hurt to watch him walk away, but instead, focused on packing. She grabbed her bag with shaking hands and threw her items in it. She grabbed Lace and placed her in her purse. "We have to go back to Dallas now, Lace. There's nothing for us here anymore." With that, she rushed out of the B&B without looking back.

As she drove away, the laughter and love they had shared echoed around her, a bittersweet reminder of what she was leaving behind. Candace knew that if she wanted any chance

at salvaging her career, she had to let Luke go—even if it meant giving up a piece of her heart.

Chapter Twelve



Hero Search and Rescue

The big red “F” sprawled across Luke’s test paper seemed to mock him, taunting him with its boldness. His heart already ached from Candace’s rejection, and now it felt as though it was being crushed under the weight of failure.

“Rancourt,” Instructor Oakley barked, snatching the test from Luke’s trembling hands. “What the heck is this? I expected better from you.”

The K9 handler academy classroom went silent, all eyes on Luke as he bit his lip, struggling to find the words to explain himself. How could he? It was bad enough that Candace had walked out of his life, but now, his dreams of being a K9 handler were slipping through his fingers, too.

“Sorry, sir,” he murmured, fighting back the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

Blitz must have sensed his trepidation and rubbed his head against the side of his leg from where he was sitting beside him.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, Rancourt,” Oakley snapped, his blue eyes blazing with disappointment. “If you don’t get your act together, you’re never going to graduate from this academy.”

The harsh reality of Oakley’s words struck Luke like a punch to the gut. He couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe he didn’t have what it took to achieve his dream or find love. As he left the academy that day, his shoulders slumped, and his

head hung low. He couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever find happiness again.

"Hey, man," Will said, catching up to him as he trudged down the sidewalk. "Don't listen to Oakley. You'll bounce back from this."

"Will you just stop?" Luke snapped, surprising both himself and his friend with the sudden outburst. "I'm a one-eyed failure who can't even pass a stupid test. How am I supposed to find the right woman if I can't even find success?"

"Come on, Luke," Will urged, trying to remain positive. "You're just having a rough patch. We all have them. But you can't let that woman get in the way of your career. You were ranked #1 up until this test, which means you have it in you to do what you need to do to finish strong."

"Easy for you to say. You've never seemed to struggle here," Luke muttered, shoving his hands into his pockets, feeling the cold emptiness where Candace's hand used to be.

"Look, I know it's tough, and you may not believe this, but I struggle. I have dyslexia, so these written tests take everything I've got to maintain a decent average," Will admitted sheepishly. "But you'll get through this. You're strong, and you've got what it takes to become a great K9 handler. Just give yourself some time."

"Time," Luke repeated, the word sounding foreign and hollow on his lips. "Yeah, it would be nice if I had time, but I don't. Next week is the last week of the academy, which means time is running out." And deep down, he knew it wasn't just more time that he craved - it was Candace, her warmth, her laughter, her kiss.

"Trust me, time heals all wounds," Will assured him. "In the meantime, why don't we head over to 'The Rusty Hinge' where you can drown your sorrows."

Part of him knew it wasn't a good idea, but a bigger part of him was willing to do anything to numb the pain he was feeling inside. "Sure, let's go," Luke told his friend as they headed down the street.

The bar's neon sign flickered, casting a soft glow on the cracked pavement beneath Luke and Will's feet. Laughter and clinking glasses filtered through the door, inviting them in.

"Let's get you a drink," Will said, giving Luke a nudge as they entered.

"Good, because I could use it after the day I've had," Luke agreed as he scanned the bar, the dim lighting making his good eye squint. He barely registered the sticky floor beneath his shoes as they approached the counter, where Jeff was pouring a beer.

"Jeff, my man," Will thumped his hands on the bar as he gave the other man a wide grin. "Can we get a couple of beers here?"

"Sure thing, fellas." Jeff slid two frosty mugs across the counter with expert precision. With a tilt of his head, he then asked, "What's got you so down, Luke?"

"Nothing," Luke muttered, taking a swig of his beer as he tried to avoid talking about his problems.

"Come on, man," Jeff pressed, leaning forward conspiratorially. "You can tell me. You know bartenders make the best counselors."

After another gulp, Luke sighed. "Candace Kealy," he admitted. "I screwed up, and now she's gone. Because things went so bad with her, I lost my focus at the academy. I know I should be more upset about that, but it's Candace that keeps consuming my thoughts."

"Ah, women," Jeff said, shaking his head. "You know what I always say? They only complicate things. That's why I stay single."

"Jeff's got a point," Will chimed in. "Keep it casual with the ladies, especially the ones like Candace who live in that high fashion world. They like to slum it with guys like us, but they never settle down with us."

Luke stared into his beer, considering their words. His heart ached at the thought of casual encounters when all he

wanted was Candace's warmth and understanding. He took another swig, hoping to drown the memories that haunted him.

"Maybe you're right," he conceded, though his heart remained unconvinced. He knew the pain wouldn't subside, no matter how much he drank. For tonight, at least, he could pretend to agree with his friends and try to forget the emptiness inside him.

"You know what gets you over an ex?" Jeff questioned with a smirk and a wag of his eyebrows. "Finding a new gal to spend time with."

Luke glanced around the bar, trying to convince himself that Jeff and Will were right. He spotted a woman sitting alone at the bar, her golden hair spilling over her shoulders like a waterfall. Taking a deep breath, he approached her, hoping for a casual conversation to prove his friends' point.

"Hey," he said, forcing a smile. "What brings you here tonight?"

"Uh, drinks?" she replied, raising an eyebrow. "Why else would I be at a bar?"

"Right, of course," Luke stammered, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. "I meant...what's your favorite drink?"

"Whiskey sour," she answered, not looking particularly interested. "Yours?"

"Beer," he mumbled, suddenly very aware of how inadequate he felt.

"Exciting," she deadpanned before turning her attention back to her drink.

"Nice weather we're having," Luke tried again, desperate for something to fill the silence.

"Really, you're going to go with the weather," she chastised, her eyes glued to the glass in front of her. "Very original, said no one ever."

"Okay then," Luke said, defeated. He walked away, feeling worse than before. This casual conversation thing wasn't working out, and all it did was remind him of how much he

missed Candace. Everything was always so easy with her. She made him feel comfortable, and he doubted he would ever feel that way with another woman.

“So, how did it go?” Will questioned with a hopeful grin as he rejoined the men.

“Horrible,” Luke grumbled as he twisted his mug in his hands.

“Well, there’s plenty more where she came from,” Jeff encouraged. “Try a brunette this time.”

He couldn’t take it anymore. Downing the last of his beer, he muttered a goodbye to Will and Jeff and practically sprinted out the door. The night air hit him like a cold slap in the face, but it did little to numb the pain in his chest.

Back at the B&B, memories of Candace haunted every corner. The cozy times they had shared now felt empty without her presence. He sank onto the bed, burying his face in his hands. “Darn it,” he whispered into the darkness. “Should I have gone after her? Was letting her walk away a mistake?” But as much as he wanted to chase after Candace, part of him held back, unsure if she’d even want him back. For now, all he could do was cling to the memories and wonder what might have been.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Luke’s heartache had only intensified. He couldn’t shake the feeling of emptiness that had settled in his chest. Every time he thought about Candace, it felt like a vise was tightening around his heart.

“Morning,” Avery said cheerfully as Luke dragged himself to the table. Blitz wagged his tail, sensing his sadness, but eager to help.

“Hey,” Luke mumbled, pouring himself a cup of coffee. The rich aroma used to bring him comfort, but now it only reminded him of sharing quiet mornings with Candace before they both went off to work.

“Rough night?” Jenesa asked, raising an eyebrow as she offered him a pastry.

“Something like that,” he replied, clutching the coffee mug tightly and shrugging away the food.

“Luke, you gotta talk about this,” Avery urged, concern etched on her face.

“What good would that do?” he questioned with doubt. “It won’t fix anything.”

“But it’s not good to keep it all bottled up,” Jenesa pointed out. “Take it from an expert. I was the queen of it back when I lived in New York. I thought it proved how tough I was, but all it did was make me bitter.”

Luke thought about her words, wondering if she was right. After a couple of moments, he finally decided to open up. “I don’t know what to do anymore,” he admitted, his voice cracking. “I miss Candace so much, but I don’t know if she’d even want me back.”

“Have you tried reaching out to her?” Avery asked.

“Would she even answer? She’s the one who walked away,” he pointed out.

“You know, from what I hear, she was going through a tough time. Maybe she feels bad about what happened but doesn’t know how to reach out,” Jenesa suggested, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Or maybe Jeff and Will are right,” he sighed. “Maybe I’m better off without her.”

“Luke, your heart knows the answer. You just need to listen to it,” Avery pointed out.

He stared into his coffee, lost in thought. A part of him wanted to believe Jenesa and Avery, but another part feared rejection. What if he reached out to Candace, and she simply ignored him? What if she had already moved on?

“Luke,” Jenesa snapped her fingers in front of his face, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“Sorry, I just...I don’t know.”

“Give yourself some time,” Jenesa advised. “But don’t wait too long, or you might miss your chance.”

“Candace is a good person and worth fighting for,” Avery added.

“Thanks, guys,” he said, offering them a small smile.

“Anytime. Now, why don’t we get some breakfast into you? You look like you could use it,” Avery told him as she placed a heaping plate of food in front of him.

“Sounds good,” he agreed, digging into the eggs.

As they sat around the table enjoying the breakfast, Luke tried to focus on the flavors of the delicious meal Avery had prepared. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t shake the image of Candace’s face from his mind. His heart ached for her, but a part of him was terrified it only went one way.

With a heavy heart, Luke finished breakfast and said his goodbyes to the women. He thanked them once more for their support before heading back to the academy. Upon arriving, he found himself unable to focus on work the same way he had before. Every moment without Candace felt like an eternity, and thoughts of her kept clinging to him no matter how hard he tried to focus on something else.

Luke and Blitz had been running drills together all morning. Luke provided commands to guide his K9 partner, and everything seemed to be going smoothly until a piece of fake bomb flew off course and collided with the Scottish terrier’s side. Blitz yelped in pain and collapsed to the ground, causing Luke’s heart to seize in his chest.

Everyone at the academy stopped what they were doing and sprinted over to see what they could do. All their voices were background noise as Luke bent down and carefully lifted Blitz into his arms. “It’s going to be okay, boy,” he promised his partner.

Without waiting for anyone else, he hurried from the academy and over to the veterinarian hospital next door,

praying that the accident hadn't done catastrophic damage to his partner.

"What's going on? How can I help?" the doctor asked as Luke came charging into the building.

He quickly recapped what happened, and the doctor gestured for him to carry him to the back. He placed him on a metal table and stepped back. Unable to contain his worry, he blurted out, "He's going to make it, right?"

"I have to examine him," the doctor explained. "Why don't you wait outside."

Luke paced nervously outside the examination room, the sound of his boots clicking against the linoleum and echoing off the walls. He felt terrible. He should have been paying more attention during their drill, but instead, he had let himself get distracted by thoughts of Candace again. Guilt settled heavily in his stomach, but all he could do now was wait and hope for good news.

He had been waiting for what felt like hours, desperately hoping for good news about Blitz. Suddenly, the doors opened, revealing the veterinarian with an expressionless face.

Luke sprang forward, his heart pounding as he waited for news about his partner. "How is he?" he asked anxiously.

"He's going to be just fine," the vet said with a small smile. "The injury was superficial, and Blitz should be back to work in a couple of days. We'll keep him overnight just to be sure. You can pick him up in the morning if there aren't any complications."

Luke released a heavy sigh of relief, thankful that Blitz would be okay. "Thank you so much, Doctor," he said gratefully before turning back to head home for some much-needed rest.

As he walked away from the clinic, one thought lingered in the back of his mind: he was determined never to allow himself to become distracted again while on duty. He couldn't risk having another accident like this happen again.

For the next several days, Luke devoted all of his energy toward taking care of Blitz—making sure he received proper nutrition, helping him move around when necessary, and keeping him company. He was grateful that his instructors told him they could make up the missing work over the weekend, and even though it meant a ton more work, he was willing to do whatever it took to get them back on track.

Chapter Thirteen



Hero Search and Rescue

Anxiety tied knots in Candace’s stomach as she contemplated what to do. She needed a plan to save her fashion career, and nothing she seemed to come up with was good enough.

“Maybe I could start designing for pets,” Candace mused aloud, trying to inject some humor into the situation. Her black hair fell across her face, and she blew it out of her eyes with an exasperated huff. “What do you think of that, Lace?”

“Arf,” she barked, reminding her that she didn’t do doggy outfits.

“I know, it’s a stupid idea,” she grumbled as she threw herself into an armchair in the corner of her living room.

“Come on, Candace, you’re better than that,” Isabella said from the couch, flipping through a fashion magazine. “Besides, who would put their dog in a ball gown?”

“Hey, stranger things have happened,” Candace shot back, half-smiling at her friend’s wit. She appreciated Isabella’s ability to lighten the mood when things looked bleak, but even her friend’s humor couldn’t diminish the trouble Candace was in.

“Okay, okay,” Isabella said, putting down the magazine. “But seriously, we need a real game plan here. Something that’ll get you back in the spotlight.”

“Like what?” Candace asked, hazel eyes wide with desperation. “I’ve tried everything I can think of. Scarlett won’t return my calls or emails. If we were dating, the only

way to describe what she's doing to me is that she's ghosting me.”

Candace sighed as the mention of dating reminded her of Luke. The thought of him sent a wave of regret washing over her, and she was certain she'd never be able to fix the damage she'd done when she left Hero. She hadn't realized how much the relationship meant to her until it was too late, but it didn't matter now. She had to focus on her career.

“Maybe I could organize some sort of charity fashion show,” Candace suggested, her mind racing with possibilities. “That might get me some good press.”

Isabella nodded thoughtfully. “That could work,” she said slowly. “But don't you think that would take a lot of time and effort, not to mention money you don't have?”

Candace sighed again, her head dropping into her hands in exhaustion. She was already so drained from trying to figure out a plan that the thought of taking on such a huge project made her feel overwhelmed. Plus, she wasn't sure if anyone would even show up to such an event—or even want to donate their clothes or services for free. It felt like a long shot and a desperate one at that.

“I guess you're right,” Candace said after a few minutes of contemplation. “I need to think of something else.”

Isabella smiled sympathetically at Candace before giving her a reassuring pat on the back. “I know we can come up with something,” she said encouragingly.

Candace returned Isabella's smile with one of determination before standing up from the armchair and walking over to the desk in the corner of the room. She opened up all the drawers and began searching for paper and pens so that she could start making a list of other options.

“Wait,” Isabella said, snapping her fingers. “There's a fundraiser going on this weekend. The one for the new art museum? Scarlett's rumored to be attending since she's visiting family in town.”

“You’re certain?” Candace’s heart raced, wondering if this was a sign that maybe she could turn things around with the actress.

“Oh, I am,” Isabella confirmed as she turned her phone around and presented the list of attendees. “I got this from my cousin, who’s the manager of the catering company. They were given the guest list with their food allergies and restrictions. Scarlett has a nut allergy.”

“That’s interesting,” Candace murmured as she wondered what she could do with the new information.

“Why don’t you go and talk to Scarlett in person? Maybe you can convince her to reconsider. Or at least find out why she didn’t like your design and see if you can alter it to suit what she wants.”

“Isabella, you’re a genius,” Candace exclaimed, engulfing her friend in a bear hug. “This could be my chance to turn things around.”

“Of course it is, and I’m coming with you for moral support.”



AT THE FUNDRAISER the next day, Candace smoothed down her dress nervously as she searched for Scarlett. The glitzy event was in full swing, with laughter and champagne flowing freely.

“Excuse me, may I speak with you, Scarlett?” Candace asked, finally spotting the actress surrounded by a group of admirers.

“It depends on who you are,” Scarlett replied with a playful smile.

“Oh, Candace Kealy,” she stammered. “I’m the designer whose gown you rejected.”

“Rejected?” Scarlett raised an eyebrow. “Oh, that must be some mistake. I never saw your design, let alone rejected it.”

“Really?” Candace’s eyes widened in surprise. “But the email I received from you said you weren’t interested.”

“I never sent an email to you. As a matter of fact, I never saw your design,” Scarlett admitted.

“That’s so weird. I have it right here,” she opened her phone and showed her the email.

“Ah,” Scarlett nodded, understanding dawning on her face. “Must’ve been a miscommunication from my manager. He sends out blanket responses all the time for me, and he mentioned wanting to go in a different direction.”

“So, you’re not interested in my design?” Candace asked with disappointment.

“I didn’t say that,” Scarlett quickly corrected. “I love the designs you posted on Instagram, and that’s why I reached out to you in the first place.”

“Then would you like to see my design now?” Candace asked, hope flickering in her hazel eyes, as she clicked the file at the end of the email.

“Sure, why not,” Scarlett replied, her curiosity piqued as she looked at the image. The actress’s eyes widened as she took it in. “Oh, wow. This is absolutely stunning. I would love to wear this on the red carpet for my upcoming award nomination.”

“Really?” Candace couldn’t help but grin. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Cross my heart,” Scarlett assured her. “Now, let’s get things sorted so you can start working on it as soon as possible. I’ll need it by the end of the week.”

“Thank you,” Candace said, feeling a rush of relief and excitement. As they exchanged contact information, the first person she wanted to tell about her success was Luke. She could almost feel his strong arms around her, sharing in her joy.

Reality then set in. She remembered the hurt in his one green eye when she’d left him behind, and she knew she had

ruined things with him. Her stomach twisted into knots, knowing he probably wouldn't forgive her for what she'd done.

"Is everything all right?" Scarlett asked, noticing her sudden shift in mood.

"Uh, yeah," Candace deflected, forcing a smile. "Just...a lot going on. This is all so overwhelming but in a good way."

"Understandable," Scarlett nodded knowingly. "But get ready, Candace Kealy, because your life's about to change forever. Once everyone sees this dress on the red carpet, you'll be booked solid for the next year."

"I look forward to it," she told the actress with a nod.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your evening. Just make sure you send me all the details we need to get started on that dress."

"Will do," Candace replied, trying to shake off the lingering ache in her chest. She waved goodbye to Scarlett, her mind racing with thoughts of Luke and the bittersweet victory she now got to celebrate alone.



THE NEXT DAY, Candace stared at the assortment of fabrics spread across her workspace. With a sigh, she picked up a soft leather piece and began to cut out eye patches. She spent hours carefully stitching them together, each one more elaborate than the last. It was her way of apologizing to Luke, trying to make amends and keep the promise she made them before she ran away.

"Six eye patches?" Isabella raised an eyebrow as she entered the room. "What's with the pirate couture?"

"Luke," Candace muttered, not looking up from her work. "I want to send these to him."

"Ah," Isabella nodded, understanding the situation. "You know, you could just talk to him instead."

“Can’t,” Candace shook her head. “I hurt him too much.” She held up the finished eye patches, admiring her handiwork. “These will have to do.”

At the post office, Candace clutched the package tightly, her palms sweating. As she approached the counter, doubt crept in. Would Luke even want these now? Frowning, she turned on her heel and started to walk out. Deciding she had nothing left to lose, she then placed the package in the drop bin. At least this way, Luke would know that she still cared. It might be too late, but she would have more regrets if she didn’t try to fix things between them.

Back at her apartment, she texted Isabella. “I went through with it. I sent the eye patches to Luke.”

“Good for you. If nothing else, it will help you move on one way or the other.”

From the undertones of the text, she could tell her friend didn’t seem to think it was going to go the way Candace wanted. She tried to ignore it and focus on something else. “I’ll talk to you later. I need to work on Scarlett’s dress.”

“Good. You’re a talented designer,” Isabella messaged back, clearly trying to be supportive. “You don’t need anyone else to be successful.”

“Right. I’ve got this,” Candace texted back, but deep down, she knew it would be hard without Luke by her side. He had been her rock, her inspiration, and now he was gone.



CANDACE SAT at her sewing machine, the hum of its motor filling the room. The gown for Scarlett lay before her, a vision in shimmering satin and intricate details. She pressed her foot down and focused on the task at hand.

She was lost in her work when the door buzzer sounded, breaking her concentration. She stood up and crossed the room to the intercom.

“Yes?”

“Hey, Candace. It’s Isabella,” a voice came through loud and clear. “I was just wondering how things are going? You haven’t called me in a few days, and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Candace sighed, feeling guilty that she hadn’t been in touch with her best friend. She had been so wrapped up in finishing Scarlett’s dress that she had let everything else slip to the wayside.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she replied into the speaker. “Just really busy working on this dress. Why don’t you come on up? I need a break anyway.”

“Okay,” Isabella said as Candace buzzed her into the building.

Isabella arrived at Candace’s apartment shortly, bearing coffee and pastries from a nearby bakery. The smell of freshly baked goods filled the room as they shared their updates.

“So, how’s the dress coming along?” Isabella asked as she stirred creamer into her coffee.

Candace smiled at her friend. “It’s coming along surprisingly well,” she said, gesturing to the gown that was draped on the nearby mannequin. “I’m almost finished.”

Isabella nodded approvingly and took a sip of her coffee. “That’s good to hear,” she said, setting down her cup. “But are you sure it’s healthy to put so much into this project without taking breaks? As far as I can tell, you haven’t taken a single break.”

Candace sighed and shrugged helplessly. “What else am I supposed to do?” she said, glancing over at Isabella with an expression of resignation on her face. “The deadline is short, and I don’t have the luxury of asking for an extension.”

Isabella nodded slowly in understanding, reaching out to squeeze Candace’s shoulder comfortingly. “I know,” she said softly. “Just make sure you take care of yourself too, okay? You can’t let your health suffer for this job.”

“I know, and Lace makes sure I take breaks. She demands her walks and feeding to be prompt,” Candace retorted, rolling

her eyes. “I’m lucky she lets me concentrate on the dress as much as she does.”

“Right, the dress,” Isabella said, nodding knowingly. “And it’s the perfect excuse to keep your mind from drifting to other things.”

“What things?” Candace asked with confusion. “I’ve only lived and breathed this dress for the past four days.”

“You’re not trying to block out thinking about a certain one-eyed K9 handler?”

“Nonsense,” Candace snapped, cheeks flushing as she averted her eyes. “I’m over him.”

“Uh-huh,” Isabella drawled, unconvinced. “You keep telling yourself that.”

“Fine, you know me too well,” Candace exclaimed, throwing her hands up in frustration. “I can’t stop thinking about him, okay? He’s a part of this gown, too, so when I work on it, all I can think about is how he inspired the design. I wish I could tell him how much he means to me.”

“Why don’t you then?” Isabella asked softly, her teasing tone gone.

“Because I made a mistake by running away,” Candace admitted, staring over at the dress. “And now I fear it’s too late to fix things.”

“Is it really too late?” Isabella prodded gently. “Or are you just scared?”

“Both?” Candace sighed, shoulders slumping. “I don’t want to lose him forever, but I’m afraid I already have. You know, he never responded to the eye patches I sent him.”

“Maybe he never got them?” Isabella asked with a raise of her eyebrows.

Tired of focusing on what she couldn’t have, she stood to her feet. “It doesn’t matter. I need to finish this dress.”

“All right,” Isabella agreed. “But promise me you’ll take care of yourself. I worry about you.”

“I promise,” Candace assured her friend, forcing a smile as she guided her friend to the door.

Once she was alone again, Candace settled into her chair, her eyes trained on the beautiful gown. Her breath hitched at the sight of it, and she could almost feel Luke’s presence. She remembered how he’d inspired her to create this masterpiece, and her heart ached at the thought of never seeing him again.

“Stop dwelling on something that’s never going to be,” she chastised herself.

“Arf,” Lace barked from beside her as if joining in on the rebuke.

“Exactly, Lace. I need to focus on my career. That’s the most important thing in my life, after all.”

“Arf,” her canine companion barked again, but this time she seemed offended.

“I’m sorry, I mean besides you, Lace. Of course, you mean the most,” Candace corrected as she bent over and rubbed the labradoodle’s head affectionately.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered her focus and began working. The hours flew by as she stitched together each intricate detail of the gown. Every so often, when exhaustion threatened to take over, Candace would pause for a moment to sip from a cup of coffee or snack on something light.

Still, Luke’s memory lingered in the back of Candace’s mind—a bittersweet reminder of what might have been. She wished things could have been different between them, that she had made better decisions where he was concerned. It was too late now, and all Candace could do was remember what might have been as she continued to sew the beautiful dress for someone else’s special moment.

Chapter Fourteen



Hero Search and Rescue

Luke sat in the academy classroom during his lunch break, the sunlight casting shadows across the worn hardwood floor. He stared at his phone, Candace's contact info displayed on the screen. His thumb hovered over the call button, but his hesitation was palpable.

"Come on, Luke. Just do it," he muttered to himself. Deep down, he feared that Candace had moved on. She was a rising star in the fashion world again, and he was just a trainee at the K9 handler academy. Who was he to think he could keep up with her?

He sighed and began scrolling through her social media profiles instead, searching for any indication of her current situation. As he flipped through photos of her attending various events in Dallas, he noticed her radiant smile and the laughter in her eyes. She looked so happy, so full of life. A pang of longing and disappointment shot through him.

"Hey, Luke, what's going on?" Will asked as he entered the room. He took one look at Luke's face and knew exactly what was happening. "You're looking at pictures of Candace again, aren't you?"

"Maybe," Luke admitted sheepishly.

"Man, you've got it bad," Will stated with a sigh. "Why don't you just reach out to her already? It seems no matter how hard you try, you can't seem to get over her."

“I wish it was that simple, but I don’t think I could handle it if she rejected me a second time.”

“Look,” Will said, sitting down beside him on the couch. “I can’t pretend to know what you’re going through, but I do know that you seemed exceedingly happy when you were with Candace. Since your relationship with her ended, you’ve been nothing but a shell.”

“I know, but it doesn’t change the fact that she’s the one who left, and she hasn’t chosen to reach out since,” Luke mumbled, unconvinced. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I have to do well on this next test, or I’ll lose two things that are really important to me.”

“I guess I’ll let you get back to your studying then,” Will said as he gestured to the book in Luke’s hands, but the way he said it, Will seemed to know Luke hadn’t been studying at all. He took a seat next to him and pulled out his own book as he got ready for their next lecture.

Luke took a deep breath, staring at the K9 handler textbook in front of him. Focus, he told himself. Last week at the academy. Just get through this.

“Hey, Rancourt,” called Tonya Bernard, another academy classmate, as he plopped down on the other side of Luke. “What ever happened with you and that fashion designer? You two were inseparable while she was here.”

“Did you mess it up?” chimed in Juan Ramirez from behind them as he took a seat.

“Enough,” Luke snapped, slamming his book shut. “It just...didn’t work out, okay?”

“Ouch,” Bernard whispered under her breath, wincing at Luke’s outburst. “Touchy subject.”

“Leave the guy alone,” Instructor Bowman interjected, stepping in to defuse the situation. “We’ve all got our own stuff to deal with.”

“Thanks, Instructor Bowman,” Luke muttered, embarrassed by his short temper.

“Anytime.” His mentor gave him a reassuring nod before returning to the front of the classroom to prepare for their next session.

“Focus,” Luke repeated to himself, opening the textbook once more. He needed to ace these exams and prove to himself that he could still succeed. Maybe, just maybe, if he proved it to himself, he could find the courage to reach out to Candace again.

First, he had to survive one more week of well-intentioned questions and pitying looks from everyone around town. It wouldn’t be easy, but Luke was nothing if not determined.

“All right, Rancourt,” he whispered to himself. “Let’s do this.”

After the long day at the academy, Luke decided he needed a cup of coffee and a change of scenery for his next cramming session.

He made his way over to The Coffee Loft with Blitz by his side.

Michelle smiled from behind the counter. “Hey, Luke, how’s it going?”

“Uh, pretty well,” Luke stammered, feeling his cheeks heat up.

“Have you heard from Candace?” Michelle asked with curiosity.

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, it didn’t work out between us.”

“Aw, I’m sorry to hear that Luke,” Michelle sympathized as she handed a cup of coffee across the counter to him.

“Have you heard from her?” Luke asked hesitantly.

There was a long pause before Michelle finally responded. “She sent me a text a couple of days ago just to check in.”

Luke wanted to ask Michelle if Candace asked about him, but he didn’t want to come off looking desperate. Instead, he asked, “Did she sound like she was doing okay?”

Michelle nodded. “From what I can tell from her text. She said she was able to get things back on track with her job. She also mentioned that she missed everyone back here, and she really enjoyed her time in Hero.”

“Thanks for the update.” Luke took a sip of his coffee to avoid making eye contact. He didn’t want Michelle to see that it hurt that Candace lumped him together with everyone else in Hero, if she even meant to include him at all. “Thanks for the coffee, Michelle. I’ll see you around.”

Determined to clear his head, Luke decided to take a walk through the park as he drank his coffee. With amusement, he watched as Blitz ran beside him, enjoying his playtime in the grass. They almost made it through without incident when Tilly spotted them while she was playing with her daughter on the swings.

“Luke,” Tilly exclaimed, pushing her child higher. “How are things with you? Have you heard from Candace?”

“Nope, she hasn’t reached out since she left town,” Luke admitted, feeling an all-too-familiar pang in his chest.

“Seriously?” Tilly frowned. “I thought you two were perfect together. She didn’t mention anything about it when we talked about her dress and how she fixed things with the client when she got back to Dallas.”

Luke forced a smile, trying to mask the ache in his heart. “I’m glad to hear it worked out for her.”

“You should reach out to her,” Tilly suggested. “I’m sure she would love to hear from you.”

Luke doubted that, but he wasn’t about to admit that out loud. “I have to go, Tilly, but have a nice day.”

As Luke walked away from Tilly, he couldn’t help but wonder if he had fought harder for their relationship, would things have turned out differently? There was no use dwelling on the what-ifs. He had to focus on his future—which clearly was going to be without Candace.

Still, he couldn’t shake off the feeling of being incomplete without her. Even though it had only been a short time since

she left town, it felt like an eternity. His heart ached with a hollow loneliness that no amount of coffee or walks in the park could fill.

He knew that reaching out to her wouldn't do any good—not if she hadn't even mentioned his name when talking to Tilly or Michelle. He also knew that staying silent wasn't going to bring her back either. He was stuck in limbo between speaking up and letting go, and it seemed like neither option was ideal.

“I need some food,” he told Blitz with a sigh. “Let's head over to the diner.”

As he slid onto a stool at the counter and Blitz settled into a spot at his feet, he noticed Mrs. Shomacker in one of the booths, her beady eyes already locked onto him.

“Luke,” she called out, rushing over to him with a sympathetic look on her face. “My goodness, I'm surprised to see you out and about after your tearful breakup with Candace. How are you doing, sweet boy?”

“I'm fine, Mrs. Shomacker,” Luke insisted as he tried to focus on his menu. “Sometimes things just don't work out.”

“Really?” She clucked her tongue disapprovingly. “Such a shame. You two seemed so happy together.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” Luke muttered as he waved the server over. “If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Shomacker, but I only have a little bit of time to eat before I need to get back to studying.”

The older woman's eyes rounded with irritation as she shrugged. “I guess that's what I get for trying to help out,” she grumbled before turning around and heading back to her booth.

After he placed his order, he tried his best to think about anything other than Candace, but even the diner reminded him of their time together. “You know what, can I get my food to go,” he said as he flagged down the server.

The young woman happily obliged, and after he received his bag of food, he took off for the B&B. He wanted to retreat

to the safety of his room. Hopefully, he could get some studying done without anyone bringing up Candace to him.

“Luke, there you are,” he heard Jenesa call out to him as he entered the Bumblebee. “I have something for you that came in the mail.”

He made his way over to the counter, his curiosity piqued since he hadn’t ordered anything. “What is it?”

Jenesa shrugged. “No idea. It doesn’t have a return address,” she told him as she handed over the item.

His fingers paused on the beat-up square package. The postage date was smudged as if it had taken an accidental detour through the postal service’s Bermuda Triangle.

“Hello there, mystery box,” Luke said, eyebrows raised. “What’ve you got for me?”

“What’s inside?” Jenesa asked with intrigue. “Do you have a secret admirer?” she teased.

“Highly doubt that,” he mumbled as he tore into the brown wrapping paper, then opened the box underneath. He was shocked when he found a collection of eye patches nestled inside. They were all different - leather, sequins, even one with a Hawaiian print.

“Those are really cool, Luke. Did you order them?” Jenesa inquired as she reached out to pick one of them up.

He shook his head as a note fluttered to the floor. Luke bent to pick it up. “So you can make your statement.” The words danced before his eyes, and in an instant, he knew they were from Candace. Her handwriting was unmistakable, each letter looping and swirling like a ribbon caught in the wind.

He handed the note over to Jenesa, who murmured, “Statement? What does that mean?” Jenesa’s brows furrowed together in confusion, trying to decipher the message.

“It’s from Candace. She promised to make me some eye patches so I can express myself rather than hide behind what happened,” he explained.

“Do you think this is a peace offering?” Jenesa questioned with hope in her voice.

“I don’t know,” he said, grabbing all of the eye patches and placing them back in the box. “I have to go. I need to study.”

Without waiting for Jenesa to respond, he turned around and rushed upstairs to his room, Blitz trotting to keep up with him.

Once he was alone, he held up one of the eye patches, admiring its intricate beadwork. It was a perfect blend of style and function, much like Candace herself. Suddenly, he felt an urge to call her, to hear her laugh, and thank her for the gift.

“Maybe it’s not too late,” Luke whispered to himself, hope flickering like a candle in the wind. “Maybe we can still make our statement together.”

He knew it was a long shot, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that Candace was reaching out to him.

“Get a grip, man,” he scolded himself, setting the eye patch down. “She’s moved on. This is just her way of giving us both closure. Her promise was the last thing hanging between us. Focus on your own life.”

With a heavy sigh, Luke placed the eye patches in a drawer, hoping by putting them out of sight, he could forget about them, and the woman who made them for him. As he tried to go about his day, the eye patches haunted him. Each time he caught sight of the drawer, his heart twisted with longing and unanswered questions. He couldn’t bear the thought of Candace sending them as a final farewell. The air felt heavy, suffocating him with memories of her laughter and the way her hazel eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Stop it, Luke,” he chastised himself, forcing himself to sit at his desk, textbooks spread out before him. “Graduation first, heartache later.”

His phone buzzed on the table—a message from Instructor Bowman.

“Hey, Luke, Hope the studying is going well. Don’t forget, the big exam is tomorrow.”

“I haven’t. Just going over some notes now,” Luke replied, trying to sound casual.

“Good job,” Danny texted back, followed by a thumbs-up emoji. “See you tomorrow, Luke. You got this.”

“Thanks, Instructor Bowman,” Luke typed back, his heart swelling with gratitude that the expert K9 handler cared so much. Now more than ever, Luke knew he needed to focus on his future at the K9 handler academy. It was all he had left.

He dove into his studies, reciting out loud facts about dog training and K9 psychology until they swirled together like a confusing blur in his mind. No matter how hard he tried, thoughts of Candace and her eye patches crept back in.

“Ugh,” he groaned, rubbing his temples. “Why can’t I just let it go? Why does she keep taking over my thoughts?”

“Because you care about her, dummy,” he answered himself with a bitter shake of his head. “And there’s nothing you can do about it but learn to live without her.”

Luke tried to push away the memories of Candace as he reluctantly opened his textbooks. He knew he had to prove to himself that he was worth something, and graduating would be the only way. With a deep sigh, Luke tried to focus on his studies, understanding that this was something he must do for himself.

“All right,” he whispered under his breath, eyes narrowing at the textbook. “It’s time to make your own statement.”

As the words rattled around in his head like a mantra, he did his best to ignore the weight in his chest that tried to tell him to give up. If Candace had moved on, then so could he.

Chapter Fifteen



Hero Search and Rescue

Candace's fingers trembled as she carefully threaded the last few stitches into the dress. Finished. She stepped back, admiring her masterpiece with a mixture of pride and exhaustion. She'd spent all of Thanksgiving week getting this dress ready and couldn't be happier with the results. It was well worth the sacrifice of missing Isabella's "Friendsgiving" party. The black and white dress was stunning, glowing in the afternoon light that filtered through her apartment windows.

"Scarlett's going to love it," Candace whispered to herself, a small smile playing on her lips. "Don't you think, Lace?" she asked as she glanced over at her canine companion.

"Arf," the white furball barked from her spot on the windowsill.

"I just wish I could show it to Luke," Candace grumbled as she carefully bagged the garment up for delivery. "I think he would have loved how it turned out."

"Arf," Lace barked again as if agreeing.

"I need to put you in your purse so we can get going," Candace told the labradoodle as she scooped her up and set her inside.

It was a short drive over to Scarlett's downtown apartment. The doorman allowed her inside, and she made her way to the top floor of the skyscraper.

As she knocked on the door, Candace felt a nervous flutter in her stomach. Was Scarlett really going to like the dress?

What if it wasn't good enough? Before she could finish her thought, the door flew open, and Scarlett's bright smile greeted her.

"Candace, you're here," the movie star exclaimed, pulling her into a hug.

"I have something for you," Candace replied with a grin as she held up the bag. "I think you're really going to like it."

Scarlett's eyes widened as she peered inside the bag, and then she let out a gasp of delight. "Candace, it's gorgeous."

Candace felt her heart swell with pride at the compliment. "Just wait until you try it on. The tailored fit and the cut-outs are everything."

"Oh, I can't wait," Scarlett exclaimed as she ushered Candace into her posh gray and silver living room. "Just wait in here while I go try it on."

Candace held her breath as Scarlett slipped into the dress and returned a few minutes later. The fabric was the perfect choice and embraced her curves like a long-lost lover.

As Candace watched the movie star twirl around in the dress with a delighted look on her face, all of her doubts and worries faded away. She had done it. Not only that, but she had brought joy to someone else with her talent. Maybe, just maybe, Luke would have been proud, too.

"Wow, Candace...this is..." Scarlett inspected herself in a nearby mirror, then finally finished, "Better than I could have ever imagined."

"Really?" Candace exhaled, relief washing over her like a warm wave.

"Absolutely. This will be my most favorite dress I've ever worn. I can't wait to show it off on the award ceremony's red carpet." Scarlett beamed, her excitement infectious. "But tell me, where did you find inspiration for this unique textile? It's unlike anything I've seen before."

"Ah, that's because I designed it myself." Candace hesitated, then quietly revealed her inspiration. "It's from a

real-life superhero I met who had only one eye. The pattern you see on the dress is his eye patch, repeated over and over.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Scarlett covered her mouth in surprise. “I’d love to meet your friend someday. Maybe you can bring him to my Christmas party when I’m back in Dallas next month. Someone like that seems really special.”

“Yeah, he is,” Candace agreed, feeling a sudden surge of courage. “Thank you. I can’t wait to see you on the red carpet in this dress.” She hugged Scarlett tightly before leaving with newfound determination.

“All right, Lace,” Candace said as she buckled her faithful dog into the passenger seat of her car. “Let’s go make things right with Luke.” Her hazel eyes flicked nervously to the rearview mirror, but she tried to keep her focus on the road.

“Okay, I think I need to practice what I’m going to say,” Candace muttered to Lace as they drove. “Luke, I appreciate... No, that’s too formal.” She sighed and gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Hey, Luke. Sorry about...Nope. Too casual.”

Lace tilted her head, offering a sympathetic whine.

“Thanks, girl.” Candace smiled briefly at her canine companion. “What I want to say is...I’m sorry for pushing you away, Luke. I really care about you and didn’t know how to handle my feelings.”

“Too sappy?” She glanced at Lace, who responded with an encouraging wag of her tail. “You’re right. I’ll be honest and heartfelt. I just hope he doesn’t slam the door in my face.”

An hour later, Candace parked in front of the Bumblebee, where she first met Luke. The old Victorian was currently decked out with Christmas decorations and lights, reminding her that if she didn’t fix things with Luke, she would be spending the holidays with Isabella and her rag-tag group of misplaced friends. Somehow, it wasn’t as appealing as it used to be.

She took a deep breath and unbuckled both her own seatbelt and Lace’s harness. “Here goes nothing,” she whispered, stepping out of the car with Lace in her purse.

As Candace approached the entrance, she could feel her heart racing like a hummingbird's wings. She smoothed out her hunter-green dress and adjusted her silver necklace, wanting to make sure she looked just right when she saw Luke again. She knew she had to face him and try to make amends, but it didn't mean she couldn't look good while doing it. Maybe the perfect outfit would give her the extra edge she needed to keep him from rejecting her outright. The thought of him doing that, or not wanting to give their relationship a second chance, left her stomach churning with turmoil.

"Come on, Lace," Candace murmured, steadying herself as they climbed the steps of the B&B. "We've got this. There's only one way to find out if there's any way to fix what I messed up."

The warmth of the Bumblebee wrapped around Candace like a familiar hug, the scent of freshly baked muffins wafting through the air.

"Candace, is that you?" Jenesa called out from the front counter, her chestnut brown hair pulled back into a tight bun. "I can't believe you're here. How've you been?"

"Good," Candace said, trying to keep her voice steady. "Listen, is Luke here?"

Jenesa's hazel eyes softened. "No, he's probably at the coffee shop studying. So...does that mean you're here to work things out with him?"

"Depends on Luke," Candace replied, feeling her cheeks grow warm. "But I hope so."

"Good luck," Jenesa said, offering a small smile.

"Thanks," Candace murmured before turning around to leave.

Her feet moved quickly down the street, her heart beating faster with each step. She knew that stepping into The Coffee Loft would finally give her the answers she was seeking, but at the same time, she couldn't help but worry about what she might discover. As she neared the shop, she felt an overwhelming sense of anticipation and fear.

The bell above the door jingled as Candace entered the bustling coffee shop, her eyes scanning for any sign of Luke. There he was, tucked away in a corner booth, his nose buried in a book.

“Deep breaths,” Candace reminded herself, squeezing her eyes shut for a brief moment before striding over to Luke’s table. “Luke?”

He looked up, surprise flickering across his face. “Candace?”

“Can I sit?” she asked, gesturing to the empty seat across from him.

He paused for a moment and nodded before he closed his book and slid it aside. “I guess.”

“Okay.” Candace inhaled sharply, trying to work up the nerve to say what she needed to. She let her breath out slowly before finally speaking. “I made a huge mistake, Luke. I pushed you away because I got scared and used my job as an excuse. It was stupid, and I have regretted it ever since I did it.”

“Really?” His green eye widened.

She nodded. “So much. I wanted to call you so many times and tell you, but I was afraid it was too late.” She swallowed the lump in her throat and added, “I’m really sorry, Luke. More than I can say. I hope you can forgive me, and I hope you might consider giving us a second chance. I want that more than anything.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You do?”

“It’s why I came here.” Candace blinked in disbelief, noticing the familiar fabric covering Luke’s eye. “You’re wearing one of the eye patches I made you?”

Luke’s hand slowly went up to his face, and he gently touched the brown leather patch that matched his matching loafers. “I am. I didn’t at first because it was too painful, but then I thought about how much effort you put into making them. I decided I wanted to honor that.”

“Luke, that means so much to me.” Candace’s eyes welled up, her heart swelling with a mix of gratitude and affection.

“I’m glad it does,” he replied, meeting her gaze. A soft smile played on his lips. “Because, Candace, I’ve been thinking a lot about us, too.”

“Really?” She leaned in closer, holding her breath.

“Absolutely.” He reached across the table, gently taking her hand. “I’m glad to hear you want a second chance because I feel the same way.”

“Luke, that’s music to my ears,” she told him with a relieved smile. “I was so worried when I came back that you had already moved on and wouldn’t want anything to do with me. Especially because you never reached out after I sent the patches.”

“I thought that was your way of closing the door. That you were telling me you were fulfilling your promise so you could be done with me and move on.”

“No way,” she said with a shake of her head. “I don’t think that would’ve ever been possible.”

“Good, because I couldn’t either. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop thinking about you and how much I care for you.” His voice was earnest, filled with emotion.

“Neither could I,” she admitted, her heart racing.

“Then let’s give this another shot,” he said, his green eye shining with hope.

“Oh yes, let’s,” she agreed, her smile matching his.

Without hesitation, Luke stood from his seat and pulled her into his arms. Candace melted into his embrace, feeling as if she was finally home after a long journey away. Their lips met in a tender, heartfelt kiss, sealing their decision to take a leap of faith together.

As they kissed, the coffee shop around them seemed to fade away. The warmth of Luke’s embrace and the certainty in his touch filled Candace with a renewed sense of happiness she hadn’t experienced in quite some time.

As they pulled apart, Candace beamed up at Luke with tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. He smiled back at her with an emotion-filled gaze that said it all. They were going to make it work this time after finding their way back to each other.

Suddenly, the sound of clapping and cheers erupted from the other patrons in the coffee shop. Startled, Candace and Luke looked around at the smiling faces surrounding them.

“Way to go, you two,” called out Michelle, who had been watching from behind the counter. Her blonde hair bounced as she clapped her hands together, her hazel eyes twinkling with excitement. “You two getting back together is the best news I’ve had all week.”

“That goes for me, too,” Luke said, pulling Candace close in a side hug.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Candace agreed, her cheeks flushed with joy.

“Really, guys,” Michelle continued, her voice sincere. “Seeing you two work things out gives me hope that one day I might find someone special, too.”

“Michelle, I’m sure you will,” Candace reassured her friend with a wide smile.

“Trust me, when you least expect it, that’s when it happens,” Luke added, looking over at Candace with a knowing grin.

“Here’s to second chances,” Michelle raised a cup of coffee in a toast.

“Second chances,” Candace echoed, her eyes locked on Luke’s, feeling grateful for this moment and the opportunity to start anew.

“Second chances,” Luke agreed, his smile more radiant than ever, instilling a sense of confidence and love that made Candace’s heart swell with affection.

“Let’s go somewhere to talk more privately,” he suggested softly.

Candace nodded happily and grabbed her purse before they both excited through the door side by side. As they walked over to the park with Blitz by Luke's side, they talked about their hopes and dreams for the future and how they could best support each other in their respective goals—all while holding hands in that perfect little bubble of theirs.

As they took a seat on the park bench and let their dogs play in the grass next to them, Candace's heart raced with anticipation.

“Luke, I feel so happy to be back here with you,” Candace told him, her eyes twinkling with delight.

“I feel the same,” he agreed as he took her hands in his and squeezed. “I never knew I could be this happy.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, simply enjoying each other's company. The sun was setting behind them, casting a warm orange glow over the park.

“I have something to ask you,” Luke said, breaking the peaceful quiet.

Candace's heart skipped a beat. “What is it?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Candace felt her heart race with excitement.

“I want you to come to my graduation at the end of the week. I know you might be busy with your dress and everything, but it's really important to me that you be there.”

“I wouldn't miss it for the world,” she told him with a wide smile. “And for the record, the dress is done, and the client loves it, so there's no reason for me to go back to Dallas right now. I was planning on staying in Hero at the B&B for a little bit.”

“That makes me happy to hear,” he told her as he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

Candace hugged him back, wrapping her arms around his neck as she smiled contently against his chest. She couldn't believe how lucky she was to have him back in her life, and she would do anything to make sure he stayed there.

“I see you two are at it again,” Mrs. Shomacker remarked from beside them, drawing their attention.

Embarrassed, Candace and Luke pulled away from each other, but their hands remained intertwined.

“Sorry, Mrs. Shomacker,” Luke said with a sheepish grin.

“Normally, I would say I don’t like this kind of public display of affection, but given that you two are finally back together, I guess I can let it slide this time,” Mrs. Shomacker replied, a twinkle in her eye.

Candace blushed, feeling grateful for the older woman’s kind words. “We appreciate that, Mrs. Shomacker.”

“Very good then. And I’m looking forward to seeing you both at the academy graduation at the end of the week,” Mrs. Shomacker said before walking away with her own dog in tow.

As the night settled over them, and they walked back to the B&B arm in arm, Candace felt a warmth spread through her body, knowing she was exactly where she was supposed to be. She was happy to be back in Hero, happy to be with Luke, and happy for the future that lay ahead.

Chapter Sixteen



Hero Search and Rescue

Luke's heart raced as he paced back and forth out front of the academy, his hands clammy with nervous sweat. It was the day of his final exam, and he couldn't shake the gnawing feeling that he might fail miserably.

"Luke, relax," Candace encouraged, her black hair swishing playfully as she walked toward him. "You've got this. You've been studying and practicing for hours. You know what you're doing."

"I know," Luke mumbled, his one green eye darting around nervously.

"Look at me," Candace said gently, placing her petite, curvy frame in his path. Her hazel eyes locked onto his eye, filled with unwavering confidence. "I believe in you, and I know you'll pass with flying colors."

Luke swallowed hard, trying to take in her encouragement. "Thanks, Candace. Your faith means everything to me."

"Good," she replied, flashing a warm smile. "Now say a little prayer and get in there and take that test."

"Prayer? Right." Luke stopped in his tracks, bowed his head, and whispered a silent plea for help. Somehow, knowing that Candace believed in him made it easier to believe in himself.

"Done?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Done," he confirmed, taking a deep breath.

“All right then, go in there and show them what you’re made of.” She pushed him from behind toward the front door.

“Thanks, Candace,” Luke whispered over his shoulder, stepping into the academy with newfound determination. Luke couldn’t help but feel grateful for Candace’s unwavering support.

“You can do this,” Luke breathed, straightening his shoulders.

Swallowing hard, Luke settled into his chair and concentrated on the test in front of him. He smiled to himself, feeling a surge of confidence. If Candace had faith in him, then maybe he could believe in himself, too.

With far less effort than he expected, he breezed through the test. Before he knew it, Luke was turning in his exam with confidence.

“How do you think you did?” Instructor Bowman asked as he took the paper from him.

“I’m confident I passed,” he told the other man. “And I’m ready for the final exercise.”

“Good, why don’t you go out to the training grounds and join the rest of your class as they get ready.”

Luke made his way outside and found Will waiting for him. “How do you think you did on the test?”

“I have to say, pretty good.”

“Is that because Candace showed back up this week?” Will asked with a knowing smile.

“That might have something to do with it,” he told his friend.

“Good, because I heard the final exercise today is going to be a doozy,” Will warned.

Almost as if on cue, Instructor Oakley sauntered over with his K9 partner, Duchess, and asked, “Ready for the final exercise, Rancourt?”

“I am, sir,” Luke told him, determination flaring in his one good eye. He took a deep breath, steadying himself for the challenge ahead.

Luke and Will warmed up their K9 partners together, then went through several drills to get ready.

“Time for the final exercise,” Instructor Buckworth announced. “Line up.”

The trainees did as they were told, Luke settling into his place determined alphabetically.

“Before you start, you’ll want to take a look at this,” Instructor Bowman said as he handed Luke his test.

He clutched the piece of paper in his palms, double-checking the grade because he couldn’t believe it. An “A” stared back at him, bold and triumphant. Relief washed over him like a cleansing rain.

“Hey, congrats on that ‘A,’” Will whispered from behind him.

“Great job, by the way, Rancourt,” Instructor Bowman encouraged, giving Luke a thumbs-up.

“Thank you,” Luke replied, feeling lighter than he had in weeks.

The training grounds spread out before them, a labyrinth of obstacles designed to test their skills as K9 handlers. The sun beat down on their backs as they approached the starting line. Just one more hurdle stood between him and his certificate of completion.

“You’ve been working for this for weeks, and now you get to prove what you’re capable of,” Instructor Oakley advised, his icy blue eyes watching them intently.

“Remember, work together,” Instructor Bowman reminded them.

“You’ve got this,” Instructor Buckworth encouraged. “Go out there and make us proud.”

“All right, Blitz, let’s show them what we’re made of,” Luke murmured, patting his K9 partner’s head. The two shared a silent moment of understanding.

“Three, two, one... go,” Instructor Bowman shouted, and Luke and Blitz sprang into action.

“Come on, buddy, over the hurdles,” Luke urged from beside his partner. Blitz’s ears flopped with each jump, but his focus never wavered.

“Good boy. Now, the tunnel,” Luke directed, adrenaline pumping through his veins. Blitz dove into the dark cavern, emerging moments later with a gleeful bark and a flag in his mouth.

The teams worked through several more areas, all of them pushing themselves as hard as they could.

“Almost there,” Instructor Buckworth called from the sidelines. “Don’t give up.”

As he worked his way through the course, Luke heard Candace’s voice echoing over and over in his head, “Be brave. Have faith. You can do this.” Luke could feel her belief in him, fueling his every step.

“Last one, Blitz—the weave poles,” Luke panted, guiding his partner through the zigzag pattern with expert precision. The finish line drew nearer, and Luke’s heart soared.

“Time,” Instructor Oakley yelled.

“That’s a new record,” Instructor Bowman announced, excitement bubbling in his voice.

“Way to go, Rancourt,” Instructor Buckworth cheered.

“Congratulations, you two,” Instructor Bowman grinned, clapping Luke on the back. “You’ve passed both parts of your final exam, and with that time, you’ve earned the top spot in the academy.”

“Thanks, everyone,” Luke said, feeling a surge of gratitude toward his instructors. They may have been tough on him, but that was what made this victory so sweet. He’d put every ounce of himself on the line and came out on top.

“Blitz, buddy, we did it,” he whispered, grinning down at his canine partner. Blitz wagged his tail, sensing Luke’s excitement.



THE SUN BLAZED high above the academy grounds, casting a golden glow over the rows of chairs set up for graduation. Luke stood tall in his crisp uniform, one hand firmly gripping Blitz’s leash, his heart racing.

“Can you believe it? We’re actually graduating,” whispered Will from beside him, a proud grin plastered across his face.

“Quiet down,” Instructor Oakley hissed with a stern expression.

“Sorry, sir,” Will replied as the audience began to quiet down and settle into their seats.

“Welcome, everyone, to the K9 Handler Academy Graduation Ceremony,” boomed Instructor Bowman from the podium. “Today, we celebrate our finest graduates, who have shown extraordinary dedication and skill.”

Luke’s heart hammered in his chest as he looked out, searching for the one person who mattered to him most. When his eye found Candace, he could feel himself relax. All he needed to know was that she was there because she believed in him even when he hadn’t had confidence in himself.

He barely returned his attention to what was being said when his name was called. He walked up to receive his certificate with Blitz trotting at his side. They posed for the camera before exiting down the other side. It was quick but the most rewarding few seconds of his life.

The applause washed over him like a tidal wave, but all he could see were Candace’s shining hazel eyes as she clapped proudly.

After the last certificate was given out, he searched the crowd for Candace. When their eyes locked, she rushed to his

side.

“Congratulations, Luke,” she whispered as they embraced, her black hair brushing against his cheek. “See? I told you you’d do great.”

“It’s because of you, Candace. I couldn’t have done this without you by my side,” Luke told her, knowing that whatever challenges lay ahead, he would face them head-on, with Blitz by his side and Candace’s unwavering faith in his heart.

“That’s not true. You did this all on your own. You’re the bravest person I know,” Candace insisted.

“Time for food,” Will announced, breaking the moment as he came up to them and pushed them along to the reception area.

“Sounds good to me,” Luke agreed as he took Candace’s hand and led her toward the refreshments.

As they entered the bustling reception hall, Luke felt the warmth of friends and family enveloping him. The aroma of delicious food wafted through the air, mingling with the hum of laughter and conversation.

“Great job, Luke,” Mrs. Shomacker praised, patting him on the arm as she passed by.

“Thanks, ma’am,” he replied with a smile.

“Hey, grab a plate,” called Will from the buffet table, already piling his plate high with an assortment of treats.

“Careful, you’ll topple that tower,” Candace warned, amusement sparkling in her eyes.

“Challenge accepted,” Will countered, grinning as he balanced another roll on top.

“Let’s get some food before Will takes it all,” Candace suggested, playfully rolling her eyes.

“Agreed,” Luke laughed, feeling lighter than he had in years.

As they filled their plates and joined their friends at a table, he couldn't help but think how lucky he was to have found such a wonderful support system. He knew that things would have to change now that he had graduated, but he knew together, they could face anything.

Several more townspeople came by and congratulated Luke and Will as they ate and talked. It was a nice afternoon, and he was grateful for all the heartfelt wishes of good luck. By the time the reception was over, Luke couldn't be happier.

"You up for continuing this celebration, just the two of us," Candace suggested, her hazel eyes twinkling as they stepped out of the reception hall.

"Sounds like a plan," he agreed. "Where to?"

"Ever been to Walter's Fine Seafood?" she asked, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

"Can't say I have," Luke admitted.

"Perfect. Let's go," she exclaimed, taking his hand and leading him toward the waterfront with Blitz by their side and Lace in her purse on her arm.

As they entered the cozy restaurant, the aroma of fresh seafood and garlic filled the air. They took a seat by the window, overlooking the water, and exchanged playful banter while perusing the menu.

"Grilled lobster or pan-seared scallops?" Candace pondered aloud.

"Both sound amazing," Luke replied, feeling his stomach rumble in anticipation.

"Ah, why not? Let's get both and share," she decided, grinning.

"Deal," he chuckled.

Over dinner, they shared stories and laughter, finding endless amusement in each other's company. Luke couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at ease with someone—there was something about Candace that just made everything feel lighter.

“Okay, I have one more surprise for you,” Candace announced as they finished dessert.

“Really? What is it?” Luke asked, curiosity piqued.

“Line dancing at The Coffee Loft garden,” she revealed, excitement shining in her eyes. “You up for it?”

“Line dancing?” he hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean, I’ve never really tried it before.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun, I promise,” she insisted, her enthusiasm infectious as she stood up, reached out, and took his hand.

“All right,” he relented, chuckling. “But just because you asked so nicely.”

“Great,” she beamed, her smile lighting up the room as she pulled him toward the door.

As they left Walter’s Fine Seafood and headed back into town, Luke felt a mixture of nervousness and excitement bubbling within him. He knew he was stepping out of his comfort zone, but with Candace by his side, somehow, it all seemed worth it.

The garden at the back of the coffee shop was alive with energy, the thumping music pulsing through the air as Luke and Candace stepped into the green space. He hesitated for a moment, taking in the sight of dancers moving in synchronized steps across the grass.

“Okay, let’s do this,” Candace shouted over the music, grabbing Luke’s hand and pulling him into the middle of the dance area.

“Wait, I don’t even know the steps,” he protested, his eye darting around nervously.

“Follow my lead,” she assured, winking at him. “You’ll get the hang of it, I promise.”

With a deep breath, Luke mimicked Candace’s movements, stumbling over the unfamiliar steps at first. As they laughed together, he began to relax, letting the rhythm guide him.

“See? You’re a natural,” Candace praised, grinning widely.

“Hardly,” he huffed but couldn’t help smiling back.

As the next song started, Luke found himself enjoying the challenge. The upbeat tempo and lively atmosphere seemed to sweep away his self-doubt, and his body moved more fluidly with each step.

“Hey, look at you go,” Candace cheered, clapping her hands in delight.

“Thanks to a great teacher,” he replied, genuinely grateful for her encouragement.

“Aw, stop it,” she blushed, playfully swatting his arm. “But seriously, you’ve got some moves.”

“Who knew, right?” Luke chuckled, suddenly feeling lighter than he had in a long time.

A slow song began to play, and the line dancers dispersed, with only a few couples remaining behind. Candace looked at Luke, her hazel eyes sparkling with mischief. “Still want to dance?”

He nodded as he pulled her into his arms. “More than anything.”

Luke and Candace gazed into each other’s eyes as they moved to the rhythm of the music, their bodies slowly swaying together in unison. He felt a warmth radiating from deep within him as he held her close.

Candace smiled up at him, her face aglow with happiness as Luke twirled her around in his arms. He felt like he was flying, lost in the moment as they danced together under the stars.

When the song finally ended, they both stood there, smiling at one another silently before Candace spoke up. “That was so much fun,” she said with a laugh, her cheeks flushed pink from their time dancing together.

Luke nodded in agreement before leaning down to give her a gentle kiss. As their lips met, he felt something stirring deep within him—a feeling of contentment and peace that he had

never experienced before. When he pulled back, Candace's eyes were filled with tears of joy, and Luke couldn't help but smile in response.

He knew right then how lucky he was to have found such an amazing person—someone who not only accepted him for who he was but also encouraged him to go out of his comfort zone and explore new possibilities. Suddenly, all of his doubts and worries seemed insignificant compared to this moment of connection with Candace.

They stayed there for a while longer just talking—about life and dreams and everything else in between—until, eventually, it was time to return to the B&B.

“Thank you for tonight,” Candace whispered, resting her head on his shoulder as they walked back.

“It was wonderful, wasn't it,” he replied, his voice barely audible as they made their way to the hallway between their rooms.

Reluctantly, he whispered, “Good night, Candace.”

“Good night, Luke,” she whispered back as she leaned up and kissed him on the lips. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

“You can bet on it,” he told her with a lazy smile.

As he watched her slip through the door and close it behind her, Luke knew without a shadow of a doubt she was everything he ever wanted, and he was so glad he found her in the most unexpected way.

Chapter Seventeen



Hero Search and Rescue

The candlelit glow of Luigi's filled the room with warmth, casting soft shadows on the walls adorned with Italian memorabilia. Candace and Luke sat across from each other, their eyes interlocked as they shared stories between bites of savory pasta.

"You've been given a spot in "Fashion Week" in New York? Tell me everything," Luke said, a playful grin on his face.

"Don't make such a big thing about it. It's only a small venue," Candace told him with a small smile.

"Classic Candace," Luke teased, raising his wine glass for a toast. "Always acting like her incredible accomplishments aren't a big deal."

"Hey now, I'm not toasting to that," she teased with a chuckle. "But I will toast to us both working toward our careers," she added as she raised her glass and clinked it against his.

As they took sips of their wine, the door swung open, revealing Jenesa and Danny, followed by Avery and Hunter and Taylor and Charlie. Their laughter filled the room as they scanned for seating.

"Hi, guys. Over here," Candace waved, beckoning them to join the table. The group eagerly made their way over, pulling up chairs and a second table as they squeezed together.

“Didn’t expect to see you all here,” Jenesa said in surprise as a pleased look settled on her face.

“Great minds think alike,” Luke replied, grinning.

Their discussion ran around the table, talking about their lives at least a hundred miles an hour. Candace sat back and enjoyed the flow of the conversation as it bounced from subject to subject like a pinball game. They spent a few minutes talking about Avery’s latest culinary creation and then moved to the men’s humorous anecdotes about their time in the K9 handler academy.

Slapping his knee, Hunter laughed so loud his voice echoed off the tall roof. “I forgot about the time Jeff visited the academy, and he started hitting on one of the female trainees.”

Danny nodded in agreement. “She shot him down so hard, it was almost embarrassing to watch.”

As the chatter continued, Candace felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. “Sorry, give me a second,” she said, retrieving her phone and checking the notification.

Her hazel eyes widened as she read the headline: “Candace Kealy’s Gown Stuns Red Carpet Critics.”

“Guys, my dress is receiving rave reviews,” she exclaimed, excitement bubbling within her.

“Seriously? That’s amazing, Candace,” Avery gushed while the others chimed in with their congratulations.

“Show us the dress,” Jenesa demanded with a wide grin.

“All right, all right,” Candace relented, pulling up an image on her phone and passing it around the table. The group leaned in, admiring the gown’s unique design and intricate detailing.

Jenesa smiled with approval, clearly impressed by Candace’s work. “I would totally have worn that back when I went to black tie events in the city.”

“Wow, Candace, you’ve truly outdone yourself,” Avery exclaimed, her eyes widening in awe.

“I’m not even into fashion, and I have to say, it’s amazing—and so unique. Wherever did you get the inspiration?” Taylor inquired.

“Is that...are those eye patches?” Luke asked, a puzzled expression crossing his face as he squinted at the photo.

“Yep, they sure are,” Candace confirmed, her cheeks tinting pink. “You inspired me, actually.”

“Me?” Luke’s remaining green eye blinked in surprise.

Candace nodded. “I wanted to create something bold and daring, just like you.”

“I wouldn’t have even known it was a black eye patch repeating over and over if you hadn’t said anything,” Charlie stated with surprise.

“That’s the point,” Candace stated with a laugh. “It was for me to know and anyone I decided to share it with.”

“Wow, that’s...really sweet.” Luke was visibly touched by her words, his lips curving into a tender smile.

“Sweet enough for a kiss?” she teased, her heart pounding in her chest as she held her breath.

“Definitely,” Luke whispered, leaning in across the table to capture her lips in a gentle yet passionate kiss.

“Get a room,” Hunter joked, causing the others to erupt into laughter.

As they pulled apart, grinning sheepishly, Candace couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of happiness and contentment. This moment, surrounded by friends and love, was one she’d cherish forever.

“Looks like you’re officially a top designer now,” Luke said, admiration clear in his voice. He raised his glass again. “To Candace Kealy, fashion designer extraordinaire.”

Their glasses clinked once more, and Candace couldn’t help but beam at the support from her friends. As they continued to celebrate, she knew that no matter where her

career took her, she'd always have this moment to remember with fondness.

The laughter around the table gradually subsided, and Candace was about to share another amusing anecdote when her phone buzzed in her hand. The screen displayed a text from Chad, and her heart seized with dread.

“Hey, saw your dress on Scarlett. Amazing job. We should give us another shot. What do you say?”

Candace's eyes flicked to Luke, who was now engaged in conversation with Danny. His strong jawline, kind eyes, and gentle demeanor seemed worlds apart from Chad. In that moment, she realized how much she'd grown since their breakup and how she no longer desired the shallow, self-absorbed life Chad represented.

“Sorry, Chad, but that's not an option.” She typed the words with conviction. “It's over for good. I've moved on.” Without a second thought, she hit the button to block his number.

“Everything okay?” Luke leaned over and asked in a whisper; concern etched across his face as he noticed the intensity of her expression.

“Better than ever,” Candace reassured him, flashing a genuine smile. “I was just putting to rest something that was a long time coming.”

“Want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “Nope, all I need is right here with you.”

“Good, because that goes both ways,” he assured her as he pressed a kiss on her forehead.

“Shall we get going? It's getting late,” Danny suggested, yawning as he stretched his arms above his head. “There's a bunch of Christmas activities happening in town tomorrow, and they asked the academy team to help out.”

“I suppose we should,” Jenesa agreed, rising from her seat.

After a chorus of goodbyes, Candace and Luke found themselves strolling along the waterfront. The sky was clear and cloudless, and the moon sent a silvery glow over the water. The air was cool and still, the only movement coming from a lone crow wheeling overhead. Lightning bugs flitted through the grass alongside them, their light merging with that of the moon to paint an almost luminescent path on the dark ground. Blitz trotted at their heels, racing after something new every few steps. He would stop long enough to raise his leg and mark his territory or chase off some small animal, but he always came back within minutes. His tongue hung out of his mouth, and his eyes were bright with excitement. Lace sat inside her purse, hanging from Candace's arm contently.

"Are you sure about this?" Luke asked hesitantly, his thumb grazing her knuckles as they walked hand in hand. "You know, being together while living in different places is going to be really difficult?"

"I know, but we can do it," Candace replied without hesitation. "We make each other stronger, Luke. And it's not like it will be forever. We'll visit whenever we can, and our careers will only continue to grow. They'll be plenty of time down the road to find a way to live closer together."

"True, and my new job with Wilmont Police Department is only an hour away from Dallas," Luke conceded, his lips curving into a grin. "I guess we're doing this, then."

"Long-distance lovebirds, that's us," Candace teased, nudging him playfully.

"Speaking of birds," Luke mused, nodding towards a pair of crows squabbling over a discarded French fry. "Think they'd mind if I join in?"

"Luke," Candace gasped, laughter bubbling from her lips. "You've been around Hunter too long."

"Guilty as charged," he chuckled, his green eye sparkling with mirth.

As they continued walking, Candace couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement for their future together. Life was

unpredictable and full of challenges, but she knew that with Luke by her side, they could face anything. She couldn't help but believe that this was the beginning of the life she never knew she always wanted.

"I guess it's time to call it a night," Luke declared, turning the doorknob to the front door of the B&B. "Well, at least for now. We have a long day ahead of us."

"Tomorrow's a whole new adventure," Candace agreed, her heart racing with anticipation. "I hear the Christmas festivities around Hero are epic."

As they stepped inside, Blitz darted past them, his paws leaving muddy prints on the pristine floor.

"Blitz," Candace admonished, trying to contain her laughter. "You're making a mess."

"Ah man, that's going to be a tough one to explain to Jenesa. Do you think we can blame it on a ghost?" Luke teased with a grin.

"I doubt ghosts have paw-shaped footprints," Candace raised an eyebrow, stifling a giggle. "I should probably go tell one of the housekeepers what happened while you grab Blitz before he can make more tracks."

"Sounds like a plan," Luke sighed, letting go of Candace's hand as he chased after his K9 partner. "Meet you back by the fire after we're both done."

Candace nodded. "See you in ten."

At that moment, seized by a surge of affection, Candace leaned in to capture Luke's lips with her own. It was meant to be a simple, tender kiss, but fate had other plans. With a mischievous bark, Blitz leaped into the fray, his muddy paws landing squarely on Candace's back, sending her stumbling forward.

"Whoa," Luke chuckled, steadying her with strong arms. "Talk about being swept off your feet."

"Very funny," Candace retorted, rolling her eyes even as her lips curved upwards. Muddy paw prints adorned her once

pristine cream dress, but she couldn't bring herself to care. The laughter that bubbled up between them was infectious, leaving them both breathless and grinning like fools.

“Seriously though,” Luke said, his eyes shining with warmth as he brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, “I wouldn't change this moment for anything.”

“Neither would I,” Candace agreed, her hazel eyes locked on his.

They passionately kissed, a flurry of emotion passing between them as the taste of love and joy electrified their senses. The air around them crackled with anticipation, filled with the intensity of the moment, creating a bond that could never be broken.

Blissfully unaware of the muddy mess surrounding them, Candace knew one thing for certain—she couldn't be happier with the way things had turned out.

Chapter Eighteen



Hero Search and Rescue

Christmas Eve sparkled with soft snowflakes drifting down. They blanketed Hero in a pure white quilt as Luke picked up Candace from her new apartment in town and walked her over to the dress shop. From what the locals told him, the town hadn't seen snow since last Valentine's Day, so this was a real treat.

Luke couldn't help but be captivated as he watched Candace gaze at the festive window display of Tilly's dress shop. It was now rebranded and named Couture by Candace. The glow from the shop's windows cast warm light on her curvy frame. With her black hair tucked under a red woolen hat that matched her sweater dress, she was the perfect Christmas present. Luke couldn't help but feel that everything was falling into place.

"Isn't it incredible?" Candace said, her hazel eyes sparkling with excitement as she turned to Luke.

"Your designs really bring the place to life," he replied, his one green eye focused on the delicate, flowing dresses that graced the mannequins. "You've earned this, Candace."

"Thank you, Luke." Her cheeks flushed from, he suspected, more than just the cold. "And I couldn't have done it without your support." She glanced back at the shop as her smile, which was as bright as the holiday lights strung along Main Street, spread across her face. "Can you believe it? A year's worth of clients for custom outfits, and now, Tilly's

passing the torch over to me in the new year. It's like a dream come true."

"Hey, I always knew you had it in you. All you needed was just a little push."

"Speaking of which, how's your apartment hunting going?" Candace asked, tucking her hands into her coat pockets.

"Actually, I found a great place here in Hero, so no more long drives for us." Luke grinned, pleased with the prospect of being closer to Candace. "And the best part, I'm roommates with Jeff."

"The bartender?" Candace's eyebrows shot up with surprise. "Doesn't he stay out really late and have a reputation for bringing home lots of women?"

Luke could tell that Candace was concerned about the environment he was going to be in, and he wanted to put her mind at ease. "He used to, but I just found out from Danny and Hunter that he's thinking about going through the academy. Of course, we need to keep that on the down low until it's official."

"Phew, that makes me feel so much better." She tilted her head to the side and then asked, "By the way, where's his apartment?"

"The triplex over on Maple," Luke told her deadpan as he waited for her reaction.

"Really? That's fantastic," Candace squealed, bouncing on her toes. "We'll be neighbors."

"I know, it's going to be great," he told her as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "We'll be almost as close as we were when we both stayed at the Bumblebee."

"It seems as if all our hard work is finally paying off," Candace winked.

"True," Luke agreed. "But you know what they say, behind every great woman is a man who lost an eye."

Candace burst out laughing. "Oh, Luke. That's terrible."

“Sorry, I just couldn’t resist,” he grinned, his laughter joining hers.

“Anyway,” Candace continued after catching her breath, “I’ve got big plans for the shop. New designs, fresh ideas, you name it.”

“Sounds exciting,” Luke said, genuinely interested. “I can’t wait to see what you come up with.”

“Trust me, it’s going to be fabulous,” Candace declared, her eyes shining with excitement.

“Knowing you,” Luke replied, his voice filled with admiration, “there’s no doubt in my mind.”

As they continued to admire the window display, Tilly Howard emerged from the dress shop, her cheeks rosy and her smile infectious. “You two look like kids in a candy store,” she chuckled.

“Can you blame us?” Candace replied, her enthusiasm palpable. “Tilly, I can’t thank you enough for this opportunity.”

“You know, it’s going to be hard to leave Hero, but it’s what’s best for my dad. And I feel better knowing I’m selling the shop to someone who is really going to cherish it the way I do,” Tilly said, patting Candace on the shoulder. “I know you’ll do wonders with this place.”

“Here’s to new beginnings,” Luke declared, raising an imaginary glass.

“New beginnings,” Candace and Tilly echoed, their laughter ringing through the crisp winter air.

As they stood there, surrounded by twinkling lights and the magic of Christmas Eve, Luke couldn’t help but feel grateful for the incredible turn his life had taken.

“You ready to head over to the Bumblebee?” Luke said as he reached out for Candace.

She nodded as she slipped her hand in his. “Let’s go.”

The scent of cinnamon and laughter filled the air as Candace and Luke walked hand-in-hand into the B&B. They made their way through the crowd, pausing briefly to admire the towering gingerbread house in the corner. Mrs. Shomacker, in a festive Christmas sweater, was making it her mission to secretly sneak bites from the confectionery creation, her eyes darting around the room like a mischievous child.

“Think she’ll finish it before anyone notices?” Candace chuckled under her breath.

“Five bucks says she will,” Luke countered, trying to suppress his own laughter.

“Deal,” she agreed, shaking his hand playfully right before they took seats in the living room. It had been filled with chairs and a makeshift aisle for Jenesa and Danny’s wedding.

“I can’t wait to see Jenesa in her dress,” Candace whispered as she looked toward the back door of the room. “She’s going to make such a beautiful bride.”

“After the last alterations you made to her dress, I’m sure she will,” Luke agreed.

“It took some work getting it done, but it was worth it for all Jenesa did for us,” Candace told him. “She was one of our biggest supporters while we were still figuring out what we were to each other.”

He nodded. “She sure was, and Danny helped turn me into an expert K9 handler. They’re the best.”

As the ceremony began, Danny stood at the altar, looking dapper and nervous all at once in his black tuxedo. When Jenesa finally appeared in the doorway, the room collectively gasped. She was breathtaking in her elegant white gown, her chestnut hair cascading down her back like a waterfall.

“Wow,” Candace whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. “Just...wow.”

“Indeed,” Luke murmured, his voice filled with admiration.

The ceremony unfolded with a mixture of solemn vows and unexpected humor. At one point, the officiant accidentally dropped the wedding rings, causing them to roll comically across the floor. Danny and Jenesa couldn't help but laugh as they retrieved their runaway bands.

"Leave it to them to make even this moment fun," Candace mused, wiping away tears of laughter.

"Wouldn't expect anything less," Luke agreed, grinning from ear to ear.

As the newlyweds shared their first kiss, Luke felt a surge of warmth fill his heart. He glanced at Candace, her hazel eyes reflecting the joy of the moment. He knew that their own adventure was just beginning.

As everyone filed into the dining room for the reception, Jenesa's eyes widened as a young woman who looked a lot like her and a young man burst through the front door, backpacks still slung over their shoulders, faces glowing with excitement. The room fell silent, all eyes on the unexpected arrivals.

"Bridget? What are you doing here?" Jenesa gasped in shock.

"You, too, Neal," Avery asked her brother.

"Surprise," Bridget squealed, grabbing Neal's hand and raising it up in the air, revealing two matching silver bands. "We got hitched in California. Can you believe it?"

A chorus of gasps filled the air.

"You did what?" Both Jenesa and Avery shouted at the same time.

Candace shot Luke a knowing look. They'd both heard from Jenesa that her sister had always been impulsive, but this was something else entirely.

Bridget shrugged, her cheeks flushed with happiness. "It just felt...right, you know?"

"Aren't you guys happy for us?" Neal questioned with a frown.

There were several more seconds before everyone slowly nodded.

“Of course we are,” Avery spoke up for everyone.

The room was filled with a flurry of congratulations as everyone settled in for Jenesa and Danny’s wedding reception. Luke took a moment to soak in the atmosphere, the joy and laughter infectious.

The reception was filled with humorous moments as guests took turns sharing stories about Jenesa and Danny—everything from her law school days to mishaps at the K9 academy. Even Luke had a tale or two to share during the toasts, his reserved demeanor melting away as he regaled the crowd with anecdotes of his own experiences with Danny.

“Great party, huh?” Candace whispered to Luke.

“Definitely,” he replied as he squeezed her hand.

As the night wore on, the romantic moments began to unfold. Couples slow danced beneath the chandeliers, hands entwined, and eyes locked. Luke couldn’t help but smile as she watched Jenesa and Danny dance together, their love for one another evident as they swayed in each other’s arms.

“Care to dance?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Candace replied, taking Luke’s hand as they joined the others on the dance floor.

As they swayed to the music, the world seemed to fall away, leaving only Candace and Luke, their fingers interlocked and hearts beating in sync.

“Luke,” Candace whispered, her gaze locked on his lone green eye, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Me too,” he murmured, his grip tightening slightly. “But you first.”

“Okay...” She took a deep breath, her heart pounding against his. “I love you, Luke. I truly do.”

A smile spread across his face, the warmth in his heart mirroring the affection in her words. “Candace, I love you too.”

More than I can ever express.”

“Really?” Her voice was soft, almost disbelieving.

“Really.” He leaned in, his breath warm against her cheek.
“Let me show you.”

Their lips met, sealing their love for one another in a tender, passionate kiss that seemed to last an eternity. As they finally drifted apart, Luke knew without a shadow of a doubt that he and Candace were meant to be together, their love strong enough to withstand anything that might come their way.

WHAT TO KNOW what happens next in Hero, Texas? Grab your copy of [By Any Beans Necessary](#), the spin-off book about Michelle and Jeff, part of the multi-author series, The Coffee Loft.

A Note from the Author

I hope you have enjoyed *Small Town Style* and plan to continue to reading [all of my books](#).

Your opinion and support matters, so I would greatly appreciate you taking the time to leave a review. Without dedicated readers, a storyteller is lost. Thank you for investing in my stories. If you would like more info, please join my newsletter and get three free books just for signing up for my [Newsletter](#) including *Saving His Reputation*, the prequel to *First Responders of Faith Valley*, centered on Ethan and Nicole's fake marriage turned real love romance.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenna Bennett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "J".

Sneak Peek of Arresting Her Heart

When Rookie Officer Noah West arrived at the retirement apartments adjacent to the church in the center of his small hometown in Texas, he had no idea what he was getting himself into. Bullets and fists flying were expected with his job. Having his ear talked off by the Widow Clancy wasn't what he signed up for when he followed after his brothers' and sister's footsteps and joined the Faith Valley police department.

“This is the first time I've gotten the youngest West officer. Of course, I've seen you at church and around town, but I had no idea how handsome you were up close.” The older woman batted her dark blue eyes at him and tilted her head to the side, as if debating what to do about it. A smile slowly spread across her face and she nodded her head in determination. “I think I have a granddaughter that is just about your age. If you come inside, I could show you her picture. She's won a couple of pageants, for scholarships of course.”

Noah didn't want anything to do with Mrs. Clancy's beauty queen granddaughter. Not only because he'd learned from past experience how high-maintenance pageant girlfriends could be, but because it would be completely unprofessional to let the older woman play matchmaker for him while he was on the job. He clicked on the button for his flashlight and pointed it around the plastic bin behind the apartment building, scanning for any evidence that someone had been in the alleyway. “Mrs. Clancy, are you sure you saw

someone by your trash can? Could it have been a raccoon?" he asked, trying to refocus her back to the reason she gave the dispatcher when she called the police department.

"Yes, Officer West, I'm quite certain I saw a man out here. I was afraid he might be trying to look through the window and see me in my undergarments," she accused with indignation. "I might be a seasoned widow, but I'm still a dish."

Noah eyed the older woman, who had a head full of curly, white hair with a tinge of purple in it. He remembered his own grandma had hair just like that once and complained that her hairdresser used too much toner and ruined her color. She never went back, but he suspected from Mrs. Clancy's humble home and clothes, her color choice stemmed from a financial limitation brought on by widowhood. Even with her meager resources, however, she was dolled up with a pound of makeup and a layer of what he assumed was her best jewelry.

She wrapped her frail arms around his muscular bicep and squeezed. "At least you're here to protect me, Officer West. You must have scared off whoever was back here prowling. Why don't you come inside so I can give you some hot tea and homemade cookies to thank you?"

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Clancy, but I need to be getting back to work," Noah objected as he gently tried to pull away.

"Nonsense. Faith Valley closes up at nine p.m. on the dot, and there usually isn't a peep out of anyone until the next day. You have plenty of time to come in and try my oatmeal raisin cookies. They're the best in the county," the older woman bragged with a smile.

Oh how he wished a call would come in over his radio, but when one didn't, he found himself being dragged into her apartment. She pushed him into a seat at a small wooden table where she already had a plate of cookies waiting. "They just came out of the oven right before you got here."

She picked one up, and before he could protest, she was shoving it into his mouth. Noah wanted to ask if she was so

afraid of the prowler outside, how did she manage to bake a perfectly delicious cookie without so much as burning them one bit? Even though he knew he shouldn't, he found himself reaching for a second cookie.

"I see you like them," she stated with approval. "Let me get you that tea. I have a wonderful cinnamon tea that goes perfectly." Mrs. Clancy shuffled into the kitchen where she had a kettle by the stove. She picked it up and poured the steaming amber-colored liquid into a teacup that was waiting on the side counter. She set to work putting in cream and sugar.

The longer Noah watched the widow work, the more he got the sneaking suspicion that she had planned all of this. He glanced from the cookies to the tea, to Mrs. Clancy several times before accepting the truth; he'd been hoodwinked.

Jumping up from his seat, he brushed his hands off over the table and pushed back his shoulders, ready to confront the widow about her entrapment. When she turned around with the cup in her shaking hand and a lonely look in her eyes, the words he planned to say got stuck in his throat.

"You want to leave, don't you?" she whispered in the most vulnerable voice. "I heard you stand up and figured you don't want to bother with some old woman. I get it, I was young once, too." She put the cup down and collapsed in her chair. "You must think me some kind of desperate person to behave like this. It's just when my Sammy passed away, I got so lonely. My two children moved to different places after college, and I don't have any other family in town."

Noah's heart ached with sympathy for the old woman, and he found himself sitting back in his vacant chair. "I guess I can have one cup of tea."

"Good," she said with a smile. She pushed the saucer and cup across the table to him. "And then we can play a couple of hands of Rummy before you take off."

An hour later, Noah finally found himself back in his police car. Not only was he full from half a dozen cookies, a cheese and meat plate, and three cups of tea, but his hazel eyes

were plumb exhausted from staring at the cards and his pride wounded from steadily losing the entire time. He couldn't prove it, but Mrs. Clancy had to be a secret card shark at one point in her life.

"Dispatch, this is P.O. 6. Show me Code 10-8," he said over the radio.

"Copy that, P.O. 6, we have you in service and available for assignment," Noah's middle brother, Marshal's voice responded over the radio. "How did the call go? What did you think of Widow Clancy?"

From his audibly amused tone, Noah realized that his brother was fully aware of what happened to him on the call. It was just another hazing in a long line of scenarios that the rest of the officers had been punishing him with ever since he finished the state police academy and joined the department eight months back. His brothers took it upon themselves to make his transition as miserable as possible. From shaving cream in his locker to secretly switching out his name tag to "Sweetheart," they'd teased him relentlessly. Add to this, his field training officer put him through the wringer for the first six months. It had been the stuff of nightmares. Even now, after two months on his own, it didn't seem like it was going to let up.

Refusing to give his brother the satisfaction of knowing that the assignment got to him, Noah tried to change the subject. "Do you have a call for me or not?"

"Nope, there's nothing pending, so resume standard patrol," Marshal ordered.

"Hold on, we're not letting him off that easy," his oldest brother, Clayton's voice boomed over the radio. Noah's heart dropped into his stomach, knowing that this was only going to get worse now that both of them were there. "I didn't come in on my night off just to have him skip over his first encounter with the Widow Clancy."

"First encounter? What does that mean?" Noah accused with trepidation.

“Oh, she calls in on a regular basis,” Marshal explained with a chuckle. “We all take turns having to handle her, but since you’re the new guy, we figured it was only right you get this one.”

“And all future ones,” Clayton added, joining in on the laughter.

Once their merriment finally died down, Marshal revealed one more nugget of torture. “By the way, she has the cards marked. That’s why you lost, Noah. I hate to break it to you little brother, but you need to be more observant if you’re going to make it as a cop.”

“Thanks for the encouragement, guys, but I need to get back to my patrol,” Noah stated in a clipped tone, biting back what he really wanted to say. As the newest rookie in the department, he didn’t have the luxury of speaking his mind. It didn’t matter that the cops ridiculing him were his brothers. There was a clear pecking order and he was firmly at the bottom of it.

He turned on his playlist from his cell phone, and the hard rock came blasting out of his speakers. Once he passed his field training and was released to work on his own, he found that the loud noise kept him awake and alert. The long, dark nights could wear on even the most seasoned officers without another soul around.

“Man, what I wouldn’t give to have a K9 partner to talk to right now,” he grumbled to himself as he shifted in his seat. Out of nowhere, the image of his estranged half-brother, Sean West, came popping into his mind. Just a month ago, he’d overheard his parents arguing about his older half-brother from his dad’s first marriage. Noah didn’t know much about the situation, since no one in the family talked about it. From what little he could gather, Sean’s mom took off with him when he was little and moved to the neighboring town of Woody. Their dad married Noah’s mother and they started their own family, and there had been no contact between them. This presented a problem for Noah. Ever since he heard them talk about Sean, he couldn’t help but wonder about the elite K9 handler that worked for Disaster City Search and Rescue. How much did

they have in common? Did they look alike? Was he serious like their father, or a joke-cracker like his other brothers? He'd been tempted to try to contact Sean since he only lived a half-hour away, but with the depth of the estrangement, Sean might as well have lived on the moon. Contact was out of the question.

Noah tried to suppress a yawn, knowing it would only make him more tired if he gave into the reaction. He rolled down his front windows, hoping the cold air would snap him back to attention. His favorite Led Zeppelin song came on, and he belted out the lyrics from memory. There was a sudden onslaught of rain, forcing him to roll his windows back up to keep it from coming inside the vehicle. Within minutes, it was raining cats and dogs outside. He flicked on his windshield wipers and tried to ignore the irritating sound of the rubber scrapping against the glass in a steady rhythm.

Just over the hill, he saw headlights coming from the other direction. His focus was pulled toward the vehicle, wondering what someone was doing out so late on this rural stretch of road. Was it teenagers coming back from a secret field party? Noah had gone to enough of them in his youth to know that heavy drinking and drugs were common at them. Did that mean the driver might be under the influence?

As the white car zipped past him, he saw the flash of blonde hair and a feminine face. He didn't recognize the young woman, which made him even more certain that it was one of the students from Faith Valley High School. He flipped his police car around and took off after the other vehicle. It only took a few seconds to catch up to the blonde. By the time he did, his suspicions were confirmed when she suddenly swerved out of control. She must have overcorrected because her car careened off the road and crashed straight into a nearby tree.

Silently, he sent up a prayer asking for God to protect the occupant of the car. Teenagers rarely thought about consequences, and he hoped that the young girl wasn't going to pay for the decision to drink and drive with her life. He pulled up and parked behind the crashed Honda Accord, then

jumped out of his own vehicle. He rushed over to the driver's side and peered through the window to get a better look at the occupant. On closer inspection, he realized that the blonde female was older than he first assessed. She looked to be in her mid-twenties rather than a teenager.

“Ma’am, are you all right?” he asked as he reached for the handle of the car door. She looked shocked as she turned her head to face him, her big, blue eyes filled with unshed tears. “Are you injured?” he inquired further when she didn’t respond to his first question.

As soon as he pulled the door open and bent down to check on her, he was greeted by the overpowering stench of alcohol. The entire car was filled with the pungent scent, confirming his initial assessment that she was indeed guilty of drunk driving. Despite how pretty she was and the fact he didn’t want to make her cry, he had to do his job and arrest her. He took a deep breath and then blurted out before he lost his nerve, “Ma’am I’m going to need you to step out of your car.”

Grab your copy of [Arresting Her Heart](#) now.

Sneak Peak of The Girlfriend Rescue

Ted Hendricks pulled his beanie cap down over his sandy blond hair to cover the edge of his ears. Even though spring was approaching, the Colorado mornings still held that crisp, cool air that made layers a necessity.

“You ready for your next search, Titan?” Ted asked his unofficial K9 partner, removing his leash and let him sniff the sock in his hand. “You’ve done great on the last two; let’s make it three.”

Titan sniffed several times, inhaling deeply. He turned and took off in the opposite direction. Ted followed, pleased that his partner was headed in the right direction. Every time he wondered if the K9 was going to underperform, Titan proved to Ted that he was the most capable search and rescue dog out there. It still shocked Ted that no one wanted to work with him after his police officer partner in Boulder was killed in a car accident. When the police bulletin went out to the county offering adoption for the dog, Ted immediately seized the opportunity. Not only was he a big animal person because he grew up on a farm just outside Clear Mountain, but he knew it was the perfect way to prove he could be a great additional K9 handler for the Clear Mountain Search and Rescue team.

Titan continued up the dirt trail, moving along the edge, stopping occasionally to take another whiff of whatever was driving him forward. About twenty yards further up the trail, Titan found the spot where the other matching sock had been

hidden earlier in the day by Ted. He barked and sat down next to a bush on the side of the path.

Ted jogged up and dug inside the bush. He plucked out the sock with pride. “Great job, Titan, you did really good,” he said, pulling out a treat from his cargo-pants’ pocket and giving it to the German shepherd.

Titan barked a second time, wagging his tail with joy. Ted ruffled his partner’s fur, laughing at how happy he was at his work. Ted had been worried whether or not they would bond and make a good team; however, the moment he picked him up from the Boulder County police kennel, there was an instant connection.

“You ready to head over and get Deanna?” Ted asked, as he re-attached the leash to Titan’s collar.

He barked again, wagging his tail even faster at the mention of Ted’s girlfriend. The only person Titan liked more than Ted was Deanna, and he couldn’t blame his K9 friend. Deanna was amazing. Not only was she drop-dead gorgeous with curly red hair and bright green eyes, she was smart, funny, and one of the kindest people he knew. Even though he had worked with her for years, he had purposely never gone after her. He saw how it bothered her when the other men at the station hit on her, and he didn’t want to be that guy. Plus, he didn’t think he had time for a relationship when he was so focused on his career. When Deanna asked him out on a date, her pursuit was the first time he thought about the possibility of making room for anything other than his job and his family.

Once back at the parking lot of the Clear Mountain Resort, they loaded into Ted’s truck and headed down the main road back into town. He drove to the east side of town and pulled up to a set of townhomes.

“Wait here, Titan. I’ll be right back.”

Ted hopped out of his truck and headed up the walkway. He reached the top of the steps and knocked on the door of the left unit. A few minutes later, Deanna opened the door. She was pulling on her last heel. “Just give me a quick sec,” she

said, moving over to grab her purse and jacket from the coat rack behind the door.

Ted grinned, repressing the chuckle that wanted to escape. It was so like Deanna to be late. She was as easy-going as they came in her personal life. This was probably her way of offsetting the need to be tough-as-nails when she was at work trying to keep up with the cops.

“Are we going to make it on time? I don’t want your parents to be upset with me.”

“We’ll be fine,” Ted promised, as he helped her into her black jacket. He hated covering up her blue blouse and jeans—which hugged the curves of her body perfectly—but he knew it was still a little too chilly to go anywhere without a coat. “Besides, they love you. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Good, because I know how important this is to your mom,” Deanna said, locking the door behind her before they took off.

Saturday brunch was a tradition Ted’s mother started for the family when his first brother moved out on his own four years ago. As the youngest of the three brothers, Ted decided to move out two years ago. His mother complained all the time about having an empty nest now that they were all gone. It was probably why she liked Deanna so much. She thought it meant Ted would be settling down soon and giving her lots of grandchildren. His oldest brother, Phil, enjoyed the single life. Ken, the middle son, had only had one daughter from a previous relationship and swore he was done. This was the main reason their mother pinned all her hopes on Ted.

A few miles outside of town, they reached a dirt road that led to Ted’s family’s ranch. Set back and surrounded by trees was a rambling farmhouse with a wooden barn next to it. There were also two large silos and, next to the barn, a corral filled with horses.

Ted climbed out of the truck and came around to help Deanna climb down, then kept the door open to let Titan out as well. They made their way to the front of the house, but before

they could even knock, the door swung open. “Uncle Teddy!” his six-year-old niece, Maggie, yelled with a giant grin on her face. “You ready to play Minecraft with me?” All of a sudden, noticing Titan, she pushed past Deanna and Ted to wrap her arms around the dog’s neck. “Never mind, I want to play with Titan instead. Come on, boy,” she said, gesturing for the K9 to follow her.

Ted and Deanna trailed after them into the dining room where the men were sitting around the table and his mother was putting out the last of the dishes.

“Can I help you with anything, Mrs. Hendricks?” Deanna offered.

“How many times do I need to remind you to call me Tamara?”

“I guess it’s just a habit from my job. I tend to call everyone ma’am or by their last name,” Deanna explained.

“Well, I suppose Mrs. Hendricks is better than ma’am. That would make me feel so old.”

The men around the table chuckled.

“We wouldn’t want that,” Ken said, elbowing their brother Phil in the side. “Mom wants to pretend she’s still twenty-two.”

“Stop that,” she chastised, patting her blonde mane. “Can I help it that I don’t have a single gray hair on my head.”

“Dying your hair will do that,” Phil pointed out with a wry grin.

“I don’t appreciate the accusation,” she said, giving her son a withering look of anger. Turning her attention to Deanna, she added, “I don’t need to dye. I have great genes. Just remember that, dear, when you and Teddy decide to finally get married and have children together. They’re going to be blessed with the same great genes.”

“Let’s hurry up and eat before the game comes on. I want to find out who is going to make it to the state finals,” Ted’s

father, Bill, said as he gestured to the empty seats next to him. "Sit down."

"Come on in here, Maggie," Ted's mother called out towards the living room. "It's time to eat."

Deanna and Ted did as they were directed just as Maggie came running into the room with Titan behind her. She took the last remaining chair at the table, and Titan laid down on the floor beside her.

His father said a prayer over the food before they passed the dishes of mashed potatoes, fried chicken, green beans, and bread around the table. The family laughed and talked about their week. Maggie kept slipping pieces of food to Titan. Ted knew he should probably stop it; it wasn't the best idea to feed him from the table, but he couldn't bring himself to stop it since it made them both so happy.

Just as they were finishing up the meal, Ted's cell phone buzzed. He picked it up and saw it was a call from work. "I have to take this." He answered the call only to be informed he was getting called in for a missing hiker. He wished he could take Titan with him and prove how great of a team they were, but he hadn't gotten up the nerve to seek the captain's approval yet. It would just have to wait until next time.

"Ken, do you mind giving Deanna a ride home for me?" Ted asked, standing up from the table. "I have to go to work. We've got a missing hiker."

"What about Titan?" Maggie asked, looking down at her K9 friend.

"Can you keep him here until I can pick him up later?" Ted asked.

"We can watch him, can't we, Daddy?" Maggie begged. "Please, Daddy, please?"

He shrugged. "Sure, I don't see why not."

Ted leaned over and gave Deanna a quick kiss. "Sorry about this. I'll call you later."

“I knew what I was signing up for when I decided to date a search and rescue cop,” she teased with a smile. “Go find that missing hiker.”

As Ted took off, he was grateful for his wonderful family and girlfriend; however, part of him still longed for the one thing he didn't have that he always wanted. He wanted to be a K9 handler. He knew he needed to finally just go for it, but in the back of his mind, he worried that it wasn't going to work out. Pushing that troubling thought away, Ted focused on what he needed to do next. He sped towards the station, ready to meet his team, and start their search.

Grab your copy of [The Girlfriend Rescue!](#)

Also by Jenna Brandt/Jennifer Branson

Most Books are Free in Kindle Unlimited

JENNA BRANDT'S CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

Hero Search and Rescue

~sweet romantic comedy with a dash of suspense~

Come visit the small town of Hero, Texas where the neighbors or nosy, the B&B is supposedly haunted, and the new search and rescue academy's the talk of the town.

[Small Town Start](#)

[Small Town Splurge](#)

[Small Town Smarty](#)

[Small Town Style](#)

[Small Town Sash](#)

[Small Town Slice](#)

The Coffee Loft

~sweet romantic comedy~

From cold brews to cappuccinos and frothy frappes, there's something on the menu for every romantic comedy reader. Fake dates, meddling matchmakers, friends-to-lovers and so much more, each stand-alone story is the right blend of sweetness, guaranteed to warm your heart.

[By Any Beans Necessary](#)

Disaster City Search and Rescue

~sweet romantic suspense~

Step into the world of Disaster City Search and Rescue, where officers, firefighters, military, and medics, train and work alongside each other with the dogs they love, to do the most dangerous job of all — help lost and injured victims find their way home.

[The Girlfriend Rescue](#)

[The Billionaire Rescue](#)

[The Wedding Rescue](#)

(Free with Newsletter sign-up)

[The Movie Star Rescue](#)

[The Best Friend Rescue](#)

[The Ex-Wife Rescue](#)

[The Cowgirl Rescue](#)

[The Single Mom Rescue](#)

[The Pop Singer Rescue](#)

[The Army Ranger Rescue](#)

[The Boss's Baby Rescue](#)

[The Patriot Rescue](#)

[The Forgetful Princess Rescue](#)

[The Holiday Rescue](#)

[The Mistaken Identity Rescue](#)

[The Bombshell Rescue](#)

[The High Stakes Rescue](#)

[The Dark Water Rescue](#)

[The Thanksgiving Rescue](#)

First Responders of Faith Valley

~sweet romantic suspense~

Fall in love with a small Texas town filled with heroes willing to put their lives on the line for others. Brothers wearing the same badge, cousins fighting the same fire, paramedics saving citizens, all while trying to find their way to the perfect soulmate.

[Saving His Reputation](#)

(Free with Newsletter sign-up)

[Arresting Her Heart](#)

[Sparking A Romance](#)

[Reviving Their Love](#)

[Guarding Her Secret](#)

[Rescuing Their Date](#)

[Mending A Broken Past](#)

[Igniting Her Feelings](#)

[Capturing His Attention](#)

[Defending Their Future](#)

Wild Animal Protection Agency

~sweet romantic suspense~

Come be apart of the adventure, danger, and heartfelt moments with the Wild Animal Protection Agency, where brave men and women work alongside each other all over the world, to do the most risky job of all — rescue injured and endangered wild animals.

[Rescue Agent for Dana](#)

[Rescue Agent for Sarah](#)

[Rescue Agent for Kylie](#)

[Rescue Agent for Josette](#)

[Rescue Agent for Margo](#)

[Rescue Agent for Penny](#)

[Box Set Books 1-3](#)

[Box Set Books 4-6](#)

[Complete Collection Box Set](#)

Christmas in Sweet Bloom Texas

~sweet romantic suspense~

Community, small town values, and where wishes turn into miracles everyday.

[A Wish for the Single Dad Sheriff](#)

The Lawkeepers

~sweet romantic suspense~

A multi-author series alternating between historical westerns and contemporary westerns featuring law enforcement heroes that span multiple agencies and generations. Join bestselling author Jenna Brandt and many others as they weave captivating, sweet and inspirational stories of romance and suspense between the lawkeepers — and the women who love them. The Lawkeepers is a world like no other; a world where lawkeepers and heroes are honored with unforgettable stories, characters, and love.

Jenna's Lawkeeper books:

Contemporary

[Lawfully Adored-K-9](#)

[Lawfully Wedded-K-9](#)

[Lawfully Treasured-SWAT](#)

[Lawfully Dashing-Female Cop/Christmas](#)

[Lawfully Devoted-Billionaire Bodyguard/K-9](#)

[Lawfully Heroic-Military Police](#)

[Lawfully Smitten-Christmas Workplace Romance](#)

[Lawfully Contemporary Box Set](#)

Billionaires of Manhattan Series

~sweet billionaire romance~

The billionaires that live in Manhattan and the women who love them. If you love epic dates, grand romantic gestures, and men in suits with hearts of gold, then these are books are perfect for you.

[Waiting on the Billionaire](#)

[Nanny for the Billionaire](#)

[Merging with the Billionaire](#)

(Entire series on Audiobook)

[BOM Box Set](#)

Second Chance Islands

~sweet billionaire romance~

What's better than billionaires on islands? How about billionaires finding second chances at life, love, and redemption while on one.

[The Billionaire's Repeat](#)

(Free with Newsletter sign-up)

[The Billionaire's Reunion](#)

[The Billionaire's Duty](#)

[The Billionaire's Christmas](#)

[SCI Box Set](#)

Billionaire Birthday Club

~sweet billionaire romance~

An exclusive resort—for the billionaire who appears to have everything but secretly wants more. After filling out a confidential survey, a curated celebration is waiting on the island to make their birthday wishes come true!

[The Billionaire's Birthday Wish](#)

[The Billionaire's Birthday Surprise](#)

[The Billionaire's Birthday Gift](#)

[BBC Box Set](#)

JENNIFER BRANSON'S HISTORICAL ROMANCE

The Lawkeepers

~sweet historical romantic suspense~

A multi-author series alternating between historical westerns and contemporary westerns featuring law enforcement heroes that span multiple agencies and generations. Join bestselling author Jenna Brandt and many others as they weave captivating, sweet and inspirational stories of romance and suspense between the lawkeepers — and the women who love them. The Lawkeepers is a world like no other; a world where lawkeepers and heroes are honored with unforgettable stories, characters, and love.

Jennifer's Lawkeeper books:

Historical

[Lawfully Loved-Texas Sheriff](#)

[Lawfully Wanted-Bounty Hunter](#)

[Lawfully Forgiven-Texas Ranger](#)

[Lawfully Avenged-US Marshal](#)

[Lawfully Covert-Spies](#)

[Lawfully Historical Box Set](#)

Brides of Persimmon Pass Series

~sweet historical romance~

Meet the Brides of Persimmon Pass. Strong, brave women with hearts of gold each in need of a man to survive in the Old West. Enter the cowboys, ranchers, & deputies ready to take on the challenge of the rural town & the women in it.

[Counting on the Cowboy](#)

[Gaming on the Gentleman](#)

[Doting on the Deputy](#)

[Relying on the Rancher](#)

[Flipping on the Farmer](#)

[Banking on the Businessman](#)

Mail Order Mix-Up Series

~sweet historical romance~

Mail order bride books about women venturing out West to make new lives for themselves. What happens when they decide to take a chance on love along the way?

[Mail Order Misfit](#)

[Mail Order Misstep](#)

[Mail Order Miscast](#)

[Mail Order Misaim](#)

[Mail Order Misplay](#)

[Mail Order Mister](#)

[Mail Order Mishap](#)

[MOMU Box Set](#)

Widows, Brides, and Secret Babies

~sweet historical romance~

Mail order bride stories with a twist. What happens when a bride arrives pregnant or with a secret child?

[Mail Order Miranda](#)

[Mail Order Miriam](#)

Secret Baby Dilemma

~sweet historical romance~

Each mail order bride arrives with a baby or pregnant, and the prospective groom doesn't know until her arrival.

[Mail Order Madeline](#)

The Second Chance Brides of the Old West

~sweet historical romance~

When things don't go right the first time, these women find a way to a second chance happily-ever-after.

[Discreetly Matched](#)

[June's Remedy](#)

[Becca's Lost Love](#)

[Hard to Please](#)

The Civil War Brides Trilogy

~sweet historical romance~

During the bloodiest conflict on American soil, two families struggle in the South to not only survive but to thrive.

[Saved by Faith](#)

[Freed by Hope](#)

[Healed by Grace](#)

[CWB Box Set](#)

For more information about Jenna Brandt, signup for her [Newsletter](#) or visit her on any of her social media platforms:

www.JennaBrandt.com

www.facebook.com/JennaBrandtAuthor

[Jen's Reader Group](#)

www.instagram.com/jennabrandtauthor

www.youtube.com/@JennaBrandtAuthor

Acknowledgments

My writing journey would not be possible without those who supported me. Since I can remember, writing is the only thing I love to do, and my deepest desire is to share my talent with others.

First and foremost, I am eternally grateful to Jesus, my lord and savior, who created me with this “writing bug” DNA.

In addition, many thanks go to:

My husband, Dustin, and three daughters, Katie, Julie, and Nikki, for loving me and supporting me during all my late-night writing marathons and coffee-infused mornings.

My mother, Connie, for being my first and most honest critic. As a little girl, sleeping under your desk during late-night deadlines for the local paper showed me what being a dedicated writer looked like.

My angels in heaven: my grandmother, who passed away in 2001; my infant son, Dylan, who was taken by SIDS seven years ago; and my father, who left us six years ago.

To my ARC Angels and Beta Bells for taking the time to read my story and give valuable feedback.

And lastly, but so important, to my dedicated readers, who have shared their love of my books with others, helping to spread the words about my stories. Your devotion means a great deal.

About the Author

Jenna Brandt is an international bestselling and award-winning author who writes contemporary romance and specializes in creating hunky heroes with sterling hearts. She has her own bestselling series First Responders of Faith Valley, Hero Search and Rescue, Billionaires of Manhattan, and the Wild Animal Protection Agency. Additionally, she's created two best-selling multi-author series, The Lawkeepers and Disaster City Search and Rescue based off the life of her husband in law enforcement. Her books *Waiting on the Billionaire* and *Lawfully Treasured* in 2018, and *Arresting Her Heart* in 2022 were voted into the Top 50 Indie Books on ReadFreely.com as well as her book, *The Billionaire's Birthday Gift*, was a finalist in the "Best Book We've Read All Year" Contest in 2020.

She's been an avid reader since she could hold a book and started writing stories almost as early. She's been published in several newspapers as well as edited for multiple papers, and graduated with her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Bethany College where she was the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper. Her first blog was published on The Mighty website, Yahoo Parenting and The Grief Toolbox as well as featured on the ABC News, CNN Health, and Good Morning America websites. She's also a member of the American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW) association.

Writing is her passion, but she also enjoys date nights with her hubby, cooking from scratch, watching movies on Netflix, reading books by her author friends, and engaging in social media with her readers. Her three young daughters keep her busy with Girl Scout activities, going to the mall, and playing at the park where they live in the Central Valley of California. She summers on the Golden Central Coast where she finds endless inspiration for her romance books. She's also active in her local church where she volunteers on their first impressions team and operates as the story curator for their media team.

She also writes bestselling historical romance under Jennifer Branson.



Join My Mailing List and Reader's Groups

**Sign-up for my newsletter and get a FREE book and a
FREE short story.**

**Join my Reader's Group, Jenna's Joyful Page Turners,
and get access to exclusive content and contests.**

**Join my multi-author reader's group, Heroes and Hunks,
for fun with some of your favorite sweet authors**