



*Jenni's*

A PINEVILLE CHRISTMAS #6

*Christmas  
Gift*



CYNTHIA COOKE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNI'S CHRISTMAS GIFT  
A SMALL-TOWN HEARTWARMING CHRISTMAS  
ROMANCE

A PINEVILLE CHRISTMAS

BOOK SIX



# CYNTHIA COOKE



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**Jenni's Christmas Gift**  
**A Small-Town, Heartwarming, Christmas Romance**  
**A Pineville Christmas Book 6**

Cynthia Cooke  
USA Today Bestselling Author

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## BOOK DESCRIPTION

### **Jenni's Christmas Gift**

*A Pineville Christmas Book 6*

***Falling for a down-on-his-luck cowboy was never part of Jenni's plan. Pretending to be engaged to raise funds for her rescue foundation was. She'd do anything for her rescue animals, but how was she to know her cowboy had a big secret, and that their two worlds were about to collide?***

When Jenni's problems fall faster and harder than a New Hampshire snow storm, she's going to need more than a shovel to save her rescue animals, she's going to need the help and trust of a handsome stranger.

Jenni's Rescue Foundation is at risk of being shut down!

How did that happen? Jenni has thrown her heart and soul into her foundation, but everything is going wrong. Now she's forced to do the unthinkable to get donations—fake an engagement to a handsome soldier fresh out of the military. She can make this sacrifice. *For the animals*. The fact that Bryce is drop-dead gorgeous will help soften the blow, won't it?

Bryce can't hide in Lincoln's barn any longer. If he wants his trust fund, worth millions, he'll have to work for the family business in Boston—the last place on earth he wants to be. What he would love to do is spend more time with Jenni, help her with her foundation, and live in the enchanting Christmas town of Pineville. But if he does, he'll be broke.

Will Jenni still want him? Will she still trust him when she finds out he hasn't been honest about who he is? Can she forgive him for the secrets he's kept?

In Pineville, Christmas dreams do come true, but the path to trust and forgiveness can be a bumpy, heartfelt ride.



## **About A Pineville Christmas!**

Pineville is known for its Christmas season. All its residents work overtime to bring Christmas to life—especially five lifelong friends who have never given up on the holiday season or each other. Read about each of these wonderful women, in these heartwarming holiday books filled with love, laughter and deep friendships, and the men who are lucky enough to love them.

## **Other Books set in Pineville!**

### **A Pineville Christmas Series**

Book #1 - [Santa Claus is Coming to Town](#) (Nicole and Landry)

Book #2 - [Christmas to Remember](#) (Brianna and Owen)

Book #3 [Home for Christmas](#) (Melanie and Eric)

Book #4 (Short) [Candy's Christmas Rescue](#) (Candy and Lincoln)

Book #5 [Candy's Christmas Wish](#) (Candy and Lincoln)

Book #6 [Jenni's Christmas Gift](#) (Jenni and Bryce)

[To view the whole series on Amazon click here!](#)

*This book is dedicated to all the men and women in our armed services and their families. Thank you for the sacrifices you have all made for our freedom.*

*A huge shout out to all the wonderful rescue organizations in communities across the world that help take care of your animals while you are fulfilling your duty. These foundations are a labor of love for all the volunteers who desperately need your help and donations to save animals in need.*

*I'd especially like to thank Hartman's Haven Dog Rescue in Hickory, NC, where I adopted my sweet Bella, and The Goathouse Refuge in Pittsboro, NC, who provide a cage-free sanctuary for cats that have no other place to seek solace and care.*

*For our military service members in need of help finding long-term foster care while on deployment, reach out to - [Dogs On Deployment](#) or [Pact For Animals](#)*

*Please consider making a donation of your time or money to your local pet rescue, or becoming a long-term foster parent for our military service people's pets today.*



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Thank You!

## CHAPTER 1



Okay. Don't Panic. Don't *panic*, Jenni Jones told herself as she scanned the classroom of thirty five-year-olds. All with big smiles, sticky fingers, and messy faces as they ate more of the candy from the bowls on their desks, then were stuck to the frosting on their graham cracker gingerbread houses.

"Miss Jenni," Sarah cried. "I need help."

"Me, too, Miss Jenni. My walls won't stay up." Sarah's friend Angie, not to be outdone in who can whine louder, turned it up a notch.

What should have been a fun afternoon had turned into a head-throbbing, exhausting day. She knew she should have divvied out the candy.

"Children, I can't help you when you're all talking at once. Can we please use our indoor voices?" she pleaded.

Billy squealed like a pig heading to slaughter.

Jenni turned toward the board and closed her eyes, blocking out the pain hammering through her temples. Maybe if she wished hard enough, when she opened them again the clock would read two-thirty and she could make a clean break out of the building.

But when she opened her eyes, the clock still read twelve-thirty. *Two hours to go.* "Okay, children, we only have thirty more minutes and then we have to practice our song for the tree-lighting ceremony."

“Thirty minutes!” Spencer wailed. “I can’t possibly finish in thirty minutes.”

“You will be surprised how much you can accomplish when you put your mind to it.” Jenni blew out a deep breath and dug through her purse for some pain relievers and took three instead of the recommended two. It was one of *those* kinds of days.

“Miss Jenni, I need more M&M’s,” Tommy yelled, the pitch of his voice reverberating through her brain. She was fairly certain he’d just had a full bowl of M&M’s in front of him five minutes ago, and there were only five or so stuck to his house.

She was about to say so when her phone jingled the tune “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” She leapt for it as if it was a magic portal out of her tortured existence.

“Hello?” she answered, even though it was frowned upon to talk on the phone during class time. If Miss Evelyn, their school principal, saw her, she would have another write-up in her file—*teacher spends way too much time on her phone while in the classroom, which is strictly against the rules.*

“Jenni it’s Carla.” Her friend’s voice sounded tight.

“Carla, hi. What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry to call you while you’re at school but I have an emergency. My dad has had a heart attack, and I have to fly to North Carolina. Now.”

“Oh, no. I’m so sorry to hear that.”

At that moment, Mrs. Hollis walked into the room, saw her on the phone, and frowned. In fact, Mrs. Hollis frowned so much, vertical lines were permanently etched into her forehead. Jenni should hang up. She knew that, but how could she hang up right then? Carla needed her.

She turned away from the door, and Mrs. Hollis. “What can I do to help?” she asked Carla.

“I have twelve animals at the shelter, and since it’s Christmas, none of my volunteers can take on more. Do you

have room at your place? There are eight dogs and four cats.”

“Of course. I’ll make room. Most of my rescues are out with foster parents right now, so there is room for the dogs in the barn, and I’ll take the cats to my apartment.” She immediately started calculating where they could put the extra crates.

“You’re a lifesaver, Jenni. I don’t know what I’d do without you. I’m driving to the airport now but Jeremy is at the clinic and can let you in.”

“Oh, you need me to come get them?” She glanced up at the clock. Driving to Boston and back wouldn’t be easy.

“I do. I’m so sorry. Especially with that whopper of a storm that’s rolling in tonight.”

“No problem. School is out in two hours. I’ll stop by the farm, pick up the van, and be on my way. I should get there before the storm. Make sure Jeremy waits for me.”

“I will. Thank you, Jenni. I owe you big time.”

“Anytime. You just take care of your dad.” She hung up the phone and turned back toward Mrs. Hollis who was standing in front of her.

The little blond curls surrounding Mrs. Hollis’s head looked tighter than they normally did. The older woman retired last year, but was still on hand to substitute, and was helping get the children ready for the tree-lighting ceremony tomorrow night. “I’m sorry about the phone call, Mrs. Hollis, but my friend has an emergency and needs my help.”

“I understand. Miss Evelyn has called a meeting right after school today to discuss the children’s singing in this year’s tree-lighting ceremony,” she said in a clipped, no-nonsense voice.

“I thought they were doing that tomorrow?” Jenni was horrified to realize her own voice sounded desperately close to Sarah’s.

“Change of plans.” Mrs. Hollis turned to face the students and clapped her hands loudly. “Children, there is way too

much chitter-chatter going on in this room. You're making my head roar. Keep it down, and start cleaning up your workstations. You only have ten minutes until you have to go to the music room."

"Oh, no!" Spencer whined.

"Ten minutes?" Sarah cried.

Mrs. Hollis frowned again. "Children, did I ask for input? No, I did not. Now clean up, quietly."

Jenni bit her lip to keep from telling Mrs. Hollis to butt out. This wasn't her class any longer, but right now she needed to keep the woman on her good side. Not to mention, it was truly annoying how much control she had over the children. They never listened to her the way they did Mrs. Hollis. That was probably because they were terrified of her. She knew she was.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hollis, but I have a prior commitment this afternoon that can't be changed. I won't be able to make it to the meeting."

The woman's brow crinkled into deep furrows. Jenni couldn't help staring at them, it was truly amazing. "I'm pretty sure it's not a request," she snipped.

"I understand, but I can't get out of it. My friend in Boston's dad just had a heart attack and she needs to go to him. I have to get down there before the storm hits or I'd wait until after the meeting. I'm really very sorry." She carefully left out the part about what she needed to go to Boston for. No one at the school was very supportive of what they considered her other full-time non-paying job of rescuing animals. Why, she couldn't imagine. "Can you cover for me?" She gave the teacher her sweetest smile.

Mrs. Hollis sighed and then nodded. "All right, I'll try to explain, but Miss Evelyn is not going to be happy."

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate it." No matter what she did, she could never seem to make their new principal, Evelyn Rutherford, happy.

Jenni shook the thought out of her head. It didn't matter. All that mattered was getting in and out of Boston before the weather turned bad. She quickly checked the weather app on her phone. The storm looked massive. She cringed and slipped her phone into her purse.

"In fact, is there any way you could cover the rest of the day for me? The kids are spending the last hour in music class so it will only be the last twenty minutes before their parents arrive." She stared up at Mrs. Hollis with hope in her eyes and in her heart.

Ms. Hollis frowned *again*.

"I wouldn't ask," she continued. "Except that storm seems to be growing by the minute and I'd hate to get stuck there."

Mrs. Hollis's eyes widened in dismay. "I would hope not. You can't miss another day of school. Especially tomorrow when everyone will be so excited about their performance at the tree-lighting ceremony."

Jenni grimaced and threw her a smile. "Trust me, I know. I will be here, I promise. I know how hard everyone has worked for this event."

Mrs. Hollis gave a heavy sigh. "Fine. Yes. All right. Go. Go now."

Bingo! Jenni clapped her hands together, and almost gave the woman a hug, which she knew would have horrified the older teacher. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

She grabbed her jacket and her purse and ran out the back door, heading down the hallway the long way around so Miss Evelyn wouldn't see her leaving from the front office. She had to do something about her job before she got fired. Maybe the upcoming break would be just what she needed.

"Miss Jenni?"

Jenni stopped in her tracks as the nasally sound of her name coming from the principal filled the hallway. She turned toward the woman who seemed to enjoy making her life miserable and plastered a bright smile on her face. "Hello, Mrs. Rutherford."

“Didn’t Mrs. Hollis tell you we’re having an all-hands-on-deck meeting after school today?”

“Yes, she did, but I’m so sorry I can’t make it. I thought the meeting was scheduled for tomorrow, and I already have a prior commitment. In fact,” she glanced down at her watch. “I really have to run. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“I better,” she called after her, her face a mask of fury. “And your class better be ready for the tree-lighting ceremony.”

“Oh, they are,” Jenni called over her shoulder.

Her class would be singing “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” They’d been rehearsing nonstop. At this point, if she never heard that song again, she would celebrate.

Evil Evelyn wasn’t happy with her, but when was she ever? Jenni wasn’t going to worry about that right now. She wouldn’t be fired. It was Christmas. No matter how much her boss hated her, she wasn’t *that* evil. Was she?



## CHAPTER 2



“*H*ey, boy, how are you doing?” Bryce Whittaker asked the silver horse, Shadow, as he ran his hand down the horse’s long neck. The horse’s big brown eyes stared at him with expectation. He pulled a carrot out of the bin and held it out for the horse, then put a scoop of feed into his bucket, along with some fresh hay. Then he picked up the shovel and started to clean the stall.

“You really don’t have to do that,” Lincoln said, coming into the barn with Tina, his Australian Shepherd by his side.

Bryce grinned. “I like taking care of the horses, it makes me feel useful.” He bent down and petted Tina. She was a good dog, and reminded him of Bucky. The thought of his dog filled his insides with sadness tinged with a heavy dose of anger. His ex, Dominique, was supposed to be taking care of Bucky while he’d been deployed, she couldn’t even manage to do that right.

He didn’t know if he was more upset over her betrayal or by the fact that she lost his dog. “He just ran off,” she’d told him, but something about the way she said it, about the look in her eyes over the video chat, had him doubting her. The fact that she left him for his brother, didn’t help.

Bryce scooped up another shovel of manure and put it in the cart.

“I need to keep busy,” he said as Lincoln fed the other two horses. “Where’s that beautiful fiancée of yours?”

“In the kitchen baking up a storm. She wants her wedding cake to be the biggest and best she’s ever made. She also made coffee. Come on in and get yourself a cup.”

“I will. Thanks.” He set down the shovel and closed the stall. Lincoln picked it up and started to clean the second stall. Bryce smiled. “Candy’s a good woman. Knows her heart.”

“Don’t I know it? She’s changed my life.”

“Tell me about it. I never thought I’d see Master Sergeant scooping horse poop and running a farm.”

Lincoln laughed. “Me, too, but I love it.” They were both silent for a moment, then Lincoln turned to him. “What about you, do you have any plans for what you’re going to do now that you’re out of the service?”

“Not yet. My parents are expecting me at our company’s Christmas party this weekend, and then they want me to start at the office on Monday so I have two days to figure it out.” Bryce gave a wry smile. Truth was, he wasn’t ready to see his family yet. To face their expectations.

“Will your ex be there?” Lincoln asked as he finished scooping the second stall. He set down the shovel and leaned against a post.

“I’m going to assume, as far as I know, she still works for the company, but I don’t know if she’s still with my brother. I haven’t talked to anyone about her in a while.”

Lincoln’s lips twisted in a grimace. “Messy.”

“Tell me about it. And that is why I’d rather spend the day scooping horse poop, then go back to work at the family company.”

Lincoln grinned, and patted him on the shoulder. “I totally get that. You’re welcome to stay as long as you want. In fact, you can watch the place while I take my new bride to Hawaii on our honeymoon.”

Bryce looked up at Shadow and felt his chest loosen. “Thanks, Lincoln, I might just take you up on that.”

Lincoln led his horse out of the stall and started to tack him up. “I need to ride out and check the fences. You up for it?”

Bryce patted Shadow’s neck. “Count us in.”

They spent the next couple hours riding the horses around the entire property, checking the fences and the livestock. Bryce couldn’t imagine a better way to spend the day. They got back to the barn and unsaddled the horses. They had just finished brushing them down and putting them away when a small SUV pulled into the yard.

Lincoln shut the stall door. “Oh, no, here comes Jenni.”

“Your business partner?”

“Supposed to be. She’s not real good with the ‘business’ side of things, though. We’re going to have to have a serious talk about the foundation pretty soon.”

“Uh, uh.”

Lincoln stepped out of sight. “Do me a favor—you haven’t seen me.”

Surprised, Bryce stopped in his tracks. “Oh, man, you have changed. Are you scared of a girl?”

“You better believe it. You should be too,” Lincoln said, laughing. “Run while you have the chance.”

Bryce smothered a smile as Lincoln disappeared into the office in the back of the barn. Bryce continued brushing Shadow as a petite woman with smiling green eyes, a pert little nose, and her long hair pulled back in a ponytail hurried into the barn.

“Oh, you must be the guy Lincoln hired to help out around here while he’s away,” said the young woman with wisps of golden brown hair and fire in her eyes as she stepped into the barn.

“Yes, ma’am. You could say that.” Bryce’s voice was casual as he watched her out the corner of his eye and he continued brushing Shadow.

“Well, you haven’t come soon enough. Let me tell you.” She inspected his work. “Are we down to two horses?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Good. I have to go to Boston to pick up some animals from a rescue there.” She walked toward the kennels in the back where three dogs were sleeping. “Have these guys been out today?”

He shrugged. “I believe so, but I wouldn’t know.”

“You wouldn’t know? Why not? Every dog is supposed to have at least three hours out of the kennels. They can’t stay locked up in cages all day. These animal’s well-being is your number one responsibility.”

He tried not to smile as he zeroed in on the spark in her eyes and the way she was gesticulating with her hands. The woman was on fire.

“Jenni, Bryce is not the hired help,” Candy called from the front of the barn.

The woman’s eyes widened. “But…”

Candy continued toward them, hurrying to his rescue. “This is Lincoln’s best man, Bryce.”

“Oh.” The woman’s shoulders deflated and she took a quick step backward. “I’m so sorry—“

“It’s all right, Candy,” Bryce said, smiling wide. “I didn’t correct her when I could have.” He stepped forward. “I’m Bryce Whittaker. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too. I’m Jenni, Lincoln’s business partner and very embarrassed.” She stepped toward him with her hand out. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Bryce took her hand. “Don’t be embarrassed. I like helping out Lincoln in the barn. That’s why I’m here.”

“And to be in our wedding,” Candy reminded him.

Bryce grinned. “Of course.”

“Is Lincoln here?” Jenni asked, looking around the barn. “I need to take the van to Boston to pick up some animals.”

Candy looked alarmed. “But there’s a huge storm coming in.”

“That’s why I need to get a move on. My friend Carla called me from the airport. She has an emergency and has no one to watch the animals while she’s gone.” Jenni walked toward the office in the back where Lincoln had gone to hide. “Lincoln?”

Bryce smothered a smile, waiting for round two of the fireworks.

“Bryce, would you mind going with her?” Candy asked. “I hate to ask, but I don’t want her out on the highway with a bunch of dogs in bad weather.”

“I’ll be fine,” Jenni yelled as she disappeared through the doorway into the office.

“I would send Lincoln with her,” Candy continued, ignoring her friend. “But he has a vet coming and I’m stuck in the kitchen.”

“No, problem. I’d be happy to go with her,” Bryce said, even though Boston was the last place on earth he wanted to go. The odds of running into anyone from his family were slim to none, but he still didn’t like the idea of being anywhere near there.

Candy smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. “Thanks, Bryce. You’re a lifesaver.”

He really liked Lincoln’s fiancée and was happy to help her out. “So, I’ve been told.”

“It’s really not necessary.” Jenni hurried toward them, grabbing some blankets off a pile along the way toward the white cargo van. “But can you make sure Lincoln lets the dogs in the back out?”

“I will. How many animals should I tell him you’re picking up?” Candy asked as Jenni loaded the blankets into the van.

“Twelve. Eight dogs and four cats.”

Candy grimaced. “Eight more dogs. I hope we’ll have room.”

“We do. There are some empty stalls in the back.”

“No, we don’t,” Lincoln said, suddenly appearing from the back of the barn. “What’s more, we don’t have enough dog food to feed them, and we’re out of funds so we can’t buy more.”

“What are you talking about?” Hands on hips, Jenni’s tone was full of exasperation.

Now Bryce knew why Lincoln had been so reluctant to see her.

Lincoln stepped toward Jenni. “I mean we can’t afford to take on anymore animals.”

Jenni’s face dropped. “But my friend’s dad had a heart attack. She has to leave town and there is no one left to take the animals. I can take the cats to my house, so we just need space for the dogs. She has food for them. I’ll bring it back with me.”

Lincoln shook his head. “I’m not going to be here to take care of the animals we have.”

“I can stay and help out,” Bryce said quickly. He should stay out of it. This wasn’t his deal, but Jenni looked so upset.

“Plus, it will be winter break at school, so I’ll have a lot more time to help out here in the barn. I told her I would, and she’s already left town.” Jenni added. “There is no one else to help them.”

“All right,” Lincoln reluctantly agreed. “I just re-homed Spirit so we can put four of the crates in his stall and put four in the back storage room. But it is getting tight, and you have to bring food with you.”

“I will. We can make it work,” Candy insisted. “I promise.”

“Are you certain you can stay?” Lincoln asked Bryce. “I’m not sure you know what you’re getting into.”

“I’m sure. Trust me, any excuse not to go home right now I’ll take.”

“Scared of a girl?” Lincoln asked with a grin.

“Ha, ha,” Bryce said, hoping Jenni and Candy hadn’t heard him. Luckily, they looked to be in deep conversation. It wasn’t that he had anything to hide, he just didn’t want to talk about the fact that his girlfriend left him for his brother and he was being forced to go to a family party with them both. Whether he wanted to or not.

## CHAPTER 3



Jenni watched Bryce out of the corner of her eye. He was gorgeous and walked with enough confidence to fill the entire state of New Hampshire. His long, jean-clad legs tapered down to an expensive pair of cowboy boots made of soft, supple leather. Her gaze lingered on those boots. She sort of considered herself an expert at cowboy boots since she herself wanted a pair but couldn't afford any made from real leather. No, hers were cheap Walmart knockoffs.

"Great news about Spirit," she said to Lincoln, pulling her gaze off of Bryce.

"It is. He was a great horse so I'm glad I found him a home," Lincoln said as he scattered fresh hay in Spirit's empty stall preparing for the pups she was about to go get.

"Do you think we'll be able to afford another building to house more kennels? I would love a facility in town." She considered telling him about her dream of opening a pet store with a room for pet grooming and the rescue kennel in the back, but it was just a dream. At this point, she didn't need another person to shoot it down. Her sister had already done a great job at that.

Lincoln shook his head. "Right now, we're already operating in the red. In fact, when I get back from our honeymoon, we're going to have to make some serious changes at the foundation."

"Changes?" Jenni repeated, her heart dropping.



“I’m sorry, but we have to cut back on our expenses. There isn’t enough money to cover the vet bills and the food costs as it is.”

“All right. I’ll look at the reports you sent me and we’ll talk about that after the wedding.” The last thing she wanted was for him to give her another reason she couldn’t pick up Carla’s rescue’s. Besides, they still have the caroling kickoff fundraiser coming up next weekend. She would talk to the girls about upping their game. They would raise enough. They had to.

She found herself staring at Bryce again. He turned to her, his smile infectious. She felt her own lips twitch. She thought about how his hand completely swallowed hers as she shook it, how warm and strong it was, but more, how his touch made her feel. She sighed, it had been way too long since she’d spent any time with a man. Obviously.

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks and looked back at Lincoln. “So anyway, I need to take the van and head up to Boston. I’d like to get there and get out before that storm hits.”

He fixed her with a serious gaze. “Okay, but I can’t go with you. I have the vet coming over to give vaccines to the horses.”

Bryce stepped toward them. “It’s okay, I already told Candy I’d go with her.”

“I can go alone, though. Really,” she said quickly, not sure she wanted the distraction of a very handsome man she didn’t know on the long drive to Carla’s place. “I have my audiobook, and it’s not like I haven’t made the drive before. A lot.” She emphasized this with raised eyebrows.

While normally she wouldn’t balk at riding all the way to Boston with a handsome stranger, in theory, she wasn’t sure she was ready for that now. What did she know about this guy? How well did Lincoln really know him anyway? He was always too nice, too trusting.

“That’s all right, I’d be happy to. Twelve animals are a lot to handle alone, especially with a storm coming,” Bryce said.

He was smiling again. Was he too eager to go with her? Jenni looked at Lincoln, about to protest. The man smiled too much. She never trusted a man that smiled that much. She lost her train of thought as she stared into eyes that were too blue, too warm and friendly.

She pulled her gaze away and looked back at Lincoln, giving him a pleading look. *Please don't send me off with this stranger.* "That's so nice," she said. "Really. But totally unnecessary. "I...I need to spend some time with Carla."

"I thought you said she called you from the airport?" Bryce smiled as he watched her squirm.

"Did I?" Did she?

Lincoln grinned and dropped a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, Jenni. I've known Bryce for more than eight years. We served in Afghanistan together. He's a fellow soldier and completely trustworthy."

"Oh." She bit her lip and turned to Bryce, who was grinning at her. He was enjoying himself. She felt like an idiot. "Well, a girl can never be too careful."

"So true," Bryce said, nodding and tipping the brim of his hat with a finger. "With cowboys or bad weather."

"I'm not sure which is worse," she said, causing him to laugh again. She had to admit, she liked the sound of his laugh, and liked even more that she was the reason for it.

"With the storm coming in, I don't want to take any chances," Lincoln said. "I'm sure you remember the story of what happened the night Candy refused to get into my truck with me. We both could have died, or at least got a serious case of frost bite chasing after Bandit the night of Brianna's wedding. If you got into trouble, Candy would never forgive me."

"You got that right," Candy said, slipping her arms around his waist and giving him a hug. "But with this guy around, there was no chance anything bad would have happened. He's my hero."

Lincoln kissed her and they stared at each other for a long moment.

“Okay, you two lovebirds, we need to get going,” Jenni said with a grin.

Candy smiled and shrugged as she looked back at them. “By the way, there’s a fresh batch of muffins in the house. Let’s get you some for the road.”

“Sounds good.” Jenni jumped at the chance to get going. She turned to Bryce. “Meet you in the van in five?”

He dipped his head. “I’ll be there.”

Jenni followed Candy toward the house. She needed to get the scoop on this handsome cowboy and quick. She bounded up the porch and through the front door. “Okay, spill everything,” she said, once the door closed behind her.

“About what?” Candy asked with a playful grin.

“You know about what?”

Candy pulled out a Tupperware container and pulled off the lid. “He’s handsome, isn’t he?”

“Very. Married?”

“Nope.” She started placing muffins inside.

“What does he do for work?”

Candy shrugged. “I don’t know. He just got out of the military. I think he’s supposed to go home and work for his dad’s company, but he’s not in a hurry, which is why he’s going to stay here for a while.”

“Hmm,” Jenni said, wondering what kind of company his dad had, and how long he was staying.

“How’s school going? Are the kids ready for the tree-lighting ceremony?”

Jenni nodded. “They are so cute, but I tell you, if I hear that song one more time, I might have to stick pencils in my ears.”

“I bet. I’m going to make them all some treat bags.” She pointed to the box full of Christmas bags tied with green ribbon and small candy canes.

“Oh, they’ll love those. How on earth did you have time to do that?”

“You know, baking is a stress reliever for me. I haven’t baked this much all year.”

“I know what you mean. I made them little lace angel ornaments and put pictures of their little faces on the heads.”

“Oh, those must be so cute.”

“Does Brianna have the barn ready for the wedding?” Their friend Brianna had turned her childhood home into a B&B and their barn into a wedding venue. It was constantly booked. Brianna was a premiere wedding planner, so Jenni had no doubt Candy’s wedding would be spectacular.

Candy sealed the container and pushed it across the counter toward her and grabbed two water bottles out of the fridge. “Yep. Everything is set. Do you have your dress ready?”

“It is. Roni and I have an appointment to get our hair done in matching updos.”

“Nice.”

“We can’t wait for your big day. Well, listen, I need to get going.” Jenni glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Yes, you do. Be careful, and I’ll see you when you get back.” She slid the Tupperware container and two water bottles across the counter.

Jenni grabbed the muffins and water and ran out the door. “Pumpkin! My favorite.”

“I know,” Candy yelled, as the door banged shut.

Jenni glanced up at the sky as she ran down the steps and almost tripped as she saw the dark clouds rolling in.

The storm was coming in faster than they thought.

## CHAPTER 4



*B*ryce didn't like the look of those storm clouds in the distance. Nor was he thrilled to be driving back to Boston. Even if he wasn't going to see anyone he knew, just being in the city limits would make him nervous, but he was glad to be there with Jenni. Especially with an oncoming storm.

She'd been talking nonstop about everything and nothing. She made him laugh and somehow managed to loosen the tension in his chest. He had to admit, he found her adorable. Especially when she talked about the antics of her cats and her kindergarten students. She was unlike any woman he had ever met.

The women he was used to were all about appearances and wanting to be perfect at everything they did. They would never leave the house with a hair out of place, or know exactly where they were going and what they were doing every moment of the day.

"I really don't know how I'm going to continue doing both, though," she said, continuing her non-stop ramble. "I haven't been able to give my students, or my animals, my undivided attention and both are starting to suffer. Not to mention my sanity."

He couldn't help smiling as she continued on about her sanity, or lack thereof. His phone rang, and he glanced down to where it was sitting on the van's console to read the display. He tensed. "It's my grandmother. Do you mind?"

A wide, authentic smile filled her face and he lost himself in it for a long second. “No, not at all. Grandmothers get top priority.”

He answered the phone. “Hello, Grandmother.”

“Bryce, how are you?” His grandmother asked, the sound of her voice warming his heart.

He grinned. “I’m good.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’m sitting here with your mother and we’re wondering when you are coming back.”

His smile faltered. “Soon. Very soon,” he said, trying not to commit to an exact date.

Jenni’s phone rang. She threw him an apologetic look as she answered, “Brianna, hi.”

“Is that a woman’s voice I hear?” his grandmother asked.

He waited a beat, not sure how to get out of answering. “Yes.”

“Thank goodness,” she said, surprising him. “I’m so glad you’ve moved on and are finally over that wretched Dominique. Your father has given her the old heave-ho at the office, but she’ll still be at the Christmas party. Unfortunately, I tried to ban her, but your father’s afraid of being sued. He’s always been a coward, if you ask me.”

Bryce grinned. He loved how outspoken his grandmother was. She said what was on her mind and forget the consequences. Age has only made her worse.

“So when are you coming home?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ve agreed to be the best man at a friend’s wedding next weekend, and they need me to stay and house-sit his place while he’s on his honeymoon.”

“So you’re back from your deployment then?”

He cringed, realizing his blunder. “Yes. I’m sorry. I should have called.”

“You are going to make it back for the company party, then?” she pressed.

He rubbed a hand down his face. “Honestly, I’d rather not. I have a lot going on.”

“I don’t blame you, Bryce, especially the way your brother has been acting, but you have to be there. Otherwise you let that wretched hussy have the upper hand. I really couldn’t stand that.”

He laughed out loud. “We certainly can’t have that.”

“No, we can’t. I’ll tell your father you’ll be there, and bring that woman that’s with you to the party,” she said with a chuckle. “Liven things up a little bit.”

He looked at Jenni who was just hanging up from the call with Brianna. She sure would make the party a lot more interesting. “It’s an interesting thought, and I will try to make it, but no guarantees.”

“Bryce, you have to be there. Do you even want to come back and work at the company?” His grandmother asked.

He sighed. “No, I really don’t. I’ve spent the last three days working with horses, and I can’t remember when I enjoyed myself so much.”

“Horses?” she said, her voice full of surprise.

“Yep.”

“I guess that woman did throw you for a loop. You had better get back to Boston quick.”

He laughed again. “I love you, Grandmother.” He hung up the phone and turned to Jenni. “My grandmother.”

“You got to admire a guy who loves his grandmother.” A twinkle lit her eyes, and for a second he couldn’t take his eyes off of her.

“I’ve been deployed for a year, so it’s been a while since I’ve been home to see her, but she is my absolute favorite person on the planet.”

She smiled. “Where do you live?”

“Boston,” he admitted as they passed a sign that read: Boston 90 miles.

“Really?” She sounded surprised. “Do you want to stop by and see anyone?”

“Can’t. We have a storm to beat.”

She looked out the windshield up at the sky. “You’re right, and I think it might get here sooner than we expected.”

He stepped on the gas pedal. “Do we know what kind of dogs we’re picking up?”

“No, I didn’t ask. Why? Are you okay with big dogs?”

“Yes, I used to have a German Shepherd.”

“Nice.”

The van got quiet and he realized he missed her talking. He was about to ask her to tell him more about herself, when she spoke. “So tell me about your family.”

He’d much rather talk about hers. “Not much to tell. We’re a little estranged.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. That’s tough.”

“Yeah, my ex works for my dad, at the family business.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. “That’s awkward.”

“Very. Especially since she’s now dating my brother and I’m expected to work there too.”

Her eyes widened. “No way.”

“Yes. Although my grandmother just told me my dad finally let her go.”

“Good. My sister and I fight like crazy, but we have each other’s backs. Always. Family always comes first in my book.”

He liked that. He wished he could say his family felt that way. “The worst part was she was supposed to be taking care of my dog while I was deployed.”



“What happened?” Jenni asked, her voice full of trepidation.

“She lost him.” Even as he said the words, his stomach clenched.

“She lost your dog?” The outrage in her voice matched his.

“I told her I wanted her out of my life. Out of my family’s company, and out of Boston. She refused, of course, and the next thing I know, my dog is missing.”

“I am so sorry. That is...horrific.”

Angry, he tightened his grip on his steering wheel.

“Tell me about it. It’s one of the reasons I can’t go back. Not yet. Not until I’m sure I won’t drive her out of the state myself.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“My dad’s company throws an annual Christmas party every year. My grandmother wants me to be there. In fact, she said I should bring you. I’m beginning to think that might be a brilliant idea.” This woman sitting next to him was charming and fun and completely the opposite of cold-as-ice Dominique.

Jenni laughed out loud. “Oh, yeah, why’s that?”

“So everyone knows I’ve moved on. That what Dominique did to me didn’t knock me down.”

“Oh, yes. Your grandmother’s right. I’m in.”

“You are?”

“Absolutely. When is it?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow? That’s quick.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy. I’m not ready to go, to face everyone. I really can’t put myself or you through it.”

“If you change your mind, let me know. I’ll find a way to make it work. I’m just glad it’s not next weekend. Saturday night is the caroling kickoff—it’s our annual fundraiser for the

rescue foundation, and apparently we need to up our game this year. You should go.”

“I will, it sounds fun.”

“It is. All the local businesses set up booths and sell things. It’s our biggest money-maker of the year. The whole town comes, or at least it seems that way.” When she spoke her eyes sparkled with joy and her whole body seemed to radiate excitement. It was contagious.

“Nice. So tell me more about yourself. Take my mind off my family.”

“Well, my life is pretty boring, except at Christmas. I teach kindergartners and rescue animals, and that’s it. I have no time for anything more. I live on coffee and muffins. Do you want one?” She opened the Tupperware container and held it out to him.

He reached for one and took a bite. “Oh, good.”

“Candy’s the best baker I know.”

“Dogs and kids. That doesn’t sound boring, it sounds like you must have nerves of steel.”

She grinned. “I try. To be honest, I’m not sure I’m cut out to be a kindergarten teacher.”

He couldn’t imagine Dominique saying she wasn’t cut out to do anything. “No? Why’s that?”

“They are just so cute and I love them to death. Apparently, I’m not stern enough and I don’t set enough boundaries. According to my principal, children need boundaries. They aren’t supposed to run roughshod over the classroom.”

“Do they? Run roughshod?”

“Only when I give them too much candy. Like today.”

He laughed, surprised she would admit that so openly. She seemed like a fun teacher—whether the parents would agree he didn’t know.

“What?” she asked with a squeal of defensiveness. “Jolly Ranchers make great bribes. You’d be surprised at what I’m able to accomplish with a bag full of them.”

He grinned, shaking his head. “Okay, I can see why you could have some problems.”

“Hey, you’re only five once, and kindergarten really sets the stage for their entire life’s impression of going to school. Do you know how many kids have anxiety problems in kindergarten? It’s outrageous. School should be fun. Learning should be fun.”

“I wish you were my teacher,” he admitted.

“Thank you,” she said with a grin.

“You might have to tell my principal that. I’m afraid she’s ready to fire me. I’ve been missing too much school lately taking care of my foundation, and now Lincoln tells me that’s in jeopardy too.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’re helping. You really are. Just make sure we get back home tonight, because there is no way I can miss another day of school tomorrow if I want to keep my job.”

He stepped on the accelerator. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it. I promise.”

## CHAPTER 5



Jenni was so glad Bryce came with her. His company made the drive to Boston go so much faster, and he seemed like a really nice guy. Though, she didn't know how he could be so dumb as to hook up with a witch that would lose his dog. It was inconceivable. He must have horrible taste in women.

What was wrong with men anyway? Here she and Roni had the worst luck finding a man that was worthy of them, and someone like Bryce, who probably wouldn't look her way twice, hooks up with someone who would lose his dog.

She burned up at the thought.

She bet that woman was beautiful and probably a size two, five-foot-eight, and drop-dead gorgeous. It was the only thing that made sense. Women who were short and a little on the chunky side never got the guy. She looked down at her sweater, making sure there weren't any muffin crumbs on her chest, and saw her sweater was covered in cat hair. Or maybe that was why she never got the guy. She grinned as she brushed off her chest.

"Oh, right there. Take that exit coming up," she said quickly. She needed to pay attention, she thought, as a fat raindrop hit the windshield. "There it is, right there." She pointed to Carla's rescue center.

"Looks like the place is closed up," Bryce said as he pulled into the parking lot.

“Don’t say that. Carla assured me Jeremy would be there. Pull around back.”

He followed her directions, drove behind the building, and parked the van. Jenni jumped out and ran toward the back door. She tried the knob, but it was locked. She banged on the door. “Hello? Jeremy! He’d better be here,” she said to Bryce as he joined her at the door. The rain started falling heavier, turning into sleet. She pounded again, and the door swung open.

A long-haired kid stepped back, smiling at her as she rushed inside, Bryce on her heels.

“Jeremy? I’m Jenni, I’m here to pick up the animals.”

“Great. It’s about time. I’m running late and need to go.” He thrust the keys at her. “Can you lock up?”

“Wait. What? Aren’t you going to help me load the animals into the van?”

“Sorry!” He ran past her out the door and toward his car.

“Can you believe that?” she said to Bryce. “It’s a good thing you’re here.”

They walked down a short hall and entered the large room in the back where Carla kept the animals. Jenni looked at the cats and dogs sitting in their carriers staring at her with big anxious eyes.

“Don’t worry, guys. We’ll take care of you.” She grabbed two of the cat cages. “Let’s put the cats up front and the dogs in the rear.” She hurried down the hall with two of the cat cages and put them in the side door of the van, then went back for the other two while Bryce carried the dog carriers. One had two Chihuahuas, and the other a small Beagle.”

As she walked back into the room, a German Shepard whined at her and pawed at the bars. “It’s okay, boy.”

She picked up the file folder with the animal’s intake papers and health records and quickly scanned the note Carla left for her with the history of the animals. Nothing to worry about, she thought as she flipped through the pages.

“We need to get moving, the snow has started to fall and it’s coming down harder than expected,” Bryce said as he walked back into the room.

The German Shepherd barked as he saw Bryce.

Bryce stopped and turned to the dog. The dog barked again, and Bryce ran toward the cage. “Bucky?” The dog barked again. Louder. More excited. “Oh, my God. Bucky.”

Jenni stood stunned as Bryce opened the dog’s cage and the dog catapulted himself into Bryce’s arms. “Is that your dog?”

“It sure is.” He hugged the dog, petting his head. “I can’t believe I found you.”

The smile on Bryce’s face brought tears to Jenni’s eyes. She quickly searched through the papers for information on the German Shepherd. “It says here, he was dropped off. His owner is deployed. Carla was going to hold him for another month before putting him up for adoption.”

“I can’t believe Dominique told me he ran away.”

“Me, either.” She shook her head. “That’s unforgivable. Do you think she was going to get him back for you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care.” He hugged the dog again, then picked up his carrier. “Come on, boy. Let’s go get in the van.”

Jenni picked up another carrier with a black-and-white rat terrier inside and followed Bryce out the door. They came back for a carrier with a large lab, another with a Maltese, and a young hound with golden hair and big brown eyes.

Jenni grabbed the papers and the other two cat cages and put them in the van. Five minutes later, all the animals and bags of food were loaded up. She had leashes, food and water bowls, and poop bags. They were all set for the ride back to Pineville. She turned off the lights and locked the doors behind her, then hurried toward the van.

“I’m so glad you came with me. I would have had the hardest time managing all this on my own,” she admitted as

snow quickly blanketed the roads.

“I’m happy too. Isn’t that right, Bucky?”

Bucky sat on the floor between the two front seats and watched the snow hit the windshield. Bryce couldn’t stop petting him. Jenni petted him too. “You are such a lucky dog,” she said.

“That he is. Your friend has a really nice place. She obviously took very good care of my dog.”

“Carla’s great. She really cares. I’m so envious of her shop. She has exactly what I’m dreaming about. A pet-supply store up front, with a rescue and adoption center in the back. A place where people can come to get their animals groomed and buy all the supplies they need. We could even have a mobile vet come on the weekends. We don’t have anything like it in Pineville. I think it would be an instant success.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Bryce said. “Have you told Lincoln yet? I think you guys should do it.”

“He agrees we need more room. He wants more of his stalls so he can take in more horses. He’s gotten very attached to them.”

“I must admit, I was very surprised when he told me he was running a rescue foundation out of his barn. He never seemed the type.”

“Me, too, but we love it and we work well together. Him with the horses and livestock, and me with the dogs and cats. I do better with the more domesticated variety.”

He grinned. “Easier to handle, huh?”

“Much easier.”

She flipped through the papers in her lap, reading up on the animals in her care. The snowfall thickened and he slowed the van. The cats started a chorus of protests that was half anxiety and half fear. She didn’t blame them. She stuck her hand in one of the cages and stroked a calico feline. “It’s okay,” she murmured.

“I think they were wrong about the arrival of the storm. I don’t think we’re going to make it over the pass back to Pineville tonight,” Bryce said with concern thick in his voice.

She looked at the dogs, realizing how serious their situation was becoming. “We have to. There isn’t a hotel anywhere that would let us check in with twelve animals. Not to mention I have to be back at school in the morning.”

She pulled out her cell phone and pulled up the radar. Her heart sank. “Oh, no.”

“That bad?”

“Worse. What are we going to do?”

He thought for a long moment, then looked at her. “I have an idea if you’re willing to stick around here for the night.”

Jenni’s heart sank. “Doesn’t look like I have a choice.” She took out her phone and wrote Mrs. Hollis a quick text, her stomach twisting with each word she typed.



## CHAPTER 6



*B*ryce knew he was playing with fire, but he also knew he and Jenni didn't have a choice. She was right, they would never find a hotel that would allow them to check in with all these animals, especially cats, and they'd never make it back to Pineville in this storm.

He only had one option: he'd have to call his cousin. Even though his brother was closer, he couldn't go there. Not yet. He hadn't been ready to call anyone, to let anyone in his family know he was back. He hadn't wanted to face the pity in their voices or the sadness in their eyes—poor Bryce, cheated on by his girlfriend with his own brother.

He still couldn't believe Caleb had done this to him. Anger swelled in his heart at the thought. No, he wouldn't call his brother for help, but he would call his cousin. Only because he had no choice. He picked up his phone and dialed. "Mark, hi. This is Bryce," he said when his cousin's husband answered the phone.

"Bryce. You're back," Mark said. "It's great to hear your voice. How are you?"

"I'm good, but I need a favor. A big one."

"Anything, buddy."

"I'm in a van about thirty minutes from your place with twelve rescue animals."

"Twelve," Mark said, drawing out the word.

“Yes. Twelve. The storm hit sooner than we expected and there isn’t a hotel that will take us. We will freeze if we have to wait out the storm on the side of the road.”

“No. I totally understand. Come here. You can stay in our basement, we have plenty of room. Is it just you and the dogs?”

“Thank you. Yes, and a friend of mine, Jenni, along with some cats. Will Leslie be okay with that?”

“Sure. Jenni, huh?”

Bryce grinned. “Yes.”

“Can’t wait to hear all about it,” Mark said.

“Thanks, man. I owe you.”

Mark chuckled. “Oh, yes, you do, my friend.”

Bryce hung up the phone and turned to Jenni, who was nuzzling Bucky. Her hair was all messed and his fur covered her sweater. She looked beautiful. She was the complete opposite of the flawless and polished Dominique and that alone made her perfect. “I got us a place to stay. My cousin’s house isn’t far from here. We can stay in her basement.”

“Sounds great.”

“I’m sorry about not getting you back in time for school.”

Concern filled her face. “Maybe the storm will let up enough that we can still make it before school starts.”

“Yeah, and maybe they’ll even have a delayed start time,” he suggested.

“Or cancel school altogether,” she agreed, though they both knew that scenario was highly unlikely.

Thirty minutes later, he pulled into the driveway of his cousin’s house and the garage door opened. He drove inside and Mark met him in the garage. Bryce parked the van and got out. “Thank you so much for this.”

“Not a problem,” Mark said. “I’m happy to help.”

Jenni got out and shook his hand. “Hi, thanks so much.”

“You’re more than welcome. Let’s get your animals unloaded and into the basement.”

Jenni opened the side door and Bucky jumped out.

Surprise crossed Mark’s face. “Hey, isn’t that...”

“Yep, it’s Bucky,” Bryce said with a huge smile, patting the dog again.

“Bucky, where have you been? I heard you were lost.” Mark rubbed Bucky’s face.

“It’s a long ugly story only to be told over a glass of whiskey,” Bryce said, and picked up two of the cat carriers.

“All right, follow me.” Mark picked up the other two while Jenni picked up the carrier with the two Chihuahuas and they started into the house and down the stairs into the basement, and into a large family room that already had a fire roaring in the fireplace.

“Let’s put the cats in the guest room and the dogs in here,” Mark said, and carried the cat carriers into the guest room and set them on the floor.

Within ten minutes, they had the last of the animals unloaded from the van. Jenni went into the bedroom to take care of the cats.

“Oh, my goodness. Look at those little doggies. They are so cute,” his cousin Leslie said, rushing down the stairs and over to the crates with the chihuahuas inside.

“They are adorable,” Bryce said, coming down the stairs carrying the crate with the Maltese inside, and with Bucky on his heels. His German Shepherd hadn’t let him out of his sight. Bryce couldn’t blame him. “Feel free to keep as many as you want,” he told his cousin with a grin.

She clapped her hands together in delight and looked up at her husband with a pleading look on her face.

“Don’t even think about it,” Mark said, then turned to Bryce. “You are going to owe me big time for this.” He walked toward the bar at the far end of the room.

Bryce followed him, laughing. “Don’t I know it? What’s the matter? Are you afraid Leslie is going to keep one?”

“You have no idea. It’s all she’s been talking about lately.”

“These are some great dogs,” he told him with a smile. “They are all looking for a forever home. Any one of them would enrich your life.”

“I’m sure,” Mark said dryly. “So what’s going on? The last I heard, you were still in Colorado.”

“Nope, I’m out. My duty is done.”

“Do your folks know that?” he asked.

“They do now. Grandmother was with my mom when she called me today. I’ve gained a few more days of freedom since I’m helping out some friends and don’t want my family interfering.”

“But they love to interfere,” Mark said, pouring him a drink.

Bryce took it and held it up in thanks. “Don’t I know it?”

“Bryce, welcome home,” Leslie said, pulling herself away from the dogs and joining them at the bar and giving him a hug. “It’s good to see you.”

“So who’s the cutie with you?” Mark asked, looking toward the bedroom door. “She’s not your usual type.”

“Boy, isn’t that true, but I like her. I like her a lot,” Bryce said.

A glint of amusement filled Mark’s eyes. “Is that because your mother would absolutely hate her?”

Leslie turned to him, her eyes widening with a question.

Bryce grinned, refusing to answer. “Her name is Jenni,” was all he said.

“And?” Leslie prompted.

“And nothing.” The dogs started whining from their carriers.

“Come on, let’s let them out,” Leslie said, crossing the room to the cages.

“Wait, we should probably wait for Jenni,” Bryce said, hurrying toward her.

“But why were you in a van with twelve dogs and cats in the middle of a storm?” Mark asked, following them.

“Jenni runs a rescue foundation. She needed help picking up the animals. We tried to make it back to Pineville before the storm hit, but obviously didn’t make it. So you guys, do me a favor. Don’t tell anyone I’m here. No one.”

“Coward,” Leslie said with a twitch of her lips.

He grinned. “Maybe. Maybe I’m just not ready to share Jenni yet. Maybe I want more time to get to know her better.” His phone rang, and he looked down at his display, then answered. “Hey, Candy.”

“Bryce, don’t forget you have your tux fitting tomorrow at 3:00 p.m.,” Candy reminded him.

“Oh,” he ran a hand down his face as he remembered the appointment. “We’re stuck outside of Boston.”

“What?” Candy cried.

“The storm hit sooner than we anticipated. Don’t worry, we’re staying at my cousin’s. Can you do me a favor and change the tux fitting appointment to Saturday? I’m not sure what time we’ll make it back tomorrow.”

“Sure, no problem. You have the rings, right?”

“Yes, I have the rings. They’re in my room in the barn.” He noticed the surprise on Leslie’s face and realized what this conversation must sound like.

“All right. Be careful, and take care of Jenni. Don’t let her do anything risky. She can be a little reckless sometimes.”

He laughed. “From what I hear, you’re the reckless one. But you don’t have to worry about Jenni with me around,” he assured her. Lincoln’s fiancée sure liked to motherhen everyone.

“Thanks, Bryce, I appreciate it.”

He hung up the phone and saw the curiosity on Mark and Leslie’s faces.

“Something you want to tell me?” his cousin asked.

Bryce shook his head. “Nope. Nothing you need to know.”

“You mean nothing you want your family to know about rings and a tux?”

He grinned, deciding to have a little fun. “Exactly. Some secrets are meant to stay secrets.”

Jenni picked that moment to come out of the bedroom. Both Mark and Leslie turned around and looked at her, their faces serious and stricken.

“What?” Jenni asked, looking confused.

“Nothing. All is good. Better than good,” Bryce said, walking toward her and putting his arm around her shoulders. She turned and looked up at him in surprise, then smiled when he gave her a wink. “Would you like something to drink?”

## CHAPTER 7



Jenni grinned as she sipped her glass of wine. Bryce's cousin Leslie was so much fun, she liked her instantly. The fact that she couldn't stop playing with the dogs might be part of it. Anyone who likes dogs that much was a-okay in her book. She felt so lucky Bryce was with her today.

She smiled as she thought of him. He was so good-looking, and his boyish charm brought out her goofy side. When he winked at her, her heart had just about stopped. She felt comfortable around him. Maybe too comfortable. Usually, whenever she felt this way, it spelled disaster. But, she had to admit, she was looking forward to spending the next few weeks working together.

"We're going upstairs to get dinner ready," Leslie said, and took Mark by the hand.

"Do you need any help?" Jenni asked.

"No, we're good. Relax." Leslie gave her a smile, and headed up the stairs.

The dogs whined from their cages stacked one atop each other along the basement wall. Jenni walked toward the cage with the elderly black lab. "Hey, boy," she said softly as she opened the cage door. She held out her hand for him to smell. After a moment, he walked cautiously out of the cage and directly toward Bryce.

She smiled. "He likes you."

After a few minutes of petting, the lab laid down at Bryce's feet next to Bucky.

“He’s very calm,” Bryce said, and seemed to like Bucky.

“Let’s leave him there. I don’t think he’ll cause any problems.” She walked over to the cages and let out a beagle with soulful eyes. “What a sweetie you are.” She petted the dog, who instantly cowered away. She left it alone and poured out a bowl of food for the Beagle and one for the lab. Then filled enough bowls for the others and put them in their cages. “You’ll get your turn soon,” she told them as she carried two of the cat cages into the bathroom where she set up a cat box. She got the other two, then grabbed their food and bowls.

“I’m going to feed the cats in the bathroom.”

Bryce was talking to Bucky and the lab, both of whom were lying by his side. He was so lucky to have found his dog. She still couldn’t believe anyone would get rid of a soldier’s dog while he was deployed. It was criminal. It looked like the lab had decided he wanted to be part of their pack. Jenni always believed the dog picked its owner and the lab had definitely chosen Bryce. Now she just hoped Bryce would accept.

She took the cats into the bathroom, then set the bowls of food in different places. One on the tub, one on the floor, one in the bath on the opposite side from where she had the box, and one on the sink. She could never be too careful with cats. One moment they were fine, and the next they wanted to rip your face off.

She filled a large bowl of water, set it on the floor, then opened the carrier door for the smallest calico. “Hello, Sweetie.” That was her name, it was written in bold print on top of the cage. She’d take that as a positive sign. Sweetie ran straight toward the bowl on the floor.

“Okay. Next.” She opened the door of a tuxedo named Simon. “Okay, big boy.” She picked him up and put him in the tub. He started chowing down, not paying any attention to Sweetie. All was good. She looked at the orange tabby that was starting to cry loudly. He didn’t want to wait a moment longer. “All right, you guys have been so good.” She opened the carrier with the name Felix written on top. She was



beginning to get the impression Carla named all these kitties herself.

Felix bolted out of the carrier, jumped up onto the toilet, and started chowing down as if he hadn't eaten in a week. She smiled and turned to the last cage. A Siamese, who stared back at her with intelligent eyes. "Why does she call you Spooky? I think you're beautiful," she cooed at the cat.

Spooky narrowed his eyes. For a second Jenni hesitated. "I am not a mouse. Do you understand? I am much bigger than you. Much meaner than you, and if you're nice to me, I can make life very pleasant for you, but if you're not..." She shook her head and slowly opened the door.

Spooky didn't move.

"That's fine by me. How about I bring the food to you?" She reached up on the counter and took down the bowl, slipping it into Spooky's cage. The cat started to eat and she let out a relieved breath.

"Okay, then." She leaned back against the wall as the cats ate and stretched out her legs, petting Sweetie. She loved cats. She loved all animals. What she wouldn't give to be able to quit her job and work with them full-time.

But how? Like her sister, Roni had said, how could she give up a great job and take such a huge risk? She'd end up in the poor house. She didn't have a business plan or any idea how she could sell enough kibble to make up for her salary. She had bills to pay.

As it was, if Lincoln didn't let her use his barn, her non-profit would have already gone belly-up. No, everyone was right, she might be great with animals, but she knew absolutely nothing about business. And what would happen to all these animals if she failed?

Death. Or worse.

No, she owed it to them to be smart. Stay the course. Don't take chances. Stay in her lane, and as Grandma used to say, those who reach too far, tumble and fall. "I won't do that to you," she promised the cats.

Ten minutes later, the cats' bowls were empty and they were climbing all over her, purring loudly. All except Spooky. What was the story with that one? Her files were back in the living room. She probably should check on Bryce. It was time to rotate out a couple more dogs. They probably all need to go outside and do their business. She shivered at the thought of taking them out in this storm. Hopefully there was a covered patio area.

She put Sweetie, Felix, and Simon back into their carriers, who protested loudly, and looked at her like she betrayed them. "I'm sorry," she said as Simon wailed loudly. The others followed suit.

She quickly stood and opened the door, but before she could make her escape, Spooky, whose door she foolishly forgot to latch, bolted out of the carrier, out the bathroom door, and straight toward the living room where Bryce had already let the dogs out of their carriers—all of them.

*Oh no!*

## CHAPTER 8



*B*ryce had just let the dogs back into the room when Jenni opened the bathroom door. A white bundle of fur shot out of the bathroom. The dogs, who were all out of their cages, started barking like crazy and running toward the furry feline. Several jumped up on the sofa, trying to track the cat as it zipped around the room.

The sound of the Chihuahuas yipping pierced his ears as chaos ensued. Bryce bolted toward the back door he'd left ajar and slammed it shut so the cat couldn't escape. Instead, it catapulted onto the back of the sofa, its back arching as it hissed at the dogs, lifting its front paw in a warning.

Bucky took it upon himself to protect the other dogs and lunged up onto the sofa toward the cat, looking like he was going to take his head off.

"No!" Jenni screamed.

"Stop!" Bryce commanded. "Bucky, no!"

The German Shepherd stopped in his tracks, looked over at Bryce, then sat obediently. Taking that as its cue, the cat ran, the other dogs chased, Jenni lunged and missed, but grabbed a handful of dog. Bryce did the same and suddenly they were tripped up in each other, tangled on the floor, being trampled by furry feet. Bryce was lying on top of Jenni, her soft curves under his hands. Her eyes widened.

"Sorry!" Bryce sat up, giving Jenni an apologetic smile as he quickly gathered up one barking dog at a time and locked them in their cages before anyone, including him, got hurt.

Jenni got to her feet, grabbed a blanket off the chair, then quickly scooped the cat up in it and took it back into the bathroom. A minute later, she came out and collapsed on the sofa. “Crisis averted.”

He plopped on the sofa next to her. “Wow.”

She looked at him with raised eyebrows. She obviously wanted an answer as to why all the dogs weren’t in their cages.

“I, uh... The dogs all seemed to be getting on so well with each other, I kind of let them hang with me while you were in the bathroom with the cats.”

She grinned. “You were hanging, huh?”

“We were.”

“Not a problem,” she said.

He smiled. “At least not until a feisty feline arrived.”

A sparkle lit her eyes, and he had the urge to scoot closer. He didn’t.

Her eyes met his, and held. “Always seems to be the case with dogs and cats, huh?”

“And some men and women,” he agreed.

The look she gave him told him he might have gone too far with that one. “Sorry. I guess I’m still sporting some wounds.”

Her hair was mussed, her color high, and he was pretty sure he’d never seen anyone look more beautiful. He could still feel her softness itching his palms and the feel of her skin was permanently imprinted on his mind.

He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Are all of your rescue pickups this eventful?”

She laughed. “Nope. But I sure am glad you were here for this one. I don’t know how I would have managed without you.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. “Me, too.” He leaned forward, wanting to kiss her, wanting it very badly. Bucky stepped forward, rested his head on the couch between them,

looked up at him, and whined. The dog's timing could have been better.

"What is it, boy?" Jenni asked, petting his head and smiling. "I think he wants to make sure you're not mad at him. The poor guy is probably a little traumatized after being away from you for so long."

"It's okay, boy. I'm not mad." Bryce petted his head, and before he knew it, Bucky was up in his lap snuggling against his chest, burrowing his head under Bryce's chin.

"Aw, that is the sweetest thing I ever saw," Jenni cried, and put her arms around Bucky. "He missed you."

"I missed him too. I'm so glad I found him again."

"Me, too."

Soon the Chihuahuas were whining loudly from the cages, which just got the other dogs started. They wanted out too. "But you just went out," Bryce told them from the couch.

"You know, you're right," she said, standing. "They are all really good together. Let's let them out."

He grinned at her. "I think maybe it's not just your kindergartners you're too soft on."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking like he'd just discovered her biggest secret.

"I think you're just a big softy."

She walked over to the cages. "You think you already have me all figured out, huh?"

He laughed and gave her a good-natured nudge. "I'm sure there are still some surprises."

They opened the cages, letting out the Beagle, the hound pup, and a little black-and-white cow dog. At least it looked like a mini cow, but it was some kind of terrier. The dogs bolted toward the door, dancing as they waited for him to open it. Along with the Chihuahuas and the Maltese, Bucky and the old lab followed them out the door.

The dogs bolted into the yard where they ran in circles all over the yard, oblivious of the snow or how they were sinking into its depths. Since the yard was fenced, he left them out there, then went back inside, rubbing his arms and hurrying toward the fireplace to warm up.

Jenni smiled a sweet smile that caught his breath. As much as he wanted to get to know her better, a lot better, he might not want to go there. She was funny, charming, and beautiful, but his life was a train wreck. She didn't deserve his problems, and he didn't need any more complications to add to the ones he already had.

After ten minutes, he opened the back door to check on the dogs. The beagle and the cow dog ran back toward him, along with Bucky, the hound, and all the small dogs, but the older lab kept walking around looking for the perfect place to do his business. He shook his head and decided to leave the old guy out there while he checked on the others. He hurried back in to find all the dogs stretched out before the fireplace enjoying themselves.

He grinned and let out a relieved breath. "You are all good dogs."

"Yes, they are," Jenni agreed.

"More wine?" He gestured toward the bar along the back wall.

"That would be nice." She followed him toward the bar. "This is such a great room and a very extensive collection of wine."

"Yes, Mark likes to consider himself an expert."

"He is very nice. We were so blessed they let us all stay. Not many people would allow all these animals into their beautiful home."

"Yeah, they're great people."

"They must be doing very well. This house is amazing," she said, admiring the stone fireplace and the gleaming hardwood floors.

He shrugged. “Yeah, they do all right.”

She smiled, leaning forward slightly and glancing up at him. “Usually I don’t trust rich people.”

He stilled. “What do you mean?”

“I run a non-profit that gets its sole source of funding from donations. It’s always the people that don’t have a lot to spare that donate the most. I don’t know why it is, it just is.”

He couldn’t help laughing. She was completely refreshing, especially when he pictured the look of horror that would cross his mother’s face were they ever to meet. Except they would meet. He’d foolishly invited her to the big company party.

Somehow he had to get out of that. The last thing he wanted was for Jenni to meet his family and to know what and who the Whittakers really were. Plus, he didn’t want her to think he was anything like his snobby parents. He’d prefer she just thought of him as a rudderless cowboy who was staying with a friend until he figured out what to do with his life.

They took their wine back to the sofa and enjoyed the fireplace. Before he could say anything, he heard barking at the back door.

“Oh, no,” Bryce leapt from the couch and ran to the door. The old lab ran inside, his back covered with snow. “I’m sorry, big guy. I forgot about you.”

The dog walked indignantly back to his carrier and went inside and plopped down with a heavy sigh.

“So tell me a little about you, and about Pineville,” he said as he settled on the sofa.

Jenni smiled with delight and clapped her hands together. “Pineville is a picture-perfect town, especially at Christmas time. We have caroling, and the tree lighting, pictures with Santa. Gingerbread house making, chestnut roasting, the whole shebang. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

He grinned. “Sounds nice. Have you lived there long?”

“My whole life. My sister and I grew up there. She runs the coffee shop on Main Street,” she said, her voice full of pride. “It’s the best in Pineville.”

“Oh, yeah? I haven’t made it down there yet.”

“You haven’t? It’s everyone’s favorite spot. Let’s hope we make it back tomorrow night in time for the tree-lighting ceremony. You can see it then, along with Pineville at its best.”

“Tree-lighting ceremony? Is that a tradition in town?”

“Yes, we are very big on traditions. My kindergarten class will be singing ‘Santa Claus is Coming to Town.’” A look of worry crossed her face. “I have to be there. I’m already on my principal’s poop list for calling out sick tomorrow.”

He grinned with delight. “Did you just say poop list?”

She nodded and flashed an adoring smile. “Did you not hear me say I’m a kindergarten teacher?”

“I did.”

“Though, I’d really love to open a place just like Carla’s in Pineville. Wouldn’t that be great? There isn’t a pet supply store in town, so I think it would be instantly profitable.”

He could see the excitement in her eyes. “No other pet supply stores?”

“Nope.” Enthusiasm sparkled in her eyes. “Just Walmart.”

“Sounds like a great idea. Why don’t you do it?”

She gave him an amused side-eye, and smacked her thighs. “I will. As soon as I win the lottery.”

He laughed, and studied her face. “You don’t need to win the lottery to open a store. Really, people do it all the time.”

“It’s a dream. A big one,” she corrected. “And I’m living in reality.”

“If you can’t dream it, you won’t achieve it,” he told her softly.

Her gaze caught his again, moving something within him and making him want to show her how to make her dreams



come true. “I like it. Is that a Bryce-ism?”

“Absolutely.” He stopped himself from leaning over to kiss her adorable lips. Instead, he got up and stoked the fire.

“So how long are you planning to stay at Lincoln’s?” she asked, watching him.

“I’m not sure. At least through the honeymoon. I promised to take care of the place while they’re gone.”

“That’s nice. I said I’d be around, too, especially with twelve extra animals to take care of.”

He liked the sound of that. Looked like they were going to spend a lot of time together in the coming weeks. If his family didn’t find a way to force him back into the office.

“Then what are your plans for Christmas?” she asked. “Won’t your family want to see you for the holidays?”

“Until my grandmother called this morning, they still thought I was deployed.”

“What?” Shocked, her eyes widened.

“Don’t look so alarmed. I wasn’t ready to call them and let them know I was back.”

She leaned toward him. “I could understand not wanting to talk to your brother, but how could you do that to the rest of them? That’s terrible.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as he stared into the fire.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That sounded very judgmental, and I’m not judging. My mouth runs away with me sometimes. I just can’t imagine what my mother would do if I pulled a stunt like that. She’d call me every kind of coward.”

His eyebrows shot to the sky. Was he a coward? Yes, he supposed he was.

She squeezed her eyes shut and twisted her mouth. “I did it again, didn’t I?”

He looked at her face and knew he should be annoyed—she knew nothing about him or his life—but he wasn't. In fact, he was completely charmed by her honesty. "I suppose everyone will know now that I'm back."

"But why would you do that to your family at Christmas?"

"It's a long story." One he didn't want to talk about. He didn't want to admit that his brother didn't just have an affair with Bryce's girlfriend, she was pregnant and they were engaged.

"Sorry, I'm being nosy. Ignore me." She laughed. "See, this is why I prefer to spend time with animals or five-year-olds."

"Don't do that to yourself."

"Do what?"

"Put yourself down. You are completely and totally charming."

A blush filled her cheeks as she bit her lower lip.

Once again he wanted to kiss her. Wanted it very much. His eyes caught hers and he inched closer, expectation building in his chest.

"So what about after Lincoln's wedding and the honeymoon?" she asked, shifting nervously.

"What do you mean?" She looked nervous. Had he read her wrong? Maybe she wasn't that into him. Maybe she didn't want to kiss him as badly as he wanted to kiss her.

"Do you have any plans to stay in Pineville?" she asked.

Did he have any plans? "I don't know. All I know is I don't want to go back to Boston and work for the family business. Not anymore."

She scooted back, putting more distance between them. "Okay. Well, what do you want to do? What makes you happy? Surely there's something you would love to do?"

He thought of his dad always telling him what his life would be like. Go to work for the family business and marry

the perfect woman—polished and well-connected that would further his career. His whole future was planned out for him, the Whittaker Way.

Until it wasn't.

He scrubbed his face with his palms. “Truthfully, I really have no idea what I want to do.” He waited a beat for the admonishment. The gasp of horror, the demands that he'd better figure it out, and soon. Surprisingly, they didn't come.

Instead, Jenni was smiling wide with her hands clapped in front of her face as she looked up at him expectantly.

Confusion swam through him. “What? What am I missing?”

“That means you're free to stay in Pineville for a while and help me with the rescue center. And believe me, I need all the help I can get.”

He laughed out loud, completely charmed by this woman who didn't hesitate to speak whatever came to her mind. “Yes, I suppose it does.” He looked at all the dogs spread out on the carpet in front of the fireplace and couldn't think of a better way to spend his time. He'd just have to be careful not to get too attached to a pretty little kindergarten teacher. He was a Whittaker and, in the long run, his choices weren't his own.

## CHAPTER 9



The next morning Jenni woke to the scent of frying bacon. The cats were snoozing, one on her pillow, one on her stomach, and the other shoved up against her side. She must have been tired. She didn't move all night. She got up, knocking Sweetie off her stomach, and carefully opened the door to the family room.

She expected to see Bryce asleep on the couch but the room was empty along with all the cages. Where were the dogs? She very carefully opened the bathroom door, poking her head inside. Spooky peered up at her from the bathtub.

"How are you doing, Spooky?" She used the facilities and very carefully put Spooky back in his carrier, then filled his food bowl and slipped it inside. He seemed much calmer this morning. Cautiously, she stuck her hand inside the carrier and petted him. "I know things haven't been easy for you, but it's going to get better. I promise."

Spooky rubbed his head under her palm. She smiled as he started to show his sweet side. "I knew you had it in you. You just have to have faith in the future. And so do I." She sighed, thinking about how much trouble she was going to be in with Miss Evelyn for not making it to class this morning. "Let's just hope the storm has passed and the roads are open."

The sooner they get back to Pineville the better. She ran her fingers through her hair, then rinsed out her mouth. They hadn't been planning to stay overnight, so she didn't even have an extra toothbrush. She looked under the sink and found a bottle of mouthwash and quickly swished it through her

mouth. “That will have to do,” she told her reflection after splashing cold water on her face.

She filled the cats’ bowls in the bedroom, then hurried up the stairs to find coffee. “Good morning,” she greeted Leslie and Mark as she walked into the room. They had a great dinner last night. It was a really terrific evening, and she was so glad to have met them.

“Good morning.” They were both standing at the window watching Bryce and the dogs play in the snowy backyard.

“I can’t believe how well they are all getting along,” Leslie said, petting the little Maltese who was cradled in her arms.

Jenni smiled as she saw them. Leslie had fallen completely and totally in love with the little dog. “They’re all really good dogs.”

Leslie turned and smiled at her. “Obviously, this one is my favorite.”

Mark turned from the window and walked over to the coffee pot, filled his cup, then turned to her. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Jenni hopped up on the barstool and tried not to stare at Bryce out the large window, but she couldn’t help it. He was having so much fun tossing tennis balls to the pups. Joy was written all over his face, and theirs. “I can’t thank you enough for putting us up last night. With all these animals, we wouldn’t have been able to find a room anywhere.”

“We enjoyed having you,” Leslie said. “Bryce explained that you run a rescue foundation in Pineville?”

“I do, and a friend of mine in Boston had an emergency and needed me to pick up her animals since she had to go out of town.”

“I can’t believe he found Bucky there. He was so lucky,” she continued. “He really loves that dog.”

Jenni shook her head in disgust. “I can’t even imagine someone who is supposed to be taking care of my dog dumping him off like that. It’s terrible.”

“I agree,” Leslie said, nodding her head and pursing her lips. “What if someone had adopted him or worse? Bryce would have lost Bucky forever. I for one, will never forgive Dominique for that.”

“She sounds truly horrible. Hopefully he’ll never have to see her again,” Jenni said.

“One can hope, but don’t count on that,” Leslie said dryly. “Especially in this family.”

Jenni could tell there was more to this story, but Leslie didn’t elaborate. Instead, she cuddled the little Maltese.

“What’s this baby’s story?”

“I’m not sure. I’d have to pull her paperwork, but she looks like she’s going to need a lot of extra care and attention.”

Leslie stared adoringly at the dog. “I absolutely love her.”

“But, we’ve decided to wait before getting any pets. We have a lot of traveling scheduled this year,” Mark interjected.

“I know.” Leslie pouted, and Jenni was about to tell her she could hold her for her until they could talk it out, but she stopped herself. She needed to stop doing that. She did it last year with Candy and Tina and almost got herself in a real bind. Luckily it all worked out. Candy and Lincoln adopted Tina, and they lived happily ever after. That time she learned her lesson: no more holding dogs.

Bryce came through the door, smiling and knocking the snow off his boots. “Good morning,” he said.

“The dogs look happy.” Jenni tried not to smile too much, but she couldn’t help herself. She really liked him. Everything about him. Last night, she had the distinct impression he was about to kiss her. She wanted him too, but had to be careful not to set herself up for a fall. With everything else going on in her life, she didn’t have time to nurse a broken heart. He didn’t live in Pineville, and wasn’t even sure how long he’d stay.

“Looks like the pass is open,” Mark said, and Jenni got the distinct feeling he was ready for them, and all their animals, to go. She didn’t blame him.

“Then I guess we should get going. We have a long drive.” Bryce petted Bucky, who followed him in.

“And a very busy night to prepare for,” Jenni added.

Leslie sat on the barstool next to her. “Oh yeah?”

Bryce looked at the dog in her arms and flashed her a knowing grin. “Yes, the town is having a tree-lighting ceremony. Jenni’s kindergarten class will be singing.”

“Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” Jenni added, and as she did she heard the tune start up in her head.

“We’re putting our tree up tonight too,” Leslie said. “Grandmother is going to be so disappointed she missed you. Is there any way you can stay?”

Bryce froze, his cup halfway to his mouth. “You told her I was here?”

“I didn’t know it was a big secret.”

“I didn’t want them to know I was in town,” he admitted.

Leslie’s eyes softened with concern and Jenni realized there was more going on here than she knew about.

“Bryce, you’re going to have to face them sooner or later,” Leslie said. “You are not the one who should be hiding, Caleb is.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he warned. “With anyone.”

“You’re going to have to go to the banquet,” she said.

“I told grandmother I didn’t want to go.”

“You have to. You have to go back to the company before your birthday.”

He got to his feet, outrage crossing his face. “How am I supposed to face them? Any of them?”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, Bryce. You didn’t do anything wrong. If it’s any consolation, Caleb feels terrible about...everything. He wants to find a way to make things right.”

Bryce scoffed. “He can’t, and no, it’s not a consolation.”

Jenni felt like she was intruding on a personal conversation. She looked at the dogs still romping in the backyard, got off the barstool, and headed toward the door.

“Tucking your tail between your legs and running away is not the answer,” Leslie said, forcefully.

Bryce stiffened beside her. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

Leslie shook her head, fire in her eyes. “Isn’t it?”

“Jenni, you don’t have to leave,” Bryce said as she pulled open the door.

She turned back to them, a pained look on her face. “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure what is happening here and I feel like I’m intruding.”

“You’re not.” He closed the door. “What I didn’t tell you about my family yesterday is my brother hooked up with my girlfriend while I was gone, and now she’s pregnant and they’re engaged.”

Jenni’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Worse, she works for the family business, and that’s why I don’t want to attend the family business Christmas party.”

“Your dad fired her,” Leslie said, petting the Maltese as it started to squirm in her arms.

“So grandmother said, but she could still be at the party with Caleb.”

“I can see why you don’t want to go back to work there. I sure wouldn’t.” Jenni walked toward Leslie to take the dog who definitely wanted to get down.

“Exactly. See someone understands,” Bryce said, looking pointedly at Leslie.

Jenni held out her arms and Leslie handed her the dog. “We all understand, Bryce, but we also know you can’t run away from this.”

“I can,” Bryce said with a grin. “I’m actually really good at disappearing.”



Surprised, Jenni looked back at him. Was that what he was doing, living in Lincoln's barn, hiding out?

"I think you should face them," Mark said, finally speaking up. "Let them know Dominique doesn't mean anything to you and that you're happy for them. And then you can walk away with your head held high."

"That's quite an ask," Bryce said, looking dejected as he sat on one of the barstools.

Jenni thought Mark was right. Running and hiding never solved anything.

Leslie touched Bryce's arm. "That business is your birthright. Do not leave it behind. Don't throw your future away because of Caleb's poor choices."

Bryce shook his head. "There is no way I can go into that building every day and face him, and everyone who knows what he and Dominique did to me. Besides, I'm going to help Jenni with her foundation. I already promised." He looked at Jenni and smiled. "Right after the wedding."

"The wedding?" Leslie asked, her eyes wide as she looked from Bryce to Jenni, then back to Bryce again. "Yesterday you were talking about rings and a tux fitting. Please tell me you're not getting married? I know you are hurt and all, but rebound relationships are never good. No offense, Jenni."

Jenni stared at her wide-eyed, her mouth falling open. She looked at Bryce waiting for him to correct his cousin. She was still waiting...

"How about I help you get those crates loaded into the back of the van," Mark suggested, looking at her. Obviously, he wanted to give Leslie and Bryce a moment alone.

"That would be great, thanks." She took advantage of the opportunity to escape and followed Mark quickly down the stairs to get the dog crates from the basement. Did Leslie really think she and Bryce were getting married? Bryce would set her straight.

Mark took the biggest crate, and Jenni put the Maltese in hers, then grabbed two small ones. "I sure hope Leslie doesn't

insist on keeping that dog,” Mark said, looking down at the Maltese.

She turned to him. “Not a dog lover, huh?”

“Honestly, I can’t imagine how much dog poop I’m going to have to pick up out of my backyard once all the snow melts.”

She looked to see if he was smiling. He wasn’t. “Sorry about that. I really am.”

“Listen, just do me a favor and make sure you take them all to Pineville with you. Don’t leave any behind. No matter what Leslie says. My job is going to require a lot of travel next year and I want her with me.”

She gave an awkward laugh to disguise what she really wanted to say. Like, what about what Leslie wants? But she didn’t. She wisely kept her mouth shut. This time. “I won’t. I promise. What kind of company is Bryce’s family business anyway?” she asked, trying to change the subject.”

“Investment brokers.”

She shuddered and grimaced. “Exactly the kind of stuff I know nothing about.”

He grinned but didn’t say anything.

They got all the crates loaded, and she went back down to get the cats and clean up all trace of the animals ever being down there when she heard Bryce and Leslie’s raised voices.

“I don’t care what they want,” Bryce said. “I’m done with them. All of them.”

Jenni walked into the room. “We’re all loaded up.” She hoped Bryce was ready to hit the road. The sooner they got back to Pineville the better.

“Good.” Bryce turned toward her. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Leslie put out her arm, stopping them. “I have an idea that’s going to solve all your problems.”

“I’m not sure I want to hear that,” Bryce said.

Leslie stepped forward, grinning from ear to ear. “Oh, but you do. You will go to that party, only you won’t go alone. You’ll take your beautiful new fiancée,” she said and gestured toward Jenni.

*Fiancée.* Jenni’s knees weakened.

## CHAPTER 10



“*Y*ou want us to what?” Bryce asked, not sure he heard Leslie right.

“It’s the perfect plan,” she said. “This will allow you to go to the banquet, ensuring your trust is secure, and everyone will be talking about you and your beautiful new girl.”

“Instead of how my brother and Dominique screwed me over.” Maybe Leslie was on to something.

Leslie grinned and nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly.”

“Did I hear you right?” Mark asked, the look of concern on his face mirrored Jenni’s.

“Don’t you think it’s a great plan?” Leslie asked, turning back to him.

Mark’s eyes widened with incredulity. “On what planet?”

“This one,” Leslie insisted. “I’m serious! Right now, Dominique and Caleb are all anyone is thinking or talking about.”

“And how they wronged poor Bryce,” Mark said, gesturing toward Bryce. “Do you really want to prolong the tongue-wagging?”

“Yes. The family won’t do anything about Caleb and Dominique because she’s carrying Caleb’s child. She will be welcomed into the family with opened arms and you’ll be expected to grin and bear it,” Leslie continued. “It burns me up.”

*Burns her up?* “So how is this supposed to be better?” Bryce asked, his face flushed with embarrassment. He didn’t want to think about it, let alone discuss it. Especially in front of Jenni.

“Because when you show up at that party with your new fiancée on your arm—” Leslie walked over to Jenni and linked their arms. “All anyone will be talking about is who is this beautiful woman Bryce has brought home with him, and where did she come from. You will go from being poor Bryce to someone who is admired.”

Bryce shook his head. “Jenni will be put under a microscope and you know it.”

“So. Anyone who can handle all those dogs that slept in my basement last night, can certainly handle the Whittaker family’s examination.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Bryce muttered.

He turned to Jenni, who looked like the blood had drained from her face.

“Of course, we wouldn’t expect her to do it for nothing,” Leslie added. “Jenni, we’ll make a sizable donation to your foundation. That way it’s a win-win for everyone.” She pulled out her checkbook. “How much do you need?”

Jenni’s eyes widened.

“Leslie. Stop.” Bryce could tell Jenni was about to bolt.

“I don’t understand what’s happening here,” Jenni said, her voice cracking. She looked at Bryce. “Is this the same party we talked about in the van yesterday?”

“Don’t mind Leslie, she tends to get excited and a little carried away,” Mark said in a warning tone.

Leslie took Jenni’s hand. “No, I don’t. Bryce needs help, and I think you are the perfect solution.”

“This will never work,” Mark insisted.

“I’m confused,” Jenni said, turning to Bryce. “How can I help you?”

Bryce touched Jenni's arm and led her toward the front door away from Leslie and Mark.

Jenni looked up at him. "What is she talking about?"

"As I told you earlier, my family is having their annual Christmas party tomorrow night, and I'm expected to attend."

She nodded. "Along with your brother and your ex. I get why you wouldn't want to."

"Yes. The entire family and all the employees at the company are required to attend. Required being the operative word."

"Oh." She cringed. "Awkward."

"That's putting it mildly. When I told you Dominique worked at my family's company, I left out the part that she left me for my brother. The last I heard, she and my brother are getting married." Bryce hated having to say it aloud, hated even more that his trust fund, and his entire future, was wrapped up in the family business. His grandfather made sure of it. He created a family business where they could all work together. Only, he also made it so they could never leave.

"No wonder you don't want to go back," Jenni said, pity in her eyes.

This was exactly why he didn't want her to know, and why he didn't want to go to that party.

She frowned. "I'm sorry I called you a coward. I wouldn't have told anyone I was back in town either."

He smiled. "Thanks, but that cat is out of the bag now."

"I guess so." She was silent for a moment. "So, Leslie wants me to be your date to this company party?"

"More than that."

"Your fiancée?" She gasped in a breath over the word. "She wants me to pretend to be your fiancée. At this party, where your entire family and all your coworkers will be attending."

"Yes."

“How? We barely know each other? How could we possibly pull that off?”

“We have a long drive back to Pineville to drop off the animals, and an equally long drive back to get to the party. That’s a lot of time to fill you in on everything you need to know about Bryce Whittaker.” He could see her seriously thinking about it. Could they do that? Should they?

“I don’t even know what I would wear,” she said.

“I got that covered,” Leslie said, stepping toward them. “Sorry. I couldn’t help myself. Come.” She grabbed Jenni’s hand and pulled her back into the house and toward her bedroom.

Bryce looked up at Mark. “Tell me I haven’t lost my mind for even considering such a thing.”

“You have,” Mark said. “But you, my friend, are between a rock and a hard place. Leslie is right, though. Everyone will be talking about your engagement and who Jenni is, instead of Dominique and Caleb.”

Bryce shook his head. “I must admit, I do like the sound of that. There is one problem, though.”

“What’s that.”

“Jenni thinks I’m a poor serviceman living in my friend’s barn because I’m down on my luck and not sure what I want to do with my life. Though, that part is true.”

“You don’t want her to know differently?”

“That money is not an issue for me and never has been?” Bryce looked toward the back of the house where Leslie and Jenni disappeared. “I would prefer Jenni didn’t know the truth, or that Leslie could solve all her problems with the flick of her signature on a check. I like this woman, but I want to see if we can make it work before getting the Whittaker baggage involved. I’d like to be certain she’s interested in me, and not what my money could do for her. She’s in a little desperate need herself.”

“I get it. I’ll rein Leslie in.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“All I can say is good luck with that. Your family name is known far and wide.”

Bryce grinned. “You’d be surprised how little people care about family names once you get out of Boston, especially in Pineville, New Hampshire.”

“Is that a good thing?” Mark asked.

“Yes, it’s a very good thing.”

Jenni floated back into the room wearing a floor-length silver beaded dress. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe.

“This is the most exquisite thing I’ve ever seen.” Her eyes sparkled as much as the rhinestones on her dress.

“Doesn’t she look stunning?” Leslie asked, walking up next to her.

For the first time in Bryce’s life, he was rendered speechless. “Stunning,” he repeated. Was this the same woman who left the room moments ago with a sweater full of dog and cat hair?

Leslie grinned. “Well, you just keep that look on your face tomorrow night and you’ll have no problem convincing the family you are madly in love.”

Jenni gave an awkward laugh as her eyes met his, sending him reeling once again.

“Are we really doing this?” he asked, getting excited about the idea for the first time all morning.

She shrugged and turned to Leslie. “I think we are.” She giggled. “Cinderella is going to the ball.”

While Jenni changed out of the dress, Bryce and Mark loaded all the dogs into the van.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Mark said.

“Me, too,” Bryce admitted. “Though if it wasn’t for Leslie’s crazy idea, I wouldn’t even consider going.”



“Then I suppose it’s a good thing.” Mark latched the lock on the lab’s cage. “Can I suggest you get in, then get out quick before disaster has a chance to strike?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Bryce smiled at Jenni as she walked into the garage carrying two cat carriers in her arms. Both cats were already crying—loudly. Leslie followed her out with two more.

“I don’t envy you this trip,” Mark admitted.

“Compared to the company party, this will be a breeze.” Bryce placed the cats as far away from the dogs as he could, then shut the doors and got into the driver’s seat. “You ready?” he asked Jenni.

She nodded and, smiling, gave Leslie and Mark a hug. “Thanks again for everything.”

Leslie hugged her back. “You’re welcome. I’ll see you back here by one tomorrow. Okay? We’ll have a very busy day getting ready for the ball.”

“Okay.” Jenni gave her a thumbs up sign as she got into the van.

“One tomorrow?” Bryce asked as he pulled out of the driveway. “That means an early start.”

“I know, but Leslie said she wanted to make appointments for us to get beautiful.”

Bryce looked at the excitement in her eyes and couldn’t imagine her being any more beautiful. “Then one o’clock it is.”

## CHAPTER 11



On the way back to Pineville, Jenni stared out the window thinking about what Leslie had told her when she was searching her closet for a dress Jenni could wear to the party. This would be a great opportunity to ask for donations for her foundation. Bryce's cousin had already promised to make one herself, and introduce her to all her family members and friends at the party.

"You really don't have to do this," Bryce said, breaking into her thoughts as they drove down the highway.

"I know," she said with a smile. "I don't mind. Leslie promised to help me ask for donations for the foundation at the party. I hope that's okay?"

"Sure. It's a great idea. Is that all? You look worried," he asked, his eyes perusing her face.

"Oh, I am." She smiled. "But not about your party."

"Okay, I'll bite. What are you worried about?"

"My job. I've been so focused on my animals, I've been letting my duties at the school slip. Having to call in a substitute today didn't help. My principal is going to be furious with me."

"That wasn't your fault. You can't control the weather."

"I know. I just hope she believes me."

He gave her a smile that had her cheeks warming. "Don't worry. I'll set her straight if she gives you any problems."

“Thanks. I might need to take you up on that.”

“You’re really not worried about the party?” Surprise filled his voice.

“No. It will be fun,” she assured him. “It’s not very often I get to get all dressed up, and Leslie has set up appointments for us at the beauty salon to get our hair and nails done.” She looked at her torn and ragged nails. “I can’t tell you the last time I had that done.”

“Good. I appreciate you coming with me, I really do.”

She looked at him and smiled. “I’m just glad I can help. I really like your cousin,” she said after a long moment.

“Yeah, she’s great.”

“Not sure about her husband, though. I don’t think he likes dogs.”

“He’s a corporate man. All business. If it’s not good for the bottom line, it’s not good for Mark.”

“Yeah, I think Leslie would have taken the Maltese if he’d let her.”

He turned to her. “What gave it away? The fact that you had to pry her out of her arms, or the tears rolling down her face as you did?”

“You noticed that, huh?”

“Hard to miss.”

“I don’t think a spouse should keep their partner from getting a pet. Do you?”

He looked hesitant to answer. “That sounds like a loaded question.”

“I can’t tell you how many times I heard someone say, oh, I really want to adopt a dog, but my wife won’t let me have one. Or my husband hates animals. It just burns me up.”

He laughed. “It must—your face is turning red.”

She brought both hands to her cheeks. “That happens when I feel strongly about something.”

“I see that.”

For at least five minutes she talked nonstop about the animals, her dreams of her rescue center, and how she needed to get stuff ready for next weekend’s fundraiser.

“I’ll help you with whatever you need,” he promised. “I owe you.”

“Thanks, I will take you up on that.” She looked at him and grinned. “So, investment broker, huh? Is that what you do?”

“No. I’m a soldier. That’s what I’ve been doing for the last four years. But, investments are what I’m expected to do. My training is in accounting. I was a business and economics major with a CPA.”

“Really? Maybe you can help me with the foundation? According to Lincoln, we need to find a way to become profitable or we’re not going to make it.”

“Absolutely. I’ve already told Lincoln I’d look at his books. I’d be happy to look at your side of the business as well.”

“Wonderful. The horses and other farm animals he’s been taking in have put more of a strain on the foundation than we expected. He thinks it’s my side, but I think it’s his.”

He grinned. “That definitely sounds like a problem. I’ll look at them and see what we can do about it. Who knows, I might enjoy being a small-town CPA. One thing is certain—whether I enjoy it or not, my parents would hate it.”

“Why is that?”

“They are big city corporate all the way. But, I think I’d be good at it. One thing I am good at is business. So, if you really want to expand your rescue foundation to include a pet supply store or grooming station, I can help you set up a business plan that you can take to a bank and get a loan.”

“You can?”

“In my sleep. Why don’t you bring your books by and let me take a look at them? We’ll see what I can do.”

Excitement filled her and she bit down on her lip. How did she get so lucky? “I’d really appreciate that. I’m afraid numbers aren’t my strong suit.”

“They are mine. You’re helping me tomorrow night, so let me help you.”

“You’re on.” Things were finally starting to go her way.

Not long after, Jenni and Bryce arrived at the farm exhausted but safe. They got the dogs settled in the barn. “The poor things look so sad,” she said as they left them. “Look at all their sad eyes. I think they got used to being with us.”

Bryce grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll check on them regularly tonight.”

She stopped him with a hand on his arm. “What do you mean? Aren’t you going to the tree-lighting ceremony?” For some reason she really wanted him to be there. To see Pineville and to meet her kids.

“Nah. Singing and festivities aren’t really my thing.”

“Oh,” Jenni said, feeling a wave of disappointment roll through her. “I was hoping to show you around town. I’ll even buy you a peppermint latte at my sister’s place. A thank you of sorts.”

He hesitated, and she could see he really wasn’t into it.

“Well, think about it,” she said, giving him an out before he could say no. She wanted him there. She liked being around him; he made her feel like anything was possible.

“Okay, then. I’ll see you there. Maybe. Hopefully.” She added with a smile when he was about to protest. She placed all the cat carriers in the back seat of her old mid-sized SUV and tore off down the road toward her apartment.

If she didn’t hurry, she was going to be late. Oh, bother, she was going to be late anyway, she thought as she pressed down on the accelerator. The cats howled in protest. “Don’t worry, we’ll be home in no time.”

She was pretty certain her cats, Andy and Sandy, were not going to be happy about the new arrivals. She’d just have to

lock them in her room until she had a chance to introduce them all properly.

Cat introductions were a very delicate matter.

She pulled into her apartment complex parking lot and came to an abrupt stop. As quickly as she could, she grabbed two of the carriers and ran upstairs, thinking about what she would wear to the tree-lighting and hoping her red sweater and matching scarf were clean.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Martin,” she said as she passed the apartment manager on the stairs.

“Hello, Miss Jones. About that rent check—” he said as she blew past him.

“I know. It’s late. I’m so sorry. I’m going to get it to you soon. Probably even tomorrow, but right now I have to get to the tree-lighting ceremony.”

She placed the cat carriers on the ground while she unlocked her door.

“But it’s already a week late,” he said in protest.

This was all she needed. “I know, Mr. Martin. I’ve just been so busy.”

The cats were howling. She saw Sandy and Andy running toward her. Furious that she’d been gone all night, she was certain. They were probably starving.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Martin, but I really have to go.”

She grabbed the two carriers, pulled them inside, then quickly slammed the door as she saw Mr. Martin raised his hand to say something more. She had left school without picking up her paycheck yesterday. She wondered if she’d be able to write him a check but asked him not to deposit it until next week. She just needed a few more days.

“Here you go,” she said to the cats who were screaming at her in full chorus as she filled their bowls. Which, of course, got Simon and Sweetie crying too.

She quickly took them into her room and set out food and water for them, then made another box, opened their carrier doors, and quickly escaped the room. Keeping all these cats, not to mention Spooky, separated from each other was not going to be an easy task.

She ran out the front door and headed back down the stairs to her SUV to get the other two carriers. Unfortunately, Mr. Martin was standing next to her SUV and staring through her back window.

“Do you have two more cats in there?” he asked.

“I do, but just temporarily. They’re rescues. Do you have a cat, Mr. Martin?”

“No, I don’t. As you know, you’ve only been approved for two cats in this apartment.”

“I know. They’ll be gone in a couple days, I promise,” she lied. Actually, she had no idea how long she would have them, nor did she know when Carla would be back. “I’m taking them to the adoption fair at the caroling kickoff next weekend. So just until then.”

“You know, Miss Jones, we have a long waiting list for people who want to move into the Belleview Apartments.”

“I understand, sir.” She opened the back hatch and grabbed the last two carriers. Felix let out a loud mournful cry.

“People who can pay their rent on time, and who don’t break the pet policies,” he continued.

“I understand. I can write you a check right now, as long as you don’t mind if I date it next Wednesday. Do you mind?”

He looked at her like she was crazy.

“Oh, no, look at the time,” she squealed while staring at her watch. “I really am so late. I hope I see you tonight at the tree-lighting ceremony. My class is singing ‘Santa Claus is Coming To Town,’” she added, reminding him that she was a kindergarten teacher. That had to work in her favor, hadn’t it?

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Martin,” she said when he didn’t respond, and bolted up the stairs as fast as she could. She

escaped into her apartment and shut and locked the door, leaning her back against it as she gasped for breath.

Boy, she hoped he didn't evict her. If he did, where would she go? Spooky, who hadn't made a sound since she picked him up in Boston, let out an ear-piercing howl.

*What now, Spooky?*



## CHAPTER 12



*B*ryce checked on the dogs in the stall once more. He'd left their carrier doors open, and the dogs were lying in the hay together. It was sweet how much they had bonded and snuggled up to one another. Bryce took Bucky with him as he checked the other stalls. A lot of them needed cleaning out.

Guess Lincoln has been too busy dealing with wedding plans. This farm alone was too much work for one person; Bryce didn't know how much longer Lincoln would be able to continue watching after the rescue dogs. He let the three that had already been there out of their crates to follow him around as he did his chores.

Bucky watched him as he worked. He was fine around the other dogs and even good around the horses. Bryce had just finished the first stall and moved on to the next when his phone buzzed. He looked at the display and swore under his breath.

"Hey, Dad," he answered, realizing that once he answered his grandmother's call, there would be no hiding the fact he was back any longer.

"I understand you're living in Pineville these days. What's that about?" His dad asked.

"I'm helping out a friend," he said, trying not to give out any more information than he had to.

"Your mother was very disappointed when she discovered you'd be so close but still wouldn't be able to make it home for Christmas."

“Sorry, Dad. I can’t. I’ve made a commitment here.”

“Your brother would like to come talk to you. Clear the air. Where are you staying?”

Bryce’s chest tightened. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I do. We need to move past this.”

Bryce’s grip on his phone tightened. “We can’t move past this.” The thought of having to look across the Christmas dinner table at Dominique and Caleb was more than he could stomach.

“Dominique feels terrible. Me too. Your mother and I shouldn’t have pushed so hard for the two of you to get together in the first place.”

“I really don’t care how Dominique feels, Dad.”

His father was quiet for a moment. “What about the firm? Now that you’re out of the service, that job we talked about is waiting for you. Come on by the office and we’ll get you all set up.”

“I don’t think so.” Bryce looked at Bucky, who whined and cocked his head at the growing tension in the stall. “I’m committed here through the month of December.”

“You made a commitment to the firm, son. To the family firm. Don’t forget that. You know the terms of your grandfather’s will.”

“I’ll be at the party tomorrow night. We can discuss it then.”

“We both worked hard to put you on the path you’re on now—a very good path for your future. I’m not going to let you throw that all away because some woman broke your heart.”

Anger surged through Bryce and he kicked a bale of hay, which only sent pain shooting through his foot. He took a deep breath. “That isn’t what this is about,” he pushed through a tight throat.

“Isn’t it?”

“No. This is about making my own choices. This is about Caleb. How do you expect me to sit across the dinner table from him, to go into the office with him every single day?”

“Because he’s your brother. You’re going to have to get past it.”

“I am past it. Trust me, but that doesn’t mean I want to be a part of the dysfunction of this family. I’m rebuilding my life without the Whittakers, or your money.”

“Don’t be foolish!” His father yelled.

Bryce didn’t say anything, just closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

After a moment of silence, his father’s voice softened. “Don’t throw your future away, son. You have worked so hard for everything you have.”

“I have worked hard,” Bryce said. “For you. For the family, and look what that’s gotten me. Now I’m going to work hard to build a new life for myself. Here in Pineville.” There. He said the words. Let the chips fall where they may. He hung up the phone and looked at Bucky, who was staring at him expectantly. “What? You’ll like it here.”

The dog whined again.

“Come on. Let’s go for a ride.”

Bucky barked, excited by the idea, and so did the other three, who were being exceptionally good. Even though it was growing late, Bryce figured they could probably get thirty minutes in. Ever since he’d come to the ranch, he discovered he loved riding. The wind on his face, the easy sway of the horse’s rhythm beneath him. The horse, Shadow, loved stretching his legs and running as much as he did.

He was curious to see how Bucky would respond to her.

Apparently, he loved it as much as Bryce did, and so did the others.

*“What is it that makes you happy?”* He heard Jenni’s voice in his mind and pictured her sparkling eyes and her wide smile.

This. Right now, this is what he loved to do. What he wanted to do. What made him happy. Riding a horse with his dog running alongside him.

He knew then what he wanted was a ranch of his own.

## CHAPTER 13



“Oh, no!” Jenni gasped as she hurried out of the bathroom and saw the clock. The tree-lighting ceremony was due to start in fifteen minutes and she was already ten minutes late. It shouldn’t have taken her so long to get ready, but having to feed and then settle six cats into their respective rooms was a lot more time-consuming than she’d expected.

She turned to grab her coat out of her closet and tripped over a cat carrier. Sweetie cried out from inside.

“Oh, Sweetie. I’m so sorry.” She quickly stuck her hand inside and petted the small cat. She wished she could cuddle her and let her know everything would be all right—actually, she wished she could keep her, but there was no way Mr. Martin would let her have three cats. He made that perfectly clear when she moved in with two.

Apparently, he had experience with *cat ladies* before. What a creep. She couldn’t think about him now. She grabbed her coat out of the closet and purse off the table and fled through the apartment toward the front door. She pulled it open and saw an envelope lying on the threshold with her name on it.

“Great,” she muttered, picked it up, and threw it in her purse, then bolted down the stairs. She drove as fast as she could toward the center of town, hoping by some miracle Miss Evelyn wouldn’t be there yet to see her arriving so late. Why did these things always happen to her?

A few minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot, parked, then sprinted toward the giant tree in the center of the park. Landry was already set up as Santa in the gazebo, and her friend Nicole was dressed as an elf taking pictures of children on Santa's lap.

Jenni smiled and waved as she saw her. Every year, Nicole swore she would never put on that elf costume again, and every year she does. Only now it wasn't her dad who played Santa in the park, but her husband.

She ran past, hurrying toward her kindergarten class, who were all surrounding Mrs. Hollis in front of the large Christmas tree in the center of the park.

"Thank you so much," she told the kindergarten teacher, whose class Jenni had taken over when Mrs. Hollis retired. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate you being here."

Mrs. Hollis frowned. "I'm not here for you, Jenni. I'm here for the children."

"I know. Of course, and thank you for subbing for me today, too. We got caught in that snowstorm that blazed through Boston last night and couldn't make it home until the roads cleared this morning."

"Planning isn't really your strong suit, is it?" the older woman asked.

Jenni was taken aback. "What do you mean?" She was a good planner. She planned all kinds of things. Organization and planning skills are critical for any teacher.

The woman fixed her with a serious look. "Everyone knew the storm was coming, and instead of preparing for it, you rushed headlong into it."

"Yes. I know, but I didn't have much choice, and the storm arrived earlier than we expected. We couldn't control that."

She nodded, little lines forming around her pursed lips. "Yes. I know, dear."

"Miss Jones, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Jenni cringed at the sound of Miss Evelyn, her principal's voice. This can't be good. She turned toward her. "Of course," she answered with a smile.

"Don't worry. I'll continue to watch the children." The knowing look in the teacher's eyes set Jenni's teeth on edge.

Jenni couldn't be angry at the teacher. Mrs. Hollis had bailed her out a lot more than she should have had to this year. "Thank you," she whispered and tipped her head to Mrs. Hollis before following the principal away from the children and their parents and behind a large pine tree. One of the many filling the park that had given Pineville its name.

"The children are so excited about tonight," Jenni said, babbling nervously. Something bad was about to happen. She could feel it all the way down to her toes. Not only that, Miss Evelyn was staring at her like she had just swallowed a sour Jelly Belly.

"I like you, Jenni. I really do, but you have been very unreliable lately," Miss Evelyn started. "It's almost like our school and your job isn't your main priority."

"What? That's not true. I love my job," Jenni protested. She did. A lot. As far as jobs go, it was great.

"And yet, you've had Mrs. Hollis substitute for you eleven times this semester."

"I just..."

"I know. You have a lot of things going on. Mrs. Hollis and I talked and she's willing to come back and cover for you for the rest of the year."

Jenni's eyes widened. Had she heard her correctly? "What? What are you talking about?"

"I really don't think our children are your top priority and that's not acceptable at Monroe Elementary."

Tears sprung to Jenni's eyes. "Are you firing me?" She couldn't be firing her. Could she?

"To protect your reputation, we're going to tell everyone that it's a mutual decision. That you've decided to quit

teaching for a while.”

This can't be happening. She knew what Miss Evelyn was doing for her was a gift. But no matter how she spun it, she was being sacked. How could that feel like a gift? Instead of whining or screaming like she wanted to do, Jenni sucked in a breath and pulled on her big girl panties and thanked the horrible woman for destroying her life, then fell back against the tree as her former boss turned and walked away.

This was a nightmare.

She was in the middle of some horrible, twisted, nightmare. This can't be happening. This wasn't happening! Jenni turned and saw the back of Mrs. Hollis's head. This had to be her fault. The woman stole her job!

*Did she?*

Or had Jenni handed it to her on a silver platter?

She was fairly certain the old teacher and principal would like nothing more than for her to leave, but she couldn't. These were her kids, her class, and she worked hard to get them ready for tonight. She wouldn't abandon them now.

With her head held high, her back straight, and a smile plastered on her face, Jenni walked toward her kids just as the organizer called them up to the stage.

“I got this,” she said to Mrs. Hollis and took her kids up onto the stage. She sang her heart out with them to “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” and struggled to keep her tears at bay. As they finished, she congratulated them all for doing such a wonderful job, gave them each a hug, posed for pictures, shook hands with their parents, and didn't shed a tear as she walked across the street to her sister's coffee shop.

Once she was away from everyone, she'd get a peppermint latte and have herself a good cry. She was just glad Bryce didn't come after all.



## CHAPTER 14



Bryce had just finished making sure all the horses were fed, watered, and secured for the night when Lincoln came out of the house and toward the barn. “How’s it going?” he asked.

“Good,” Bryce said and walked into the back to check on all the dogs. They’d all been fed and let out, and were settling in for the night.

“I heard you got stuck in Boston overnight.” Lincoln walked with him and looked at the dogs lying in the hay.

“We did. Luckily, my cousin let us crash at her place since we had all these guys with us.”

“They look like a good group.” The seven dogs were snuggled next to one another.

“They are.”

“What about this one?” He pointed to Bucky.

“Believe it or not, this is my dog, Bucky.”

“Your Bucky?” Lincoln asked, a look of incredulity on his face.

“Yep. Dominique dropped him off at the rescue center and didn’t tell anyone.”

Lincoln’s forehead furrowed. “That is so not cool.”

“Nope. Not cool at all,” Bryce agreed. “I’m just glad I found him.” He looked down at the German Shepherd, whose wise eyes seemed to understand everything they were saying.

“So have any of the dogs shown any aggressive behaviors?” Lincoln asked.

“No. Not even toward the cats. Except maybe the two chihuahuas.”

Lincoln laughed. “I bet. Sounds like a fun night.”

Bryce thought of Jenni’s smile and twinkling eyes. “It was.”

“Well, finish up here. We’re getting ready to go to the tree-lighting ceremony. You want to come?”

“Nah, I think I’ll pass and call it an early night.”

“Are you sure I can’t talk you out of it? I really don’t want to have to go back in the house and tell Candy you’re not going. Christmas in Pineville is not to be missed, no matter what. Apparently, it’s mandatory.”

Bryce cringed. “I’m not really into Christmas.”

“Sorry, brother, but you have no choice. You might as well give in now. You know how tenacious Candy can be.”

“Okay, I’ll be ready in thirty.”

Lincoln pet Bucky. “Good boy,” he said to the dog. “You better make it ten. We’re already running late. I think we might have missed Jenni’s class singing.”

Bryce laughed. “Fine, but that means I’m going as I am.”

“Not a problem.”

“Hey, Lincoln,” Bryce asked, as Lincoln started back toward the house. “What made you decide to buy a farm?”

“I really did it for my sister and the kids. They needed me. My sister was going through a really hard time, and so was I. I was staying with them after recovering from my eye surgery.” He pointed to the house next door. “The kids and I grew really close. They loved the animals on this farm so much that when the farm came up for sale, I decided to buy it.

After everything we went through in Afghanistan, my accident, and the surgery, it was very cathartic out here. The

kids still help out when they can, and I love being close to them.”

“I get that. I’m beginning to feel the same way about the place.”

Lincoln grinned. “It’s nice to be away from the city, that’s for sure. And then, of course, there was Candy.”

Bryce smiled and nodded, knowing Candy meant everything to Lincoln. “She probably played a small part.”

Lincoln grinned. “Yep. Just a little. Why are you asking?”

“Staying here this last month, helping you with the horses and the farm, has got me thinking is all.”

“That maybe you don’t want to go back to the tall glass and steel buildings and corporate world of Boston?”

Bryce nodded. “Exactly.”

“What about your family and the business? Aren’t there some golden handcuffs thrown into the mix?”

Bryce’s chest tightened at just how golden those handcuffs were. “There are, but there is no way I am going to go back there and pretend that what my brother did, and my family’s response to it, is okay. I’m not letting them off the hook that easily.”

“Nor should you. But make sure you’re not changing your life for all the wrong reasons.”

Bryce stilled. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve worked hard to be part of your family’s business. Are you sure you’re ready to throw away a future you’ve worked hard to carve out for yourself just to spite your brother? It seems like you’re hurting yourself more than him.”

He’d had those same thoughts a lot in the last few weeks. “You would be right, if that was what I was doing. But I really don’t think it is. Not anymore. The truth is, I love it here. I love waking up and taking care of the horses every morning. I love riding along the fences and checking on the cows. I

would much rather face them each morning than an office full of suits.”

Lincoln nodded, a sharpness in the directness of his gaze. “I get that, I really do, but running a farm isn’t cheap. We’re having to rethink things around here.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t other things I can do, too. Like maybe be a small-town investment broker or a CPA.”

“Sounds like you’ve given it a lot of thought. Let’s walk around downtown Pineville tonight. Maybe seeing the town will spark some ideas.”

“All right,” Bryce said. “Can Bucky come?”

Lincoln laughed as the dog followed Bryce toward the back of the barn. “Will he give us a choice?”

“I doubt it.”

“Luckily, it’s a dog-friendly town.” Lincoln headed back toward the house.

“Tell Candy we’ll be out front in ten.”

As Bryce got ready, he played over the idea of becoming a small-town accountant in his mind. It might be doable. It might be completely boring, but just the thought of it would drive his father crazy. He grinned, thinking what it would be like to have a small piece of property with maybe a horse and a barn of his own.

No. The idea was ridiculous. No matter what he said to his dad, he couldn’t give up his trust fund. He should go back to Boston, reclaim his life and build the life he wants slowly. But he’d already given up so much time, and the thought of going back to the family business made his stomach turn. As he pulled on a pair of jeans and a clean flannel, his phone beeped. He stared down at a text from Dominique. “*Can we talk?*”

His grip tightened on the phone.

“*I’ll see you at the banquet.*” He typed.

“*Okay. I’ll find you.*”

He smiled as he thought of the look that would cross her face, cross all their faces, when he walked into the room with Jenni on his arm. He'd certainly give them something to talk about. In the meantime, he planned to go over every word in his grandfather's will. There had to be a loophole.

Maybe one his grandmother knew about?

She would be the first one he talked to once he got back.

He pulled on his boots, and just for a drill, plopped a cowboy hat he'd found hanging on the wall onto his head. Yep, even if his mother was standing before him, she wouldn't recognize him. The thought made him grin.

And then he thought of Jenni. What would she think? If he stuck around, he'd get to see her more and find out. That was a definite checkmark in the plus category.

Maybe Lincoln was on to something. Maybe he should find out how many CPAs Pineville already had. He stopped and did a quick Google search. Not too many. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"Come on, Bucky. Let's go say hi to Jenni and check out our new town."

## CHAPTER 15



Jenni rushed into the coffee shop, thrashing her principal's words around her mind. How could she tell Roni she had been fired? Her sister would be so disappointed in her. What could she say so she didn't sound like such a loser? She got fired! She was so ashamed.

"What's wrong?" Roni asked the instant she saw her face.

Jenni's throat immediately closed and tears flooded her eyes.

Roni rushed around the counter, put her arm around her shoulder, and pulled her toward a table in the corner. "What is it?"

"I got fired," Jenni admitted, her face crumpling under the weight of the words.

"Oh no. You're kidding. Hold on, right here. I'm going to make you a peppermint latte."

"Okay, with extra whipped cream and a cherry."

"You got it." Roni hurried back to the counter and a few minutes later returned and handed her a peppermint latte with an extra whip and two cherries.

"Thank you. Do you have time to talk?" Jenni asked.

"Sure, there's still a few minutes before the crowds will come in."

"What am I going to do?" Jenni asked as the gravity of her situation hit her.

“Do you have any money in savings?” her sister asked.

“No. I used it all to buy food for my rescue animals. I can’t expect my foster parents to take care of them and feed them. Dogs eat a lot. Thank goodness, Lincoln takes care of all the horses and livestock we are rehoming.”

Roni was giving her that look.

Jenni hated that look. “What?”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but you’re going to have to make a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t keep dividing your focus. It’s not fair to your students or your rescue animals.”

Jenni couldn’t believe her sister was saying this. Not now. Not after she just lost her job. “What do you mean? I think I’ve been doing a great job.”

“Be honest. Have you given those kids one hundred percent of yourself?” Roni asked, one boldly-lined eyebrow hiked.

“Well, no. There’s only one of me, you know. How can I give one hundred percent to them and one hundred percent to my animals? They all depend on me.”

“Exactly my point,” Roni said. “And they are both very important jobs that require all of you.”

Jenni inhaled a deep breath. “Well, I don’t have my teaching job anymore. So problem solved.”

Roni reached across the table and took her hand. “I don’t want to make you feel bad.”

“I know.” Jenni took a long sip from her latte. “So any idea what I should do now?”

“You should give up the foundation and ask for your job back.”

Jenni scowled. “What! I could never do that.”

Roni leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Then you have your answer.”

She supposed she did, and it didn’t taste good. “You are absolutely, totally, and completely no help,” Jenni said, though it wasn’t true. It was exactly what she needed to hear.

“I’m sorry,” Roni said and gave her arm a squeeze. “I really am. I wish there was something I could do.”

The door chimed and a family of four piled in. “The rush is coming.” Roni stood.

“Roni,” Jenni said, stopping her. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“This place? How do you make this place work?”

“It isn’t easy, and it takes everything I have. That’s what it will take if you want your foundation to be successful.”

Jenni nodded, her mind running in a million different directions.

“You will be successful, too, as soon as you figure out what you want to do.” She gave her a smile and walked away.

“What happened to me being the extraordinary Jenni who can do it all?” she muttered aloud and took another drink from her latte. “She crashed and burned, that’s what.”

“Hey, Jenni. What’s up?” Melanie asked as she and Brianna came into the room.

Jenni plastered a bright smile on her face and pretended everything was okay. “Hey!”

“Oh, no. What’s wrong?” Melanie asked as she and Brianna sat at the table.

Jennie should have known she couldn’t fool them. They’d been best friends for too many years for her to be able to hide anything from them. “Nothing!” she said, smiling brighter and giving it one last try. “I just got the opportunity to spend more time on my foundation.”



“That’s great. Isn’t it?” Brianna asked, confusion filling her face as she watched Jenni.

“Yes. It is,” Jenni said, nodding. It was all in how she spun things. She was going to start spinning and not stop until her life was perfect. Whatever that was.

“The kids were great tonight,” Melanie said as one of Roni’s servers delivered two more lattes to their table.

“Thanks, I thought so too,” Jenni said. “They worked really hard.” The tears were threatening, expanding inside her, like that big blooming storm that blew in and destroyed her life.

“So have you. You love those kids,” Brianna said.

“I know.” Jenni shook her head as her tears broke free and once more filled her eyes. “But apparently I can’t handle my teaching job and my foundation. So, they’ve let me go.”

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry,” Brianna said, leaning over and giving her a hug.

“What are you going to do?” Melanie asked, leaning forward and also hugging her.

The three of them held onto each other and rocked back and forth for a long moment until Jenni finally felt like she could breathe again. “I don’t know. Start looking for another job?”

“I have an idea,” Melanie said. “You know the old Hadley’s place behind my inn?”

Jenni looked confused. “The one that has been abandoned ever since he died?”

Melanie nodded. “Yep. I reached out to the owner on record, and they’re willing to sell it.”

“They are?”

“Yes, thank goodness, because the place has been attracting rodents, not to mention it’s a complete eyesore. His heirs know it needs a lot of work, so they’re willing to let it go under market value.”

“Are you thinking of buying it and adding to the inn?” Jenni asked.

Melanie shook her head. “No, I think it would be a perfect place to open a pet supply store.”

“Yes, it would,” Brianna agreed. “You can have your pet shop and your grooming rooms in the front of the house, and live upstairs.”

“And there’s even an old garage in the back and a fenced yard for your rescue animals,” Melanie added.

“Oh, my gosh. That sounds perfect,” Jenni said, clapping her hands together. “Do you really think I can do it?”

“Why not? Just don’t let those dogs of yours keep my guests awake,” Melanie said with a laugh.

The very thought filled Jenni with excitement. “I won’t. I promise. But, how am I going to be able to get the bank to give me a loan to buy a place without a job?”

“You’re going to get a business loan for the foundation, and I’m going to help you,” Melanie said.

Jenni looked at her friends as more tears filled her eyes. “You really think this could happen? If it did, that would be so perfect—it would be a dream come true.”

Brianna leaned forward. “We’re going to do our best to help you make it a reality, but don’t get your hopes up too much, just do your best. It’s all you can do.”

“Do you have any money saved at all for a down payment?” Melanie asked.

Jenni shook her head. “I don’t. I had to buy the van to transport all these animals, and I’ve put everything else into the foundation.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll call my mom and see if she can show you the property tomorrow. Okay?” Brianna asked. “Maybe the seller would be able to do some special owner financing.”

“Really? Wow, that would be terrific. But I can’t tomorrow. I’m going to Boston with Bryce.”

“Bryce?” Brianna asked. “Who’s Bryce?”

“You know, Lincoln’s best man.”

“Oh, yeah?” Melanie said. “What’s in Boston?”

“Oh, it’s a party his family is throwing. I’m going as his fiancée.” She grinned as she said the words.

“His what?” her friends said in unison.

Jenni laughed. “Don’t worry, it’s just a temporary engagement—a pretend engagement.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I think,” Melanie said, looking slightly confused and disturbed.

“So, Lincoln’s friend, Bryce?” Brianna asked. “Is he cute?”

“So cute,” Jenni said with a grin.

“She likes him,” Brianna said to Melanie.

Melanie smiled. “So much.”

“So when do we get to meet him?” Brianna asked.

“Meet who?” Roni asked, pulling up a chair.

Not wanting to explain her fake engagement to her sister, Jenni quickly changed the subject. “Let’s go see the property on Sunday,” she said to Brianna and Melanie. Roni was great, but she couldn’t keep a secret to save her life.

“Sure, I’ll call my mom and set it up,” Brianna said, putting her phone to her ear and stepping away from the table.

“We’re thinking I might be able to buy the Hadley place,” she told Roni.

“Really? That’s exciting,” her sister said, though she looked skeptical.

“Anyway, I need to go to Boston tomorrow with a friend, and I have six cats in my apartment. Any chance you can come

by and spend a couple hours with them? Better yet, would either of you like to foster a dog or cat?"

"Not on your life," they both said loudly.

Jenni laughed and rolled her eyes.

"But yes, I'll come by and stay with them," Roni said. "But you'll owe me dinner."

"You got it." Jenni stood. "Speaking of the cats, I need to go home and make sure they're not killing each other."

"Okay, you take care," Melanie said, standing and gave her a hug.

Jenni hugged her back, then hugged her sister and gave Briana a wave as she left the coffee shop and started walking toward the park and her car. She thought of the Hadley place and wondered if she could actually make this happen. Was her dream really possible?

She drove out of the parking lot and passed by the Hadley place. It was hard to believe she might actually live there. It seemed like a dream coming true. She pulled over and peered at the house, which was shrouded in darkness, when she noticed Lincoln's truck driving past and slowing down to take a look.

Had Melanie already called him? Maybe with Lincoln on her side, she might actually be able to make it happen. She smiled wide and gave a little squeal of joy.

Maybe getting fired wouldn't be so bad after all.

## CHAPTER 16



“*W*hat is this place?” Bryce asked as Lincoln slowed in front of a dilapidated old house downtown.

“Prime downtown real estate and it’s about to go on the market,” Lincoln said.

Bryce stared out the window at the overgrown yard of the abandoned property. “So why are you showing it to me?”

Lincoln grinned. “I’m just planting a seed. Wouldn’t this make a great accountant’s office?”

“Yeah, for the Addams family.” Bryce had to admit, his friend might be on to something. He gave the place a second look.

“This property would be perfect for a downtown business,” Candy said, looking out the window. “I always thought it was a shame the way Mr. Hadley let it go. I guess he was too ill to take care of it.”

“We have contractor friends,” Lincoln added. “They could get this place fixed up in no time.”

“I don’t know.” Bryce stared at the old house. It was hard to see from the beam of the headlights, but it looked like it needed a lot of work. “I’m not sure I even want to be a small-town CPA. I’ve spent most of my career, when I wasn’t in the Army, working for the family business. Mergers and acquisitions. Ask me about your investment funds and I can definitely help you there. Working on peoples’ tax returns might be a little outside my area of expertise.”

“No pressure,” Lincoln said. “It was just an idea. You can continue working on the farm with me and sleeping in the barn. I can always use help.”

Bryce grinned. “You know, that doesn’t sound half bad. No commitments. No decisions. No pressure. Sounds perfect.”

Lincoln shook his head. “No worrying about where your next paycheck is going to come from. Yeah, how long can you live like that without being totally and completely bored?”

“You’d be surprised,” Bryce said as Lincoln continued toward the center of town.

“Oh, we missed the tree-lighting ceremony,” Candy said, looking at the lit tree in the middle of the park. People were milling about, heading toward their cars. “Come on, let’s go to Roni’s.”

“Roni’s?” Bryce asked. He’d heard that name somewhere...

“Jenni’s sister. She owns the coffee shop across the street.”

Lincoln parked. “Can Bucky come?” Bryce asked as they all got out of the truck.

“Sure. Dogs are welcome in the back room.” They all walked into a large coffee shop full of patrons.

The woman behind the counter, who bore a small resemblance to Jenni, waved and hurried over. “Hey, you guys. Who’s this?” she asked, smiling at Bryce.

“Roni, this is Bryce,” Candy said. “He’s the one who went with Jenni to Boston.”

“Oh.” Roni looked at him for a long moment, then leaned toward them. “I’m only telling you this so Jenni doesn’t have to, but that impromptu trip to Boston got Jenni fired.”

“What?” Candy exclaimed. “Why?”

“Miss Evelyn said she’d missed too many days.”

Bryce’s stomach turned as he heard the news. Jenni had been so worried about having to miss school today.

“But she loved those kids,” Candy said.

Roni frowned and shook her head. “Apparently not as much as she loves her rescue dogs. Who’s this guy?” she asked, petting Bucky on the head.

“One of those rescue dogs,” Candy said quickly.

Bryce still hadn’t told her Bucky was his. He didn’t want to have to explain the story again. Didn’t even want to think about Dominique and the things she’d done.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Roni said. “Well, I’m sure Jenni will find him a new home soon. She’s got a knack for finding and rehoming strays.”

“Where is she now?” Bryce asked, looking around the room.

“She already went home. Something about six cats?” Roni shuddered. “Take a seat and I’ll bring you something. You want peppermint lattes or peppermint hot chocolate?”

“Chocolate for me,” Candy said, and Bryce and Lincoln nodded their agreement. “Let’s go sit with Brianna and Melanie.”

They sat at a table with Candy’s two friends and they all started talking at once. “I feel so bad for Jenni,” Candy said.

“Yeah, she must be so upset,” one of the women agreed.

They both kept staring at him with curiosity heavy in their eyes. Candy introduced him and they both smiled and started nodding like they were in on some secret he wasn’t aware of. Before Bryce could ask, Jenni walked through the door, her eyes red and puffy. He pulled out the chair next to him and gestured for her to take it.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded, gave him a small smile, and looked about ready to lie and say *fine* when Roni arrived with their hot chocolates. How was it that he could already read her so well?

“Jenni, you’re back. I hope you don’t mind, but I told them about Miss Evelyn.”

Jenni looked stunned. “You told them? Already?” She glanced at Bryce and embarrassment flamed across her face.

“It’s all right. We’re here for you,” Candy said as Roni placed the tray on the table. “All of us.”

“Yes, what can we do to help,” Bryce asked.

“I don’t know. Melanie suggested I buy the Hadley place for the foundation,” Jenni said.

“Yes, my mom said she could show it to you on Sunday at noon,” Brianna said.

Jenni turned to Lincoln. “What do you think? Since we run the foundation together, do you think it could work?”

“The Hadley place?” Candy repeated, looking at Lincoln.

“Yes, it would be perfect for a pet store, grooming shop, and rescue center,” Melanie said. “And Jenni could save money by living upstairs.”

“Or it would make a great accountant’s office,” Lincoln said quietly.

“Wait. Is that why you were there? I saw your truck.” Jenni looked surprised and a little hurt.

Lincoln leaned forward and clutched his hands together on top of the table. “I’m sorry, Jenni, but I don’t think the foundation is in good enough shape to be able to afford to buy a building.”

“Our biggest fundraiser is the caroling kickoff next weekend. Shouldn’t we wait and see what we bring in? Plus, there is always the party in Boston tomorrow night.” She looked at Bryce.

“That’s true. I promised to ask for donations for the foundation at my company’s Christmas party. We will be able to bring in some money there too,” Bryce said.

Lincoln shook his head. “I really don’t think it will be enough. We’d need to double last year’s donations to even pay off what we already owe. The truth is, your rescue organization is losing money hand over fist. We can’t afford



the vet bills anymore. I was going to talk to you after the honeymoon about shutting the foundation down.”

The blood drained from Jenni’s face. Bryce didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t imagine having to tell her something like that. The foundation was her life. Her dream and her passion. He wished he felt half that committed to anything.

Jenni quickly stood. “I... I should go.”

“Jenni, wait,” Bryce said. “There’s another way.” The words were out before he could stop himself. He just couldn’t stand to see her so upset.

She stopped and turned back to him, the pain in her eyes twisting inside him.

“Tomorrow night at the party, I will stand up and ask everyone to contribute to the worthy cause. We can talk about soldiers who are deployed and have to give up their dogs.”

“That would be very compelling,” Candy said, reaching for Lincoln’s hand. “Soldiers and their families are already sacrificing so much.”

“Exactly,” Bryce said. “There will be a lot of wealthy people at that party. I will make a personal plea for donations.”

“You really think it will work?” Jenni asked.

“Absolutely. How could they not contribute to my fiancée’s foundation?”

“Wait. What was that?” Roni asked, her face filling with shock. Echoed by Candy and Lincoln demanding to know what was going on.

Jenni grinned and grabbed his hand, pulling him up next to her. “Sweetie, I wasn’t ready to tell everyone yet.” She winked at Melanie and Brianna, who looked like they were in on the joke.

He lifted Jenni’s hand and kissed her knuckles. “Sorry, darling. I guess I just let the cat out of the bag.”

## CHAPTER 17



Jenni grinned as she peered at her reflection in the mirror and sipped her glass of wine. One stylist worked on her nails, making them shine and sparkle while another twirled one-inch pieces of hair around a curling iron, filling her head with perfectly coiffed ringlets.

“I love it,” Leslie said, as she was getting equal treatment in the chair next to her.

“Me, too. Luckily, my hair is long, or I’d bear a striking resemblance to Shirley Temple.”

Leslie laughed. “Just wait until she brushes it out. You won’t recognize yourself.”

Jenni sipped her wine, trying not to let on that this wasn’t something she did all the time, and she really was a pampered princess. Once her fingers and toenails were gleaming with perfection, the stylist hurried away and another came over to apply makeup to her face.

She felt like the belle of the ball and was certain she never looked more beautiful. “Quick, take a picture,” she told Leslie. “I want to send it to my sister, otherwise she’ll never believe it.”

Leslie laughed. “Why not?”

“I’m pretty sure I haven’t had all my nails one length and the same color since... Well, since never. Not even for my prom, which was the last time I got so fancied up. I don’t know how I can ever thank you for this,” she told Leslie as Bryce’s cousin picked up the tab.

There was no way Jenni could afford all this pampering, but she didn't want to let Leslie know that.

"This is my treat. You're doing Bryce a huge favor and I'm happy to have a little girl time."

"Me, too! I've spent too many of my days with five-year-olds and my nights with dogs and cats watching romance movies and eating greasy popcorn. No reason to get all gussied up for that."

Leslie grinned as she led them to her car. "You know, I can see why Bryce is so smitten with you."

"Smitten?" *Is that even a word?* Jenni thought but wisely didn't say aloud. She was certain Bryce's perfect cousin must already think she was a country bumpkin. But she hoped Leslie was right and Bryce was smitten.

"Yes, you are the real deal."

"I like to think so." Jenni liked Leslie. Liked everything about her. "Bryce is lucky to have you and Mark."

"Thanks for saying so. We think so too." She grinned and flashed her bright red nails. "You ready to go wow the boys?"

"I sure am."

Jenni had brought her one pair of fancy high-heel shoes to wear with the dress. Practical black, Roni had said. So far, Jenni had worn them to prom and all her friend's weddings. She supposed that soon it would be time to invest in a new pair. They were beginning to look a little worn.

Once they got to Leslie's house, she hurried into the guest bedroom and slipped into the gown that was lying on the bed. She felt like Cinderella going to the ball. She'd never seen a more beautiful dress. The heart-shaped bodice tapered down her hips and dropped majestically to the floor. Silver beads and rhinestones glittered as she moved. The form-fitting dress fit her perfectly.

She took one last look, applied another coat of ruby red lipstick that matched her nails, then left the room and went up the stairs to see Bryce. Her breath caught as she saw him

standing by the fireplace, wearing a black tux. He no longer looked like a down-on-his-luck cowboy, but a millionaire bachelor.

“Wow, I—” she said, her tongue suddenly filling her mouth and making it almost impossible to talk. She sucked in a deep breath and tried again. “I almost didn’t recognize you.”

For a long second, she wondered which Bryce she found more attractive, the one in form-fitting well-worn jeans and cowboy boots mucking out stalls, his muscles bulging through his flannel shirt, or this one in a sharp midnight-black tux and gleaming black leather shoes who looked like he stepped off the set of *the Bachelor*. Nope, she couldn’t decide.

How could he look so comfortable, so at home in both? Once again she wondered if everything she thought she knew about Bryce was wrong. Who was this cowboy living in Lincoln’s barn, and what exactly was his family’s business?

“You look stunning,” he said, walking toward her and making all the thoughts rushing through her head vanish. The way he was staring at her—his eyes were gleaming with admiration and pleasure. Toward her?

“Thank you,” she squeaked. She was smiling like a carnival clown. She must be because her jaw was starting to ache, but she just couldn’t stop.

“Look at you,” Mark said, entering the room and pulling her out of her awkward thoughts.

She tore her gaze off Bryce and turned to Mark. “Thank you. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“See this is why we love going to these things—we get to get all dressed up,” Leslie said, joining them in a flowing dress of red silk and chiffon.

“Wow, that dress is beautiful. Are you sure we’re not overdressed?” Jenni asked. “I thought this was a work banquet for Bryce’s dad’s business?”

Work banquets were usually so boring and stuffy, with everyone hovering around the chocolate fountain with

marshmallows and pineapple chunks speared on bamboo skewers.

“Don’t worry,” Leslie said. “The family likes to dress up and make a big deal out of the holidays.”

“Are they going to make us sing? Because I’m an old pro at ‘Santa Claus Is Coming to Town.’ I’ve been practicing it for a month.”

Leslie laughed, and Mark looked at her like she’d just lost her mind.

“I love this girl,” Leslie said to Bryce. “I need to get our coats.” She hurried into the back room.

Bryce took her hand. “Don’t worry. You are going to wow everyone there.”

His words made her ridiculously happy.

“Don’t forget the ring,” Leslie yelled from the other room.

“Right.” Bryce pulled a ring box from his pocket and stared down at it for a long moment.

Nervousness fluttered like butterflies in her stomach. “Are you sure about this?” Jenni asked him, not sure they were doing the right thing. “There’s still time to back out.”

He looked up at her, the depth and intentness in his gaze stealing her breath. “I’m sure, and I really appreciate you doing this for me.”

She giggled nervously. “So far, I’ve had a full day at the salon and I’m wearing the most beautiful dress I’ve ever seen. I’m the one who has lucked out.”

He smiled and opened the box. Inside was a large princess diamond surrounded by a circle of sapphires. She stared unblinking and mesmerized as he took the ring from the velvet and slipped it onto her finger. This had to be the biggest and most beautiful diamond she’d ever seen.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Was this real? “Bryce, I...”

“Just don’t lose it,” Leslie said, coming back into the room. “It’s his grandmother’s.”

Jenni was unable to pull her gaze off the ring on her finger. It was unbelievable, and unlike anything she’d ever imagined wearing. *His grandmother’s!*

“It’s incredible, Bryce, but it’s too much. This doesn’t feel right.” She ripped the ring off and handed it back to him. “What if something happens to it? I’m very forgetful, clumsy even. This is a huge responsibility. I can’t take this chance. I... I lose things.” She was rambling. She did that when she got nervous, and oh boy, was she nervous.

A slow smile filled his face and he stepped closer to her, placing his hand on her shoulder. “Everything will be fine. I trust you. I know you’ll be extra careful and you won’t lose it.”

“You do?” She side-eyed him, unsure whether he was being serious. How could he be so sure when even she wasn’t?

“I’ll get it back right after the party,” he assured her.

She looked up at him and melted. Her knees weakened as she trembled in her high heels.

“You can do this,” he assured her.

“I can do this,” she repeated.

“Are we good?” Leslie asked, joining them in the foyer.

Jenni nodded. “Yes. Good.” She pushed out a relieved breath and felt ridiculously happy that he trusted her. She could do this. It was only a ring, and it wasn’t even loose.

“Stop worrying. You’re going to be fine,” Bryce said. His silky smooth voice tickled her insides.

“Then why am I suddenly so nervous?”

“There is no reason to be nervous. My family is going to love you.” He took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

She took a deep steadying breath to calm herself and looked up at him. Having only Bryce’s reassurances to rely on

made her feel shaky and vulnerable. Was she doing the right thing? “How can you be so sure?”

He winked, giving her heart a flutter. “What’s there not to love? You’re beautiful, fun, charming, and completely adorable.” He tweaked her nose, and for some reason the gesture made her want to cry. But she couldn’t. She would mess up her perfectly and professionally applied makeup.

*Breathe. In. And out. Big breaths.* “Kittens,” she whispered.

“What?” Bryce asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“I’m picturing kittens. Fuzzy white kittens with blue eyes and pink tongues.”

He laughed. “Of course you are.”

“And goats,” she added.

His eyes crinkled. “Goats too?”

“Yes. Screaming goats. They always make me smile.”

“*You* make me smile,” he said, stepping closer to her and stealing her breath all over again.

“I do?” She looked up at him, her gaze lost in his, and leaned forward, imagining what it would feel like to step into his arms, for his lips to fall over hers and steal a heart-stopping kiss.

Then she really would be the princess of the ball.

“I figured you could use this,” Leslie said, walking toward her with a floor-length black wool and silk jacket draped over her arms.

Jenni glanced at her practical red wool coat hanging by the door and was once again thankful for her new friend. Especially when she saw the clumps of cat hair stuck to the arm of her jacket.

“Thank you,” she said, as Bryce helped her into the luxurious garment. “I feel like a princess.”

“You look like one, too.”

Her eyes held his for a long moment. He was leaning toward her. Her heart skipped a beat as she reached up onto her toes, her lips inches from his.

“Come on, you lovebirds, the limo is here,” Leslie called.

Jenni’s knees nearly buckled from the disappointment as Bryce pulled back and gestured with his hand for her to walk toward the door.

Leslie was grinning at them, fully aware of what she had interrupted.

Heat rushed to Jenni’s cheeks.

Bryce grabbed her hand and led her out the door and toward a long black limo sitting in the driveway.

“A limo?” Jenni said breathlessly. She’d never been in a limo, and once again wondered exactly what kind of business party they were going to.



## CHAPTER 18



Bryce sipped his champagne watching Boston grow closer outside the limo's window. With each mile toward the downtown cityscape, his nervousness grew. He wasn't sure why. This was his family. Their company. But with everything that had happened with Dominique and his brother, he felt like he was walking into enemy territory.

"Okay, I think it's time we explained to Jenni exactly what she's walking into," Leslie said. She and Mark were sitting on the bench seat facing them. Mark had the bottle of champagne by his side and had already filled his glass twice. Bryce supposed he wasn't the only one nervous about tonight. He wondered how Mark felt about their plan of deception.

"I'm not sure—" Bryce started to object. The last thing he wanted was for Jenni to know exactly who the Whittakers were—how connected and how wealthy.

"It's okay," Leslie said, looking at him as she held up her phone displaying a family photo. He wasn't in this one. "This is Bryce's family from last year's Christmas party."

He took the phone and held it for Jenni to see. "I wasn't there because I was still deployed."

"They look like a nice family," Jenni said, smiling at the picture as she took the phone.

"They got their photo smiles down. That's Caleb." He pointed to his brother. "My mom and dad, and my grandmother."

"Flip to the next one," Leslie said, leaning forward.

Jenni did and Bryce saw a picture of Dominique and Caleb. She looked beautiful, picture-perfect, and happy. He wondered how he could have been so wrong about her.

“How long were you together?” Jenni asked with sympathy swimming in her eyes.

“Technically little more than a year, but we were only together for eight months before my deployment. When exactly she got together with my brother, I’m not sure.”

“I’m sorry. I still can’t believe your family is okay with this.” Jenni handed him back the phone and he passed it to Leslie.

“Oh, they’re not okay, but what choice do they have?” Leslie said. “The witch is carrying the Whittaker heir.”

“I’m sorry,” Jenni said, her soft hand on his.

“Don’t be. What she did to me with Caleb doesn’t bother me half as much as what she did to Bucky. I’m just glad I’m no longer with her.”

“I’m totally on board with you there. Speaking of Bucky, do you think you can help me get some donations for my foundation? I brought some brochures to hand out.”

“I’ll get your donations,” Leslie said, taking the brochures.

“Thank you. I really appreciate that.”

Leslie patted Mark’s leg. “As long as you promise not to give away my little sweetie.”

“The Maltese?” Jenni glanced at Mark.

He shrugged and grinned. “I know a losing battle when I see it.”

Bryce laughed and Jenni clapped her hands together. “That’s wonderful. You know, she can always go with you on your trips.”

“That’s right,” Leslie agreed.

Mark looked skeptical. “All I know for sure is she’s not sleeping in my bed.”

“Deal!” Leslie leaned over and gave him a big kiss.

“Wow, wonders never cease,” Bryce said.

“Congratulations,” Jenni whooped. “That’s wonderful news. Think how much joy that little dog is going to bring into your lives. Let’s toast to your new addition to the family.” She held up her glass.

“Cheers!” Leslie said, and they all took a drink.

Bryce couldn’t take his eyes off Jenni. “Do you always make miracles happen?”

“Ha! Not by a long shot, but that doesn’t mean I don’t try.”

“This calls for another toast.” Leslie grabbed the bottle out of the bucket and refilled their glasses. “To Jenni’s perfect little Christmas gift.”

“To raising lots of money for Jenni’s foundation,” Bryce said, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. He was so glad she was there with him. He couldn’t imagine facing his family alone.

“I’ll drink to that,” Jenni said, a sparkle lighting her eyes.

“And to keeping Bryce in his grandmother’s good graces,” Mark said.

Jenni frowned. “Is that going to be hard?”

“Not at all. She’s going to love you. They all are,” Leslie said. “Bryce showing up tonight is half the battle.”

“What’s the other half?” Jenni asked.

“Getting her to agree that I can open a branch of the company in Pineville.” Bryce caught her gaze with his and held it. “So I can stay.”

“Really?” Jenni’s eyes sparked with excitement, and his heart filled with relief. He hadn’t realized how worried he’d been about her reaction.

“I poured over my trust documents and it’s the only way to get around having to work for the family business if I want to keep my inheritance.”

“Is that what you really want to do?” Leslie asked. “I have a hard time picturing you as a small-town broker.”

“Either that or a CPA,” Bryce said. “I’ve done some research and I think it would be perfect for me. I can set my own hours and still have time to have a life outside of the office. No travel. No weekends. No late nights, except maybe around tax time. I would like to own a ranch and a horse or two.”

“A horse?” Leslie blurted. “Since when?”

“Since I’ve been staying at my friend Lincoln’s farm.”

Leslie stared at him wide-eyed. “I’m stunned.”

“What if you can’t get your grandmother to agree?” Jenni asked, looking up at him with wide luminous eyes.

“Then I’ll have to come back,” he admitted.

“Even if you don’t want to?”

“Even if I don’t want to.”

Her beautiful mouth twisted in a frown. “That’s awful. You should get to live where you please.”

“Not in the Whittaker world,” Leslie said.

Bryce felt Jenni stiffen in the seat next to him. “Don’t worry. It will all be fine,” he said and hoped his words would convince them both.

The limo pulled up in front of the luxury hotel on the waterfront. The driver dropped the partition between them. “We’re here. I’ll meet you back at this spot at midnight.”

“Thank you, we’ll be here,” Leslie said, and they all got out of the car. A blast of cold air hit them, and Bryce put his hand on Jenni’s back and quickly led her up the steps and toward the glass doors.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked her.

She looked up at him, her lovely eyes growing wide with expectation. “I’m excited and nervous all at the same time. I’ve never been to such a fancy party. Do you think they’ll

have a chocolate fountain? I love those, though they can be disastrous if you're not careful. But who doesn't love chocolate and strawberries?"

He laughed. She was rambling again about marshmallows and pineapple and what happened once at a chocolate fountain at the Gable Inn Christmas party. She was definitely nervous.

"You're going to be great," he assured her. "Not just because you look sensational, which you do. My family is going to love you for who you are. You're nothing like the plastic people in that room that only care about appearances and climbing the corporate ladder."

"Thanks." Her forehead crinkled into adorable little furrows. "I think, though, that maybe I should care about appearances a little more. Fake it just a little, then maybe I'd still have a job."

"That school made a huge mistake firing you. With your enthusiasm and creativity, you must be a fantastic kindergarten teacher."

She laughed. "Thanks for saying that. Can you tell my sister? Right now she thinks I'm a big loser with a capital L."

He pulled her closer to him and leaned close. "Think of the difference you make every day in people's lives. You save animals. You are not a loser, you are a bringer of joy and happiness."

Her eyes widened with stunned disbelief as she gazed up at him for a moment. "I think that's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"I'm serious." He pulled out his phone. "What's your sister's number?"

Jenni smiled and put her hand over his phone. "Thank you. You've managed to make me feel a thousand times better, not just about my situation, but about myself. That's your gift."

"Come on, let's go knock them dead," he lowered his voice. "My fake fiancée."

They followed Leslie and Mark toward the coat room to give them their jackets.

Jenni chewed on her lip as she looked around the room. She did that a lot when she was nervous. He was tempted to kiss her nervousness away.

“Christmas must be pretty important to your family for them to spend this kind of money on a company holiday party,” she said, slightly breathless.

“Oh, it is. Our annual Christmas party is a tradition in the Whittaker family. No one is allowed to skip it for any reason.”

She looked up at him. “Unless, of course, you’re deployed.”

“Exactly.” He touched Leslie on the shoulder. “We’ll meet you inside in a few minutes.”

She looked at Jenni, then back to him, nodded and smiled, then she and Mark continued toward the ballroom. Bryce led Jenni over to a table in the corner of the lobby bar. “I just wanted a few minutes alone with you before we went inside. Do you want something to drink?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m too nervous.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you. You don’t have to be nervous.”

“No?”

He smiled. “This night. My family. They aren’t important.”

She raised her eyebrows, showing her doubt. “Then why are we doing all this?”

He shrugged. “Okay, maybe a little important, but tonight is not about them.”

“It’s not?”

He reached across the table for her hand, which was tender and cool, her skin soft. It fit in his hand perfectly and the feel of it made his insides tighten. He stared at her lips, so sweet and enticing, and after a second pulled his gaze away. “No, it might have started out that way, but it isn’t anymore.”

Her head tilted with confusion. “Why not?”

“Tonight is about Jenni’s Pet Rescue.”

Clearly delighted, her face lit up in a brilliant smile. “Is it?”

“Yes. Tonight is about saving your foundation. I looked at your books today. We are going to raise enough money to put your foundation back in the black and give it a real shot.”

She laughed out loud. “From your lips to God’s ears. I hope you’re right.”

“I want this to happen for you, and I’d like to be involved in it. I like what you’re doing, the difference you’re making.”

“You do?” Hope shined in her eyes. “I’d like that too. A lot.”

“I love Pineville,” he admitted. “I love Lincoln’s farm. I love the town, and I...” *love her?* Surely he wasn’t about to say he loved her? No, but he loved being around her and wanted to do that a lot more. “I’d really like to see where this can go between us.”

She smiled, her eyes glistening with warmth. “Me too.”

He stood, took her hand, and led her a few steps forward and then stopped and looked up, pointing. “Look what I found?”

Mistletoe wrapped in red ribbons hung over their heads. He leaned down and kissed her. Softly at first, his lips just grazing hers, and then the kiss deepened. He lost himself for a long tender moment in the feel of her lips against his, the soft touch of her fingers lightly caressing his shoulders, the sweet taste of champagne still on her lips. He didn’t want to stop. He didn’t want to go into that party and share her with all those people.

No, he wanted her all to himself.

And to kiss her again.

“Are you ready?” he asked, trying to catch his breath.

She nodded, looking slightly dazed, her fingers touching her swollen lips. He smiled, wondering how he got so lucky. He'd never met anyone like her. Fun, charming, sweet, but most of all, authentic. She wore her heart on her sleeve and didn't hide anything she was feeling or thinking.

After having spent his entire life with the Dominiques of the world, who always had an agenda and never said what they really thought, Jenni was a breath of fresh air.

“Come on, I can't wait to introduce you to the family.”

They crossed the lobby and continued down a hall toward a large banquet room and into a winter wonderland. The room was beautiful—elegant, yet inviting. The first person Bryce saw standing up on the stage was Dominique, wearing a floor-length white gown that shimmered in the low lights.

The second person, standing by the bar with a glass of whiskey in his hand and glaring at her, was his brother Caleb.

Looked like everything wasn't happy in his brother's life.

“Bryce, it is so good to see you,” his grandmother said, walking quickly toward them. She held out her arms and he stepped into her embrace. Her warmth encompassed him and, for a second, he felt a surge of guilt for the deceitful game he was about to play. She pulled back and looked adoringly up into his face.

“Grandmother, it's good to see you too. I want you to meet someone very special to me.” He turned toward Jenni and smiled. “This is Jenni.”

“Hello,” she said warmly, took a step forward, and held out her hand.

Bryce rested a possessive hand on the small of Jenni's back. He was sending her into a snake's nest, and it was his job to make sure she didn't get bit.

His grandmother's eyes widened as she took Jenni's hand and held it up to peer at the ring on her finger, then narrowed as she inspected the ring. She dropped Jenni's hand and looked sharply up at Bryce.



“What have you done?”

## CHAPTER 19



Jenni cringed as the older woman's accusing voice rose and caught the attention of several people standing around them. They turned to stare and she felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Grandmother, Jenni is my fiancée." Bryce slipped his arm around her and pulled her next to him. It was the only thing that kept her from bolting. The look on his grandmother's face made her feel like a cockroach squished between two pieces of glass under a microscope.

"Hello," Jenni said again, her voice cracking. "It's so nice to meet you. Bryce has told me how important you are to him."

The woman's gaze softened and a smile trembled on her lips. "Of course. I'm sorry, dear. I was just surprised when I saw the ring." She turned to Bryce. "Very surprised. No one told me Bryce had gotten engaged."

"Because no one knew but me," Leslie said and gave the woman a hug. "Hello, Grandmother."

"Hello, Leslie dear. How are you and Mark?"

"We're great," Leslie answered for them. "We're getting the cutest little dog. A Maltese from Jenni's Rescue. Wait until you meet her. She is so adorable..."

Jenni looked up at Bryce as Leslie continued talking about her dog, his gaze catching hers for a long moment as she burrowed in closer to him.

“One down, two more to go,” he whispered, his voice causing her heart to skip a beat. She couldn’t stop thinking about their kiss, and how much she wished they could slip back into the lobby, find the mistletoe and do it again.

“Here we go,” Bryce said, and she felt him stiffen.

She followed his gaze and recognized Bryce’s mother from the picture Leslie had shown her, quickly walking toward them, his father on her heels.

“Bryce, it’s so good to finally see you,” she said, stepping toward him with her arms extended, and ignoring Jenni completely.

“Hello, Mother.” Bryce hugged her and shook his dad’s hand, then pulled Jenni next to him. “Mom, Dad, I want you to meet Jenni. Jenni, these are my parents, Bob and Kathy Whittaker.

“Hello, Jenni,” his mother said, her curious eyes sweeping over her.

“My fiancée,” Bryce added.

His mother’s eyes widened, then hardened. “Excuse me? Did you say fiancée?”

“Yes.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jenni,” Bryce’s father said, stepping forward to shake her hand. He instantly noticed the ring, as did Bryce’s mother.

“When did this happen?” she asked, looking shaken. “How did you even meet? Were you in the Army, too? How long have you known each other?”

Jenni fidgeted under their direct stares. “No. I live in Pineville.”

“Pineville?” his mother said. “Where’s that?”

“Mother, that’s enough,” Bryce said, his tone stern.

“New Hampshire,” Jenni finally muttered. Bryce’s parents were staring at her intently, waiting for her to say something that would help them make sense of a sudden engagement, but

what could she say? This was a mistake. A huge mistake! Her throat tightened, and she was having trouble finding her breath. “Excuse me.” She turned and fled from the banquet hall. The ladies’ room had to be in the hallway somewhere. She didn’t make it far when she felt Leslie taking her arm and walking by her side.

“I don’t know what we were thinking,” Jenni said in hushed tones as she tried to find the bathroom.

“Don’t be silly. You’re doing great.” Leslie led her past a large leafy plant and through the restroom door.

Once inside, Jenni leaned against the wall and took several deep breaths.

“You’ve made it through the hard part,” Leslie assured her while covertly peeking under the stalls to make sure they were alone. “The parents and grandmother. The rest will be easy-peasy. We’ll wait for everyone to get settled, get a few drinks in them, and then we’ll make our pitch for the foundation. But to start you off, I wanted to make a donation of my own. For my little Maltese.”

She handed her a folded check. “Don’t look at it until the end of the night.”

“Okay,” Jenni said, taking the check and slipping it into her beaded bag. “Thank you.”

“Consider it payment for my little sweetie.”

Jenni smiled. “She’s lucky to have found you. Are you sure we’re doing the right thing?”

“Yes, and you’ll agree with me when you meet Dominique.” She lowered her voice. “The woman’s a viper.”

Jenni couldn’t help but laugh. “All right. Let’s do this.”

“Yes, let’s go raise money for all those sweet babies of yours.”

They linked arms and walked back into the ballroom. Mark and Bryce were making the rounds, shaking hands, talking to people. Leslie led her over to a round table near the

stage. “It’s the family table,” she whispered. Jenni set down her bag next to Leslie’s. “Let’s get a drink.”

Jenni followed her toward the bar where a man stood alone sipping his drink.

“Caleb,” Leslie greeted coldly.

He didn’t say anything, just shot daggers toward her. “You must be the woman everyone is talking about,” he said, his voice slightly slurred.

Leslie turned to her. “Jenni, this is Bryce’s brother, Caleb.”

Not knowing what else to do, Jenni bit her lip, then held out her hand.

He didn’t take it.

Rude much? She dropped her hand. He was nothing like Bryce. Bryce would never treat anyone like that.

The man’s eyes narrowed as they slid down her body. “If you were smart, you’d turn tail and run from this family. As fast and as far as you can. You don’t look like you’d last a month.”

“You’re drunk,” Leslie stated. “Maybe you should get a room. Sleep it off.”

“Maybe you should mind your own business,” he sneered.

“Is there a problem here?” Bryce asked as he stepped next to her. Relief filled her bones at the feel of his warmth at her side.

“No. It’s fine,” she said, looking up into his eyes and smiling. It wasn’t fine, she was a little shaky, but there was no reason to let his awful brother know he’d gotten to her.

Caleb’s gaze moved over Bryce. “Good to see you back in one piece, brother.”

“Is it?” Bryce looked at his brother for a long moment, then turned Jenni away from him. He walked with her over to the family table, picked up her purse, and handed it to her.

“I think we should find another table to sit at. I don’t want you to have to sit across from my drunk brother all night.”

His pain clear on his face touched her heart. “Are you okay?”

“No. But I will be.” He led her to a table at the back of the room. “Thank you for being here with me. You are my guest, and you don’t deserve to be treated the way my family is treating you.”

She smiled, and ran her hand down the lapel of his jacket. “They are just surprised. You can’t blame them.”

He glanced again at his brother, who was still staring at them. “Oh, I can definitely blame them.” The band started to play, and couples moved toward the dance floor. He held out his hand. “Would you like to dance?”

She watched the couples holding each other and knew she wanted to hold Bryce. She took his hand, the warmth of his skin tickling hers, and smiled. “I would love to dance.”

They walked toward the dance floor, then Bryce pulled her into his arms, and they swayed to the music. She held on tight, loving the feel of his chest against her cheek. Her eyes drifted closed as she pretended this wasn’t a fake date, or a fake engagement, and that they could dance like this all night.

It had been so long since she’d met anyone she liked as much as Bryce. He was kind and honorable, and she liked the way he looked at her, and how special he made her feel. But most of all, she liked how he treated her rescue animals. She could always tell a lot about a person by the way they acted around animals. Her rescue’s liked him a lot, too.

Even the cats. She smiled against his shirt, a big, wide, silly grin as she remembered chasing Spooky around Mark and Leslie’s basement. He’d taken such good care of all those dogs. She knew she should put on the brakes, but she was falling for him and falling fast.

She opened her eyes and tried to hold on to reality. She wasn’t a princess at the ball, and he wasn’t the answer to all her problems, nor could he fill the big hole of loneliness in her

heart—loneliness she tried to fill with her animals? Maybe, but she wasn't foolish enough to try and fill it with a man who was still in love with his ex. Her gaze sought out the woman in white, looking elegant in the way she moved, flitting from guest to guest.

He might not admit it, but she saw the way he had looked at her when they walked into the room. How could she blame him? The woman was beautiful. Polished. Sophisticated. Glamourous. And nothing like Jenni. No matter what she might have thought when she met him, Bryce wasn't an out-of-work, down-on-his-luck cowboy. From the look of the people in this room, he was far from it.

“Do you mind if I cut in?” Bryce's father asked.

Bryce looked at her, the question in his eyes. She nodded and flashed him a reassuring smile, then took his father's hand.

“I wanted to get the chance to talk to you,” he said, as he whirled her closer to the band and farther away from Bryce. “Tell me a little about yourself.”

His gaze was warm and friendly, and he seemed genuinely interested. “Oh, well, I live in Pineville. I'm a kindergarten teacher, and I run a foundation that rescues animals.”

“A kindergarten teacher. That's wonderful.” His eyes brightened, sparkling with a new curiosity. “How did you meet my son?”

“My business partner in the foundation, Lincoln Church, is Bryce's best friend. They served together.”

“I see. Yes, the friend he's been staying with and helping with his barn.”

She couldn't help but grin as she thought of Bryce in his cowboy boots and flannel shirts. “He's become quite fond of the horses, and all the other animals,” she added.

His dad chuckled, and shook his head. “I must admit I'm having a hard time imagining that.”

“Trust me, I am having an equally hard time imagining Bryce in this room with all these fancy-dressed people.”

“You’re pretty fancily dressed yourself. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” A blush warmed her cheeks. “I had a lot of help from Leslie. She’s adopting one of my rescues.”

“Really? I’m surprised Mark would be on board with that.”

She looked up into his blue eyes that looked so much like Bryce’s. “Oh, me, too. You should have seen him when we showed up at his house in a van with twelve animals during the storm. Luckily, he took us in. We didn’t know where else we could go.”

His eyes widened as he laughed. “Twelve! Now that sounds like a story.”

“It is. Eight dogs, four cats, and complete pandemonium.” She liked him. Liked his laugh, liked how interested he was in her life.

Suddenly, his smile, his warmth vanished. “What I’d like to know is how on earth did you convince Bryce to go with you to pick up that many animals?”

The sudden sharpness of his tone put her on edge. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t he go with me?”

He smirked. “Wasting two entire days to pick up a van load of strays? You really don’t have any idea who Bryce is, do you?”

She looked up into his face, feeling like she’d just stepped into a trap. He’d been whirling her around, asking her harmless questions, and she stumbled right into it. He was right, she had no idea who he was, but she was certain she knew enough to know he cared about people and animals. A lot.

She had to salvage this situation, but how? What would Bryce want her to say? “You’re right, Mr. Whittaker. There is a lot I don’t know about Bryce, but I know he’s unlike anyone I’ve ever met. And I know that I love him.” Even as she said



the words, as crazy as they were, she felt like she believed them. She felt like they were true. What's worse, she felt like it would be very easy to love Bryce Whittaker.

## CHAPTER 20



Bryce watched his dad twirl Jenni around the dance floor. She was smiling up at him, talking nonstop the way she does, and completely charming his dad. Bryce wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it for himself. The song ended, and his father returned her to him.

"Thank you for the dance," his dad told Jenni.

She nodded up at him, her eyes wide and looking slightly stunned. "My pleasure."

Bryce watched him walk away, then pulled Jenni into his arms and moved her toward the center of the floor. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," she murmured, and snuggled close to him.

He liked the feel of her, the tickle of her hair under his chin, the soft flowery fragrance of her perfume. "What did you say to my dad?"

"Not much. I told him about Lincoln and how much you love to ride horses."

"Ah, that must be why he had a shell-shocked look on his face." Bryce held her tight as they swayed to the music.

"Are you sure we're doing the right thing by announcing our engagement...here?" She looked around her and lowered her voice. "It just feels wrong."

"I know what you mean. I suppose we could have handled things differently if I hadn't been such a coward."

She grinned up at him. “You’re not going to let me live that down, are you?”

“Probably not. It’s not often people tell me what they really think of me.”

“Why not. Honesty is the best gift we can give to people.”

“It certainly is to me.” He gazed warmly down at her, and as she peered up at him he wondered if she knew the truth about him. That he really wasn’t an out-of-work soldier just released from the military, but a millionaire businessman pretending to be normal. If just for a little while.

He saw Dominique watching them and leaned forward to whisper in Jenni’s ear. “We have an audience.” Then he did what he’d been wanting to do ever since they stood under the mistletoe. He swept his lips gently over hers, taking in their softness. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he pulled her closer to him. Warmth filled his chest as she made a soft little moaning sound. He wished they were anywhere but there right then. He pulled away and smiled down at her, ready to tell her...everything.

“Hello, Bryce.”

He stiffened at the sound of Dominique’s voice. He turned to find her standing next to them, looking almost angelic in her long white gown, until he saw the huge diamond ring on her hand.

His jaw stiffened. “Shouldn’t you be with Caleb?”

“Can we talk?” she asked, her gaze raking his face.

“I don’t think we have anything to talk about.” He turned away from her.

“I do,” she said, a light hand on his shoulder.

Jenni shifted next to him, facing her. Dominique still hadn’t acknowledged her. Annoyance surged through him.

“You’re right. We do have something to talk about. Let’s talk about Bucky.”

Regret flashed through her eyes, so quickly he wasn't sure he'd actually seen it. "I... I'm sorry, about what happened to your dog."

"Are you really?" He scoffed.

Around them, the eyes of nearby party goers flicked in Bryce's direction, their voices hushing and steps slowing as they listened in.

"I should have taken better care of him. You deserved that," she admitted.

"You mean you shouldn't have dumped him off at a shelter?" he said the words loudly, so loud that several people turned to stare. Her face whitened. "Yes, I know what you did."

She opened her mouth to say something else. He didn't let her. He stepped close enough that he could see fear in her eyes. "You dumped my dog at a shelter. I don't ever want to see your face again. Now, get away from me."

She turned and fled, running past Caleb, who'd been standing right behind her, a look of shock on his face.

"Is Bucky all right?" Caleb asked.

"What do you care?" Bryce sneered.

"I didn't know. I swear."

"Apparently, there were a lot of things you didn't know."

Bryce saw the look of regret on his brother's face, and for a moment felt sorry for him. Obviously, his brother was as much a victim of Dominique as Bryce had been.

"Are you okay?" Jenni asked, grabbing his hand in both of hers. "I've never seen you like that."

"I'm sorry. I hope I didn't scare you." He gave her hand a squeeze, knowing he'd have to make it up to her, then turned back to his brother. "Are you actually going to marry her?" Bryce asked.

Caleb took another drink of his whiskey. "I don't have a choice. She's carrying my child."

Bryce shook his head. “You have a choice, and you had better run.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Oh, yes, it is. It’s called misery or happiness. That’s your choice.”

Caleb shook his head, then turned and walked away. From what Bryce could see, he was already living in misery.

“Hi, everyone,” Leslie said from the microphone on the stage, turning everyone’s attention away from Bryce and Caleb. “On behalf of the entire Whittaker family, we’d like to thank you for coming tonight and sharing this annual tradition with us. Tonight is extra special because our very own Bryce is back from his deployment.”

Everyone turned toward Bryce and started clapping.

“Thank you for your service, cousin,” Leslie said, and gestured toward him.

Bryce smiled and lifted a hand.

“And with him is a very special friend to both of us. Her name is Jenni, and she runs a foundation for dogs and cats in need of rescuing. She arrived on my doorstep the other day, caught in a snowstorm with twelve of the cutest animals you’ve ever seen. This holiday season, if you have room in your heart to donate to Jenni’s foundation, we would both very much appreciate it. I left some brochures along with envelopes and a basket on the bar. Thank you for your time, and enjoy your night.”

Everyone clapped, and Bryce’s heart warmed as people turned to Jenni to ask questions about her foundation and the work they were doing. Encouraged, Bryce also went up to the stage and picked up the microphone.

“Hey, everyone.”

“Hey, Bryce. Welcome home,” someone from the audience yelled.

“Thank you. I just wanted to second what Leslie said about Jenni’s foundation. As some of you have heard, Jenni and I

have become very close. When I agreed to accompany her to pick up those dogs from a shelter in Boston the other day, I was stunned to find my own dog, Bucky, in a cage in a back room.”

A gasp sounded through the room, and Dominique had a look of horror on her face.

“I had been told Bucky had run away. That wasn’t true. The reason I’m bringing it up, is because, like me, there are many of our service members who are deployed and don’t have family or friends who can look after their pets while they’re gone. It is devastating for the soldiers and for their animals who don’t know where their owners are. At Jenni’s foundation, we’d like to open a special rescue to help find long-term foster homes for our soldiers and their animals. But to do that, we need your help. Anything you can donate to the foundation would help us, and as you know, your donations are tax-deductible. Thank you.”

He jumped off the stage and approached Jenni. Her eyes filled with grateful tears.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome.” He wrapped his arms around her waist, and in front of everyone, kissed her deeply. The crowd erupted into applause.

“Now that was a speech,” Leslie said, smiling.

## CHAPTER 21



After dinner, Jenni made her way to the ladies' room. She brushed her hair and was reaching into her purse to reapply her lipstick when she glimpsed the envelope her landlord had shoved under her door the night before. She pulled it out and opened it, staring in shock at the eviction notice.

She only had ten days to find a new place to live. Ten days! Over Christmas? How could he do that to her? Her hands shook as she reread the letter again. Roni was going to be so upset with her. She pulled out her phone and turned to call her when the door opened. She disconnected the line and turned back around to find Dominique staring at her eviction letter lying on the counter.

Jenni shoved the letter and her phone back in her bag.

"I've done some digging on you, Jenni," Dominique said with a note of triumph.

Jenni looked at the woman's reflection in the mirror, not sure how to respond.

"You aren't the perfect little woman Bryce and Leslie are portraying you as, are you?"

Jenni couldn't deal with this right now. "I'm sorry, but aren't you marrying Bryce's brother? Why would you care anything about me?"

"You're right. I'm engaged to Caleb. That makes anything that happens within this family my business." Dominique glanced at the ring on Jenni's finger.

She wouldn't let this woman intimidate her. Jenni wagged her fingers. "I guess this makes the family my business, too."

Dominique's eyes narrowed. "I don't appreciate Bryce trying to publicly humiliate me. I don't deserve that."

Jenni rolled her eyes. The nerve of this woman! "You dumped his dog at a shelter. Public humiliation is the least you should get."

"I took his dog, who was too much for me to handle, to a rescue center. That's different. I told the lady there his owner would be coming back for him."

"Then why wasn't Bryce notified?" Jenni demanded.

"I don't know. Ask the lady at the rescue place."

"Nice story, but you could have told Bryce where Bucky was."

"And I would have, had he bothered to answer any of my phone calls. Listen, I don't like dogs. I don't do well with dogs, and no one in his family, not even Caleb, would take a German Shepherd. I had no choice. I did the best I could."

Jenni had heard it all before and could definitely see how things could have spiraled to this point, but someone in that family could have told Bryce where Bucky was.

"Listen," she said, stopping Jenni from walking away. "We are all going to be living in Boston. Bryce will have to come back to the office at some point. We need to be able to get along." She pulled out her checkbook and started writing a check. "What's the name of your foundation?"

"What are you doing?" Jenni asked.

"I'm making a donation."

Jenni wanted to say no, but she couldn't make her lips move. She needed every donation she could get. "Jenni's Pet Rescue."

"Will you be moving it to Boston?" she asked while writing out the check.

"Moving it?"



“You guys will have to relocate.” She looked up from the checkbook. “He told you that, right? In order for him to get his trust fund money, he has to work at the company. In Boston.”

“Trust fund?” Jenni said, her voice cracking. *Bryce had a trust fund?* He’d mentioned talking to his grandmother about opening an office in Pineville, but never said anything about a trust fund.

Dominique’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t know?”

Jenni bit her lip before she could say anymore. She’d almost made it through this whole evening without letting on how completely clueless she was. Why had she even talked to the woman? She knew better.

“Yes. He has a trust fund. A nice one. Believe me, once he gets his first installment, you won’t have to beg for money any longer.” She shoved a ten-thousand-dollar check across the counter. “For Bucky.”

Jenni stared in shock at the check for a long moment after Dominique left the room. Ten thousand dollars? How rich were these people? Her hand shook as she picked it up and put it into her bag. She found the check from Leslie already inside. She unfolded it and stared at the zeroes—one thousand dollars.

Her knees weakened.

She took out her phone and immediately Googled the Whittaker family. Images of all of them at charity galas, and mingling with politicians and celebrities filled her screen. *Millionaires. They were all millionaires.*

Her eyes widened as she read all about Bryce, his brother, and the entire family. This was all a game to him. A way to stick it to Dominique and Caleb. He wasn’t serious about her? About buying a dilapidated old house in Pineville. They had no future together. He was moving back to Boston to claim his trust fund, and once he did, she’d never see him again.

Tears of shame and embarrassment filled her eyes as she thought about her jacket with clumps of cat hair on the arm, about him discovering she couldn’t even keep a job as a kindergarten teacher. She could have had her nails painted and put

on a fancy dress, but once the clock struck twelve she'd go back to being the poor girl from Pineville who didn't have a job, was terrible with numbers, and was about to lose everything.

Except now she had eleven thousand dollars in her purse and maybe more had been put in the basket on the bar. Would that be enough for her to prove to the bank she could start her business, and maybe even get a loan to buy the Hadley place? Something had to come out of this night.

She dabbed her eyes and walked out of the bathroom. She was heading toward the banquet hall when she saw Bryce's mom talking to Leslie just inside the door.

"It was completely inappropriate to ask the employees of the company to make donations to Bryce's fiancée's foundation," Bryce's mom, Kathy, said.

Jenni hesitated, but stayed close enough to hear their conversation.

"What do you mean?" Leslie asked.

"Bryce holds part ownership of the company. It could be construed that if those people didn't make a donation their jobs could be in jeopardy. I'm sorry, Leslie, I know you meant well, but we can't accept those donations."

"But Jenni isn't part of the ownership team."

"Maybe not, but she's engaged to Bryce, who is. Do you understand there's a huge conflict of interest there?"

Leslie nodded. "Yes. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I was just trying to help Jenni."

"It's all right. We've already removed the basket, and we'll be returning the checks to everyone who contributed."

Jenni's heart sunk at the woman's words.

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again," Leslie said.

Jenni was about to step forward but stopped as she heard Kathy continue.

"It's all right, now tell me a little bit about Jenni."

“What do you want to know?” Leslie asked.

“I want you to assure me she isn’t after Bryce’s money.”

“Oh, she definitely isn’t. She doesn’t even know about it. Bryce made me promise not to tell her anything about the Whittakers.”

“He did? Good, at least he learned something from the Dominique debacle.”

Jenni stood rooted to the spot, her stomach twisting in knots as Leslie and Bryce’s mother returned to their table.

*Bryce hadn’t trusted her with the knowledge of how rich he was.*

What did he think she’d do, steal his grandmother’s ring? The truth hit her in the pit of her stomach. He didn’t want her to know because he didn’t trust her. He didn’t believe in her enough to share who he really was.

Jenni’s guts twisted and her cheeks burned. She glanced toward the door, wanting desperately to run away, to never again have to see Bryce’s warm blue eyes pretending to look at her so lovingly, while really secretly, he was only amused by how unpolished and unsophisticated she was.

She didn’t fit in with these people, and he knew it. She wasn’t from around there, and she wasn’t like them. Any of them. And she never would be.

## CHAPTER 22



Bryce saw his dad standing by the bar ordering another drink and approached him. “Dad, can I have a moment?”

His dad glanced at him. “Sure, what’s up?”

“I’d like to talk to you about the company.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re finally coming to your senses. Let’s find someplace more private.” He led Bryce to a small table in the corner of the room, away from everyone else. And away from Caleb, who was still parked at the bar watching them.

“When can we expect you back at the office?” his dad asked.

“That’s just it. I don’t want to come back.”

His dad’s brow furrowed. “If this is about Caleb and Dominique...”

“It’s not.”

He watched Bryce with narrow, skeptical eyes and then said with a placating tone, “We realize it’s not an ideal situation for you to have to deal with.”

Bryce huffed. “Not ideal? Have you seen Caleb tonight? I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone look more miserable.”

“That might be the case, but this is the bed he made. He has to lie in it.”

Bryce couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Dad, he's a kid. Does he have to be miserable for the rest of his life over one mistake?"

"A pretty big mistake if you ask me, and trust me, he's no longer a kid. I'm surprised to hear you sticking up for him. Are you saying you forgive him?"

Bryce shook his head. "Forgive is a strong word. Let's just say I don't hold him completely to blame."

His father nodded, and took another drink from his whiskey.

Bryce rubbed a finger down his jaw. "The truth is, I don't want to come back to Boston. I want to start a new life in Pineville."

"Pineville? New Hampshire? There's nothing there but cows and horses."

"That's not true. I've been living there these past few weeks and I really like it. In fact, I happen to like cows and horses and would love to get a small ranch of my own."

"Does this have anything to do with that woman you brought here tonight?"

"You mean my fiancée?" Bryce asked, watching his dad's reaction closely.

His father scoffed. "Right."

Okay, so maybe he wasn't fooling him. "It's not just because of Jenni, though, I would like to be able to spend more time with her. It's about the people and the lifestyle."

"You know the terms of your grandfather's will as well as I do. If you want your trust fund, you have to work for the company. It's what you've been planning for your whole life. You were allowed to join the military only because your term of service would end before your thirtieth birthday. But next January, you have to be back working for the firm."

"Maybe. But it's not what I want anymore. It's not what I've wanted for a long time. I don't like spending my days inside a building surrounded by concrete."

“My hands are tied. Your trust is from your grandfather. He set it up that way, hoping to keep the family together. You’ll be walking away from a lot of money. Think hard on it.”

“I have, and unlike Caleb, at least I’ll be happy.”

His father downed the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. “You’re making a huge mistake.”

“What if I opened a branch of the firm in Pineville? I don’t see anywhere in the Trust’s language where I have to reside in Boston. People in small towns need their funds managed, too, or I can be an accountant. Whittaker Financials can handle a little diversification.”

“We aren’t that kind of a firm. We handle investment funds, big ones.”

“We could be.”

His father looked at him like he was crazy.

“Listen, Dad. I’m going to make it on my own terms, and I’m going to make it in Pineville.”

“Then expect to make it on your own dime.”

Silence hung in the air between them.

After a moment, his father shook his head. “Give us a chance. Dominique has left the firm. Today was her last day. All her clients have been turned over to Caleb.”

“I bet she didn’t take that well.”

“No, she didn’t. But she and your brother have caused this family a lot of problems. I hope you don’t think we condoned their behavior, because we didn’t, and now that you’re back, we don’t want you to have to face their indiscretions every time you walk into the office.”

“I appreciate that, but don’t know how we’re going to get around it. Considering her condition.”

“Forget that. Forget her. Come back, Bryce. Things will be different. You’ll see. You can set your own hours, work a four-day workweek, and spend the weekends in Pineville. You can

even stay in the guest house until you get a place of your own. Bring Jenni. She looks like a lovely girl.”

He could see his dad reaching, trying to meet him halfway. He didn’t want to tell him the truth about Jenni. Not yet. “Thanks for the offer. I’ll think about it, I really will.”

“Good. Your mother would be thrilled. We missed you, Son.”

He leaned over and patted his dad on the back. “Thanks, Dad. I missed you guys too. I really have.”

“So you’ll give us a try?”

His dad looked so hopeful Bryce didn’t have the heart to turn him down. “Yes. Four-day workweeks, and I will be spending my weekends in Pineville.”

“Wonderful. How soon can you start?”

“I have a commitment in Pineville next weekend, but I suppose I can drive back up there for that. I’ll start Monday.”

“That would be terrific, because to tell you the truth, Caleb is in a little over his head. I’d like to be able to pass some of Dominique’s clients to you instead.”

Bryce grimaced—that couldn’t be good. “Does Caleb know that?”

“Of course not, and there is no reason for him to find out.”

“Find out what?” Caleb asked, approaching them.

“That your brother has agreed to come back to the firm.”

Surprise crossed Caleb’s face. “Has he now?”

“Don’t see that I really have much choice,” Bryce said.

Caleb’s nostrils flared. “Oh, brother, we all have choices. It’s a matter of misery or happiness. Isn’t that what you told me?”

Bryce stared at him, as a chill seeped through him. “Yes, I suppose it was.”

“Go up to your room, Caleb. You’re drunk and embarrassing yourself,” his father insisted.

Caleb saluted them with his glass of whiskey and headed toward the door. Dominique stopped him on the way. He brushed off her arm and kept going.

“You have to do something about him,” Bryce said, shaking his head.

“You don’t think I haven’t tried? Your mother has tried, even your grandmother has talked to him. There isn’t anything that can be done. Not anymore. There’s your mother now. I’m going to tell her the good news.”

“Okay, I better go find Jenni.” Bryce watched his father hurry toward his mother and hoped he wasn’t making a huge mistake. He looked around the room but didn’t see Jenni. He had almost made it to the doorway when Dominique stepped in front of him.

“I heard you’re coming back to the company.”

Bryce stared at her coolly. He didn’t owe her an answer. He didn’t owe her anything at all.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she snapped.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m responsible for everyone’s problems.”

“Maybe not everyone’s, but certainly Caleb’s. Luckily, Jenni is someone who can be trusted. Luckily, she’s nothing like you.” He started to walk away when she grabbed his arm.

“I don’t think her scruples are all that stellar, nor do I think you trust her.”

He turned back toward her. “Why would you say that, and what would you know about her scruples?”

She gave a triumphant grin and licked her upper lip. “She just took a ten thousand dollar check from me. Obviously, she’s after your money, and might as well be a woman for hire.”

“Like you weren’t?”

She gave him a sly smile. “That wasn’t a denial I heard. I’m just giving you fair warning.” She turned and walked



away.

Bryce looked up to find Jenni standing in the doorway, tears in her eyes, and a look of mortification on her face before she turned and ran.

## CHAPTER 23



Jenni spun and ran, Dominique's words ringing in her ears—*a woman for hire*.

How had her life fallen so completely apart? No job, no apartment, and now no character. She'd lied to all these people and soon they would all know it. How could she have been so foolish? She knew better than to play this stupid game.

She hurried into the lobby. She didn't want to face anyone. She was so ashamed. She saw Leslie talking to Bryce's mom. The woman turned to her, a smile on her face. "Thank you so much for agreeing to come to Boston," his mother said, touching her arm. "We are so thrilled to have Bryce back in the office."

Jenni's heart sank.

"He's agreed to stay in the guest house until he can find a place. It's beautiful, and of course, you are welcome to come too."

"Thank you," Jenni said, her voice squeaking.

"No cats, though. I'm deathly allergic."

"Of course." Jenni thought of the six cats in her apartment. The apartment that was no longer hers. "I appreciate it. If you'll excuse me." She hurried away as quickly as she could, not knowing where to go. She couldn't go back into the ballroom, and she couldn't hide out in the ladies' room all night. She rushed over to the table by the mistletoe where Bryce had kissed her just a couple hours earlier, when she'd been so excited about what the evening might bring.

Now she just wanted to collapse into a puddle of tears. Bryce wouldn't be coming back to Pineville. He wouldn't be helping her with her foundation or helping her figure out their finances. How could he? He wasn't who he pretended to be. He was a millionaire businessman who had commitments. Commitments that didn't include a small town or her.

Tears filled her eyes. She was being ridiculous, she knew it, but she had allowed herself to dream of what they could accomplish. Together. But that's all they were; dreams. Empty dreams.

"What's the matter?" Leslie said, sitting across from her at the table.

"Nothing. I'm ... I guess I'm just embarrassed. I overheard what Bryce's mom said about the donations. I should have known better. I don't belong here. I'm not a part of all your lives. I really don't know anything about any of them. All I know is Bryce didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth about his family and about how rich you all are. I feel like an idiot, and I really just want to go home."

Leslie reached across the table and squeezed her arm. "I'm sorry. It's not that he didn't trust you. It's just that we've learned over the years not to advertise who we are. People treat you differently when they know how much you're worth. That's all. It's not personal."

"Considering I'm wearing your dress and his grandmother's ring, it feels really personal."

"I'm sorry, and I'm sorry about the donations too. I'm going to try and find a way to keep some of them."

"It's okay." Jenni told her. "I'm just really tired."

"Take the limo and have him drive you home. I'll call him." She whipped out her phone and sent the driver a quick text.

Jenni looked surprised. "Are you sure? All the way to Pineville?"

"Absolutely. I'll order another one to pick us up later." Her phone beeped. She glanced down at her screen. "He said he's

already out front.”

“Thank you.” Jenni stood and started walking to the coat check. “Can you tell Bryce I left?”

“Don’t you want to tell him? He really cares about you.”

Jenni shook her head, her throat tightening as she tried to answer. “No, it would never work. I’m from a completely different world than him. I don’t fit into his life any more than he fits into mine.”

Leslie squinted and looked at her sideways. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Jenni was. “I’ll get your dress back to you next week.”

“I know you will. Don’t worry about it. I hope you still consider me a friend.”

Jenni sniffled. “I do.”

“Good. Take care of yourself.” Leslie gave her a hug. “As soon as I get the chance, I’m coming to Pineville to visit you and pick up my little Malti. So, I’ll see you very soon.”

Jenni hugged her back. “I’ll hold you to that.” She left the hotel lobby and walked down the front steps to the waiting limousine. As Jenni got into the back, she gave the driver her address in Pineville. “Sorry for the long drive.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s my job,” he said, and closed the partition between them.

She leaned back on the soft leather seat and stared at the bottle of champagne still sitting in the bucket that they’d opened earlier. She should have known they had money. Why hadn’t Bryce just told her? Did he really not trust her?

It was supposed to be such a fun and exciting night. What happened?

Dominique happened.

Jenni should never have accepted that horrible woman’s check. She should have known she was setting her up to make her look bad. Ten thousand dollars, and she fell for it. Jenni

opened her purse, took out the check, and started to rip it in half.

She didn't need that woman's money. She wasn't that desperate. She thought of the eviction notice and felt her eyes fill with tears once again.

Or was she?

How had she fallen so far?

## CHAPTER 24



Jenni slept in late the next morning. As she opened her eyes, she saw Spooky staring down at her from atop her chest.

“Good morning,” she said to the Siamese. The feisty feline must finally be beginning to accept her. Jenni looked around her and saw all six of the cats lying on her bed. So much for keeping them separated. She had been so tired when she got in last night, she just stumbled to the bed.

She looked at her gown, which was lying on the chair, and wondered how much it was going to cost her to get it dry cleaned and if she’d be able to afford it. She sat up and took a deep breath, then looked at all her things in her apartment. She had ten days to pack up and find someplace to live. What was she going to do?

“One step at a time,” she told Spooky. “And the first step is to make a pot of coffee.”

She got out of bed, walked into the kitchen, and started the coffee. Then she fed the cats, took a quick shower, and got ready to go check on the dogs and talk to Lincoln. There was a good chance Bryce wouldn’t be coming back, so she’d have to pick up the chores he was doing.

Thinking of Bryce made her heart ache. She thought of the feel of his lips on hers and his hands wrapped around her waist as they danced. She had to get past this and put Bryce out of her mind. Especially since she would have to ask Lincoln if

she could move into Bryce's room in the barn. That wasn't going to be easy, but it was better than bunking with Roni.

*Roni.*

She needed to call her sister and let her know that she didn't have to come over and check on the cats this morning. She pulled her phone out of her purse and saw several messages from Bryce.

*"Where are you?"*

*"Leslie said you left. Why?"*

*"I need to talk to you. Please call."*

She stared at the phone for a long moment. She couldn't talk to him right then. If she did, she'd collapse into a puddle on the floor. Why couldn't he have trusted her?

Her front door swung open and Roni walked into her living room, her keys clutched in her hand and her eyes widening as she saw her standing there. "What are you doing here? I thought you were staying at Bryce's cousin's?"

"I'm sorry, I was just going to call you to tell you not to come," Jenni said. "I uh, I overslept."

"That's all right." Roni dropped onto the couch. "Tell me about the party."

"It was good." There was no way Jenni had the energy to get into what really happened at the party right then. "Bryce's cousin offered for the limo driver to take me home, so I took her up on it. Bryce needed to stay in Boston and deal with some family stuff."

"Oh, okay," Roni said and petted Spooky as the cat jumped onto the sofa next to her. "Well, I'm glad you're here. I want to talk to you about something."

"About what?" Jenni asked, already thinking about everything she had to do in the next ten days. And where would she take all her cats?"

"Spooky," Roni said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Spooky?” Jenni turned and looked at the Siamese who had spread herself out on Roni’s lap. “What about him?”

“I want him.”

Jenni gave a little shake of her head, looked at her coffee cup, and decided she needed more. She walked toward the coffee pot in the kitchen. “You want Spooky?” she repeated.

“Yes,” Roni said, stroking his back. “There is something magical about this cat.”

Jenni didn’t even have the energy to laugh, but she was definitely laughing on the inside. Magical. “Have you been drinking?” She took a long sip of her coffee.

“No, I haven’t been drinking,” Roni said with a wry twist of her lips. “Last night while Spooky and I were watching TV, I told him I wished I didn’t have to spend Christmas alone, and an hour later, bingo. Jimmy called me. Out of the blue! I haven’t heard from him in years.”

“When you and Spooky were watching TV together?” Jenni repeated.

“Yes. When I was here cat-sitting.” Roni shook her head as a look of disgust crinkled her forehead. “Did you get enough sleep?”

Jenni walked toward the couch, bent over, and looked the cat directly in the eyes. “Spooky, I want you to bring Bryce back to me.”

“It’s true!” Roni said, laughing. “He’s magical and I’m adopting him.”

“I don’t think you should adopt Spooky because you think he’s some kind of genie.”

“I’m not. Didn’t you say that your rescues always pick their owners,” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, duh!” She pointed at Spooky who was lying on her stomach with both fingers. “He picked me. So, when can I take him home?”



Jenni had to admit, Spooky seemed to have claimed her. “Roni, you don’t even like cats.”

“That’s not true!”

“Really?”

“Okay, I don’t like most cats,” Roni admitted. “But Spooky, well, Spooky is different.”

“I’ll say. He is a lot to handle.”

“He’s an angel,” she said, making baby noises toward the cat. “We bonded. I couldn’t stop thinking about him and Jimmy’s call all night. That’s magic.”

“Maybe, but not genie magic.” A dull ache started to spread through the back of Jenni’s head.

“I don’t care what kind of magic it is. Spooky picked me and I’m keeping him.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Jenni said. “You take him home with you and see how it works out for the next couple weeks, and then if you still want to adopt him, he’s yours.”

Roni squealed. She actually squealed! “You hear that Spooky? You are all mine.”

She picked him up and cuddled him close. For a second, Jenni waited for Spooky to claw her face off, but he seemed to enjoy it.

Wonders never cease.

Maybe her sister was right. Maybe Spooky did pick her.

“I’m going over to Lincoln and Candy’s, I need to talk to them about moving into their barn. You can take Spooky now, if you want.”

“Their barn. Why?”

“I’ve been evicted for having too many cats,” she said dryly.

“You’re kidding!”

“I wish I was. Do you have everything you need?” She pulled open the closet door and pulled out her old coat. Her

red wood one was still at Leslie's.

“What do you mean?” Roni asked.

“For Spooky.” Jenni lifted a cat box filled with two cat bowls, a bag of sand, a scooper, and a week's worth of food already packed and wrapped with clear plastic and a large red bow off the closet floor. She thrust the box at her sister. “Here you go.”

Roni looked at the bundle of cat supplies in her arms. “Do you always give this much stuff to your foster parents?”

“Yep.” She picked up her purse.

“No wonder you're going broke.”

“Hey! No judging,” Jenni protested. “You sound like Lincoln.”

“I'm not judging, but you are going to have to rethink how you do things, especially now that you lost your job.”

“I know. Lincoln and I are going to talk about it soon. I'll see you later?”

“Yes, come by the coffee shop tonight and I'll make you dinner.”

Jenni liked the sound of that. “Sounds good, and then I can see how well Spooky is settling in.”

“And you can tell me what happened at that party,” Roni said as they left her apartment and went down the stairs to her car. “Because I can tell you're keeping something from me.”

“Deal.” Jenni hugged her sister goodbye, then as she drove to Lincoln's she thought about what Roni had said. She wouldn't be able to continue giving away all the pet supplies. They were expensive.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled into the barn and went inside to check on the animals. The horses needed their stalls cleaned and the dogs were anxious to be let out. She opened the cage doors and they all ran out of the barn. “I'm sorry guys.” She walked out after them, feeling overwhelmed. She could do this.

The dogs seemed to be getting on fine with each other, so she went back into the barn and started cleaning out the stalls. Bucky followed her, and the old lab followed him. She could tell Bucky was missing Bryce.

“I miss him, too,” she told the German Shepherd and petted his head. She had just finished cleaning out the stalls when Lincoln pulled up with Candy.

“How are you doing?” Lincoln asked as they walked toward the barn.

The Chihuahuas ran toward Candy and started jumping up on her legs. “Look at you two, aren’t you adorable? Aren’t they adorable, Lincoln?”

“Don’t let Tina hear you say that,” Lincoln said with a grin.

“Oh, I know.” Candy laughed. “So, anyway, the party? How was it?”

Jenni sighed. “Very nice, but I don’t think Bryce will be coming back.”

Lincoln’s expression softened and concern filled his eyes. “He left a message on my phone last night. His family wants him in the office, but he’ll be back this weekend for the wedding. Are you okay?”

She nodded, but couldn’t speak for the tightness in her throat as Lincoln confirmed her biggest fear. She supposed she’d still been holding out hope that he’d wake up this morning and change his mind.

Candy touched her arm. “How are you, really?”

Jenni gave her a bright smile. “Great. Just great, but, I need to ask you both a huge favor.”

“Sure, what is it?” Candy said.

“Can I move into Bryce’s room in your barn?”

Surprised, Candy’s eyes widened. “What? Why? It’s dinky.”

“I’ve been evicted. Apparently, Mr. Miller isn’t a cat lover and six was too many. You know what a curmudgeon he is.” She was about to say more, to ramble on and on, but stopped herself.

“Even though it’s only temporary?” Candy demanded, hands on her hips.

“Yep.” Jenni nodded.

“You can stay in the house with us,” Candy said. “I’m not putting one of my best friends out in the barn.”

Jenni shook her head and fought back the tears. It was all too much. “No. I couldn’t do that. It will be all right, really.”

Candy’s eyes met hers for a long minute, then she nodded. “All right, let’s go take a look at it.”

Jenni let out a relieved breath and followed Candy through the barn to the room in the back. Bryce’s things were still there, but he didn’t have much. Jenni touched the arm of Bryce’s flannel that was lying on the bed. “He’s not a down-on-his-luck soldier doing odd jobs.”

“He’s not?” Candy said.

“No, he’s a millionaire businessman from Boston who was taking time off from his real world until he decided what he wanted to do with his life.”

“You’re kidding?” Candy turned to Lincoln. “Did you know that?”

Lincoln looked doubtful. “I knew he had a wealthy family in Boston, but I didn’t know they were millionaires. Are you sure you’re not exaggerating?”

Jenni shook her head. “I really wish I was. Just normal well-to-do would have been better.”

“I’m sorry,” Candy said, placing a hand on Jenni’s back.

“Me, too. He has to go back to work for his family’s company if he wants to collect his trust fund.”

“Trust fund?” Candy repeated.

Jenni nodded. She dropped the shirt to keep from rubbing it against her cheek. As ridiculous as it was, she missed him. A lot.

“I’ll pack up his stuff,” Lincoln said.

Jenni turned toward him. “No rush. I still have ten, no make that eight days in my apartment, and he’ll need somewhere to stay this weekend when he comes for the wedding.”

Candy followed her out the door. “I still can’t believe they’d evict you at Christmas time.”

“Do you have time to go over the books?” Lincoln asked. Jenni nodded and followed him into the barn office.

He pulled out some papers and handed them to her. “We’re about three thousand dollars in the hole. Now, last year at the caroling kickoff, we came close to bringing in that amount, but that won’t give us any operating capital for this next year. Something is going to have to change.”

Jenni pulled the two checks from last night’s party out of her purse. “I was going to rip up the ten-thousand-dollar one, but now I think it’s probably a good thing I didn’t. Though I wouldn’t be surprised if she put a stop payment on it.”

“Who’s it from?”

“Bryce’s ex. She gave it to me to prove to Bryce that I have no scruples. That I’m a woman for hire.”

“I can’t believe that,” Candy snapped.

Lincoln closed his eyes for a long moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. She set a trap and I walked right into it. But you know, our animals can use this money, so I hope it’s still good.”

“I’ll deposit it right now.” He pulled out his phone and opened the banking app.

“I have another one too. This one is from Bryce’s cousin. She wants to adopt the little Maltese.”

“You mean this little guy?”

Jenni turned to find Candy holding the little dog in her arms. “Yep, that one is going to be a very pampered pooch.”

Candy grinned. “That’s because she’s so cute.”

“Luckily, Roni is adopting one of my cats.”

Candy’s eyes widened. “No way.”

“She thinks he’s magic.”

Candy laughed. “Hey, I had an idea the other night that I wanted to run by you. What do you think of these?” She picked up a bag of doggie treats with a red ribbon tied around the top.

“I think these are great,” Jenni said, looking at the dog- and cat-shaped treats.

“I have several batches in the freezer to sell at my booth for the caroling kickoff. They were such a hit last year, I thought I’d do it again. Then I was thinking Roni could sell them at the coffee shop. All year long.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“I thought so too. We can make different recipes for each season, and then at the end of the year, we can create a little rescue cookbook for all the doggie treats.”

“I love that idea,” Jenni said.

“We could add pictures to it of all the rescue animals. Do you still have all those cute little ribbons and bows you used to dress them in for your website?”

“I do. They’re right here.” Jenni took down a bin off the top shelf and opened it.

Candy started pawing through them. “These are really cute. We could put them in bags and sell them, too. Is this all you have?”

“Yes, but I have a lot more fabric and notions.”

Candy’s eyes filled with excitement. “We need to get the girls together. We have a lot of sewing to do before the

kickoff. I want everyone of our animals to be wearing these for our big event.”

Jenni’s heart soared. “Don’t you have a wedding to prepare for?”

Candy grinned. “With Brianna in charge, everything is already done and I’m so excited about it, I need something to keep me distracted and your foundation is it.”

Tears filled Jenni’s eyes. “Thank you! I need to hear that right now, especially after last night. Not to mention, anything to keep me thinking about Bryce is just what I need.”

Candy reached out and hugged her tight. “That’s what best friends are for.”

## CHAPTER 25



*B*ryce woke up in the guest house of his parents' estate. He couldn't believe he was back here, that he agreed to go back to work for the company. Was his trust fund really worth that? He looked around at the cottage, which probably cost more than Lincoln's farm.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't go back to the life he'd worked so hard to escape. He got up and stepped into the shower. Trying to decide what to do, how to tell his parents that he wouldn't be coming back. His dad made it sound like he really needed him, though. Could he abandon him? Abandon his family?

He wished he had Bucky with him. He'd go to the main house, get a cup of coffee, and call Lincoln. He would have to leave Bucky alone there for the week, but he would be back for the wedding and he'd get Bucky then. He promised his dad he would show up at the office tomorrow. He had to at least try.

The thought turned his stomach.

It won't be forever. It wouldn't even be for a year, he told himself. Who was he kidding? He wouldn't be able to make it for even a week. He got out of the shower and pulled on his tux from last night. His mom said his stuff from before he was deployed was stored in the basement of the main house.

He walked across the backyard and went straight into the basement and dug through his boxes until he found a pair of jeans, a sweater, and some old sneakers. Dressed in his old



comfortable clothes, he made up a box of enough clothes to last him a week, then carried it up the stairs and walked into the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

“Bryce,” his mom called from the dining room. “Come join us. We’re having breakfast.”

Bryce set down the box, grabbed his cup of coffee, and walked into the living room. His grandmother, Leslie, and Mark sat at the table along with his mother. “Leslie, Mark, this is a surprise,” he greeted. “Good morning, Grandmother,” he leaned down and gave her a quick kiss.

“Good morning, Bryce. I haven’t seen you in over a year. I wanted to spend as much time with you as I could,” his grandmother said.

Leslie set down her orange juice. “We stayed so late at the party, we just got a room at the hotel. Your mom told us to come by this morning for breakfast.”

“I wanted to hear all about Jenni,” his mom said.

“Yes, me, too,” his grandmother added. “Leslie said she took a limo back to Pineville last night. I hope everything is okay.”

Bryce didn’t know what to say. He was about to tell the truth when Leslie cut in. “She said she had to get back to her animals so I sent her home in the limo. She is so committed to her rescue’s.”

Grandmother looked disappointed. “I could see that.”

“Is there any way we can forward those donations from last night?” Leslie asked. “I know her foundation could really use them.”

“No, I’m sorry,” his mother said. “I’ve already returned them, but the donations added up to a very nice sum. I’ve asked our accountants to make out a check to the foundation from the company. I’d like to give it to her myself. When is she coming?”

Bryce caught Leslie’s warning look.

“I’m not sure,” Bryce answered. “That is a really nice gesture mom, but she didn’t take the news of me having to stay here that well. Her life is in Pineville.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure you can make it work,” his mother said, rising and hurrying toward her office as his father walked into the room.

“Make what work?” his dad asked, walking over to the sideboard and loading up a plate of bacon, eggs, and potatoes.

Bryce joined him and filled up a plate for himself.

“Bryce and Jenni having a long-distance relationship,” his mother explained as she walked back into the room. “Make sure she gets this.” She handed him a check.

Bryce’s brows rose as he stared at all the zeroes. “After the way Dominique talked to her, I’m not sure she will take this much.”

“See that she does. This is the amount our guests at the party wanted to contribute last night. If it wasn’t for the lawyers, she would have gotten it all then. This way everyone is covered, and the foundation will still get what it needs to help soldiers’ pets. Especially after what happened to your dog, Bucky.”

“Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate it, and I know Jenni will too.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

His dad took a seat. “So, Bryce, what are your plans for today?”

Bryce thought of the horses in Lincoln’s barn and Bucky. How he longed to be there right then saddling up Shadow and going for a ride.

“Tell me about Pineville, Bryce,” his grandmother said. “Why do you like it so much?”

Bryce smiled, happy to talk about the farm and what he’d been doing there. “I’ve been staying in my good friend Lincoln’s barn.”

“In his barn?” she asked, a gleam in her eye.

“Yes. If I was there right now, I’d be up, feeding the horses, making sure they had water, cleaning out their stalls. Then I’d saddle up Shadow. That’s the horse I like to ride, and we’d ride out to check the fences and the livestock.”

She looked interested. “Oh, does he have a lot of livestock?”

“No, not a lot, but enough. Lincoln rescues farm animals whose owners can no longer take care of them. He tries to find homes for them. It’s definitely a labor of love. I love being outside in the morning and working with the animals. Right now the barn is full of the dogs we had to rescue from Jenni’s friend’s shelter here in Boston. That’s where we found Bucky.”

“I was so sorry to hear about your dog, Bryce. We had no idea what Dominique did,” his mother said.

“No one did. It’s not something I’ll ever be able to forgive her for.”

An awkward silence filled the room for a long moment as everyone ate.

Finally, his dad leaned forward. “I thought we could go into the office and get you set up so you’ll be ready for a running start in the morning.”

Bryce stiffened, hating the idea, but before he could answer, Caleb burst through the front door.

“What the hell is this?” Caleb asked, holding up a piece of paper.

“Caleb!” his mother admonished.

Caleb stopped short as he saw them all at the breakfast table. “Oh, a family breakfast and I wasn’t invited. Is that how it’s going to be now that the golden boy is back?”

“No, son, we just wanted to have a meal without all the drama. What is it, now?” his father asked.

Caleb stepped toward them, waving the paper in his hand. “I want to know why most of Dominique’s accounts are going to Bryce instead of to me. Isn’t that what we discussed when Dominique agreed to leave?”

“What I discussed with Dominique is between us,” his father said.

“Fine, I quit, too,” Caleb said.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” his father said. “I’m not sure Dominique will stick around once you walk away from your trust fund.”

Bryce pushed back from the table and stood; the pain flashing through his brother’s eyes was more than he could take. He wouldn’t be responsible for the disintegration of his brother. His father and that trust fund were already doing a bang-up job. Who needed it? Not him.

“Stop,” Bryce said. “I don’t want the job. I don’t want the trust fund. I want to have control of my own life. I know I said I would stay and help you, Dad. But not at this cost. I’m sorry.” He started to leave when his mother called him back. He turned to look at her, at the sadness brimming in her eyes.

“Bryce, where are you going?”

He smiled. “To find my fiancée. I should never have let her go back to Pineville without me.”

“Bravo!” Leslie said, clapping her hands.

“Do you think she’ll understand why you said you’d stay and work at the company?” his dad asked, taking a step toward him. “Because I’m not sure I do. I thought you wanted to help your family.”

“Dad, I was, and if I thought I could stay here and work for the company without being completely miserable, I would. But this is not my life. I want to build a life in Pineville, and I’d like Jenni to be a part of it. Though I wouldn’t blame her if she never wanted to speak to me again.”

“She will, and tell her I’ll be coming to get my Malti soon.” Leslie spun in her seat as Mark started to protest and put a finger to his lips. “Don’t you say a word.”

Mark smiled and shook his head. “I can never deny you anything.”

Bryce admired their relationship, no one was in charge, they each pushed, and they each pulled. He liked that about them. No games, no demands, no lies. He wanted that. With Jenni? Maybe. He sure would like to find out. He just hoped she would understand why he didn't trust her with the truth about who he and his family were.

On the way to Pineville, he called Lincoln and asked him to set up a showing for that afternoon to see the Hadley Place. He was ready to start his own company and build a new life. In Pineville. He should have just enough to buy the place and do some basic renovations.

He needed a plan for how he could win Jenni's trust back, and it started with him getting his life on track. Like she said, he needed to know what he wanted—now he did.

He wanted to live a life in Pineville on his own terms.

With Bucky, and with Jenni if she'd have him.

## CHAPTER 26



A week later, Jenni walked into her sister's coffee shop and sat at the table with Brianna, Candy, and Nicole. Roni brought over peppermint lattes for all of them and took a seat at their table in front of the fireplace.

"Okay, we're going to have to raise more money at tonight's caroling kickoff than we ever have before," Jenni said. "I had an appointment with Mr. Stone at the bank the other day about getting a business loan for the foundation."

"And?" Nicole asked, bouncing in her seat.

"I got the loan! Not only that, I was able to buy a very small farmhouse on the outskirts of town that has a barn in the back where I can set up my kennels. Brianna's mom put in the offer today."

"That's fantastic! I'm so proud of you," Nicole said. "I can't wait to see it."

"Me, too," Brianna added. "My mom said the house will need some work, but with all of us helping, we'll get it looking great in no time."

"I still can't believe someone swooped in and bought the Hadley place so fast," Roni said, "but this way you can focus on the foundation and plan to open a pet supply shop in a year or so."

"I know you're right." Jenni smiled at Roni.

"Yes, and in the meantime, we need to sell as many of these dog treats and little pet accessories as we can tonight,"

Candy added, holding up one of the bags they were all decorating. “Plus, I made cupcakes to sell. They’re in the car.”

“The pumpkin spice ones?” Jenni asked with a grin. They were her favorite.

“With buttercream icing,” Candy beamed.

Jenni shook her head. “You are going to be the death of my waistline.”

“Okay, I’m ready when you are,” Roni said, wheeling out a wagon for them to fill up with the stuff to take to their booths at the caroling kickoff. “Melanie, who runs the Gable Inn, called and they were having problems with the lights in the gazebo, but they got them all fixed. She’s ready for us anytime.”

“Lincoln is on his way with the dogs,” Candy said. “Should we take bets on how many will be adopted? They look so adorable in their bowties.”

“I hope all of them. I’m starting to get too attached to this group. We’ve been through a lot together.” That was the one drawback to Jenni’s job—she couldn’t keep them all.

They filled the wagon, and pulled it toward their booths on the front lawn of the Gable Inn where the caroling kickoff would be held. As they passed the Hadley place, Jenni noticed all the lights were on and there were several trucks parked out front. “What is going on over there?”

“There have been a lot of workers over there all week long,” Roni said. “Whoever bought the place is really fixing it up. People have been working nonstop.”

“Now I really want to see it,” Jenni said. “I wish I had time to go check it out. I’m dying of curiosity.” She wondered who bought the place out from under her so fast.

“Why don’t you go see? We’ll start setting up your booth until you get there,” Candy said.

Jenni looked torn as they walked by the house. “I can’t do that.”

“Of course you can. I’m sure it will only take you five minutes,” Candy insisted.

“I will, but not now. Once I get the dogs settled and the booth set up. If I have time before everyone arrives, I’ll sneak away.”

“Suit yourself, but let me know when you go so I can come with you. I’m dying to see it too,” Roni said with a wink.

“Hey, how’s Spooky doing?” Jenni asked. She’d been wondering all day but kept forgetting to ask.

“I love him,” Roni admitted with a grin. “He greets me at the door every day after work. We watch TV together, and he’s a great snuggle.”

Jenni laughed. “I never would have believed it.”

“I don’t know why not?” Roni protested. “And Jimmy has been calling every night.”

“You’re kidding. Where is he?”

“He moved to Colorado but is thinking of coming home. Apparently, his dad is not doing well and his mom could really use his help.”

“Fingers crossed,” Jenni said, remembering how much Roni loved her high school sweetheart.

Roni grinned. “No need. I have Spooky. He’ll make it happen.”

“You better be careful with your wishes,” Jenni warned her. “You only get three and genies like to trick you.”

Roni laughed. “Oh, who was the one who said Spooky wasn’t magical?”

“I was right, wasn’t I? Spooky didn’t bring Bryce back for me, so I have reason for doubt.” Jenni tried to keep her voice light and not let on how much Bryce’s going back to Boston hurt. He would be at the wedding tomorrow night, but what would she say to him? The last thing she wanted was for him to know how much he had broken her heart.



“It’s because you didn’t bond with him,” Roni said to the others?

Surprised, Jenni whipped back toward her sister. “With Bryce?” *What was she talking about?*

“No, with Spooky!”

“Oh.” Jenni laughed. “He slept on my stomach. How much more bonding do we need? You are a goofball.”

“Maybe,” Roni agreed.

They reached the staging area for the caroling kickoff. Several booths surrounded the grassy area around the gazebo. This was the event of the season, and luckily, it kept growing bigger each year. It was sure to be a fun and successful night.

“Fingers crossed you’ll get lots of donations,” Roni said, and gave her a quick pat on the shoulder before hurrying over to her booth.

Jenni finished arranging everything she wanted to sell on her table. She and Brianna had the cages with the cats that were available for adoption behind the table and the dogs off to the side. She wondered if now would be a good time to sneak off to see who bought the Hadley Place.

“Hi, Miss Jenny!” Sarah called and waved as she walked by. It was probably the tenth student that night.

“They are so sweet. Do you miss them?” Brianna asked, walking into her booth.

Jenni gazed warmly after the child. “I really do.”

“Why don’t you sign up to be a substitute teacher? That way you can still see them every now and then.”

Jenni turned to her friend. “You know, that’s not a half-bad idea.”

Brianna grinned. “I have them every now and then.”

People started wandering over to her booth and the selling began. She could tell it was going to be a great night. One hour in, and she’d sold half her doggie accessories and almost all the dog treats, though, she still had a lot of the animals with

her. The beagle had been adopted along with both chihuahuas—luckily together—but the old lab had no takers. Probably because he'd been moping around, missing Bucky.

“I know how you feel, big guy.” Just thinking about Bryce still caused an ache in her heart. She pushed it away.

“My Malti better not be up for adoption,” Leslie said, surprising her.

Jenni spun around. “Leslie! It's so good to see you.” She gave the woman a big hug. “I'm so glad you're here.”

“Me, too. Bryce told us this was a big event for Pineville.”

“He's right. Be sure to browse all the booths before making your way to the gazebo for the map routes and the list of the songs for caroling.”

Leslie shook her head. “Oh, I won't be singing.”

“You won't?”

“Nope. I came for Malti! Hi, sweetie,” she said, walking into the booth and looking at the little Maltese in her carrier.

Jenni grinned as Leslie pulled the little dog out and snuggled her close.

“Do you remember me?” Leslie cooed at the dog.

The dog licked her chin and snuggled up to her.

“I knew you would,” Leslie cried.

Jenni would have laughed if Bryce's parents hadn't walked up at that moment, with sour looks of unhappiness filling both their faces.

## CHAPTER 27



Bryce stood back and admired his work. He'd put the last coat of lacquer on the hardwood floors earlier that afternoon, bringing them back to life. They looked fantastic. He'd ripped all the old carpeting out of the old Hadley house, and had been lucky enough to find hardwood floors beneath it. A little sanding, buffing, and polishing and they looked great.

The painters had just finished painting all the rooms an hour ago—a light beige to match the golden tones on the floors. The light fixtures had been updated and all the new stainless steel appliances were in. The house was almost ready to show Jenni.

With Lincoln's help, he'd been able to keep his arrival back in town a secret. He'd been living upstairs and working it nonstop. Lincoln was right, the downstairs study would make a perfect office for his new venture of opening his own CPA firm.

"What do you think?" he asked Bucky.

Bucky hadn't left his side, moving with him from room to room, even sleeping at the foot of his bed. He didn't know what Bucky had been through while Bryce had been deployed, but he'd been doing his best to assure the dog they would never be separated again.

He walked into the kitchen and opened the box that had been delivered earlier that day. The sign he'd ordered from Boston looked perfect and he couldn't wait to hang it up on the porch next to the front door.

Lincoln walked in the door. “Knock, knock.”

“Come on in,” Bryce called from the kitchen as he lifted the sign out of the box.

“This place is looking great,” Lincoln said, looking around at all the work Bryce had done since the last time he’d been there.

“I have loads of furniture arriving next week, and the garage in the back is heated and has electricity. We’ll be able to put at least twenty kennels in there,” Bryce told him.

“This is really amazing. Does Jenni know yet?”

“No, I’ve been waiting to surprise her. I wanted to let her have the honor of ordering all the supplies she wants for her new shop. Plus, I was waiting for these.” He held up the signs.

“Nice,” Lincoln said with approval.

Bryce admired the signs. “I can’t wait for her to see them. Do you want to help me hang them up?”

“Absolutely.”

He handed Lincoln a hammer and they walked out to the porch. “I was serious about running a long-term foster center for deployed soldiers’ pets. This is important to me, and I have the donations from the Christmas party to get it started along with getting Jenni’s dream of a pet supply store up and running. There is enough that you won’t have to worry about money again for the rest of the year.”

“That is terrific news. Jenni will be so thrilled,” Lincoln said as they hung both of the signs next to the front door.

Bryce stood back and admired their work. “We’re official now.”

“I never had any doubt you could pull this off.” Lincoln patted his back.

Bryce laughed as happy anxiety filled him. “I did, and I really can’t believe you’ve been able to keep my secret all week.” Bryce clipped Bucky’s leash and they started to walk over to the Gable Inn.

“It wasn’t easy, trust me. Candy knew I was hiding something, but I blamed it on the wedding. Told her there were some things a bride doesn’t need to know until the wedding night.”

Bryce grinned. “Good call.” Excitement and nervousness moved through him as he thought about seeing Jenni again. How would she greet him? Would she be happy to see him, or furious that he hadn’t called her to talk about what happened in Boston?

“I sure hope Candy still has some of her pumpkin spice muffins. I’m starving,” Bryce said.

Lincoln grinned. “Don’t you worry, she never runs out.”

They had just made it over to the Gable Inn’s grassy area and all the booths when Bryce did a double take. His parents were standing under a big sign that said Jenni’s Rescue. “Oh, no,” he moaned.

“What is it?” Lincoln asked.

“My parents.”

## CHAPTER 28



**B**ryce's parents both looked upset as they approached Jenni's booth. Why? Jenni thought. Did Bryce tell them they'd lied about being engaged? Why else would they possibly... and then she remembered. *The ring*. She still had it. Not with her, of course, but it was at Candy's house in her jewelry box. She had to find a way to get that ring back to Bryce as soon as possible.

"Here's my Malti. Isn't she adorable?" Leslie said, turning to show off the little dog to Bryce's mom.

"Where's Bryce?" Kathy Whittaker said, not looking at Leslie or the dog, but directly at Jenni. "I was hoping to see him here."

"Bryce?" Confusion swam through Jenni's mind. Why would Bryce be here?

"Yes, Bryce. I know you're in love, but I just want you to understand what he's giving up to be here with you. I accept you are from two different worlds. To him, you are new and exciting and different than anyone he's ever met. But do you really think you can be enough?" Her eyes narrowed. "Do you really think he won't resent you a year from now for not coming to Boston?"

Jenni stepped back under the onslaught of harsh words coming from Bryce's mom. The woman was furious at her. And for what? "I'm sorry, Mrs. Whittaker, but I don't know what you're talking about."

“Kathy,” Bryce’s father warned. He put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t.”

She brushed him off with a quick shrug. “Bryce is giving up a lot of money to stay here with you. A *lot*,” she emphasized.

Jenni shook her head, noticing the attention they were getting from onlookers. She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Whittaker, but I think there’s been some misunderstanding. Bryce isn’t here. I haven’t seen him since the party. The last I heard, he was staying in Boston with you.”

Mrs. Whittaker’s head snapped back. “What are you talking about?” she demanded. “That can’t be true.”

“Mom, Dad. What are you doing here?” Bryce hurried quickly toward them with Bucky by his side.

At the sound of his voice, Jenni’s heart did a cartwheel in her chest. Bryce! He was back.

“We came to see you,” his mother said, turning toward him. “To see how you’re doing and to find out if you’re ready to come home.”

Come home? What was she talking about? Why did she think Bryce had been there the whole time? Jenni watched Bryce and his parents growing more confused by the moment.

The old lab saw Bucky at Bryce’s side and started whining from his cage and pawing at the door. Bucky pulled at the leash to get closer to the black lab.

Bryce turned and saw what was happening. “Mom, Dad, can I talk to you later?”

“Bryce, we came all this way,” his mother said, a look of distress on her face.

Bryce looked at his watch. “I’ll meet you back here in one hour. Check out the other booths, go caroling, get a cup of coffee. Okay? I need to talk to Jenni.”

His father nodded. “That will be fine. Come on, Kathy. Let them be.” He led Bryce’s mother away. Jenni sucked in her

breath as Bryce walked toward her.

“Hi, Jenni. How are you?” Bryce asked, giving her that charming smile that gave her heart a good tweak. Bucky immediately ran to the cage with the old lab inside.

“I’m all right,” she said, trying not to let on how happy she was to see him.

“Hey, boy,” Bryce said to the old lab. “Can I take him out?”

Jenni nodded and handed Bryce a leash. The two dogs were inseparable. “You just made his night,” she said with a smile. “He’s been missing Bucky.”

“I think Bucky’s been missing him too. Maybe I should adopt him.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I think that would make him the happiest dog on the planet.”

“Consider it done.”

She looked down at the paperwork she usually gives to prospective adopters. “Do you have a fenced yard?” she asked, wondering where he was living in Boston. Not at his parents’ house since they thought he’d been there with her.

“I do.” A twinkle lit his eye as the corner of his mouth lifted. She stared at it for a long moment.

“Are you here for the wedding?” Of course he was there for the wedding. Why else would he be there?

“That and other things.” His lips twitched.

She wanted to ask if she was one of those things, but didn’t. Instead, she looked into his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to ease the tightening in her chest. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have your ring with me. It’s fine, I promise. Candy has it in her jewelry box for safe-keeping.”

He stepped closer to her. Her gaze found his lips and it took all she had not to put her arms around him, lean her head against his chest and pull him close. “I’m not worried about it. I know you won’t let anything happen to it.”



“Thanks for saying that.” She started straightening all the stuff on her table, mostly so she didn’t have to look at him.

“Don’t you usually do house visits to see if the prospective homes are safe for the dogs being adopted?” He rubbed his shoulder against hers.

“Yes.” She turned to him confused. “I don’t have time to drive all the way to Boston to check out your home. I trust you. We’re friends, aren’t we?” After everything they’d been through, she hoped they were.

“I should hope so.” He held out his hand toward her. “Can you come for a walk with me?”

She looked around her, her nervousness making her hands flutter. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t be alone with him and get her insides all tangled in knots just to watch him leave again. “I really shouldn’t abandon my booth. Not with all the animals here.”

“Lincoln,” Bryce called to Lincoln, who was talking to Candy at her booth next to hers.”

Lincoln walked over to them and handed Bryce a bag. “A couple of cupcakes for you.”

“Thanks,” Bryce said. “You’re a lifesaver. Would you mind watching Jenni’s booth for a few minutes?”

Jenni gave her head a quick shake, hoping Lincoln would get the message. Instead he just grinned. “Not at all. Take your time.”

Jenni glared at him, but he only smiled back. Men, they were so oblivious.

Before they could leave, Melanie stepped onto the stage under the gazebo and walked up to the microphone. “Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for coming to our caroling kickoff!”

The crowd cheered and gathered around the stage.

“We have a real treat tonight. Bryce Whittaker, can you come up here please?”

“That’s my cue,” Bryce said, and touched her arm as he hurried toward the stage with Bucky in tow.

Stunned, Jenni stared after him, then grabbed the old lab’s leash to keep him from following and turned to Lincoln. “What’s going on?”

Lincoln just shrugged as Bryce walked up onto the stage. “Hi, everyone. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” the crowd called back.

“Thank you for coming out tonight. I understand this event is the highlight of the Christmas season here in Pineville, and I can see why. Those pumpkin spice muffins made by Candy’s Confections are to die for. I think there are still a few left if you hurry.”

He laughed as several people hurried to Candy’s booth. Jenni watched him, stunned. He is a natural up there on the stage, and looked like he’d been a part of Pineville his whole life.

“The reason I’m up here talking to you tonight is I wanted to tell you a story about my dog Bucky here.” Bucky sat obediently by his side.

“Last year, I was deployed, and while I was gone, the person who promised to take care of Bucky left him at a shelter and told me he had run away.”

The crowd gasped and booed.

Jenni glanced at Bryce’s parents, who both frowned and dropped their eyes to the ground, clearly embarrassed.

“I couldn’t believe it myself, but luckily for us, Bucky and I were reunited because of my good friend Jenni Jones and her rescue foundation. This experience has taught me how much of a need there is for fostering soldiers’ animals. These men and women are sacrificing everything for us. The least we can do is take care of their pets while they are gone.”

The crowd clapped and cheered.

“It’s important to be a champion for those that need it, and Jenni’s Rescue Foundation is just that. Your support tonight is

going to go a long way to helping Jenni get this new venture off the ground. We very much appreciate your help and your donations. Every cupcake, dog treat, or dog bow you buy tonight will go directly to the foundation to help Jenni's animals."

The crowd broke into applause as several people turned to smile at her and give her the thumbs up sign. She couldn't help the grin filling her face, or the tears misting her eyes.

"Thank you for your time. Have a great night." Bryce stepped off the stage and walked back to Jenni's booth.

"Thank you for doing that," Jenni said, fighting the urge to hug him, and wiping a tear from her cheek.

"You're welcome." He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him.

His arm felt comfortable, it felt right. She tried to fight the onslaught of warm fuzzies and stepped away and looked up at him. "I don't understand, though. Did you talk to Lincoln about taking on long-term fostering of soldiers' dogs? I really appreciate what you said up there, but I don't see how I can handle that too. I wouldn't be able to afford the food as it is, let alone vet bills, and everything else that will go along with it."

"I understand, and I did talk to Lincoln, but he's not the person who will be handling it."

"He's not?" Now she was really confused.

"Whittaker Financials accumulated all the donations you got the night of the party and wrote you a check. They didn't think your foundation should have to suffer because the lawyers wouldn't let you take the checks from the guests."

"Bryce, I don't think..."

He took the check out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Her eyes widened. "This is for eighteen thousand dollars."

He smiled. "Yes, it is."

She grinned and looked up at him. “That’s a lot of dog food.”

“Yes it is!”

In her joy, she threw caution to the wind and hugged him tight. The feel of his warmth, the smell of his cologne, the softness of his flannel against her cheek warmed her heart like nothing else.

Melanie took the stage again and started off the caroling, then led the troops of carolers down Main Street.

Bryce looked down at her, and she melted as his gaze found hers. “Do you think you could leave for a minute?”

She glanced at her animals in their carriers at her booth.

“I’ll watch them,” Lincoln assured her.

“Thanks.” She handed Lincoln the check. He glanced at it, his eyebrows lifting to his hairline. “Donations from the Christmas party from Bryce’s family’s company last week.”

“That was a pretty good haul,” he said with a grin.

“I’ll say. We’ll be right back.”

Bryce took the leashes for Bucky and the lab and led her across the street. For the first time in she didn’t know how long, she couldn’t think of anything to say. She had a million questions, but the words wouldn’t come. Not until he stopped and grabbed her hand.

“Why are we at the Hadley place?” she asked, staring at the house that was all lit up. “It’s no longer for sale. Someone bought it.”

“I know.”

“You do?” She looked up at him, a sneaky suspicion entering her mind. But that couldn’t be, could it?

He led her up the porch and stopped before two signs hanging next to the front door. They read ‘Whittaker Accounting and Jenni’s Pet Supplies and Rescue Foundation’.

Jenni's heart stopped, and for a second she couldn't breathe. "Bryce. I don't understand," she whispered.

"I bought the Hadley place. I've been renovating it all week." He opened the door and led her into a large room with gleaming hardwood floors. "I had the wall separating this room from the next removed to make one big room for your pet supplies. We can put the cash register and check-out counter right here in front of the window, and fill the room with as many pet supplies as you can.

"Wow, this is amazing. I love it," she said, easily envisioning his plans.

French doors from the right side of the front door led to a large office, complete with a desk, bookcase, and two guest chairs. "This will be my office." He led her through the office and down a small hallway to a back room with more bookcases, filing cabinets, and a long table. "These two rooms will be my accounting offices. There is a kitchen through that door, and rooms upstairs where I've been living."

"You've been living here?"

"I have." He nodded, grinning. "Me and Bucky, and now this guy can live here too." He petted the old lab who rubbed up against his leg.

"You bought this house for our businesses?"

He turned to face her, his hands on her shoulders. "I did. I believe in them that much. Not only that, I believe in you."

She laughed, shaking her head in disbelief as tears flooded her eyes. He just said the words she'd been longing to hear her entire life. "You're not going to believe this, but I just bought a farmhouse about twenty minutes from here with a barn in the back."

"You did?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"I did. Melanie helped me put together a business plan. I took it to the bank and got a loan for the farm."

"With your barn and the garage in the back here, we will have plenty of room to rescue and foster lots of animals."

She shook her head in amazement. “I don’t know what to say?”

He stepped closer to her. “Say you forgive me for not being totally honest with you and for not trusting you. Say you’ll give me, give us, a chance.”

She lost herself for a moment in the sincerity shining in his eyes. “I want to. I really do.” But she was afraid to open her heart again. “What about your trust fund? Don’t you have to work for your company in Boston?”

“I walked away. I told my family I didn’t want it.”

Shock rumbled through her system. “What?”

“I want to live life on my terms. With you. Here.”

She thought of his mother’s words. *He will resent you.* “Please tell me you didn’t give it up for me.”

“If I’m honest, you were part of it, but not all of it. I like my life here. I like living in a small town and working with animals. I like doing something that makes a difference, that matters. But more than that, I love you, Jenni. I want to build a life with you, here, if you will have me.”

She looked at him, unable to believe what was happening. *He loved her?*

“Will you?”

Laughter and disbelief bubbled in her throat. “I will. Yes, of course, I will.”

Bryce pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she couldn’t breathe. Warmth flooded her system, along with happiness at the possibilities of what lies ahead, of their future together. Finally, when he pulled away, she looked up at him, her handsome cowboy. *Ready to tumble and fall —I’m falling now, grandma, falling hard.* “I love you, too, Bryce. So much.”

A knock sounded at the front door, interrupting the moment. “Should we get it?” Bryce asked, smiling. “And welcome our first guest?”

Jenni wondered what would have happened if that didn't happen. Would he have said it too? She walked with him toward the front door and opened it. Roni stood on the porch with Spooky in her arms. "Roni what are you doing here?" Jenni hoped she wasn't there to give the cat back.

Roni walked through the door looking around her with wonder in her eyes. "Spooky was insistent on coming over to see the place. He was relentless, really."

Jenni laughed. "He was, was he?"

"Absolutely." She walked deeper into the house, inspecting every room and stopping in the kitchen. "This place is fantastic. I love it."

Jenni put her arm around Bryce and squeezed. "It absolutely is. It's a Christmas wish come true."

Roni cuddled Spooky to her chest. "You mean it's Spooky magic."

Jenni laughed and petted Spooky. "Maybe you're right. Thank you, Spooky, for bringing Bryce home to me."

The cat gave her a slow blink, and Jenni couldn't help the shiver running down her arms.

Bryce glanced between them with confusion filling his face. "Whatever it is, being here with all of you and especially this wonderful woman, is the best Christmas gift I could ever have imagined."

He pulled Jenni close. "I love you, too," he said, then kissed her.

Roni cheered. "Now that's what we're talking about."

Jenni's heart expanded with happiness. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back, praying he'd never stop. This was the best Christmas she could have ever imagined, and he was the perfect, most unexpected Christmas gift of all.

The End

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Thank you for reading *Jenni's Christmas Gift* the latest installment in A Pineville Christmas series where Christmas can always be found.

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EXCERPT FROM CHRISTMAS  
IN GRANITE FALLS

## GRANITE FALLS SERIES BOOK 1



*Someone was there.*

*She could feel him. Hear him, moving, rustling in the darkness.*

*Abby's breathing hiccuped as her lungs contracted painfully in her chest. Where was he? "Neal," she cried, stumbling forward, tripping, lurching forward. The inky black night smothering her.*

*"Neal!"*

Abby Giles sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding, her sheets soaked with sweat. She'd had the dream again. Always the same. She was alone, left shaken and scared. Knowing it was useless to try and go back to sleep, she got up and went down the stairs of the small townhouse. She pulled open the blackout curtains and stared into the early morning darkness, wondering who was out there lurking in the shadows.

Her cat perched on the back of the plush green recliner. The ugly, practically threadbare chair had been Neal's from before they'd met, and he refused to get rid of it. They'd often joked about how he'd be buried with that chair. He hadn't been, of course. Now, she didn't have the heart to let it go.

"Good morning, Terror." The cat arched his back as she petted him. For years, the black feline had slept between her and Neal. Now, he spent his nights in "Neal's chair." Another reason it was destined to never leave this townhouse. "That's okay, Sweetie. I know how you feel."

She continued into the kitchen, started the coffee, then turned on the TV for her morning yoga. She followed the exercises as she did every day, automatically moving through the motions, checking off another task on her list. Thirty minutes later, she sat at the table, drinking her coffee, watching the sunrise, and waiting until it would set again.

A text pinged from the standing charger where her phone sat in its cradle. Surprised, she got up and checked the display.

*Are you awake?*

She picked up the phone and stabbed it with her index finger. *Yes.*

A second later it rang, and her sister's face filled the screen. "How are you doing?"

"Fine." Abby held up her coffee mug.

"Did you take that walk yesterday?"

"It rained," Abby lied.

"I'm worried about you." Her sister's eyes filled with concern, a look Abby had seen a lot since Neal died. She could easily rattle off all she was doing, giving her sister plenty of reasons not to be concerned. She just didn't have the energy.

"Don't be," she said, already thinking up an excuse to hang up the phone.

"Don't be mad, but I needed to see for myself that you're okay."

The doorbell rang.

Abby's heart lurched as she glanced toward the door.

"It's only me," Jenn turned her phone, showing Abby an image of her own front door.

Abby couldn't move. *She was here?*

"Are you going to let me in?"

Abby took a deep breath and forced herself to approach the door. She hesitated, her hand hovering over the doorknob. She

disconnected the line, took a deep breath, and opened the door. “Why are you here?”

Jenn brushed past her. “You haven’t seen me in over a year, and that’s all you have to say?”

Abby quickly shut and locked the door, then turned to her sister, her eyebrows raised.

“I stayed at Dad’s last night. I needed to see you. I need a favor,” Jenn said.

Abby’s eyes widened in alarm. “You stayed at Dad’s? He’s not here, is he?”

“No, I took an Uber. Though he really wants to see you.”

“I’m not ready.”

“I understand, but I need you to be ready. I need you.”

Abby closed her eyes to slow the panic rising in her chest. “For what?”

“To be my maid of honor.”

The meaning of her sister’s words sank in, causing her heart to ache. “You’re getting married?” How was that possible? She hadn’t even met the man. Images of her own wedding flashed behind her eyes. Her stomach tightened painfully. She dropped onto the sofa and took several deep breaths.

The cushion dipped next to her. “His name is Keith O’Malley. He’s a wonderful man and a terrific nurse at the hospital. I’d like you to be there. To stand up next to me.”

“How can I?” Her voice broke over the words. Abby wanted to be there; she really did. But other than quick trips to the corner market, she hadn’t been outside in so long.

“We can drive back together,” Jenn suggested.

“To North Carolina?” The thought stole Abby’s breath.

“I’ll be with you. Every moment. Do you still have a car?”

“Neal’s car is in the garage, but it hasn’t been driven.” *Not since he died.* “Not for a long time.”

“Perfect. We can drive that.”

Abby shook her head. “No. There’s no way.”

“Listen. You are my sister. This is my wedding, and I can’t get married without you by my side. Just like we planned, just like I did for you.”

“But...”

“No, butts. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

She wouldn’t. Abby could see the determination on her face. “When is the wedding?”

“Christmas Eve.”

“Christmas Eve?” *Was it already Christmas?*

The thought of spending another Christmas alone in this townhouse was almost unbearable, but how could she leave?

“You can stay with me and Keith—”

Abby sucked in a quick breath.

“—But if that’s too much, Keith’s best friend has the cutest cabin he’s just finished renovating. He hasn’t even listed it on VRBO yet, and he said you can stay as long as you want.”

“A cabin?”

“In the woods. You’ll love it. There isn’t anyone around for miles.”

What would it be like not to be afraid that someone was outside, constantly watching? *Constantly waiting.* “It sounds wonderful,” she admitted. “It would be nice to get away from the city.” The people. The noise. *The memories.*

“I could also use your help at the school. I have a teacher going out on maternity leave.”

Abby jumped to her feet and walked behind the kitchen counter taking several deep breaths. “I’m sure there are plenty of substitute teachers in North Carolina. Call one of them. I’m not ready to go back to work.”

Jenn followed her. “The school year has already started and we’re a small town. Not a lot of candidates. The job would

be perfect for you. They're kindergarteners, and they're so sweet."

Abby felt a tug within her. She wanted to go. She wanted to resume her life and teach again. She was so tired of being alone. "I don't know how I can." How could she explain how hard it was for her to physically leave this house?

"It's almost Christmas; do you want to be alone on the holidays?"

*No.* Abby pulled another mug from the cabinet.

"How often do I ask for help?" her sister persisted.

*Never.* She filled the mug with coffee and set it on the counter in front of Jenn.

"Other than the occasional run to the store, I barely leave the house." Tears spilled onto her cheeks as she admitted the truth she hadn't wanted her sister to know but somehow figured she already did. "How can I go all the way to North Carolina?"

Jenn put an arm around Abby's shoulders. "Honey, it's been over a year. You need to start living again. I know what happened to you, what happened to Neal, is unthinkable. You have to find a way to heal. He wouldn't want this life for you."

Abby wiped her tears and blew her nose in a paper towel she'd grabbed from the holder. It was made from walnut wood carved in the shapes of sea turtles. Neal had bought it on their last trip to Rockport, Massachusetts. They'd had such a great time. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"I know he wouldn't. It's just... Every time I step onto that street, I'm transported back to that night of the attack, and I'm paralyzed. I can't breathe."

"Come to Granite Falls. Get away from the city." Jenn's warm hand found hers and gave a reassuring squeeze. "Let me help you. I should have come sooner. I'm so sorry I didn't."

"I didn't want you to. Didn't want to see anyone." Abby looked around her townhouse, her gaze falling on Terror atop

Neal's green chair. "This was our home. How can I leave it?"  
*How can I start over without him?*

Jenn held her gaze. "You're right. It is a beautiful home, but it isn't a home anymore. You aren't living, Abby."

"I don't know how I could manage on my own," she admitted.

"You won't be on your own. I'll help you. It's not forever; it's just for right now. Come to the mountains, spend Christmas with us, be in my wedding, and if it's not too much, there's a job waiting for you. A temporary job, just to help get you back on your feet. It would be good for you to have somewhere you have to go every day. Other people to depend on you, smiling faces to greet you every morning."

Abby saw the logic behind her sister's words and was tempted. She looked around her home at the leather sofas and antique furniture. At the pictures of her and Neal on their wedding day and honeymoon. How could she pack them away? The thought of leaving it all behind was overwhelming.

"I can't. I'm sorry."

"Neal's gone, Abby. You have to move on." Frustrated Jenn walked toward the front door. "You can't stay cooped up in this townhouse all by yourself anymore. I won't let you. I should have come sooner, but I didn't, and that's on me. I'm not leaving you here alone like this." Jenn pointed to the front door. "Prove to me you're okay. Walk out that door."

Fear seized Abby's chest.

"Go on. Prove to me you can make it to the sidewalk and back." She pulled open the door, holding it against her.

"What are you doing?" Abby asked, her voice breaking, her chest tightening. A cold breeze hit her face, stealing her breath.

*Shut the door.*

"Go on. Do it. Walk out that door."

Before either of them could move, Terror bounded off the back of the green chair and darted out the door.



“Terror!” In an instant he was gone.

Without hesitation, she followed him out the opened front door, down the steps, and onto the sidewalk. Terror crouched in the bushes at the bottom of the stairs.

“Come on, Sweetie. Come back inside.”

Terror looked at her, gold eyes surrounded by black fur, but didn’t budge.

“Come on,” she begged. “Please.”

He burrowed deeper into the bushes.

“Terror. Want some tuna?” Jenn called from the porch and turned the crank on the can opener hooked onto a can of StarKist. Terror turned as Jenn lifted the lid off the can. He tore up the stairs and into the house, crying at Jenn’s feet for the gourmet breakfast.

Abby shook her head in astonishment as she watched the cat run back through her front door. “Really?”

“How is it you don’t know every cat’s Achilles’ heel?” Jenn grinned. “Now are you going to stand out there all day or are you going to come in?”

In a blinding flash, Abby realized she was standing on the sidewalk. Frozen, she looked up and down the street. Heart racing, she ran back up the stairs, shut the door, and locked it behind her.

“You and Terror are coming back to Granite Falls with me. You are going to stay in an adorable cabin, be my maid of honor, and spend Christmas with your family. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Abby could see there was no getting out of it. Her sister was right; time was slipping away, and all she’d done was hide.

She sucked in a deep breath. “All right. I’ll come.”

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Book #3 - [All My Loving](#)

Book #4 (Short) - [All I Want Is You](#)

#### **A Pineville Christmas Series**

Book #1 - [Santa Claus is Coming to Town](#)

Book #2 - [Christmas to Remember](#)

Book #3 [Home for Christmas](#)

Book #4 (Short) [Candy's Christmas Rescue](#)

Book #5 [Candy's Christmas Wish](#)

Book #6 [Jenni's Christmas Gift](#)

# ABOUT CYNTHIA COOKE



First published in 2003, Cynthia Cooke is a USA Today Bestselling author who has published 37 novels in 12 different countries with Harlequin, Entangled, and Amazon Kindle Worlds. She has a deep affection for romance stories and playing in the ocean. On her best days you can find her on the beach with her notebook, a novel in hand, and her dog, Bella, by her side.

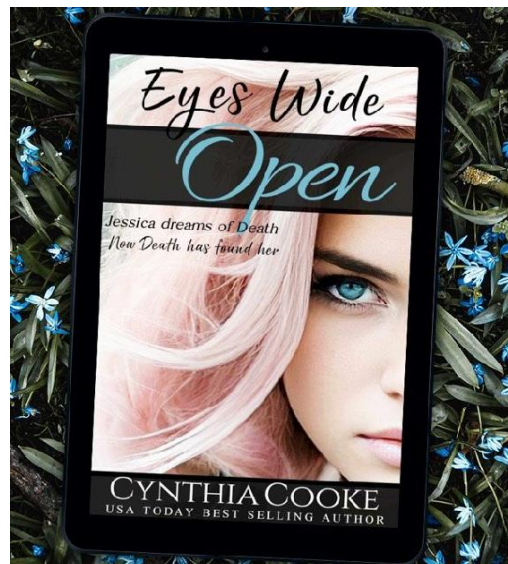
“Cynthia Cooke is an amazing and talented writer who captures your heart from the beginning of her books to the ending! If I could give this book more than 5-stars I would!” Rose 13 – Amazon Reviewer

“Cooke keeps readers on the edge of their seats...” –Alexandra Kay, Romantic Times Magazine.

**CYNTHIA LOVES to hear from readers!**

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THANK YOU!

Thank you for reading **Jenni's Christmas Gift!**

If you have a moment to recommend this story to your friends and family, I'd be very appreciative. Reviews are always welcomed and appreciated.

Thank you!

[Jenni's Christmas Gift - Review Link](#)

~Cynthia