

The Road
HOME

ROCKY RIDGE SERIES

BOOK 7

MORRIS FENRIS

The Road Home

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE ROAD HOME

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Written by Morris Fenris.

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Rocky Ridge Series Book Seven

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Prologue

“Stacy Davies, please rise while the judge reads your sentence.”

Stacy stared at the bailiff and then looked at her lawyer, some guy from the public defender’s office in a cheap gray suit. He hadn’t done a very good job of defending her, which was what he was supposed to have done. He gestured for her to stand up beside him. She stood, swaying slightly. Steadying herself on the table in front of her, she looked up at the judge.

This was definitely not like those crime shows she loved watching on TV. There hadn’t been a jury. No one had cared what she had to say. The facts were the facts, and that was what the judge was going to base her sentence on. Mr. Public Defender had assured her that it would be community service. Maybe a fine.

“Ms. Davies,” the judge said. She told herself to pay attention. This was important, but the judge had such a nice, rumbly kind of voice that soothed her. Not to mention that he was handsome for an older man. She found it hard to concentrate with all these factors working against her. If she didn’t pay attention, she knew that things would be worse for her. It always worked that way.

“You know why you are here today, I presume?” The judge looked like a nice man. He had white hair and a white beard. He almost looked like Santa Claus. Right down to the crinkles around the corners of his blue eyes. Despite the nice appearance, from the way he was looking at her, Stacy knew that she was in trouble.

She had heard about judges making examples out of people like her. She wasn’t a first-time offender, but she had never received anything but a warning before. Mr. Public Defender didn’t care about her reasons for being bad. And she had so many reasons. If someone would just listen to her, they might realize that it wasn’t like she wanted to be bad. She just needed someone to help her.

Stacy nodded in response to the judge's question. Mr. Public Defender had warned her about saying too much. She had protested, sure, that if the judge heard all her reasons, he would let her off just like every cop had in the past. Mr. Public Defender had been annoyed at that. He set out on a lengthy lecture about how cops and judges are not the same. Half the time he talked to her like she was a toddler, unable to comprehend basic speech. She wanted to punch him in the face. Obviously, she hadn't. That would have gotten her into more trouble.

That was the thing, Stacy knew right from wrong. The problem was that most of the time she just didn't care. Stacy liked being bad. She liked the way it made her feel. She liked the way men looked at her when she could out drink them, out-smoke them, outlast them. She had never been a shrinking violet. Not like her sister, Melinda. At that thought, Stacy winced.

"Miss Davies, I need you to answer out loud," the judge said. "Do you understand why you are here today? Do you understand the charges?"

"Yes," Stacy said, a little too loud, unable to keep the annoyance out of her voice. Mr. Public Defender shot her a dirty look. She tried again. "Yes, Your Honor. I do."

The judge regarded her with his Santa Claus eyes. "From what I see here, you seem to have a long history of breaking the rules."

"I do," Stacy said. Another dirty look from Mr. Public Defender. It was all Stacy could do not to give him one back. She couldn't help it if she sounded proud of herself. She was. Most people thought it was easy to be bad. It wasn't. It took a lot of work.

The smirk on the judge's face told her that he knew how much work it took to be bad. Her respect for the man increased exponentially. Maybe things wouldn't be as bad for her as Mr. Public Defender seemed to think. Maybe the judge would give her a fine. Maybe he would let her keep her driver's license. Maybe he wouldn't send her to prison.

“Miss Davies, I feel that you might not understand the severity of your crime,” the judge said.

Stacy frowned up at him. That didn't sound good. Her hope soured. Suddenly, the coffee and toast she'd had for breakfast turned in her stomach. The churning made her want to sit back down, but somehow she kept herself on her feet, although she swayed enough that Mr. Public Defender put out a hand to steady her.

“But, Your Honor,” Stacy began to protest.

The judge held up a hand. “Miss Davies, there isn't anything that you can say that I haven't heard before,” he said. “This court is here to provide justice for crimes committed. You are here because you were driving while intoxicated and caused an accident that, quite frankly, could have been a lot worse.”

Stacy looked down at the table in front of her then. She had caused an accident. The first that had ever been because of her. And she had been relieved that the man she hit had been fine. She heard from Melinda that it was one of Melinda's friends' boyfriend. Not as convoluted as it sounded. The fact that it had happened in downtown Rocky Ridge had been horrifyingly embarrassing.

“Given your age and the fact that I think you can indeed be rehabilitated, I am sentencing you to 100 hours of community service, two years probation, and outpatient rehab. In addition, you need to get a regular job.” The judge banged his gavel, and Stacy realized that that was it. Her future had been set. And there was nothing she could do about it if she didn't want to go to jail.



Chapter One

Stacy tied her apron on and looked around the kitchen. She had been working here at the Lakeshore Inn for a few weeks as a server in the dining room. It wasn't such a bad job, and the owner, Dale, was a nice guy. So far her court ordered requirements weren't going too bad. She hadn't started her community service yet. That started this weekend, and Stacy had to admit that she was feeling nervous about it.

Tasha, another server, waved to her across the kitchen, and Stacy headed toward her. Tasha was her best friend at work, if you could even call them friends. Still, she was grateful for the other woman's guidance. The training she had been given had been minimal at best, and she couldn't afford to lose this job. The judge's orders had been clear about that.

"Do you know what I heard?" Tasha asked, lowering her voice but unable to keep the excitement at bay.

"What?" Stacy asked because she was genuinely curious. Tasha was usually so even keeled that to see her this way was surprising.

"I heard that Dale just signed a contract to have a movie filmed here," Tasha said. Her eyes got wide, her eyebrows went up nearly to her hairline, and her mouth formed a comical little "o" shape.

"Wow," Stacy said with what she hoped was the right amount of enthusiasm. Honestly, she wasn't sure if she believed Tasha or not. Call her skeptical, but she wasn't sure why anyone would want to film at the Lakeshore Inn. Sure, it was a nice place on a lake in the Wind River Mountains, but it was old. Maybe that was the appeal of it.

"I know, right?" Tasha said. "How long are you here today?"

"Five hours," Stacy said. "Through the dinner rush."

Tasha gave her a sympathetic smile. "I get off at two."

Stacy gave her a tight smile in return. Part of her punishment was that she had to work at a job for over a year. So even if she hated the fact that so far she had worked every dinner shift on the days she had to work, she didn't dare complain. She just couldn't afford to lose this job.

Tasha wandered off to check on her tables, and Stacy went to check on her assigned section for the day. They were in a lull between tourist season and the holidays, so even during the dinner rush, she was never overrun with tables. Tasha had promised that it picked up during the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas, but for now Stacy was just glad that she was able to get her feet under her.

Section B. She liked that section because it was by the windows that overlooked the lake. Growing up, her mother used to bring her and Melinda to the lake like it was some extravagant vacation. And when she was little, it had seemed that way. She hadn't realized it was because they couldn't afford much. Stacy had never realized how much she appreciated her mother's sacrifices to make her life and Melinda's life just a little bit better. Easier. Safer.

Stacy felt a pang of guilt. Now that she was sober, she was discovering that a whole host of negative emotions plagued her. She longed for a drink, or something harder, but she had to do random drug testing at her outpatient program. And as for having a drink, her mother watched her like a hawk now.

The lake was rough today, with the early November wind churning up waves that had white peaks. There were no boats moored in the marina at this time of year, so the dock looked forlorn as the waves crashed against it. Stacy shook her head at her ridiculousness. Once upon a time, she had thought that she could be a poet. That ship had sailed. No pun intended.

"Miss?"

Stacy's head snapped around. She knew that she shouldn't be annoyed, but she was. There were still two minutes until her shift started, and she should be able to enjoy them. A man was waving to her from the other side of her section.

"Miss? Can I get some service over here?"

Stacy gritted her teeth and pasted a smile on her face. She pulled her order pad out of the pocket of her apron, and headed toward the man. When she got closer to him, she realized that he was actually quite good looking. Not exactly handsome or hot, but classic looking. Strong jaw, high cheekbones, long eye lashes. His eyes were a shade of pale blue that did not look real. Stacy had to knock herself back into reality.

“Sorry, sir, what can I get for you?” Stacy asked as she approached the table. She wasn’t even sure if it was in her section, but she doubted that this guy would care.

“A burger with ketchup and a glass of iced tea,” the man said.

“Coming right up,” Stacy said in her cheerful voice.

She turned away from the man, but she hadn’t gotten a step away from him when he asked, “Aren’t you going to write it down?”

“What?” Stacy asked, turning back toward him.

“Aren’t you going to write down my order?” he asked.

“I was going to write the ticket up in the kitchen,” she said. Not that it was his business how she did her job.

“I just think you should write it down now,” the man said.

“And I will. When I get to the kitchen,” Stacy said.

“You might forget. Just do it now. Where I can see,” the man said.

Stacy frowned at him. “I don’t come into your job and tell you what to do,” she said. “I know you might not think much of a serving job, but it’s important to me.”

The man looked flabbergasted. He obviously wasn’t used to being put in his place. Stacy felt a swell of pride...for all of three seconds before he said, “That’s it, I’m going to talk to your manager.”

Stacy knew that she should do something. This guy could put her job in jeopardy, and she honestly wasn’t sure what would happen if she lost her job. All she could do, though, was

stand by and watch the man stride toward the hostess stand. When Bethany, the hostess, looked back at Stacy, her heart sank. She just knew that she was going to be hauled into her manager's office and fired. It wasn't like this was the first time this had happened to her.

Suddenly, all Stacy wanted to do was hide. Well, that and to drown her sorrows in something stronger than soda. The therapist she had to see daily at the outpatient clinic told her that soon those feelings would be reduced to only once in a great while. Stacy wasn't sure she believed that. Hiding was the only option open to her at the moment.

Hurrying back to the kitchen, Stacy hastily scrawled the man's order on a ticket and stuck it in line on the order window. Gerald, the cook, glanced up at her and nodded his confirmation that he saw the order. Then Stacy slipped through the side door out of the kitchen and into the back hallway that connected the restaurant to the hotel. This area was only for staff use, so Stacy figured she would be safe here for a few minutes.

She wasn't sorry that she had opened her mouth. The guy had been rude. He probably thought that because she was a waitress, she didn't know anything, that he was smarter than her. She hated that attitude. The service industry might not be high class and elegant, but it was honest work. And she hadn't done anything like that in a long time, so she felt like she had every right to be proud of herself.

There was a doorway halfway down the hall where she could step back and not be seen. There had been a few times she'd needed to take a breather and had come in here just for that purpose. She was glad now that she had found it. The prospect of getting fired made her stomach churn. Her anxiety medication was in her purse in the staff room. If she went to get it, she'd undoubtedly be seen by someone.

“Stacy?”

At the sound of Tasha's voice, Stacy peeked around the corner. Without the haze of drugs and alcohol, she found that she was much more timid than she had anticipated. “Yes?”

“Marilyn is looking for you,” Tasha said, naming their manager. Just the mention of the woman’s name made Stacy’s stomach clench again. She thought she might throw up. “What did you do? She seems pretty mad.”

“Bad customer,” Stacy said, swallowing against her suddenly dry throat.

“Well, I’d go find Marilyn and get your side of the story in,” Tasha said.

“Okay,” Stacy said. Her anger at the way the man had behaved leaked out of her, leaving her exhausted.

She trudged past Tasha back down the hallway to the kitchen. Cutting through the back, Stacy went straight toward her manager’s office. Marilyn was seated behind her desk when Stacy knocked. The other woman motioned for Stacy to come in.

“I’ve had a complaint about you from a customer,” Marilyn said without preamble. “You are going to need to talk to the owner since you are still in your trial phase and you are on...probation.”

Stacy knew that her manager was in contact with her probation officer, but hearing it said out loud made her feel awkward and ashamed. “Where do I go?” she asked.

“Dale’s office is through the main lobby. Ask at the front desk. He’ll be expecting you,” Marilyn said.

Now Stacy was actually shaking. She made a quick stop at her locker in the staff room to get one of her anxiety meds. The therapist who had prescribed them had promised that they would help. It would just take time. Everything just seemed to take time.

After she had dry swallowed the pill and gagged a little, Stacy headed back down the connecting hallway, stepping into the lobby, feeling faint. She took a deep breath and walked straight to the reception desk.

“I need to see Dale,” Stacy said to the girl behind the desk. “Marilyn sent me over from the restaurant.”

“Oh, sure,” the girl said. “Dale’s office is right through this door. If Marilyn sent you, he’ll be expecting you.”

Stacy muttered a thank you and hurried toward the door. Each step she took just made the tension grow. If she was going to get fired, she just wanted to get it over with. A quick knock was met with, “Come in.”

Dale was a wiry old man with a shock of white hair, bushy white eyebrows, and a white handlebar mustache. He was the epitome of the old West, but there was also something mellow about him that almost put Stacy at ease.

“Stacy, right?” Dale asked.

Stacy nodded as she slid into a chair across from him. He sat regarding her for so long she wondered if he had asked her something and she just hadn’t heard him. There was an odd buzzing in her ears.

“So, let’s cut to the chase,” Dale said. “You’ve had a complaint, and I need to talk to you because your probation officer checks in with Marilyn weekly. My advice is to not be snarky to the customers. Marilyn doesn’t like that.”

“I know I shouldn’t have been, but he was rude. I’ll work on it,” Stacy said. Then she frowned. “Wait, that’s it? I’m not getting fired?”

“Why would you get fired? We all have people complain about us from time to time,” Dale said. “My philosophy is that you can’t make everyone happy one hundred percent of the time. Generally, I am for seventy-five percent. That seems like a good goal for me.”

“I suppose so,” Stacy said. She still wasn’t sure how to respond. The relief she felt was overwhelming.

“Now, you should get back to work. Chin up,” Dale said. “I think you’re a great addition to the Lakeshore Inn family.”

“Thanks, sir,” Stacy said as she stood back up to leave.

As she headed back across the hotel lobby to the restaurant, Stacy felt like this was going to be such a different

experience for her that maybe it really could be a turning point for her.



Chapter Two

Aaron Roberson scowled at the woman standing on the door step. It was the waitress from the Lakeshore Inn. “What are you doing here?” Aaron snapped. He was waiting for his new volunteer. He didn’t have time for this woman’s nonsense again.

When he had signed up to be part of the community service program for low level offenders, he hadn’t counted on so many of them not showing up. Today’s person was probably going to be a no show as well. But that still didn’t mean he had time for the obnoxious waitress. He needed today’s person to show up too because his three other staff members were all down for the count with the same stomach bug.

“You,” the woman said. “What are you doing here?”

“I asked you first,” Aaron said with a smirk. “Also, I live here. And work here. This is my animal rescue. I answered your question; now you answer mine.”

The woman groaned. “This cannot be happening. I’m here to serve out my community service.”

Aaron felt the smirk drop right off his face. “What now?” he said. “That’s not possible.”

“It is,” she said. “My name is Stacy Davies. My probation officer told me to be here at nine o’clock sharp, so here I am.”

Aaron realized that he needed to recalibrate this interaction quickly. “Great,” he said, although he knew that his tone left a lot to be desired. He just couldn’t get over how this woman, Stacy, had been so reluctant to do her job. All she had to do was write down his order while she was standing at the table so he would know that it would be right. Aaron couldn’t help it if he liked things a particular way.

“Well, come on in, then,” Aaron said, stepping back. “I’ll show you around.”

“Okay,” Stacy said. She seemed just as reluctant as he did to have her there. Not that any of the people who had done their community service with him had been overly enthusiastic. Most of them had indeed dragged their feet. Some of them had ended up being willing participants in the mission of the animal rehabilitation center.

“So we rehabilitate animals that have been wounded and release them back into the wild. I also act as the county animal control officer, so I do domestic animal rescue as well. Currently, I have seven dogs and fifteen cats that are available for adoption. On the rehab side, I have two eagles, a prairie dog, a pronghorn antelope, and an ostrich. Obviously, not a wild animal, and not being released, but the owners were abusing it so it will go to a new home when it’s all healed up.”

“That’s actually pretty cool,” Stacy started to say, but she cut herself off with a yelp.

Aaron turned to see his big cat, Evita, walk into the room. “And this is Evita,” he said. “She is a mountain lion who I have had since she was a cub. She’s completely domesticated.”

To prove this, he walked over to the cat and scratched her behind the ear. Evita lay down with a soft thump on the floor and started to purr. “She’s just a big baby,” Aaron said.

Stacy’s eyes were wide, but to her credit, she inched forward toward the cat with her hand extended. Aaron could see that she wasn’t sure if she should pet the animal or run away for fear of being eaten, but she kept moving forward. Once she patted Evita on her head, she moved backward again.

“Let’s continue the tour,” Aaron said. “Then we can sit down and figure out where your skill set will be best utilized.”

“Great,” Stacy said.

He almost chuckled as he watched her keep a close eye on Evita as they headed through the house toward the rehab rescue side.

Aaron had designed this house specifically for his mission. His main living quarters were small—just a kitchen, living

room, bedroom with attached bathroom. Toward the back of the house, he had a spacious office. To one side there was a large facility that housed the wildlife rescue and rehab. To the other was a kennel facility where he kept the dog and cat rescues that he put up for adoption. The whole thing wouldn't have been possible without the generous support of his parents, who never failed to remind him that if he used his veterinary degree for private practice he would make much more than plunking away at his nonprofit.

Not that he was bitter. He wasn't. Not exactly anyway. He appreciated their support, even if it came with the added baggage of needing to listen to them give their opinions on how he ran things. Most of the time he just avoided their calls.

“So, this side is where we keep our adoptable animals,” Aaron said, leading her into the kennel room. “The cats live in these rooms together. Unless they have a reason that they need to be separated, then we keep them over here. The dogs all have their own space unless a bonded pair comes in.”

“I'm sorry to sound stupid, but what's a bonded pair?” Stacy asked.

“Sure, yeah,” Aaron said. “There are no stupid questions here. I'd rather you ask me if you don't know something. The animals' well-being is important. So always ask. A bonded pair is a set of animals that are bonded together, and we don't want to separate them because that would be traumatic.”

“Got it,” Stacy said. She began to wander around the room, peering into the cages. She spoke softly to the animals, and several let her scratch their heads. Aaron decided that was a good sign. She would at least be able to work with the animals in here.

“Now on to the rehab side,” Aaron said.

As they walked across his office, Stacy asked, “So how did you start all of this? It seems like a pretty big undertaking.”

“It was; it is,” Aaron agreed. “I am a vet by profession, but I felt called to open this place. So I did.”

He wasn't about to share his life story with this woman he barely knew. It wasn't like he could ask her for the details of why she ended up with community service. All he knew was that the people placed with him were non-violent offenders. Some were first time offenders and others weren't. All of them had some kind of special circumstance that made the judge assign them to Aaron's rescue and rehab center.

"So in here all the animals have their own pens or kennels. The birds have their own aviaries. Obviously, there is a big difference between rescuing and rehabbing wild animals and rescuing domesticated animals."

Aaron did a quick walk through to make sure all his patients were doing fine. When he was reassured that all was well, he motioned for Stacy to join him by the prairie dog's cage.

"Aw, he's so cute," she said.

"He was hit by a car. Lucky to survive. We created this for him because he needed to be able to dig and burrow," Aaron said. "When I can, I try to make each animal's environment as much like what they will go back to as possible. That way when we release them into the wild, they still have that reference."

"That makes sense," Stacy said.

After letting her look over each cage, Aaron said, "Let's go sit down in my office for a few minutes, so I can get to know your strengths."

When they were seated, he pulled out his volunteer intake form. He would have paperwork to fill out for her probation officer, but this was for his own records. "So tell me about your experience with animals," he said.

"None?" she said. "I've never had a pet before."

"You have no animal experience?" Aaron asked, frowning. That was unusual. The judge usually assigned people here who had some kind of experience or love of animals. Most of them had at least had a goldfish before.

"Nope," Stacy said. "But I like animals."

Just then Evita came back into the room, and promptly went to Stacy, head butting her affectionately. That made Aaron feel better. Evita was a good judge of character. “Okay,” Aaron said. “We’ll just start you out simply with feeding the cats and dogs. How does that sound?”

“Fine with me,” Stacy said.

Aaron watched as she scratched Evita behind the ears. The mountain lion began to purr. He felt like Stacy would work out fine for her one hundred community service hours, even if his initial impression of her hadn’t been all that good. There was always hope for people, but they did tend to let him down more often than animals did. That’s why he preferred the company of non-human species. Still, he was glad to have the help. Hopefully, Stacy felt the same way.



Chapter Three

Stacy poked at the spaghetti that her mother had made for their dinner. Her mom had to go to work, so Stacy was alone again. Pasta seemed to be the default meal for when she was home alone. Maybe it was just easiest to heat up in the microwave. Stacy wished that she knew how to cook, but every time she thought she might want to give it a try, the whole concept exhausted her.

Melinda knew how to cook. For the longest time, Stacy had resented that about her sister. One of the laundry list of things that Stacy had resented. Now that her sister was married, had kids, and just generally had her own life, Stacy actually missed her. Not that she had ever told Melinda that.

Stacy knew that Melinda would forgive her for all the bad things Stacy had done to her over the years. And she had done some pretty bad stuff. From stealing things to physically assaulting her. Stacy was no angel, but Melinda was. She had always taken everything that Stacy dished out.

It was because she went to church all the time. Stacy knew she shouldn't judge that because it really did seem to make Melinda a better person. And they had all gone to church when Stacy was younger, but she didn't really understand how Melinda could go through life like she did. Forgiving anyone who crossed her path or meant her harm.

The therapist at her outpatient sessions kept trying to get her to write a list of all the people she had wronged over the years. It sounded so dramatic when put that way, but Stacy got the gist of the assignment. She was supposed to think about how her actions had affected other people. Maybe she should try it. Like making a list would solve anything. Still, she didn't have anything else to do, and she felt antsy.

Sticking her plate in the sink, Stacy went to her mother's office and found a pad of paper and a pen. She sat down at the desk and wrote a list of names.

Mom

Melinda

Trent

Ethan

She was sure there were more, but those were the four that seemed the most important at the moment. What had her therapist told her to do after she made the list? Oh, right. She was supposed to write a paragraph apologizing for all the things she had done wrong. Again, Stacy couldn't see what that would help, but she figured she might as well give it a try.

Mom. I have been a spoiled brat most of my life. I haven't appreciated what you gave up for me. I have cost you time and money that you didn't have so that you could come bail me out. I never say thank you; even if I'm sick of pasta, you make it for me because I literally can't cook. You still take care of me, and all I do is loaf around the house and make messes. I've brought terrible people into our lives. I've brought terrible stress onto you. Terrible things. Terrible.

Stacy frowned at the paragraph she had written. She thought she sounded ridiculous. No one else would ever see this. She was going to burn this list as soon as she was done with it or flush it down the toilet. Something. But there were no details about what she had done to her mother. Her therapist kept telling her that the more concrete she could get with her apologies, the more change she would make to her patterns and habits. None of it made sense to Stacy, but since she was trying, she figured she might as well actually try.

Melinda. I'm sorry for all the times I hit you. Like when you moved back to Rocky Ridge. I scared you. I hurt you. I let Trent scare you. I have said mean things to you more times than I can count. I have mocked your faith. I have spread rumors about you. I haven't been a very nice sister.

Stacy let out a frustrated sigh. She sounded like a seventh grader. Where was the depth of character? Her apologies should be deep and real. At least now she had something to bring up with her therapist. She decided to finish her list anyway.

Trent. I am sorry that I let you be codependent on me. With me? We were bad for each other. I wish that I could have seen that. Maybe it would have helped both of us.

Ethan. I'm sorry for hitting you with my car. The accident was all my fault.

It felt good to put on paper the bad things that she had done. Kind of like a confession. She felt lighter, even if the notes hadn't been the soul-baring treatises that she had hoped they would be. Maybe all the drugs and alcohol had truly dulled her brain. Maybe she would never be able to have deep thoughts again.

Instead of burning the list or flushing it down the toilet, Stacy took the list upstairs to her room and tucked it into the drawer in her nightstand. She had to believe that she was going to be able to make a difference in her life and the way she lived. That would have to include how she related to people.

Stacy lay down on her bed. She needed to get a hobby or something because lately she found herself growing bored. Without drugs and alcohol, she didn't have anything to do but think. And she had found that her brain was a very dark place.

If she had her choice, she never would have given up the things she was doing. She liked how it felt to be strung out, high, drunk. Take your pick. Stacy liked it, but after the DWI, she hadn't been given a choice. Detoxing from it had been horrific, but the doctor gave her medicine to take the edge off the worst of the symptoms. And somehow she had gotten through it just in time for her court date.

Now she fought with herself daily. Deep down she doubted that she could ever change for real. She had smoked her first joint at twelve, had her first drink at thirteen, and gotten into the harder stuff by fifteen. It had become her everything, and the only people she associated with were the ones who made her bad decisions look like good ones. How many times had she been told that she was a bad influence in a way that made it sound like a good thing?

Without any of that, who was she? Stacy didn't like the idea of having to get to know herself. Who wanted to do that anyway? All she would find was a loser who no one liked. Tears began to leak down the sides of Stacy's face. Frustrated with it all, she rolled over and wished for sleep to come. When it eventually did, she dreamed of the Lakeshore Inn and mountain lions and pale blue eyes.



Chapter Four

Aaron put the phone down so that he didn't drop it and crack the screen. Again. He hated getting calls like this. Animal hoarding was never easy, but this one sounded even worse than the others he had witnessed. The officer, a Daniel Hops, had told him about the animal cages stacked one on top of the other in a garage. The police had separated out the live animals from the dead ones. When Officer Hops said that, Aaron's heart had plummeted into his stomach.

He was just heading out the door when Stacy pulled up the drive. Aaron cursed under his breath. In the chaos of getting ready to do a rescue, he had forgotten that Stacy was scheduled to come today. Oh well, she would just have to come with him.

Stacy was stepping out of her car when Aaron reached her. "Hey," she said. "What's up?"

"We have a slightly different assignment today," Aaron said. "We're taking a field trip. I'll explain more in the car."

He kept walking to his truck, glancing back once to make sure that she was following him. Although she looked confused, she followed him to the truck. Once he unlocked it, they both climbed in and fastened their seat belts.

As Aaron pulled out of the driveway, Stacy asked, "So where are we going exactly?"

Aaron glanced over at her. "I got a call about a hoarding situation, so we are going to rescue the animals that are alive."

From the corner of his eye, Aaron watched as a myriad of emotions flickered across Stacy's face. He knew that it was hard to comprehend, so he gave her a moment before he continued, "It will be hard to see. I've done a number of these, and it never gets any easier."

"Hoarding," Stacy said. "Like hoarding animals?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Aaron said.

“I don’t understand,” Stacy said. “How does someone hoard animals? I mean, I’ve watched those TV shows where the people hoard garbage and old newspapers, but how can someone hoard a living thing?”

Aaron sighed. “I don’t really understand it either. The best I can tell you is that people who hoard animals have the same mental health issues that other hoarders have. It’s worse, though, because innocent animals have to suffer.”

“What are you going to need me to do?” Stacy asked.

“It depends on the situation that we are walking into,” Aaron said. “The police told me that they have removed all the deceased animals, so the ones there will need to be brought back to my place. I don’t know if you noticed, but I have a variety of kennels in the back of the truck. We will use those to transport them.”

“Okay,” said Stacy. “I have to admit that I am really nervous about this. Do you really think I’m qualified to help you in a situation like this?”

“Qualified or not,” Aaron said, “you’re here, and at the moment that is the most important factor. I would just caution you that some of these animals might be extremely snappish, especially if they haven’t eaten in a long time.”

Stacy nodded but didn’t say anything. Aaron regretted bringing her along. She didn’t know what she was doing around animals, and this was not for the faint of heart. He should have just left her back at the center and let her feed the animals while he was gone. But that wasn’t the decision that he’d made, so he needed to focus on living with the one he’d made.

That was what he was thinking about when the GPS told him to turn down a barely there dirt track. Surely this could not be the road, but yes, it was. No wonder it had taken so long for this hoarding situation to come to light. No one could get out here. Not easily at least. And it didn’t seem like there were neighbors for miles in any direction.

Aaron steered the truck over deep ruts, both of them bouncing in their seats. Stacy didn't complain, but he could tell that with each passing minute she regretted coming too. He was working on sticking by his decisions. Sometimes he made the wrong choice, but that didn't change the fact that he had to live with it. This was one of those situations, and he wished he could share his philosophy with Stacy. They didn't know each other well enough for that.

By the time they got to the end of the driveway, Aaron had a headache. There was a police cruiser waiting for them when they pulled up. They parked and climbed out. Officer Daniel Hops approached them. He and Aaron shook hands, and when Stacy tentatively reached out to shake the officer's hand, Aaron wondered if they knew each other.

"The garage is over this way," Daniel said. "It's bad in there. I don't know how many you'll be able to save. Most of them are just barely alive."

"Thanks," Aaron said. "I'll take a look. Is the homeowner around?"

"We took him down to the station," Daniel said. "Charges are being filed against him. I'll wait out here until you are done."

Aaron nodded at him and headed toward the garage. Stacy followed beside him. "When we get to the door, I want you to wait out here while I assess the situation," he said.

"Okay," Stacy said.

He could tell that she had something else to say or some question that was remaining unasked, and he wasn't sure why. Although he wanted to make sure that she was comfortable, there just wasn't time to talk through every scenario that might present itself. Stacy stopped about five feet from the door, and Aaron knew why.

The stench from the open garage door hit them like a brick wall. Aaron reminded himself to breathe through his mouth, not his nose. He glanced back at Stacy to see if she was okay, and he found her watching him with big eyes. Then he turned

back to the garage door and pulled out his phone. He flipped on the flashlight and went inside. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the combination of dim light and flashlight, but when he was able to see better, he was horrified with what he found.

Cages, small ones, were stacked floor to ceiling around the perimeter of the garage with more scattered throughout the middle section. From what he could tell there was a mix of extremely malnourished cats and dogs. There were so many that he couldn't believe that officers had already taken the deceased ones out. How many animals had been here in the first place?

Aaron went slowly around the room, shining his flashlight into each cage. Some of the animals growled or hissed at him while others were too weak to make any sounds. Some animals pressed against the sides of the cages, desperate for any attention. How someone could do this was beyond him, but Aaron knew that he didn't have time to dwell on the anger he felt. Instead, he knew that he needed to come up with a plan.

From his preliminary count there were fifteen dogs and thirty cats. He didn't have room in his main center buildings for all these animals, so he would have to use one of his outbuildings. He'd done that before, and they were perfectly well suited to the task. He had made sure of that. But he couldn't transport them all on his truck. He would have to ask Daniel if he could get some help out there.

Emerging from the garage, Aaron's eyes teared up from the sudden brightness of the sun. At least, that's what he told himself. He swiped at his eyes quickly before anyone noticed. He had to move fast. All of these animals would need veterinary care, which he would provide as soon as they got back to the center.

Aaron paused beside Stacy. "It's pretty bad in there. We're going to have a lot of work to do. You need to brace yourself."

"I can deal with it," she said, although she didn't sound too sure.

After Aaron talked to Daniel, he forced the large garage door up, so that light and air flooded into the space. There was a cacophony of noise as the animals adjusted to the new set of circumstances. Who knew how long it had been since they had seen sunlight or breathed in fresh air?

“Oh my goodness,” Stacy said, her hands flying to her mouth. “Those poor animals.”

He let her have a few moments to adjust before he said, “We’re going to get the cat cages out first. Officer Hops is having a police truck come to transport them to the center. Then we’ll get the dogs out on leads and get them into my truck. Would you mind running back and grabbing the leashes and work gloves? They are in the utility box in the back. It’s unlocked.”

“Sure,” Stacy said.

While she did that, Aaron began pulling out the closest cat cages. Each one was so small the poor animals barely had room to turn around. They were caked with urine and feces, and all of them had ribs showing.

By the time Stacy returned, Aaron had already gotten out ten of the cats. He was moving fast, almost frantically, but he continued to remind himself that he needed to slow down. There was no good that would come from him rushing. He might make a mistake that could cost one of these animals their lives.

Stacy pulled on a pair of work gloves, and after watching him for a few minutes, jumped right in and started hauling out cat cages. She didn’t seem fazed when some of the cats hissed and spit at her, swiping at the bars with their claws. Aaron was glad to see that some of the felines had some fight left in them. Far worse were the ones who lay quietly in their cages. They would be harder to save.

When the police truck arrived, there were a few officers to help load up the cages. Aaron gave them specific instructions on where to wait until he got back to the center. The cages would be exposed, and it seemed like there might be a storm front moving in. Aaron suspected that the temperature would

drop, so he wanted the officers to pull into one of his outbuildings to shelter the animals until he got back.

“We’ll need to work fast to get the dogs back safely,” he told Stacy.

The first dog they approached growled but let them get the leash on and lead him to the truck. They were able to get the next six dogs out without incident. When they got to dog number eight, though, the animal cowered in the far back corner of his cage and refused to budge. Finally, Stacy crawled into the cage and talked softly to the dog. Little by little, she got him out.

“I think this one should be named Buster,” she said. “Because he is one for sure.”

Aaron had to chuckle; in spite of the horrible circumstances, he was glad that Stacy had connected with the animal. It made moving the rest of the dogs easier somehow. They worked well together, and their efficiency helped get all the dogs loaded up and back to the center before the storm rolled in.

Stacy stayed after her shift had ended to help him clean up the animals and get them into new enclosures. He appreciated that because they got the work done in half the time it would have taken him working alone. He was thrilled to see that, yet again, sticking to the choice he had made and seeing it through to the end had worked out swimmingly.



Chapter Five

Stacy carefully folded up her apron and put it back in her locker. This was the first time she had gotten off before the dinner shift. It almost felt like Marilyn was starting to like her. She had helped rescue a bunch of cats and dogs the other day. Her whole life was turning around. Stacy couldn't wait to tell her therapist all about it at their session tomorrow.

As she stepped out into the gathering November twilight, she realized that she had gone all day without wanting a drink or to smoke anything. That seemed momentous to her, and she looked around as if there would be someone to share it with.

The only person she saw was Aaron coming up the walk. Not exactly who she had pictured. She gave him a small wave, but he didn't seem to see her until he nearly collided with her. Stacy had to take a step back to avoid getting stepped on.

"Hey!" she said with a yelp. "Watch where you are going."

"Oh, Stacy, sorry," he said. "I didn't see you there."

"Obviously," she said, miffed. She took a deep breath, remembering her vow to be kinder to everyone in her life, even the people who didn't seem to deserve it at first glance. "You seem distracted, is everything okay?"

Aaron looked at her then, and she could see the sadness in his eyes. "One of the dogs we rescued didn't make it."

"What? Oh no! Which one?" Stacy asked, feeling a rush of grief wash over her.

"The one you named Buster," Aaron said.

Stacy's heart clutched in her chest, and her breathing became ragged. "How can that be?" she asked, sinking down to the step beneath her. The cold seeped through her jeans, but she didn't care. "He was fine when I left."

Aaron sat down on the step next to her. "Sometimes it just happens that there is nothing we can do to save them. Buster was too malnourished. I did everything I could."

Tears began to leak down Stacy's cheeks. "I'm sure you think that. But there had to be something else. He didn't deserve to die."

"I did do everything I could for Buster," Aaron said. She could hear the rough edge to his voice, and she realized how badly this affected him.

"I'm sorry," Stacy said. "I have no idea how you deal with this on a daily basis."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. It was such an old fashioned gesture that Stacy stopped crying and took it from him gratefully. She dabbed at her eyes and then blew her nose.

"I forget how rough it is the first time you see something like this," Aaron said with a sigh.

Stacy wanted a drink. The desire to obliterate the pain she was feeling almost overwhelmed her. All victories of not thinking about altering her state of mind with some kind of chemical substance flew out the window. Her heart was breaking, and she had no way to talk about it. She was despondent. Over a dog. A dog that she had only known for a few hours. Could an animal really take hold of your heart that fast? Apparently so.

"Doesn't it all just make you want to smash the world to pieces?" Stacy asked.

"Always," Aaron said. "That's why I do what I do. My parents like to remind me that I could make a ton more money in private practice, but then who would help these animals?"

"How do you make this gnawing pain go away?" she asked, looking up at him hopefully. She knew that he had been doing this for a number of years; surely he had some tips and tricks that he could share with her.

Aaron sighed and ran a hand through his short blond hair. "I wish that there was some kind of magic salve that I could give you to make you feel better. There isn't anything to do except grieve and move forward. That's what keeps me going.

The ones I lose make me fight harder to help the next ones that come into my care.”

“But what can I do?” Stacy asked. “I can’t do any of the things that you do.”

“You keep showing up,” Aaron said. “You help me get these animals healthy. Not just feeding them, but socializing them so they can be adopted into good, loving homes.”

“Okay,” Stacy said. “I see how that might help.”

They lapsed into silence. Stacy didn’t know if she believed that just continuing to show up would help her feel better, but she did want to help the rest of the animals that they had rescued from that garage. She was still lost in thought when Aaron cleared his throat.

“Would you, um, want to have dinner with me?” he asked.

“Oh, well, I mean, you were going to eat here, and I just got off work. I don’t really want to eat here,” Stacy said.

“We could go somewhere else,” Aaron said.

She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling too big. “Sure, that would be nice,” she said. “Where did you have in mind?”

They ended up at the Blue Jay because not much else in town was open that evening. Sunday evenings were always like that in Rocky Ridge. It was awkward for Stacy since Ethan owned the bar and she had wrecked her car smashing into his car. That had not been her finest moment. Driving while high. Even now, she wasn’t sure what she had been thinking. She had never done that before despite all her years of doing drugs and drinking.

As they approached the door, Stacy hesitated. Did she really want to go in there? She didn’t want to disappoint Aaron, especially because she felt like she needed to be near him. It made her feel better to hear him talk about all the other animals. Her heart ached every time she thought about Buster. He had trusted her. That was the only way they got him out of the cage. And he must have thought that he was going to get a better life.

And maybe she had been able to give him that for a tiny bit. She had given him a bath and then had petted him while Aaron checked him over. He hadn't been able to eat without throwing up. That should have been a red flag to her that he wasn't doing well. But she had thought that Aaron would just magically fix it. She knew he felt bad for not being able to do more for the animals, and she hoped she hadn't made him feel worse. Self doubt crept in, and she had one more thing to add to her growing list of things she didn't like about herself.

When they got a table, Stacy allowed herself to look around the packed restaurant. She was surprised to see her sister and her sister's friends seated at a table across the restaurant. Not that she should have been surprised. Her sister's friend, Faith, was engaged to the guy who owned the Blue Jay. Of course, they would all hang out here. She wished she and Aaron hadn't come.

Melinda caught sight of her, and Stacy saw the flicker of emotions that swept across her sister's face. Concern, frustration, but also, maybe happiness? Stacy wondered which of those emotions she would rather face from Melinda. Maybe the frustration because it would be the closest thing to anger her sister would ever show her.

Stacy raised her hand to wave but changed her mind and looked down at the menu in front of her. Aaron hadn't seemed to notice the exchange, and she decided that she would rather just keep it that way.

"I haven't been here before," Aaron said. "What's good?"

"The burgers are always a safe bet," Stacy said. Then she looked at him curiously. "You've never been here. How come? I was under the impression that you've lived in Rocky Ridge for a while."

Aaron grinned at her sheepishly. "I have, but when I go out to eat, I tend to go to the Lakeshore Inn. Sometimes I head over to White Plains."

Stacy laughed. "Well, then you are missing out on a lot of good stuff here in town. I'll have to show you around sometime."

“I’d like that,” he said.

Stacy glanced up from her menu to see that Ethan had come into the bar. She saw the exact moment when he spotted her, and her heart sank. He didn’t look angry, not really, but there was something startled in his expression that made her want to hide under the table. Suddenly, she wasn’t hungry anymore.

She cleared her throat. “So, the thing is, I don’t feel super comfortable here,” she said.

Aaron looked up at her, and she could tell that he wanted to ask why. Before he could, though, Melinda approached their table. Stacy wished that a hole would open up in the floor and swallow her whole. Nothing like all the awkwardness in her life being in one place at the same time.

Melinda smiled. “Hey, Stace, it’s good to see you. It’s been a while.”

Stacy shot a sideways glance at Aaron, who was pretending not to notice or pay attention to the interaction. She could feel her cheeks heating up from embarrassment. “Uh, yeah, hi, Melinda,” she said.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Melinda asked.

When Stacy didn’t answer, Aaron reached out his hand and said, “Hi, I’m Aaron. Stacy’s volunteering at my animal rehab center outside of town. We had a rough day yesterday, so we’re just out decompressing.”

Stacy knew what went through Melinda’s mind at that moment. “I’m drinking ginger ale,” Stacy said; she pushed the glass toward her sister. She couldn’t keep the anger or irritation out of her voice. Why did everyone need to check up on her at all times? She had been trying. She really had. She hadn’t had a drink in sixty-three days. That was a record for her.

“I didn’t say anything,” Melinda said in a hurt voice.

“You didn’t have to,” Stacy said. She looked at Aaron. “I’m sorry. This was a bad idea. I can’t be here right now.

Thanks anyway.”

Stacy pushed her chair back and ran out of the restaurant. What had she been thinking going to a bar? Of course, everyone would think that she was there to drink. That would be a stigma that she would carry with her for the rest of her life. Why was she trying when all it ever seemed to do was backfire on her?

“Hey, Stacy, wait!” Aaron called.

The problem was that she didn’t want to wait. She wanted to get as far away from the Blue Jay and Melinda and her past as she could. So she kept walking. She knew that Aaron was following her. Part of her appreciated his concern, but mostly, she just wanted to push him away.

Finally, she stopped and turned toward him. “I’m fine, Aaron. Just go home. Take care of all those animals. I don’t need anyone to take care of me.”

“We all need people to take care of us,” he said, coming closer until they were only inches apart.

Stacy tipped her head back so that she could look up at him. He leaned down. In that instant, she knew that he was going to kiss her, and she wanted him to. If she couldn’t have drugs or alcohol, then maybe she could obliterate her feelings by making out with a good looking man.

But before his lips touched hers, he pulled away. “Why don’t you let me take you home?” he asked.

Confused, Stacy nodded. “Oh, okay, sure,” she said.

She wanted to ask him if she had misread the signals, but she was too embarrassed, so she sat quietly in the truck the entire way back to her house. She waved goodbye before bolting out of the cab and up to her porch. She felt like she was in high school all over again. Except this time she had to live through all the feelings sober.



Chapter Six

Stacy didn't show up the next day, and Aaron didn't blame her. This hoarding case had been the hardest one he had ever experienced. Then the dog that she had clearly fallen in love with had died. She just needed the day to grieve. He wasn't going to rat her out for something like that. If the probation officer called today, Aaron would tell the man what a huge help Stacy had been in rescuing all the animals.

Aaron told himself that Stacy definitely did not not show up because of their almost kiss the night before. He knew that he had been drawn to her sadness over Buster and wanted to comfort her. Luckily, he had realized what a huge mistake they would have made if they had allowed themselves to go through with the kiss.

As he sat at his desk with Evita purring and snoring at his feet, he wondered if he should try calling Stacy. It was because of him that they had nearly crossed a line that they wouldn't have been able to come back from. Maybe he should apologize for that. But then, he didn't want her to think that he didn't want to kiss her. Because he did. Even if he knew he shouldn't.

He wished that the rest of his staff was back. Although it had only been two days since they'd last been in, it felt like an eternity. He was just glad that he hadn't gotten whatever it was that they had. Knock on wood. Fannie, his vet tech, would have been great to have on the rescue. Not that Stacy had done a bad job. Quite the opposite actually.

Standing abruptly, he decided to go out to check on the rescued animals. As he strode out the door into the brisk fall air, he took a moment to look around the property. Although his parents had given him the money to buy an old ranch, they had never approved of his decision. That they made abundantly clear. Every time he talked to them.

Still, he would always be grateful for the fact that their funds had given him forty-four acres on the edge of Rocky Ridge. Most of the land was suitable for pasture in the

summer, and when he had large animals that needed more space, he often let them roam. Mostly just cattle but occasionally there were wild horses that the men who leased the government land brought in.

As he approached the long building that at one point had been a work shop for the previous owner, he could hear raucous barking. That made him feel good. The more the dogs barked, the more certain he was that they were going to make it. When they went silent was when he started to worry.

Pushing the door open, he was met with excitement that only dogs could give. Looking around at the large space, he wished again that Fannie, Rachel, and Nicole were back at work. At least he had been able to avoid the stomach bug. That was honestly the only thought he had about it at the moment.

Just as he started his rounds, his phone rang. He pulled it out to answer and realized that he needed to step outside just to hear anything. Chuckling, he headed to the door. "Hey, Fannie," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," Fannie said. "What is that noise?"

"It's from a rescue yesterday. Massive hoarding situation," Aaron said.

"How did you manage that with all of us out?" Fannie asked.

"New probation program participant," Aaron said. He paused, considering what else to tell Fannie. Usually he would just tell her everything that he was allowed to reveal, but with Stacy, he had a moment of hesitation. There was something about her that made him feel protective, even though he had a feeling she could handle herself in most situations.

"Wow, well, color me impressed," Fannie said.

"Yeah, she worked really hard," Aaron said. "So when do you think you'll be back in? As good as our new program participant is, there's really more than either of us can handle."

"Tomorrow for sure. I'm not sure about Rachel and Nicole, though," Fannie said.

“Well, I’ll take what I can get,” Aaron replied.

When they got off, Aaron went back into the outbuilding. He set about with the chores that his staff would normally do for him. He had to let each of the dogs out into the outdoor kennels so they could use the bathroom and get some exercise. Some of the dogs that were weaker needed to be separated into dog runs by themselves.

Then he let the cats out one at a time into the covered play yards he had. While each cat was out, he cleaned their litter box and fed them. This process took over two hours. By the time he finished, he had also brought all the dogs back in, fed and watered them, in addition to checking them over. All the animals seemed to be improving, even if it was just the tiniest bit.

Aaron knew that they would likely lose a few more, and even just losing Buster was one dog too many. He thought again of Stacy and wondered if he should call her. Checking in wasn’t his job, but he felt differently about her than he did most of the regular program participants. He knew that things had changed for him the second she showed her willingness to pitch in and help, but really when she had jumped in to help rescue the cats and dogs in the hoarding situation. Most people wouldn’t crawl into feces-glazed cages to coax flea-ridden dogs out. Stacy hadn’t hesitated.

He really didn’t blame Stacy for skipping today. If he could, he would have skipped it too. Some days were just harder than others. The fact that the animals needed him so much was the only reason he could keep himself coming back most days.

As Aaron headed back to the main building, he decided that he would go for a run after he made rounds of the wildlife rescue and adoptable animals. The driveway was long enough that he could usually get a decent workout. Or...he could head into town. It wasn’t like the run was all that long, and he could check in with the feed store to make sure his shipments were coming in on time.

That's just what he did too. After he checked on all the animals and made his usual rounds, he threw on a pair of sweats, locked the building, and headed off. The brisk air felt good after being in the heat of the buildings. Aaron loved how Rocky Ridge had all four seasons and how fall could turn to winter in the blink of an eye. He knew that most people in the area felt differently, but there was something about a sudden snow storm that invigorated him.

Not that he would ever admit it to anyone because it seemed so silly, but he definitely thought that it might be because he loved Christmas so much. Growing up, his family hadn't been big on decorating until the last minute, which Aaron had always felt was such a waste of magical lights and festive bits and baubles. Now he decorated on November first, if not sooner. Just a few more days. The thought made him smile.

The few miles into town went by quickly, and Aaron savored the last of the leaves falling from the trees. The bright yellow of the larch trees contrasted beautifully with the deep green of the pines, though at this time of the year most of the color had already passed its peak.

As he entered Rocky Ridge, a few snowflakes began to fall. Aaron assumed it was just a passing flurry since the weather report hadn't predicted even a bit of a chance of snow. He headed straight for the feed store where he ordered all his supplies. Although he knew that he could get things cheaper online or through a wholesale supplier, Aaron liked giving his business to a local store.

The store was busier than normal for the time of day, but Aaron liked the hustle and bustle. It wasn't something that he often found in Rocky Ridge. When he had first moved to the town, he had been surprised at how much it had to offer. Though small, it was the biggest town in the general region, so it thrived off of people coming in from smaller towns in the area.

Bev, the customer service manager, waved to him as he approached the counter. "How's it going, Aaron?" she asked.

“Good,” Aaron said, running a hand through his hair. “I have a whole bunch of new animals, so I think I’m going to need to order some more supplies.”

“I heard about the rescue yesterday,” Bev said. “Well done.”

Aaron suppressed a smile. Of course, she had heard about the rescue. Half the town had probably heard about the rescue by now. “Thanks, but you know that’s my job.”

Bev said, “Well, I don’t know what we would do around here without you.”

The compliment made a warm glow spread through Aaron’s chest. Outwardly, he gave Bev a benign smile, but inside he was ecstatic. Given that he often heard incredibly negative things from his parents about his career choice, any kind words made him remember why he had come here in the first place.

They got his order sorted out, and the one he had placed the week before had shipped right on schedule. Aaron meandered around the store for a few minutes before heading back out for the return trip home. When he stepped outside, he was surprised to find that the snow was starting to stick and the wind had picked up. This was most definitely the weather that he loved.

Driving back home proved to be a bit harder than he had anticipated, but since the snow was sticking, there were fewer people out on the road. He turned into his driveway with the overwhelming feeling like he wanted to get out his Christmas bins. And why not? Who was going to stop him? It was his home and business. He was smiling when he let himself into the house because he knew what he was doing until the next feeding/check in time.



Chapter Seven

When Stacy arrived at the animal rescue center the next day, she was met by a woman with long blonde hair streaked with purple. She was surprised because she hadn't realized anyone else worked there.

"Hey, I'm Fannie," the girl said. "You must be Stacy. You're part of the probation program, right?"

Stacy squirmed. There was an uncomfortable feeling of shame spreading through her, and it was all she could do not to turn right around and leave. "Uh, yeah," she said.

"Aaron's out back," Fannie said. "Have you met Nicole and Rachel yet?"

"Um, no. Who?" Stacy asked.

"The other girls who work here," Fannie clarified. "We were all out sick. Too bad. I heard we missed an exciting rescue."

"It was...interesting," Stacy said. She still felt awkward, but there was too much running through her head to focus on.

"Well, I have down that you are in charge of adoption center feeding and cleaning today," Fannie said.

Stacy nodded but didn't say anything because she found it hard to swallow her disappointment. She had been looking forward to working with Aaron. Maybe he was mad at her for not coming in yesterday. She just hadn't been able to face the thought of Buster being gone. She knew that was silly since she had only met the dog briefly. But something about being the one to coax the dog out of his cage had really affected her.

Fannie turned back to what she was working on at the computer. Stacy felt a flash of something that felt a lot like jealousy seeing the girl behind Aaron's desk. That was a ridiculous thing to feel, though, since she also barely knew Aaron. Stacy swallowed her discomfort and headed toward the adoption center. She doubted that there would be many people coming in today with the snowstorm they'd had yesterday.

People in Rocky Ridge were wimps when it came to the weather. Even people who had lived here all their lives.

The dogs and cats that were in the adoption center were healthy and adorable. So unlike the dogs and cats that they had rescued from that garage. Stacy shuddered at the memory. She wondered if she could go see them at the end of her shift. Maybe she'd get to talk to Aaron for a few minutes. The prospect made her brighten up.

“Hey, here you are.”

Stacy turned at the sound of Aaron's voice. “The girl at the front...Fannie? Told me to come in here. This is where I'm assigned today.”

Aaron frowned. “I swear I wrote you down for coming out to help with the rescues. I thought you might want to see how they are doing.”

Stacy nodded, relief flooding through her for some reason. “Have you...have you lost any more?”

“We haven't,” Aaron said softly.

She knew that was a good thing, but it made her even sadder for Buster. “Shouldn't I finish up in here first?” she asked, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat.

“I'll help you,” Aaron said. “That way it will go faster.”

They worked beside each other in silence. The work really did go much quicker with two people doing it. Stacy realized that this was the first time in a long time that she was letting someone else help her with something. Being an addict was a very isolating experience. Even when she had been getting high with someone else, ultimately, she had ended up alone. Trapped in her own high, in her own mind, in her own crash. No one could walk through the experience with her.

She kind of liked having a partner to share the burden of work with. It made her feel like she was connected to something bigger than herself. Connection was something she and her counselor talked a lot about. Growing up, there had been a serious lack of connection, and Stacy couldn't figure out why. Maybe it was the fact that she didn't have a father

who had been involved with her life, but she wondered why she hadn't bonded with her mother and sister.

Stacy stroked the head of a mother cat that was still with her kittens, though all the babies were ready to be adopted. Now she knew that her addictive personality had been part of her life all along. Addiction wasn't a simple disease. She'd never really be cured, and she would have to fight every day against the desire for a fix. So far she felt like she was doing a really good job. But there had been so many moments when something minor sparked her anger. And when that happened, it took everything in her to stay put. To not get in her car and drive to her dealer.

When they were done feeding the animals, Aaron said, "I'll let Fannie know we're heading out to the other building."

There were a few retorts that Stacy bit back. She had no reason to be nasty about the other woman. They were probably about the same age, but for some reason Stacy felt like she was in competition with Fannie. She was sure her counselor would have all kinds of thoughts if Stacy brought it up to her. Trying to shake away whatever this odd feeling was, Stacy followed after Aaron.

"I thought I was going to help you," Fannie said. There was a slight whine to her voice along with a barely hidden irritation. "She's just a...parolee."

"Actually, it's probation," Aaron said. "And she helped with the rescue, so that earned her the right to help me. Thanks for covering the desk until Rachel gets back tomorrow. If you need us, we'll be in Building 2."

Stacy glanced at Fannie as she passed, but the other woman didn't even glance up. It struck Stacy as she followed Aaron out to the other building that Fannie must have a crush on her boss. She could see why anyone would. Aaron was a good looking guy, and he saved animals. Plus, Stacy was pretty sure he came from money; otherwise, he couldn't afford this place. It certainly didn't make a lot of money.

Not that money was all that important to her at the moment. She was waitressing for next to nothing. She shook

her head. None of her thoughts mattered or made any sense for that matter. It was true that Aaron was the first man she'd found attractive since everything went down with Travis, but she knew she shouldn't be interested in dating anyone at the moment. She had to find herself, put herself back together.

By the time they got to the other building, Stacy was shivering and wished she'd remembered to grab her jacket. They slipped into the outbuilding, and immediately, she was warm again. After her body adjusted, she realized that she was actually a little too warm.

"Do you have the heat set to eighty-five in here or something?" she asked, fanning herself. She knew she could step back outside, but that seemed absurd.

Aaron frowned. "It does seem too warm in here, doesn't it?" he said. "I'm just going to go check the thermostat. I'll be right back."

Ten seconds after he walked off toward the back of the building, Stacy realized that she should have asked him what she should do. She was reluctant to walk to any of the cages... just in case. He had said that all the other animals were improving, but what if another one had passed away since he had last checked them? Stacy didn't want to be the one to find out.

As she was standing awkwardly by the door, she heard a sad whine. She looked around, but didn't see any animals out of their cages, so she assumed it was just a dog who wanted to be let out. A moment later she heard it again, and this time something bumped against her leg. She jumped back, startled. When she looked down, there was a small, scruffy dog sitting at her feet staring up at her.

"Oh," she said. "What are you doing out of your cage?"

She scooted back a little more until she was nearly backed into the door. The little dog kept looking at her and whining like it expected her to do something. She guessed that it wanted out, but she didn't know where she could let it out. There were dog runs, but she knew those were for specific dogs. Still, she didn't want it to make a mess inside. That was

the least fun thing to clean up. So Stacy glanced around, and when her eyes lit on a row of leashes, she reluctantly grabbed one.

“I’ll take you out,” she said to the little dog. “But don’t get used to this. You have to behave just like everyone else here.”

After she clipped the leash to the dog’s collar, she eased open the door. The cool air that hit her face felt like blessed relief after the sauna that was this building. The little dog eagerly trotted out the door, pulling the extendable leash all the way until it was taut. Stacy stood at the entryway, the door shut behind her. After the dog did its business, it trotted back to her, sat down, and looked up at her again expectantly.

“What?” she asked, like the little thing could actually respond to her.

The dog yipped at her, then tipped its head to the side. It dawned on Stacy that the dog was cold. Of course, it was. There was snow up to its knees. Did dogs have knees? Why was she bothering with such silly thoughts when the dog was cold? Embarrassed, Stacy pulled herself out of her thoughts and opened the door, ushering the dog back into the building.

“There you are,” Aaron said as Stacy and the dog reentered. “I wondered where you had gotten to. Oh! And you took Dusty out. Thanks.”

“Dusty, huh?” Stacy said as she looked down at the dog.

Aaron shrugged. “He’s a dusty color. I don’t always get creative when I name them. Anyway, thanks for taking him out.”

“He was already out of his cage,” Stacy said.

“Oh? We have a little Houdini on our hands, do we?” Aaron said.

He seemed amused, but Stacy didn’t feel the same. Something about the whole situation was making her feel sleepy. She really wanted a nap. The exhaustion that hit her all at once made her sway on her feet.

“Hey, are you feeling okay?” Aaron asked. He took a step toward her, but she waved him off.

“I think I just need to sit down for a minute,” she said.

“There’s a tiny office toward the back,” he said. “You can sit down at the desk until you feel better.”

“Thanks,” Stacy mumbled as she tossed Dusty’s leash toward Aaron.

She made it to the office, but she knew that she wasn’t okay. Her head felt light, but her vision felt dark. The room was spinning. She sat down in the desk chair with an unceremonious thump. The chair swiveled a little, making the room spin more. Stacy dropped her head to her hands and tried to steady herself.

A moment later, she heard Aaron come back into the office. “Whoa, there,” he said. “You are definitely not okay.”

“I haven’t eaten much today,” she said, although her own voice sounded far away to her own ears.

“Stay here,” Aaron said. “I’m going to run across to my house and grab something for you.”

Before she could protest, he was gone. Stacy leaned her head against the back of the chair. Her whole body felt like it was rocking from side to side. Suddenly, something landed in her lap. She let out a small yelp and opened her eyes. Dusty was sitting in her lap, looking up at her.

Some energy surged back through Stacy. “Really?” she said, struggling to sit up straighter. The little dog shifted, and his little tongue darted out and licked her on the nose.

“Ew,” Stacy said as she rubbed the slobber off with her sleeve.

“He sure likes you.”

Stacy looked up to find Aaron watching her. “Uh, yeah,” Stacy said.

“Here, drink this,” Aaron said, holding out a juice box.

Stacy took it and was grateful when Aaron scooped Dusty off her lap. As the sugar from the juice hit her system, she started to feel better. “Thanks,” she said after a long moment.

“Eat this next,” Aaron said as he set a granola bar on the desk in front of her. “I’m going to start my rounds. If you start to feel better, you can come help. If not, I’ll check in on you in a few minutes.”

Stacy watched him walk out of the room with Dusty tucked under his arm like a football. She could have sworn that the little dog looked back toward her. She wasn’t about to start liking another dog. Not after what had happened with Buster. She didn’t like how similar the two dogs’ names were, and she wondered if she could convince Aaron to change it.

As she munched on the granola bar, she thought about what she could suggest changing the name to. But she kept coming back to Dusty. The name really did suit the little dog. Frustration surged through her again. And the urge to throw everything away rushed over her. She knew that her dealer would be around. She had some cash in the car from her tips the night before. It would be so easy.

Taking a few deep breaths, Stacy calmed her speeding pulse down. And her thoughts began to ease and clear. She was not going to ruin her sobriety. She worked hard in rehab, and she was working hard now. She was going to take a few minutes, and then she was going to go help Aaron. Having a plan helped. She was going to be okay.



Chapter Eight

Aaron strode into the Lakeshore Inn, hoping that he'd find Stacy working. To his disappointment, she wasn't. He went to sit in his usual section, the one that looked out over the lake. Should he even be here? He felt like it was a conflict of interest. But was it? He wasn't her boss or her supervisor. He wasn't here to ask her on a date. He was just here to eat lunch. If she happened to be his server, they could chat. There wasn't anything wrong with that.

"Ah, one of my regulars," Dale said as he approached the table.

The owner of the Lakeshore Inn dropped into a chair opposite Aaron. This happened with pleasing regularity. Aaron had never been a regular anywhere in his life until he moved to Rocky Ridge and found the Lakeshore Inn.

"This is one of my favorite views of the lake," Dale continued. "I'm guessing it's one of yours too."

"It is," Aaron said. "This has to be one of the prettiest places in the whole world."

Dale grinned. The old man had a shock of white hair on his head and a white goatee. There was definitely something about the guy that evoked the Old West. Aaron had never really bought into the cowboy myth that most people seemed to put so much stock into, but with Dale he could kind of see the appeal.

"Now that's what I like to hear," Dale said.

They lapsed into silence. Outside, the early November sky was a pale blue against the dark stands of pines that lined the shore. Most of the snow had melted, and while most of the people in the area hated this between the seasons, the barrenness didn't bother Aaron. He still saw the beauty in the transition. And he was also excited that now more people would be decorating for the holidays. And by holidays, he meant Christmas.

“So when are your holiday decorations going up this year?” Aaron asked.

Dale chuckled. It was a conversation that they had often over the years. Last year, Dale had been firm that he waited until the day after Thanksgiving, but then he had hung a few wreaths up the week before. When Aaron had pointed this out, Dale told him that he just thought they looked nice.

“I’ll see what I can do for you,” Dale said.

By the time the waitress came to take his lunch order, Aaron and Dale had chatted about the animal rescue and the prospect of a movie being filmed at the Inn. Aaron ordered his usual. That was something else that he really loved. Having a usual order at his regular restaurant.

Growing up, Aaron had moved around a lot, but it wasn’t like most kids who moved. He had met kids whose parents were in the military. That felt like a good reason to be moved around a lot. Those parents had no choice in the matter. No. Aaron’s parents had moved him around from place to place because they got bored. And they had the money to change locations as often as they liked.

Regardless of their reasoning, the constant moving around made it hard for Aaron to make friends or feel at home. His parents had, however, gotten him a dog who had become his best friend. That first pet had started his love of animals. The rest was history.

“Here you go, sir,” the waitress said as she set his BLT sandwich down in front of him.

“Thanks,” he said. He could feel the disappointment lingering in his chest, but he tried to push it away, shove it down deep. He made sure he smiled at the girl, who he saw was named Geena. She had probably introduced herself when she came to the table to take his order, and he had just forgotten. Or more likely, he hadn’t been paying attention because he was trying to see if maybe Stacy was working, just in a different section.

Geena smiled back as she left. Aaron realized that his feelings for Stacy were bordering on romantic. Who was he kidding? He clearly had a crush on her, but that didn't matter. She was in the program to get her life back on track. Dating wasn't part of that, he didn't think. Stacy had enough to deal with.

Aaron ate his sandwich, stared out the window at the lake, and left the money for his meal and a generous tip on the table. He waved goodbye to Dale from across the restaurant. Just as he stepped outside, his phone rang.

"Mom, hello," he said after staring at the name on his lock screen a moment too long. He knew that she would be annoyed.

"Aaron, you didn't call this week," she said.

He sighed. "It's been busy here, Mom. I just rescued over thirty animals from a hoarding situation. They require a lot of care."

His mother made a non-committal sound that wasn't very dignified. Aaron knew what his parents thought of his career choice. They constantly made it abundantly clear. Still, he wished that they could support him since they also knew how important it was to him.

"Well, that's no excuse not to call your own mother," she said.

He wanted to tell her that clearly the phone worked in both directions, but he bit back his snide remark. Instead, he said, "I'm sorry, Mom. It's good to hear from you now."

"Yes," she said. "I wanted to talk to you about that little animal rescue of yours."

"Oh?" Aaron said, brightening. This was a first. There were so many things that he absolutely wanted to share with her. But where to start? His mind was racing so much he almost missed what she said next.

"Your father and I have decided that it would be in our best interest not to support this endeavor any further."

At first, his brain couldn't process what she was saying. Then his heart began to hammer. Surely she couldn't be saying what he thought she was saying. "But, Mom," he said. That was all that he could get out. There was nothing else, because even at that moment, he knew it would be futile. His mother didn't care what his mission was. She and his father didn't care how much good he was doing in the world or how hard he had worked to build his rescue center.

No amount of pleading could change her mind. So Aaron just kept quiet. He barely heard what her reasoning was. Something about how they couldn't indulge his pet projects any longer, no pun intended. Aaron added that part. His mother would never try to be funny.

"You're just going to have to stand on your own two feet, Aaron," his mother said. "You know I don't like to take the tough love approach with you, but I feel that it is time."

"I'll talk to you later," Aaron said, cutting the call short.

Immediately, his phone began lighting up again and vibrating. He could practically feel his mother's anger through the phone. Part of him felt guilty, but the larger part of him felt angry. He had never asked his parents for the money that they had given him to start his animal rescue. They had given it to him as a gift, and then they had decided that they would keep giving it to him as a charitable donation. He had no idea what had changed, but he knew that his finances were certainly in trouble.

Aaron's head began to ache. He was not going to be able to talk to either of his parents for the foreseeable future. As much as he loved both of them, he was afraid that he might say something that he would regret. Before he could start figuring out what had prompted them to withdraw their support, he needed to set about making sure that he was going to be able to keep running the shelter. He knew that what he did was a valuable service to the community.

"Okay," he said to himself, "I'll just swing by Lance's place."

Deciding to head to his accountant's office was obviously the best move at the moment. He went straight there after leaving the inn. The fact that he didn't have an appointment hadn't even occurred to him until he pulled into a parking space in front of the accountant's office. Aaron sat there for a moment, not knowing what he should do. Then he decided that he could at least check if Lance had any availability that day.

The bell over the door trilled as he walked in, and Anna, Lance's office administrator, looked up. "Hi, Aaron," she said. "I heard about the big rescue the other day. Good work."

"Thanks," Aaron said with a tight smile. "I don't have an appointment, but I was wondering if Lance has any time to see me today?"

"Yeah, sure," Anna said. "It's pretty quiet today. Go on in."

"Thanks," Aaron said again.

He headed straight to Lance's office. A quick knock brought the invitation to enter.

"Aaron, good to see you," Lance said, standing and offering his hand for Aaron to shake. "What brings you in today?"

Aaron had so much nervous energy bouncing around inside of him that he felt like he was vibrating. He took a deep breath that didn't do much to calm him down. "So, my parents have decided to stop making their monthly charitable donation to me," he said. "I need to know how long I have to figure something out before we're out of money."

Lance's eyes widened briefly as he took in what Aaron was saying. "Okay," he said. "That's a pretty big blow. Give me a minute to run the numbers."

Aaron slumped back in the chair across from Lance. He felt deflated. The anger that had propelled him here was starting to wane. Now all he wanted to do was to figure out how he was going to keep the whole operation going. He had worked too long and too hard to let everything fall apart now.

"Okay," Lance said after a few minutes. He was staring at his computer screen, and every few seconds he input data. Or

something. Aaron wasn't sure if he felt like it was a good thing that his accountant seemed so focused. It was either that or he just couldn't look Aaron in the eye.

"What is it?" Aaron asked, bracing himself for the worst of it.

"It's not as bad as you think it is," Lance said. "I can tell. So with everything you have coming in from grants and the social programs you're involved in, that will cover your bills, like gas and electric, indefinitely. So that's good news. The bad news is that your parents' monthly donation was paying your mortgage on the property."

"That's not great," Aaron agreed.

"But I think there are some simple solutions here," Lance said.

"Like what?" Aaron asked.

"Have you thought about opening a private veterinary practice?" Lance asked. "One in particular for large animals. As of right now, anyone with horses or cattle or any big animal has to go to White Plains. You'd clean up here."

Aaron sighed and ran a hand over his face. "It's always been on the periphery," he said. "I don't love the idea because it will take me away from the rescue side of things." He paused as he thought over the idea. "But I could hire some more staff. Maybe even bring in another vet when the time is right."

"Let me help you draw up a solid business plan with the calculations," Lance said. "I'm free all afternoon. That way if you need to go to the bank for a loan, you'll have the numbers at hand."

Aaron could feel how daunting that task seemed, but Lance set right to work. In a couple of hours, they had something that made Aaron feel like he was solidly on a new path. He decided to head home. When he got there, Fannie was still at her post, even though her shift had been over hours ago.

“Neither of the probation program guys showed up,” she reported. “They both called off, said they were sick.”

“Okay,” Aaron said. “I’ve heard there’s a stomach bug going around.”

Fannie frowned at him. “I called the program supervisor to report them,” she said. “And I reported that the new woman, Stephanie? I told them that she didn’t show up yesterday.”

“But she was here yesterday,” Aaron said, feeling a surge of annoyance go through him.

With a shrug, Fannie said, “The records aren’t perfect, but I felt like we should be truthful. It makes a difference for these people’s rehabilitation.”

Aaron didn’t like the tone of Fannie’s voice, but she was one of his best employees, so he wasn’t going to start a fight with her. Instead, he said, “Well, thanks for that. Why don’t you head on home? I’ll take it from here.”

Fannie hesitated like she often did at the end of her shift. Lingered. Waited for him to do something. He felt like she was always waiting for him. Sometimes he found it funny, but most of the time it just irritated him. He never said anything because he was her boss and he didn’t want to make things awkward.

“Do you...do you want to grab dinner?” Fannie asked.

He hated hearing the hopefulness in her voice. They had skirted the issue of her having a crush on him before, but now he was going to have to be more direct. “That wouldn’t be appropriate,” he said. “I’m your boss, Fannie.”

“Yeah, but, I mean, I go out to dinner with Nicole and Rachel all the time,” Fannie said. She was frowning at him. He thought there might be tears in her eyes. He hated being the bad guy. Sometimes it was just an essential part of life, though.

“They aren’t your boss,” he said.

A mask slammed down over Fannie’s features. “Right, I get it,” she said. “I’ll, um, see you tomorrow.”

He watched as the young woman strode quickly toward her car across the gravel driveway. Aaron sighed and locked the front door before he headed inside to make his rounds. Surely, Fannie would get over her infatuation with him now that he had been more firm.



Chapter Nine

“You’re back.”

Fannie’s voice was flat and totally unfriendly.

“I have over one hundred hours to finish,” Stacy said. “I’ll be back a lot.”

“Right,” Fannie said. “Aaron requested that you meet him in the back building.”

“Okay,” Stacy said.

Fannie turned away from her then, without ever making eye contact. Stacy knew that she was probably imagining the hostility, but if the other woman wasn’t angry with her, she didn’t know what the issue was. Maybe she should ask Aaron. But then again, he would probably think she was being silly for bringing up something so trivial.

The day was chilly, but honestly, the weather had been nicer than usual for early November. Stacy knew that she should soak it all in. That was what her therapist kept telling her. Be mindful. Live in the moment. All that jazz. Stacy had discovered that she was total crap at any of that. She found that she was either hyper-focused on the future or living with the overwhelming guilt and regret about the things she had done in the past. When she could be in the moment, she found that she wrestled with her desire for a fix.

Stacy swallowed the sudden, Pavlovian rush of saliva in her mouth that always came at the thought of getting a hit of... well, anything at this point. Despite the fact that Stacy was determined to stay clean, that didn’t stop her from fantasizing about doing drugs. She doubted if that feeling would ever really leave her.

Stuffing her hands into her jacket pockets, Stacy put her head down and hurried across the gravel drive to the back building where the rescued animals were still being housed. She hoped that they were all still doing well. She still didn’t think she could take it if another one had died. As each day

passed, she found that the grief over what had happened to Buster stayed with her. She wanted to feel better, but she just couldn't stop thinking about the dog. He had trusted her enough to come out of his cage. He had probably thought that he was safe, that he was going to get a new life, but then he had just ended up dying.

Pushing the sad thoughts to the back of her mind, Stacy cracked open the door to the out building. "Aaron?" she called.

"Stacy, hey," Aaron said.

She couldn't see him, but from the sound of his voice, she thought he might be at the back of the row of cat cages.

She stepped into the warmth of the building and shrugged out of her coat. Just as she was hanging it up, there was a yip and something nudged her. When she looked down, she saw Dusty. She sighed.

"You again," she said to the little dog, who stared up at her expectantly. "Don't look at me like that. Go find Aaron. Aren't you supposed to be in your kennel anyway?"

Dusty yipped again. Stacy shook her head and walked back toward where she thought Aaron was. Dusty followed her happily. What was it with the little dog? He wouldn't leave her alone. It was annoying at best. And why did Aaron constantly let the beast stay outside of his cage. None of the other dogs had that privilege.

"Hey," she said again when she found him. "What's up? Fannie told me that you needed me out here. I don't think she likes me very much."

"Why do you say that?" Aaron asked.

He didn't sound offended at the question, just genuinely curious. Stacy wondered what she should say. What proof did she even have that Fannie didn't like her? None. That's what she had. It was just a feeling. And Fannie was Aaron's employee. He had known her longer than he had known Stacy; this fact caused a flash of envy to flood through her. She didn't

want to say anything that might offend Aaron, so she just shrugged.

Aaron nodded like he understood, but she didn't know what there was to understand. Still, she liked the way he didn't press her or try to start an argument. It occurred to Stacy that Aaron probably wasn't an emotionally manipulative type of person. He was probably someone who had healthy relationships, although if she had learned anything in her life it was that appearances could be deceiving.

"So what can I help with today?" Stacy asked.

"Well, we're actually going to determine which cats can be put up for adoption," Aaron said. "For some reason, they were all in much better condition than the dogs."

"That's so strange," Stacy said, thinking about Buster again. "I'm glad that they'll be able to find homes soon."

"Definitely," Aaron agreed. "Don't forget to tell people you know that we'll have a lot of animals up for adoption in the next few weeks. It'll be a great time to get a pet."

"You sound really hopeful that they'll all get homes," Stacy said. "How can you be so sure?"

Aaron smiled at her. "I've been doing this for a while. I've never had an animal stay longer than three months. Rocky Ridge is a great community. They step up when they're needed."

"How come you don't have a pet?" Stacy asked.

"I do," Aaron said. "I have three cats. Petey. Rose. And Mika."

"Oh!" Stacy said with a gasp. "I'm sorry. I didn't know that."

"Why would you have?" Aaron said. "It hasn't come up in conversation yet. You can meet them later if you want."

"Okay," Stacy said without a moment of hesitation. "That sounds great."

“It’s a date then,” Aaron said. He seemed to catch himself, and she was sure she saw him flush. “I just meant that after we’re done here, you can meet them. I didn’t mean anything else. Nothing inappropriate.”

“It’s fine,” Stacy said. She found herself wishing that it could be a date. Just for a second it was nice to think about dating a normal guy. Not one who was caught up in the world of drugs. Not one who wanted to hurt her, physically or emotionally.

Her therapist had used the past few sessions to help Stacy understand what were emotionally abusive behaviors in her past relationships, the one with Travis in particular. Even after talking about it ad nauseam, Stacy still wasn’t sure she completely understood. It was one thing to acknowledge intellectually what her therapist was saying and quite another to have that information permeate to the core of her being.

Stacy followed Aaron from cage to cage, where he opened it up and drew the cat out. Some of them hissed and growled, but the vast majority let Aaron handle them just fine. Stacy took it upon herself to write down everything she could about each cat before they put it back. That way, she reasoned, the potential adoptive families would be able to have an idea about each animal’s personality and how it might fit in with them. The last thing they did before moving on was give each cat a name.

“I think this one should be Muffin,” Stacy said as she peered in at the gray and white striped cat.

“You really like food names with animals,” Aaron said with a laugh. “So far we have Tortellini, Lollipop, Watermelon, and now Muffin.”

“They’re cute,” Stacy said. “And the families can always change them when they adopt them.”

“True enough,” Aaron said. “I think we should name the cream-colored one over there Egg Nog.”

“I bet you end up adopting that one,” Stacy said with a teasing tone.

“Why do you say that?” Aaron said.

“It’s the only one you’ve wanted to name,” she said.

Aaron paused. “You are not wrong. Who knows? I might.”

They continued working, and when they got to Egg Nog’s cage, Stacy could already tell that she had called it correctly. Aaron took the small cat out and held her close to his chest. The cat started to purr immediately. The check over went a lot slower with this one.

“Should I just write adopted on her form?” Stacy asked.

Aaron sighed. “Yes, I am going to keep her,” he said. “She’s just too sweet not to. I’ll take her home with me tonight.”

Stacy felt a surge of pleasure at being right. There was a slight bounce to her step as they completed their work. And as they drew to a close, Stacy realized she was feeling slightly giddy at the thought of getting to see Aaron’s house. It was always so...intimate to see where someone lived. It could tell you so much about a person.

“Well, it seems like we can move twelve of the cats over tomorrow morning,” Aaron said. “And most likely another ten by Saturday. That will leave seven that will need a bit more time to get better.”

“And one is going to her furr-ever home tonight,” Stacy said with a grin.

“That she is,” Aaron said. He smiled back, and her breath caught in her throat. He had the nicest, kindest smile. She didn’t think she had ever seen a nicer smile.

She fidgeted by the door while she waited for him to get Egg Nog into a cat carrier. She slipped on her jacket and zipped it up. Then she unzipped it. She stuffed her hands into her pockets. Stacy was so caught up in her nervous energy while she waited for Aaron to finish that she almost didn’t hear the yip at her feet.

“Dusty!” she said, not meaning to sound as angry as she did. With effort, she softened her tone. “You are supposed to

be in your kennel.”

Since Aaron was busy, Stacy stooped down to pick up the little dog. She thought he would squirm or struggle, but he settled happily into her arms. Without much fuss, Stacy returned him to his kennel and made sure that the door was shut and locked.

“Ready?” Aaron asked.

“Definitely,” Stacy said.

As Aaron dimmed the lights, there was a cacophony of barks and meows and whimpers as the animals realized that they were stuck again for the night. Stacy wondered if they had any memory of being trapped in that terrifying garage. She hoped that they were all able to find good loving homes quickly.



Chapter Ten

“Wow, you really like Christmas, huh?” Stacy asked as she looked around his living space.

Aaron shrugged. “Yeah, I do.”

“I’ve never really understood that,” Stacy said.

“Understood what?” Aaron asked. He was watching her as she wandered around his living room, looking at each of his decorations. He knew that if she asked, he would tell her the story behind each of his decorations. And each one did indeed have its own story.

“People’s obsession with Christmas,” she said.

“I mean, it’s not the worst obsession to have,” Aaron said with a grin.

He was nervous about having her in his space, where he lived, where he rarely invited anyone. But he covered it well with the fact that she was already distracted by the decorations that he had put out. “This isn’t even everything I have,” he added. “Besides, I haven’t even started on the Christmas tree yet.”

Stacy smiled, a slow smile that stretched across her face like the sunrise. He had to stop himself from staring. She really was gorgeous, especially when she smiled.

She shook her head. “I guess my family was never really into Christmas,” she paused. “Or maybe it was just me. I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me why you are so into it?”

Aaron sat down on the couch. “Okay,” he said. “I started this collection when I was seven years old. My parents got... bored of where we lived basically once a year, so we moved constantly. They had money, so they were able to do that.”

“Ouch,” Stacy said, sitting down on a chair opposite him. “That sounds rough. How many times did you move in your life?”

“Eleven before I moved out to go to college at eighteen, and they still move a lot. Now they just make a circuit of their four houses, though,” Aaron said, feeling slightly embarrassed by the uninhibited privilege he had grown up with.

“So, the decorations? Obsession with Christmas?” Stacy prompted.

“Right, right,” Aaron said. “So when I was seven, we moved right after Thanksgiving. From California to Spain. Talk about a culture shock.”

“Wasn’t it awful to switch schools in the middle of the year?” Stacy asked.

“I always had a tutor, so it never really affected me,” Aaron said with a shrug. “My parents got me a dog when I was nine, so I always had a companion. But yeah, so the year I was seven, we were in a foreign country. Nothing was familiar. My parents had just told me that we wouldn’t be visiting my grandparents for Christmas that year.”

“It sounds depressing,” Stacy said.

“It was,” Aaron agreed. “But my nanny was a really kind older woman. She took me to a Christmas market of some kind, and she bought me a small tree that had little handmade decorations on it. I was hooked. That gesture brightened everything for me, and I’ll always associate Christmas with kindness and light. So I decorate as early as I can. This year it was a few days before Halloween.”

“I just never got into Christmas,” Stacy said. Her voice sounded small and far away. “I was angry from a very young age.”

“Angry?” Aaron repeated. He found that hard to believe. From every interaction he’d ever had with Stacy, anger wasn’t an emotion he would ever have associated with her.

“Yeah, life just never seemed to go my way, so I lashed out.” Stacy paused, a far away look on her face. Aaron wondered what was going through her head, what memories she was having. He could tell that whatever she was thinking about was causing her pain, and he wanted to take her pain

away. “I don’t know. My therapist seems to think that it’s the reason I started using drugs. My anger, I mean.”

“But you don’t agree?” Aaron asked. He didn’t want to pry, but he was curious. If she wanted to share, he wasn’t going to stop her.

“I started doing drugs because the people I was hanging out with were doing drugs,” Stacy said. “I was twelve. They were all older. In high school. I wanted to belong. I sure didn’t belong at home. I think sometimes people want to look for a deeper meaning in bad choices. Like my anger made me lash out so I used the drugs to numb my pain. When really? It’s so much simpler than that. I took the drugs because I thought it would make me seem cool.”

“That sounds like there might be deeper meaning in there somewhere,” Aaron said.

Stacy smiled at him sadly. “I got hooked on heavy drugs by the time I was fourteen. I’ve done some really bad things,” she said.

He wanted to tell her that nothing in her past mattered, but of course, that was a lie. Everything in her past had led her to this point. If she hadn’t experienced everything in her past, she wouldn’t be who she was at that moment. He liked this Stacy. The one who was fighting to make a better life for herself. To make herself a better version of herself. Aaron didn’t know how to say any of those things, though, so he stayed quiet.

They stayed silent for a long time, lost in their own thoughts, until a tiny meow broke through. Aaron blinked and looked around. When his gaze stopped on the cat carrier, he remembered that he had brought Egg Nog home. She meowed again.

“I guess I should let her out and see how she does with the other cats,” he said, standing.

Petey, Rose, and Mika had been lounging in the kitchen waiting for him to feed them. When Egg Nog started meowing, they all jumped down from the counter and came

into the living room to investigate. Aaron opened the door and stepped back.

Aaron watched as the small cat stepped out of her cat carrier. Mika was the first to approach, sniff, and wander off, already accepting that the little kitten was now part of the family. Petey did the same. Rose kept her distance for a few minutes but eventually came forward to sniff Egg Nog. No one hissed. No one growled. Egg Nog had made a successful, and quick, transition into the family.

He glanced over at Stacy, who was watching the whole interaction with a delighted smile on her face. Aaron realized with a jolt that he would like to have her be part of this small family too. Which was ridiculous. They barely knew each other. It had to be the close working conditions that they had been in the past week. That had to be it. Aaron felt better knowing that he wasn't falling for a woman he'd known for less than two weeks.



Chapter Eleven

Stacy looked around at the other women who came to the support group meeting week in and week out. She suspected that this was a lot like an AA meeting, although there weren't twelve steps here. It was just a lot of women who had similar issues and were looking for support. Her eyes landed on someone who she didn't recognize. Something prompted her to go toward the woman and welcome her to the meeting. It felt wholly unlike her, but it also felt pretty good.

"Hi, are you new? I just ask because I don't remember seeing you here before. I'm Stacy, by the way," she said.

The woman looked at her with big brown eyes. She looked...scared. But also exhausted. The bags under her eyes told Stacy that this woman wasn't sleeping very well. Despite the fact that she was clean, her hair was limp, and from the way she fidgeted, Stacy assumed she hadn't gotten clean too long ago. It was strange to think that Stacy was farther along on her journey than this woman and she could offer her support. How had that happened?

"I'm Amanda," the woman said. "This is my first time." There was a long pause as Amanda looked around the room at all the other women. "Do they make you talk? Like about all the stuff that you've done wrong?"

"Not at all," Stacy said. "You can just sit and listen. That's what I did for my first month. Why don't you sit with me? It's always a little easier if you know someone."

Relief settled onto Amanda's features, and Stacy felt good when she realized that she was the reason that it was there.

"Thank you," Amanda said in a soft voice.

Even though Stacy felt like she could safely say that she was farther along on her journey than she had been a month ago, she wished that she could find the words to tell Amanda that even though it got better, every day was so hard. But Stacy wasn't eloquent. Some of the people in the group got up

and started to tell their stories in ways that left Stacy with chills.

The one and only time that Stacy had gotten up to share her story, she had stumbled through the telling. Whenever she had gotten to one of the horrible things she had done, her voice had faltered, and she could feel the whole group shaming her. Except that they hadn't actually done that. Another thing that Stacy was working on in therapy was to differentiate between what was actually happening and what she perceived to be happening.

Amanda followed Stacy across the room to where a circle of chairs had been set up. They always sat in nearly the same places, so Stacy made sure to grab an extra folding chair for Amanda. It was strange but those seats meant so much to everyone in the group.

"I'm here because the court said I have to be," Amanda said in a soft voice.

"Most of us are here because of that," Stacy said, hoping that this information would reassure Amanda.

"Yeah, but I've done some really bad things," Amanda said. Stacy could hear the urgency in the other woman's voice. She recognized herself in the grief and fear. Amanda had to be worried about the exact same things Stacy had been worried about when she had first come here.

"I promise you that a lot of us here have done bad things, things we are definitely not proud of," Stacy said. "That's why we are here. It isn't just because a court ordered us to be here. It's also because we have to face those bad things at some point, and we have to let ourselves forgive what we did, who we were."

Amanda blinked her large eyes. There was still fear there, but gratitude was creeping in. Stacy remembered the first time someone here had said something similar to her. She had felt so grateful that someone finally understood what made her chest ache all the time. Being told that she could forgive herself had been so powerful.

It was at moments like this that Stacy thought about her sister, Melinda. Gratitude had always been such a big thing with her sister that it was something that Stacy had often rejected. Possibly because it was always followed by talk of God and prayer. And most of her life, Stacy hadn't seen that God had done anything for her, so why should she pray? Now, though, she had to admit that she was open to learning more about the Christian faith. Apparently, Jesus loved sinners. And Stacy was definitely a sinner.

The other group members began to take their seats. A few of them greeted Amanda, who seemed to shrink back into her chair. Stacy felt protective of the other woman. She remembered how she had felt the first time she had come here.

In her mind's eye, Stacy could still see herself walking into the community room here with the faint smell of stale coffee lingering in the air. A lot of the other women smoked, so in addition to the smell of nicotine, they seemed to share a bond given their shared vice. Stacy had put on a front, acting like she didn't care what any of the other women thought of her. Inside she had been shaking so hard that she thought she might puke. If Amanda felt even half as nervous as Stacy had felt that first day, then Stacy knew she needed someone to take care of her.

Stacy leaned over to Amanda and said in a quiet voice, "Hey, how are you doing? I know this first time can be really overwhelming. If you need to step out at any point, I can go with you."

Amanda gave her a grateful smile. Stacy wondered what it would have been like to have someone reach out to her on the first day she had attended the group. Would she have felt grateful? Or would she have shut down and pushed the person away? That was her usual MO. Reaching out to Amanda was a huge step outside of her comfort zone. Stacy found that she couldn't wait to tell her therapist about it. Her therapist and also Aaron.

"Let's get started!" one of the group leaders called.

Everyone gathered in their chairs, and the meeting started. There was the usual check in where the leaders asked if there were any case updates that people wanted to share, any relapses or temptations that had felt especially hard to control. The kind of things that most of the group participants had spent the bulk of their lives hiding. Finally, it was time for the part of the meeting that Stacy found the hardest to participate in. The sharing of stories.

Cherry asked to go first. She was a woman in her mid-thirties with blond hair shaved on one side. This week she had all her hardware in. Some weeks she took her jewelry out. When she kept all her piercings in, she was having a better week. Stacy was glad to see that this seemed to be a good week for her.

“So most of you know my story,” Cherry began. “But for those of you who don’t, the short version is that when I was twenty-four, I started doing meth while I was pregnant with my first child. When they ran the drug test in the hospital, obviously, they found out that I was using and my son was taken from me.”

Beside Stacy, Amanda made a whimpering noise and shifted in her seat. Stacy wondered what the other woman’s story was.

Cherry continued. “This pattern continued over the next seven years. I gave birth four times. I lost all four of my babies. I never had the opportunity to get them back. When I got pregnant for the fifth time, I was still using. I was low on funds so I decided that I would just take some money from a corner store in Denver. Didn’t seem like it would hurt anyone. Well, long story short, I got caught. Best thing that ever could have happened to me. The judge saw an opportunity to help me. I got clean and came back to my hometown. I got to regain custody of my baby.”

“And where are you this week?” one of the group leaders asked.

Cherry spent the next few minutes outlining what she was doing and how her recovery was continuing to progress. Stacy

hated to admit that she zoned out through most of it, but sometimes all she could think about was her own recovery, and she didn't want to think about someone else.

After Cherry, Sophia began to speak. Stacy tried to pay attention, but it was no use. She had heard Sophia's story almost three times a week for the past month. Sophia loved to share, but the thing that Stacy had noticed was that Sophia never said anything new. The woman had been in recovery for years, and she was doing well, which was great. But it got boring. Stacy had to fight just to stay awake. That was why she was thrilled when Amanda tapped her on the arm.

Amanda leaned over to her. "Can we go outside for a minute? I think I might have a panic attack if I have to listen to any more of this," she whispered.

Stacy nodded. She caught the eye of one of the group leaders and pantomimed that she was going to leave for one minute. The leader nodded back. They were pretty relaxed with people coming and going in the group. Stacy had learned that they encouraged breaks. Mental health was of the utmost importance here. It went hand in hand with recovering from their addictions.

Sensing that Amanda was going to follow her lead, Stacy stood and walked toward the door without looking back. She knew that no one else in the group cared where they were going, but that didn't stop her from feeling like they were being judged. Once they were out in the hallway, it was easier to breathe. Stacy slowed her pace so Amanda could fall into step next to her.

"Sorry," Amanda said. "It just got kind of...overwhelming listening to all those stories."

Stacy understood, but she knew that it got a lot more intense as the meetings went on. They had listened to two people rehash their stories and what they were learning. Stacy had heard both the women's stories before, and she had to admit that it was fascinating listening to how people coped and grew over time. She wondered how her story would sound to people.

“Yeah, it can be a lot,” Stacy agreed.

They stepped out into the November day where weak sunlight was trying to heat the ground, but only succeeding in making everything feel a bit overly bright. Stacy blinked as her eyes adjusted. The front steps to the building were cold as she sat down, her jeans not providing much padding. Amanda sat down beside her.

“How long have you been coming?” Amanda asked.

“Just over a month,” Stacy said. “Court ordered, along with everything else in my life.”

“What else do you have to do? If you don’t mind me asking,” Amanda said.

Stacy shrugged. “I don’t mind sharing. So, I had to get a steady job. I have a probation officer obviously. I have therapy as part of my outpatient rehab. I come here. Oh, and I work at an animal rescue as my community service. What about you?”

Amanda sighed as she slumped down on the step, shoving her hands into her pockets. “Similar. I have rehab and therapy. I have to get a job. I don’t even know where to look. My community service hasn’t been set yet. My probation officer hates me, though, so there’s that.”

“I doubt they hate you,” Stacy said.

“Oh no, she does. This woman told me that people like me make her sick and I should have gotten jail time,” Amanda said.

Stacy frowned. That didn’t sound good. Her own probation officer was a gruff older man, but he was always professional and straightforward. Their check-ins were all business. And Stacy appreciated that. “Maybe you should talk to your lawyer and see if they can get you a new probation officer,” Stacy suggested.

Amanda just shrugged. “Can I tell you the worst part of all of this?”

“Sure,” Stacy said. Even though in other circumstances it might feel strange to have someone she just met confide in her,

Stacy was getting used to the weird intimacy of group sharing sessions.

“I have a daughter,” Amanda said, “who I haven’t seen in over a year. She lives with my brother and his wife. They have a little girl too. He’s always calling me, telling me that I should come see her. That I could get her back if I get clean. But I can’t do it. They are all she’s ever known, and look at me. I’m still a wreck. What kind of life would that be for her?”

Stacy’s heart broke for Amanda. There were plenty of other women in the group who had children who they didn’t see often, and many of them were working on case plans to get their kids back. Amanda seemed so beaten down by life, though, that she wasn’t even trying to see her daughter.

“I don’t have any kids,” Stacy said. “But I do know that your daughter would benefit from having you in her life. No matter what that looks like.”

Amanda sighed. It was like Stacy could see the weight of the world crushing Amanda’s spirit right before her eyes. Stacy wanted to say something else that would be encouraging, but she couldn’t think of anything right away. So the two women sat in the cold in silence.

Just as Stacy was about to suggest that they go back inside, a car pulled into the lot that she recognized in a heartbeat. The world seemed to slow down, and her chest felt like someone was squeezing the air out of her lungs. This couldn’t be happening, but she kind of wanted it to happen too.

“Travis,” she whispered.

Amanda looked at her curiously, but Stacy didn’t have a voice to explain. All the words were stuck in her throat. Part of her wanted to run inside and let the group leaders know that she didn’t feel safe, but the bigger part of her wanted to talk to him. She still hadn’t made up her mind with what to do when his car came to a stop in front of them.



Chapter Twelve

Egg Nog batted at the feather toy that Aaron was dangling off the end of the sofa. He had told Fannie, Rachel, and Nicole to take a long lunch break. The routine chores had been completed with ease that morning, so there was no reason for them to rush back. All he wanted to do was sit in his private apartment and decompress. He still had no idea how he was going to restructure everything to make it work. No, that wasn't quite right. He had the plan that Lance had helped him outline, but the reality of putting that plan into action was causing Aaron paralysis.

He had to find a way to tell his staff that he was going to be bringing more people on board. He had to figure out what it meant for his partnership with the probation program, which there was no way he would abandon. There was also the issue of finding clients.

Aaron knew that Lance had a point about him being the only vet in Rocky Ridge. Most people traveled to White Plains to have their animals looked at. When he opened his private practice, people would come to him for the convenience of it. But he couldn't let that take up all his time, so he would have to hire another vet. He should also hire some vet techs. All in all, he estimated that he would be adding five or six new staff members. If he had thought being a boss of three people was hard, he couldn't imagine what it would be like with nearly a dozen.

His anger had subsided quite a bit, but he still wasn't taking his parents' calls. Right now all he wanted was to figure out how he was going to handle things going forward. Aaron leaned back against the sofa and closed his eyes. A few minutes worth of napping would be just the thing he needed to set his day right again.

He must have dozed off because a short while later he was awakened by something that jolted him from sleep. The sound was like nothing he had ever heard before. A creak, a snap, a crash. Then what he could only describe as a gush. Aaron

jumped off the couch, startling all four cats who went skittering in different directions. He ran toward where he thought the sound was coming from, which was the adoptable animal area.

The door to his apartment slammed shut behind him as the gushing sound got louder. Aaron knew that he was definitely hearing water, but where and why? He couldn't identify what could have possibly happened to cause something that sounded this big.

When he opened the door to the adoption center, Aaron could feel his eyes widen in dismay. There was already significant flooding with at least an inch of water across the entire floor. The dogs were barking wildly, clearly distressed with what was happening, and the cats were yowling in response to the dogs.

Aaron's brain was working overtime. A pipe must have burst, which was strange because the weather hadn't been that cold yet. There wasn't time to think about that, though. His first order of business was to get the animals to safety. He slogged into the room and opened the first kennel door. The dog raced out and into the lobby. Aaron knew this wasn't going to work. He needed to think logically.

Get the water off. That was the actual first step that he needed to take. There had to be a water valve somewhere around here. He slogged through the water to the other side of the adoption center where the bathroom was for this area. All the plumbing for that side of the building went through that area. So he assumed that's where he'd find what he needed.

Sure enough, in the back of the supply closet that was on the other side of the bathroom, he found the shut off valve for the water to the adoption center. When he got it off, Aaron took a moment to step into the main room to assess the damage. The water was deeper now and lapping against the bottom of the kennels on the ground level. The animals were still distressed.

He needed to get them out of here and call a plumber. The bill wouldn't help his financial situation either. That part didn't

matter at the moment, though. He would figure that out with everything else that needed figuring out.

Grabbing a bunch of leashes from the hooks on the wall, Aaron started opening the kennels one at a time, leashing the dogs, and moving them into the lobby a few at a time. When he had gotten all eight dogs out into the lobby, he went back in to figure out how to transport the cats. There were thirteen at the moment.

“What happened?”

Aaron turned to see Fannie standing in the doorway of the adoption center with Rachel and Nicole behind her. They all looked as shell shocked as he felt. At least they were back. Having his employees here made him feel like he could take control of the situation. Help was an essential part of his getting things in order.

“A pipe burst. We’ll deal with that in a bit, but first we need to get all of the animals out of here.” Aaron paused as he looked around. “We’ll have to open up the Merritt building. The dogs can go out right now. They’ll need to be doubled up in the kennels we have; they’re big enough. Rachel, Nicole, can you walk all the dogs and then take them out there? Fannie, can you help me get the cats in carriers so we can transport them?”

“Of course,” Fannie said. Nicole and Rachel echoed her sentiment.

Aaron pulled a few cat carriers out of the supply closet. They would have to move the cats a few at a time. The Merritt building was where Aaron had originally toyed with the idea of setting up a private vet clinic right after he had bought the property, and he had been swayed by his mother’s argument that he had spent all those years in school to be a vet. Not an animal rescuer.

He had named the building after his grandfather, who had also loved animals, and had outfitted the place with kennels for animals that needed to stay over after surgery as well as two exam rooms. He had never used it for anything but

storage. At the moment, though, he congratulated himself for thinking ahead.

Fannie set to work moving the first group of cats to the carriers. "I'll get these two settled and come back for the next two," she said. Before she hoisted the cats onto her shoulders, she gave Aaron a long, searching look. A look that seemed to say, look what she was willing to do without complaint. Why wasn't that enough?

Aaron looked away before she could read anything in his expression. He had been clear with her that she was his employee, and he didn't feel anything romantic toward her. The last thing he wanted to do was lead her on. No matter how much he appreciated her help, he wasn't going to behave any other way than a boss with his employee.



Chapter Thirteen

Travis strolled toward her with a supremely satisfied look on his face. A whole host of emotions went through Stacy at that moment. What was she supposed to do in this situation? Her therapist hadn't covered it with her yet. Part of her wanted to run away, but she could feel Amanda's eyes on her. So whatever Stacy was going to do next felt extra significant.

Her pulse started to race like she was having some kind of Pavlovian response to Travis. Forcing herself into a standing position, she walked toward him on wobbly legs. She knew that he could probably tell how nervous she was. They hadn't seen each other since she'd been in the accident that had gotten her arrested. While she was waiting for her court date, they had talked on the phone a few times, but mostly it had been to break up.

Stacy knew how bad Travis was for her. It wasn't that she blamed him for her addiction. She knew that only she could take responsibility for her own actions. But when they were together, they brought out the worst in each other. The past few months, while she had missed him, had also allowed her to see their relationship more clearly than she would ever have been able to if she'd stayed the course she had been on.

"Travis, what are you doing here?" she asked, proud that she was able to sound normal despite the trembling that had worked its way through her entire body.

"Looking for you, baby," he said. He gave her a sly smile, but from the thickness of his voice, she could tell that he was high. Hopefully, he'd be in a mellow mood.

"How'd you find me?" she asked.

"I have my ways," he said.

"What do you want?" Stacy stood firmly planted in one spot, but Travis kept coming closer to her, and all she wanted to do was back up.

“Just to have some fun,” Travis said. “We haven’t had any fun in months.”

“That’s because we broke up,” Stacy said. “Remember those conversations?”

Her voice felt flat, but she needed to stick to her resolutions, especially those that were to do with Travis. She and her therapist had made physical lists of all the things that she wanted in her life, and the corresponding lists of the things that she needed to do to get there. Number one on the list was that she needed to stay away from Travis.

Yet here he was. Standing in front of her. Temptation, as the group leaders in the meeting would say. Stacy wasn’t so sure that was the right way to describe Travis. He had been her whole world for so long that she still found it hard to believe that they had been apart for nearly three months at this point. Sometimes when she was alone at night, she longed for him to be there next to her. It wasn’t even that she wanted a fix, although she had to admit that sometimes that was at play. Really it was that she longed for the familiarity that he brought.

“Breakups are temporary,” Travis said. “Let’s just get back together.”

Stacy felt her resolve wobble because...well, he was right. Break ups could be temporary. Getting back together would be so easy. They would just pick up where they left off. She was wavering, but then Amanda coughed behind her and Stacy was brought back to reality. Everything that she would lose if she went back to her former way of life came rushing at her all at once. Her freedom was the biggest thing she would lose.

“Leave, Travis,” Stacy said. Her voice did wobble then, but the words came out strong.

“What?” Travis looked at her through his drug-induced haze. Like her words were cracking through all of that, but that his brain still couldn’t process what he was hearing.

“I said, you need to leave. Things are over between us,” Stacy said.

Travis took a step backward and stumbled a bit, like Stacy had shoved him. She felt it in her gut, the guilt that had been dancing around the periphery of her brain for the past three months. Even if Travis was a terrible influence on her, she had been the same for him, but she had real feelings for him. Complicated feelings that she couldn't just get over in a matter of days or weeks or months.

"Leave," she said again.

"Fine," Travis said. A look of pure rage descended on his face, and she shivered. She had seen him like this before, and it had never ended well. "But this isn't the last time that you'll see me."

He turned and stumbled toward his car. Stacy backed up to the steps to stand beside Amanda. She watched as he spun his wheels in an attempt to leave quickly. For a moment, she just stood still, unsure what she had just unleashed. She could only hope that he wouldn't remember any of this when he sobered up.

When Travis' car had faded from sight, Amanda let out a low whistle. "He reminds me of my ex," she said.

"Yeah?" Stacy asked. She didn't really want to talk at the moment. She was still trying to calm her racing heart down.

Amanda nodded. "We pulled some bad crap when we were together."

"Like what?" Stacy asked, curiosity cutting through her anxiety.

Amanda sat back down on the steps and wrapped her arms around her knees. Stacy noticed how often the other woman assumed defensive postures and wondered what other bad crap had happened to Amanda while she was with this ex.

"We committed a ton of robberies," Amanda said. "It's a miracle I'm not sitting in jail right now. The only reason I'm not is because I testified against my ex. That's basically the reason we broke up."

The two women sat in silence for a long time. Stacy thought that Travis might come back to try again, but this time

it wouldn't be so easy to make him leave. Because of this, she knew that they should go back inside, but she felt paralyzed. She couldn't force her body to move. Eventually, Amanda reached out to squeeze Stacy's forearm. The contact brought Stacy back to reality.

"We should get back inside," she said. "It's so cold out here."

"Yeah, it is really cold," Amanda said. "Thanks for sitting out here with me."

Stacy wanted to thank Amanda for sitting with her and witnessing her interaction with Travis, but she couldn't form the words. There was something so humbling about having someone else watch their interactions because no matter what, Stacy knew that they weren't healthy. As they walked into the building, Stacy felt something she hadn't in a long time, like she might have just made a new friend.



Chapter Fourteen

The plumber handed him the bill and actually patted him on the shoulder as he left. Aaron set the bill on his desk. Then he sat down behind the desk. And he didn't move for a whole minute. There were so many thoughts piling up in his mind that he just needed to take a break and let them settle. Besides that, Aaron felt stuck. The idea of cleaning up the mess was overwhelming, but the thought of letting it sit and mold growing panicked him.

“Hey, boss, we're going to head out.”

Aaron glanced up to see Nicole standing in the doorway. He nodded. “Okay, sounds good. Thanks for all the extra effort today. The animals and I appreciate it.”

Nicole smiled and shook her head. “All in a day's work,” she said. “You know we'd never want anything bad to happen to the animals.”

“I'll see you in the morning,” Aaron said.

Nicole shut the door gently behind her, leaving Aaron alone with his thoughts once again. The bill from the plumber was certainly more than he had hoped, but Aaron wasn't surprised. Plumbers were expensive to begin with. Add the fact that this was an emergency plumbing situation, and that made things even more expensive.

Aaron looked around the office. With the adoption center temporarily out of service, he would have to start opening up the other outbuildings to accommodate the influx of adoptable animals from the hoarding house.

When Aaron had first moved in with his dream of opening the animal rescue, he had done all the renovations that he could think of. His parents had been generous, and he'd had no reason to think that it would stop. Looking back, though, he could see that the money they had continued to give him had been a bribe to do what they wanted him to do with his life.

The house had been the weirdest renovation to everyone. Why on Earth would he want to have the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation as well as the adoption center attached to his office and living quarters? The answer to that had been that at the beginning, Aaron wasn't sure he would be able to hire employees. So his solution had been that if everything was in one building, he'd be able to do it all himself.

That lunacy hadn't lasted long, and he'd ended up with three full time employees. Now he would have even more. So maybe it was time to move the adoption center and the wildlife center to different buildings. He had enough of them. Maybe he could turn the spaces here back into a home space in the future. Looking at the plumbing bill again, he thought it would be far in the future.

Aaron sighed and dropped his head to his hands. How was he going to work through all of this? It made his head hurt. He knew that he needed to go assess the damage to the adoption center. The plumber hadn't given him much information on that part. Cleaning up wasn't in the man's job description, after all. But Aaron didn't have the money to hire a restoration service at this point.

Aaron eased the door open and peered inside. Logically, he knew that there was no mold growing yet, but his irrational fears told him that it was just lurking, waiting for the precise right moment to spring up.

As a child, Aaron had always been afraid of mold spores filling his lungs and killing him. He didn't even know where the fear had originated, and he doubted that he would ever remember. Regardless of how it had come to be, anytime he was near anything remotely damp that could encourage the growth of mold, he would break out in a cold sweat. His clammy skin would just serve to remind him even more of the danger just out of his line of sight.

Just staring at the standing water on the floor caused him to have a hard time swallowing. Maybe there was money in the budget that he could move around to hire people. But no, that wasn't a good use of his funds. He knew that. He knew that he would have to make some sacrifices if he was going to

keep his dream alive. Cleaning up the adoption center himself would have to be one of those sacrifices.

The problem was, Aaron really didn't know where to start. He shut the door with a sigh and went back to his desk. He sat down and opened his laptop. Just as he was about to start researching ways to clean up standing water, the front door opened and Stacy came in. The relief he felt at seeing her was no joke. He felt a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth even though he was still feeling panicky and overwhelmed.

"I didn't know you were coming in today," he said. "Fannie didn't have you on the schedule."

Stacy frowned. "Hmm, well I definitely know that I'm supposed to be here. It's on the schedule that I made with my probation officer."

"Oh well, doesn't matter," Aaron said. "I'm just glad that you are here. We've been having a day."

"Yeah? What happened?" Stacy asked. She settled into one of the chairs on the opposite side of his desk. He appreciated how she seemed to actually care about what went on here. A lot of their other program participants just came, did their work, and left. Not that he begrudged them that attitude. They had literally been ordered by a court to be there. But it was nice to have someone who showed interest in the place like Stacy did.

"A pipe burst in the adoption center. It flooded the floor, and we had to move all the animals to a different building," Aaron said. "Not to mention that the plumber charged an arm and a leg."

"Too bad you couldn't bribe him with a cute cat," Stacy said.

Aaron smiled. Having Stacy here definitely lessened the bad things he was feeling. She was like a ray of sunshine for his soul. He flushed at how stupidly poetic he sounded, and he was glad that Stacy couldn't hear his thoughts.

"Yeah, uh, that would have helped," he said with a choked chuckle. He cleared his throat. "So, right. The cleanup is going

to be a lot. Especially since I have no idea where to start. Kind of embarrassing actually.”

“Can I look?” Stacy asked.

“Be my guest,” Aaron said, although he wanted to warn her about the invisible mold that was probably already growing. He kept those thoughts to himself as well. Stacy didn’t need to know about his irrational fears and paranoia. Not just yet anyway. They didn’t know each other well enough for that.

Stacy eased the door open like she was afraid there would be a tidal wave of water waiting for her. After she had peeked in, she opened the door wider and shook her head. “This will be easy to clean up,” she said. “I assume you have a mop and bucket somewhere?”

“In the supply closet,” Aaron said. “Across that lake.”

“It’s not that bad,” Stacy said. “Trust me, I’ve seen worse. Do you have any box fans?”

“Sure. I have a couple in my apartment,” Aaron said.

“Why don’t you go get those?” Stacy suggested.

“Okay,” Aaron said. “But—”

“What?” Stacy asked.

“I feel bad leaving you to start the heavy work,” he admitted.

“Seriously, it’s not as bad as you think it is,” Stacy said. “And the whole point of me being here is to help with things.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back down,” Aaron said.

He turned toward his living quarters, but paused and looked back over his shoulder. Stacy hadn’t even hesitated as she strode across the water-logged floor toward the supply closet. It occurred to him that there really was so much that he didn’t know about her. So many things that made him appreciate her even more.

In his apartment, Aaron grabbed the two box fans he owned and then stopped by the closet where he kept his small

collection of tools. From there he grabbed two respirator masks. It was better to be safe than sorry. Not that he would make Stacy wear one, but he figured he could offer it to her. That wasn't too crazy a concept.

When he got back downstairs, Stacy had already begun mopping up the mess. He left the fans in the office and stepped into the adoption center. Stacy looked up when he entered. She smiled. "See?" she said. "I've already made a huge dent in the puddle. That's really all it is."

"Yeah, it does seem smaller than I remember it," Aaron said. "Uh, do you want one of these? In case of mold?"

"Sure," Stacy said, reaching out to take one. She didn't hesitate or ask him why he thought there was mold in here when the water hadn't even been sitting out for more than a few hours. She just accepted that it was a good idea to have one.

"Is there anything I can do right now?" Aaron asked. He hated having her do all the mopping, but she waved him off.

"Once I get the floor mopped up, we'll get the box fans in here," she said. "Then we can give the kennels and cages a proper cleaning. When do you think you want to get the animals back in here?"

"I'm actually thinking about using one of the outbuildings as a new adoption center," Aaron said as he leaned against the door frame. "With all the extra adoptable animals from the hoarding situation, it seems like the perfect time to transition to a bigger space."

"Makes sense," said Stacy.

"Where did you learn how to clean up a flood?" Aaron asked.

"My childhood home," Stacy said. "The basement flooded every time it rained."

"That would be my literal nightmare," Aaron said.

Stacy laughed. "It wasn't pleasant, but I have some useful life skills, right?"

Aaron watched as the water disappeared from the floor. He was on the verge of telling Stacy that she was magic, but he knew that was sort of weird. It also made him painfully aware of the privilege he had grown up with. That and the fact that he didn't really have any applicable life skills.

Once Stacy was done with the mopping, Aaron retrieved the box fans that they set up on opposite sides of the room. Aaron emptied the large bucket of murky water into the utility sink and rejoined Stacy in the main room.

"So, if you are moving the adoption center to another building, what are you going to do with this space?" she asked.

"Eventually, I think I'll have it renovated back into usable house space," Aaron said.

"Cool," Stacy said.

They made their way back into the office. There were still a lot of rounds to make and chores to do, but Aaron found that he really just wanted to linger with her for a few more minutes. He liked talking to her, getting to know little things about her. The more they talked, the more he wished he could ask her out, but he didn't think that would go over well with the probation program.

"Thanks for your help in there," Aaron said. "It was all a little too much for me."

"Why is that?" Stacy asked. She didn't sound judgmental at all, but there was definitely curiosity in her voice.

"Honestly, I never had to do any kind of cleaning growing up," Aaron said. "I was literally going to google what to do."

Stacy giggled. "Sorry," she said. "I'm not making fun of you or anything. It's actually kind of cute."

"Uh, thanks," Aaron said, feeling his face redden from the compliment. "It's that and the fact that I'm deathly afraid of mold."

"Mold?" Stacy repeated, her brow furrowing.

"I know it's not normal to be afraid of mold," Aaron said. "I don't know where the fear came from or what triggered it."

All I know is that it stops me in my tracks, and I can't function."

"Geez, I'm so sorry," Stacy said. "Fear is isolating, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," Aaron agreed. "I don't tell people about the mold thing because I'm worried what they'll think of me. I mean, I'm a grown man."

"And grown men can't be afraid of things?" Stacy asked.

"Well, sure they can," Aaron said, "but...I don't know. I guess it just wasn't acceptable growing up."

"Were your parents hard on you?" Stacy asked.

Aaron shrugged. "Not if I did what they wanted. When I did something they didn't like, they would withhold things from me. Allowance. Video games. Whatever. Either until I gave in and did it their way, or until they got bored. That was the theme of their lives. They would get bored and move on to the next shiny or exciting thing."

Stacy was quiet for a long time. "I don't have a dad," she said. "But my mom is a good person. I often wonder what she did wrong to be stuck with a kid like me."

"Don't say that," Aaron said. "I think you're great."

"Thanks," Stacy said.

Aaron realized that their conversation had veered into personal territory that Stacy might not be entirely comfortable with. He cleared his throat again. "Well," he said. "I suppose we should get out to check on all the animals. None of the afternoon rounds have been done yet."

"Oh, right," said Stacy, blinking like she had just woken up from a nap.

They headed out to check on the animals that had been moved from the adoption center. Then they went to check on the animals rescued from the hoarding house. As soon as they walked in the door, Dusty trotted up to Stacy and gave her a welcoming yip.

“Does this dog ever stay in his cage?” Stacy asked with a tinge of annoyance in her voice.

“He really likes you,” Aaron commented.

Stacy wrinkled her nose. Then she leaned down, scooped the little dog up, and took him back to his cage. Aaron thought it was pretty cute how she didn't want to bond with the dog that wanted to bond with her.

After she had put Dusty back, Stacy looked around the room. “When do you think the dogs will be ready for adoption?” she asked.

Aaron had gone to check on one of the cats that was taking longer to recover than some of the others had. “Well, I don't have room for them currently. I was thinking that I should have a big adoption event before Thanksgiving. Kind of a bring home a new friend for the holidays type thing.”

“That's a nice idea,” Stacy said. “But that's just a couple of weeks away. Can you put something together that fast?”

“Hmm...that's a good point,” Aaron said. “Honestly, I'm not sure.”

The idea for the adoption event had crossed his mind earlier that day before the burst pipe and flooding. He hadn't thought of many details yet. His thought had been that if he could host an adoption event, then he'd have room for the animals that were nearly healed and ready to find their forever homes. Plus, if he had fewer animals onsite, he could start the process of getting the private vet practice up and running.

“What if you made it a Black Friday event?” Stacy suggested. “Advertising would be really easy. You could do the whole Adopt, Don't Shop thing.”

“That could work,” Aaron said. “I'm not great at marketing. Do you think you could help me with it?”

“Me?” Stacy asked. “Yeah, that would be great.”

Aaron grinned. “We'll get started on that tomorrow, then. I think we're good here. You can call it a night.”

“Oh, okay,” Stacy said.

Aaron frowned a small frown. He had thought she'd be as excited to get off her shift as his employees, but if he was honest, she seemed disappointed to him. Still, there was nothing left for them to do at the moment. He would do another set of rounds closer to midnight. For now, he was going to sit down and figure out his finances.

As they headed toward the door, Dusty yipped at them—well, really at Stacy—for attention. She grumbled something at the small dog, and Aaron had to smile. He was truly glad that Stacy had ended up in the probation program. Without it, they never would have met.



Chapter Fifteen

Stacy hadn't realized that it had started snowing until she walked outside to head back to the main building. Had the forecast called for snow? She couldn't remember. After everything that had happened with Travis and Amanda, and then getting to the animal rescue center and finding out all that had happened, it just hadn't been on Stacy's radar to check the weather.

"Hey, Aaron, it's snowing!" Stacy called back to him. She had a feeling that he liked winter weather, given how much he liked Christmas.

She had to admit that she enjoyed the quiet that settled over everything when it snowed. There was something almost magical about being out in it. Still, she didn't relish the thought of driving back to town in this, and it seemed to be coming down fast and heavy.

Aaron appeared at the doorway of the Merritt building and grinned. "It sure is," he said. Then his smile faded into a frown. "We should get you on the road before this gets any worse."

As they headed back to the main building, the wind picked up. Stacy shivered. She hadn't brought her coat with her. After the meeting, she had come straight to her shift here at the animal center. It had been a relief to come to someplace that actually felt hopeful despite all the horrible things that brought animals there.

When they got to the main building, Stacy felt like an icicle. She was grateful to get into the warmth. Aaron walked to the front door, pulled it open to a sweep of frigid wind, and peered outside. Stacy joined him, although she was freezing. The snow was piling up quickly. She shivered again, and this time not entirely from the cold. The thought of driving in this made her blood run cold.

"Honestly?" Aaron said. "I don't think you should be out driving tonight. You can stay here. I can crash on the couch

and you can take my bedroom.”

“Okay,” Stacy said without any hesitation. She wasn’t ready to voice her fear out loud, but where Aaron was deathly afraid of mold, Stacy was terrified of sliding off an icy road and not being found until it was too late.

“Why don’t we head upstairs and I’ll make us dinner? We could put a movie on too, if you want,” Aaron said.

Stacy thought it sounded a lot like the sleepovers her sister Melinda used to have with all of her friends. Those slumber parties had made Stacy so jealous, but instead of asking to be included, she had just lashed out, done mean things to get their attention.

“Sounds great,” she said. “But, oh, I don’t have any pajamas or a toothbrush.”

“You can borrow some of my pjs,” Aaron said. “And I’m sure I have an extra toothbrush. I always buy double packs.”

“You sound like a Boy Scout,” Stacy said. “Always prepared. Isn’t that their motto or something?”

Aaron shrugged. “I have no idea,” he said. “I was never in Boy Scouts.”

They climbed the stairs to Aaron’s apartment. Stacy realized that she was excited to see if he had put up more decorations yet. Of course, he had. So while Aaron went to start dinner, Stacy looked around at the ornaments on his tree, the large vintage Santa in a corner, and a row of tiny stockings that had his cats’ names on them.

She really admired the way Aaron seemed so bonded to his animals. They were his family. She wondered if she might ever have an animal that she felt that kind of bond with. Buster might have been that animal for her. That might be why she had gotten so attached in such a short amount of time. The grief threatened to swell again, but Stacy pushed it away. She was not going to ruin tonight with sadness or second guessing herself.

“Does mac and cheese sound okay?” Aaron called from his tiny kitchen on the other side of the living room.

“Sure!” Stacy called back. “Anything is good.”

She was secretly pleased. Macaroni and cheese was one of her ultimate comfort foods. It was one of the only things she knew how to make herself. For a lot of years, mac and cheese had been such a staple that people joked that she would turn orange one day just like the powdered cheese. Part of her had hoped that would happen, but it never had.

After examining all of Aaron’s Christmas decorations, Stacy sat down on the sofa. She pulled out her phone and scrolled through her messages. There weren’t that many, but she was pleased to see one from Amanda just saying hi. Stacy shot a quick message back. She wasn’t sure what having a friend felt like, but she hoped that this was the beginning of something.

A short time later, Aaron came into the living room with two steaming bowls of macaroni and cheese. Stacy took the bowl gratefully. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was. When she looked at the pasta, she was shocked to see that it wasn’t the bright orange she was used to. Then it dawned on her. Aaron had made macaroni and cheese from scratch. In just a few minutes. The thought humbled her. She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had made something homemade for her. Both her mother and sister had given up on that years ago.

“This looks amazing. Thank you,” she said.

“It’s all I had ingredients for,” Aaron said in a self-deprecating tone that Stacy didn’t fully understand.

They tucked into their food and ate in silence for a few minutes. Stacy knew that there was a gap between their lived experiences, and she wasn’t sure that they could bridge it. Aaron seemed like the kind of person who had grown up with a lot of money, more than he let on. He had told her about moving a lot, having a nanny/tutor who educated him, and he had this amazing rescue. He had gone to college. All things that Stacy had never had, never known were an option for people in the world.

In some ways, Stacy felt world wise and weary. In other ways, she felt like all her years using and abusing drugs had left her without certain core experiences that her peers had had growing up. There were situations like this one where she felt almost naïve about the way the world worked. Something inside of her grasped onto this notion, and it gave her a desire to stay clean and explore these other possibilities. For the thousandth time since that afternoon, she was glad that she had stayed strong and sent Travis on his way.

When they had finished dinner, Aaron cleared their dishes and asked, “Would you like to watch a movie? I subscribe to basically every streaming service known to man even though I never have time to watch anything. Long-winded way to say, if there’s a movie you want to watch, we can access it.”

“How about *Elf*?” Stacy asked. Being surrounded by all of Aaron’s Christmas decorations was putting her in a festive holiday mood.

“Sure,” Aaron said. “That’s one of my favorite movies.”

He ran downstairs to get his laptop. When he returned, he set about getting everything set up. Just as he was about to press play, the lights flickered. They didn’t go out, but Stacy got chills. The fact that the storm seemed to be sticking around for the foreseeable future and the fact that they were outside of town did not make Stacy feel great. She hated power outages almost as much as she feared driving on icy roads.

“If the power goes out, I have to make sure all the generators are going,” Aaron said. “You don’t need to help me with it, but just so you know, I’ll have to pop out.”

“I’ll help,” Stacy said. She couldn’t imagine being left alone in an unfamiliar place. Plus, she had grown to care about the fate of the animals in Aaron’s care.

“I doubt it will go out,” Aaron said as he settled himself back against the couch. “It rarely does.”

Just as he had finished speaking, the lights flickered again. Then they flickered off once more. This time they did not come back on. Aaron swore softly under his breath and sighed.

“Well, looks like we need to go get the generators going,” he said.

Stacy hurried to get her tennis shoes back on. When Aaron saw that she didn't have a coat, he passed her one of his. She shrugged it on and zipped it up. It was ridiculously large on her, hanging almost down to her knees, but she loved it. The jacket smelled like Aaron, and she felt safe in it. Feeling safe was an underrated feeling in people. Stacy sought it as often as she could, so in that moment, she was blissfully happy.

The storm had not let up since they had been out earlier, and Aaron reached for her hand as they made their way across the yard to the first outbuilding where the hoarder house animals were. Stacy knew that he was holding her hand so they didn't get separated. That was Blizzard 101 in these parts, but there was a large part of her that just wanted to pretend that he was holding her hand because he liked her as more than just a helper or even as a friend.

When they got inside the building, Dusty immediately greeted them at the door. Aaron turned on his phone's flashlight as he headed toward the back of the building where the generator was. Stacy scooped the little dog up in her arms.

“You have got to stay in your cage,” she scolded. Dusty's little tail thumped happily against her arm. He just wanted attention.

A few moments later, the low lighting that Aaron left on for the animals along with the soothing music he played overnight came back on. Stacy felt herself exhale a breath that she hadn't realized that she had been holding. They quickly let the dogs out to do their business, checked food and water levels, and settled the animals back in for the night.

“One more outbuilding, and then we'll head back to get the main building powered on again,” Aaron said, reaching for her hand again.

They struggled through the snow to the other building where the adoption center animals were being kept. The snow drifts seemed to be getting deeper with every passing minute. Storms like this were normal for Wyoming in November, but

Stacy couldn't remember ever feeling used to them. They always howled up when she was least expecting it, and they caused her so much anxiety. That was another thing that she missed about drugs—the fact that they would keep her in a haze for days and she didn't have to feel these things that were so uncomfortable to feel.

They got the second generator going with no problem and let the dogs there out as well. After being assured that all the animals were fine, they headed back to the main building. Aaron got the generator going and checked on the rehab animals. Once everything was done, they headed back up to the apartment.

Aaron dug out a spare pair of pajamas and found Stacy a toothbrush for later. While she changed, he made popcorn and hot chocolate. They settled in to watch *Elf*, and Stacy found herself enjoying the movie more than she ever had. Maybe it was the snow storm raging outside or all the festive decorations inside. Or maybe it was the company she was keeping. But for the first time in her adult life, she found herself looking forward to Christmas.

As the movie ended, Stacy found herself nodding off, her head tipping precariously onto Aaron's shoulder. When she jerked awake suddenly, she found herself looking up into his eyes. There was something there that she had been hoping to see, hoping that he felt what she did. Stacy was almost one hundred percent certain that Aaron was going to kiss her. They'd shared a similar moment before, but she hadn't had feelings for him like she did now.

And just like that, the moment passed and he didn't kiss her. Instead, he sat up and said, "Well, I'm guessing you are exhausted. We should be getting to bed."

He walked her into the bedroom where he actually turned down the covers for her before he grabbed a spare sheet, pillow, and blanket for himself. "Sleep well," he said. "If you need anything, you know where to find me."

Stacy looked at Aaron as he retreated to the sofa. He was nothing but a perfect gentleman, and she was ashamed to

admit that she wished he wasn't. As she drifted off to sleep, the only thing she could think about was how much she wanted Aaron to kiss her.



Chapter Sixteen

Stacy had just padded downstairs in Aaron's spare pajamas with a cup of coffee when Fannie entered the office. Aaron could see the look of horror cross his employee's face as she took in the scene. He stepped between the two women so Fannie wouldn't say anything that couldn't be taken back.

"I'm guessing the roads are clear now?" Aaron asked, hoping to diffuse the situation.

Fannie gave him a look of pure betrayal, and Aaron felt the kick of guilt that such looks bring, but he knew that he hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe whatever Fannie thought had happened between him and Stacy would help her get over her infatuation with him.

"Yeah, the roads are clear," Fannie said. "I thought I should try to get here early to help you out since I figured you'd been stuck here alone since yesterday afternoon. Clearly, I was wrong about that."

"Stacy had her shift late yesterday, and by the time she was done, the storm had kicked in," Aaron said. "Luckily, she was here to help me get the generators going so all the outbuildings had heat. Thanks for coming in early today. Would you mind doing the morning rounds in the wildlife rehab center? I'm going to head out to the adoption center animals in a few minutes."

Fannie hesitated a moment before a look of defeat washed over her features. "Sure," she said. "I'll get right on that."

Once Fannie had gone to start her shift, Aaron turned to Stacy. "Sorry about that," he said.

"She has feelings for you," Stacy said softly.

"And I'm her boss," Aaron said. "And I don't have feelings for her. Not like that. She knows that. I have told her many times."

"That doesn't stop feelings from happening or existing," Stacy said.

“I know,” Aaron replied. “I keep hoping that she’ll get over it.”

“Easier said than done most of the time,” Stacy said.

Aaron wondered if she was talking about someone from her past. Although they had talked about a lot of things that bordered on intimate and personal, they hadn’t talked at all about their past relationships. Not that that was the sort of thing they would be talking about anyway, but he still couldn’t help but wonder.

“Well, I should go get dressed,” Stacy said. “If the roads are clear, that means that I have a shift to get to at the Lakeshore Inn.”

“I might be in for lunch today,” he said. “Uh, to see Dale.”

Stacy nodded like she was pretending to believe him. “Right, to see Dale,” Stacy said. “He’s one of the nicest people I have ever met.”

“I know what you mean,” Aaron said. “He really is.”

Aaron watched as Stacy climbed the stairs to his apartment. It was in that moment that he realized that his feelings for her weren’t going anywhere. He wondered if he should tell her, but he had no idea how she felt about him or how it would make her feel. What if she just liked him as a friend and his confession made things awkward for her here? That wasn’t fair to Stacy. She needed to be able to finish out her community service without feeling bad. No, he would keep his feelings to himself until she was done with the program.

That didn’t mean that he didn’t want to spend as much time with her as possible. There was still so much getting to know each other that they had to do, even if they were never more than friends. He was excited to start thinking of ways to advertise the Black Friday adoption event with her. It would give him a good way to tell the community about his new private vet clinic that he had decided would open after the first of the year.

According to the calculations that Lance had done, the rescue center would be fine even through February of next

year if Aaron did nothing. After that point, he would have a hard time paying the mortgage. Aaron wondered if there were any other community programs he could get involved with that would help defray the cost even more. It seemed like something to look into.

Aaron was so lost in thought that he didn't hear Fannie come back into the office. She cleared her throat, and when he looked at her, he could still see the pain in her eyes. He hated that he was the cause of it, but he had been clear with her. It was just something that she needed to accept.

"The wildlife center has been taken care of," she said. "All the animals look good."

"Fannie," Aaron said, "have you ever considered going to Rocky Ridge College to get your vet tech certificate? You've been working here for three years. I think you definitely have the skills and the compassion to make a great vet tech."

Fannie looked confused, but then her expression lightened as the compliments sank in. "I mean, I hadn't really thought about it because there aren't any vets in Rocky Ridge." The pleasure on her face faded. "Oh, I see," she said. "You're trying to get rid of me."

"What?" Aaron was first alarmed, then confused. When he finally realized why she was so confused, he chuckled. "No, I'm definitely not trying to get rid of you. You're a great employee, Fannie. No, actually I'm planning on opening a private vet clinic here to help offset the cost of the rescue. I will need to hire at least two, maybe three, vet techs. It seems like a great time for you to consider that."

"Wow, really?" Fannie asked. "I'll have to think about it. That would be amazing."

Aaron smiled. "You should. We'll also be hiring another vet. This place is expanding. Would you mind looking at the appointments today? I'm hoping that we have a few adoptions today. With all the animals from the hoarder house, we need to find a lot of forever homes."

Fannie perked up as she went back to work. He had meant what he had said to her. She was a good worker, and she would make an excellent vet tech. Aaron hoped that Fannie could understand that their relationship was strictly professional. That was yet another reason he didn't go out with the three young women after work. Even if it was for dinner or a drink at the Blue Jay Sports Bar, that would send a message he didn't want sent, cross a line that he didn't want to cross.

Speaking of crossing lines...Aaron let his mind drift to thoughts of Stacy. He knew that he shouldn't. It wasn't right, but he thought that there might be something between them. Something more than just acquaintances or even friends. If he was one hundred percent honest, he hadn't felt this way about anyone for a very long time.

The difference between Fannie and Stacy was vast, more than just their ages. Fannie most certainly had never strayed from the straight and narrow. She struck Aaron as the type of person who had grown up privileged. Trauma was just an abstract concept to her. That was most likely why Fannie seemed to have such big emotions when it came to him. Her unrequited love made her feel like she was living out some big dramatic story. Stacy, on the other hand, had grown up with a rawness that had informed every part of her life. Aaron saw an old soul behind her sad eyes. All of what she had been through made him aware of how much she had overcome. Her strength was admirable, but her vulnerability was what had drawn him in. Getting to know her had been a privilege.

Aaron glanced over at Fannie, who had gotten right down to work. The young woman was glowing, and he hoped it was because she could see a future here. Just not with him. Nicole and Rachel came through the front door just then, chattering to each other as they went about their routine of hanging up coats and putting away personal effects.

After greeting them and giving them their assignments, Aaron headed out to the building serving as the temporary adoption center. He knew that he needed to get as many animals adopted out as possible because the other animals from the hoarder house would be ready to be put up for

adoption very soon. There were only so many kennels to go around, less now that they were in temporary quarters.

Aaron's head hurt from trying to figure out the logistics of it all. He loved what he did more than most people. He knew that, but some days he felt like he had taken on more than he could handle. Part of him wished that he had the kind of faith people had when they could fully rely on God. Aaron prayed occasionally and he knew the odd Bible verse, but he had never been a regular church goer. Still...something about his current situation seemed to warrant a little prayer session.

"Dear Lord," Aaron mumbled out loud. "Please send people here to adopt these poor, sweet animals. Amen."

It wasn't the world's most eloquent prayer, but Aaron didn't care. He needed all the help he could get at the moment. As he stepped into the adoption room, there was a cacophony of barks and meows. All the animals seemed to know or sense that he was the person they needed, that he would help them.

"I'm trying, guys," he said to the room. There was a brief pause in the noise as if all the animals seemed to believe him. Then they started barking or meowing again and the moment faded into the hastiness of trying to figure out how to get the word out about the adoption events he had planned.



Chapter Seventeen

“I can’t find Aaron, but I assume you know where he is,” Fannie said as Stacy came through the door.

Stacy could feel the resentment coming off the younger woman in waves. She understood what it felt like to have an unrequited crush on someone. And it did make sense. Aaron was amazing. He thought that no one noticed, but Stacy could tell him that honestly everyone noticed. The dedication he had to all the animals and to the vision that he had created here—and was still creating—was incredible. Even though Stacy still felt so much shame for the mistakes that she had made in the past, she was glad that she had been sent here. Aaron was exactly who she needed at this time in her life.

“I just got here,” Stacy said as kindly as she could. “I haven’t seen Aaron yet.”

Fannie made a frustrated noise. Stacy wasn’t really sure what to do. It seemed like the other woman needed something, but it wasn’t really Stacy’s place to go about making decisions. She shifted from one foot to the other, feeling awkward, not sure how to proceed.

“Is there anything that I can help you with?” Stacy finally asked. It was why she was there, after all. She was supposed to help wherever she could. And when she was here at the animal adoption and rehab center, she felt the pull of wanting to do everything that she could to help the animals and Aaron. Nowhere else in her life did she feel that way. Actually, now that she was thinking about it, she couldn’t think of any time or place in her life that she had felt that way. She knew a lot of it had to do with Aaron.

Fannie waved her over to the computer. “Come look at this,” she said.

Stacy stood behind the younger woman. A self funding page was open on the desk top, and there was a picture of a dog on it—a dog that looked a lot like Dusty. Stacy scanned

the text. “Wait,” she said. “What is this? Is that one of our dogs?”

“It sure looks like it, doesn’t it?” Fannie agreed.

Stacy frowned at the picture and then refocused on the text underneath. The person was making a plea for people to give them money so they could get their dog out of the Rocky Ridge animal shelter. There had already been hundreds of dollars given to this person. In Stacy’s mind, there were two explanations for this post. One, this was the piece of crap human who had been hoarding animals. The other option was that this person was just a sick scammer. How they had Dusty’s picture, Stacy didn’t know, but it made her mad.

“So...do you think this is the woman who was hoarding them in the first place?” Stacy asked.

Fannie squinted at the screen as if that would decipher what it was that they were missing from the post. “I doubt it,” said Fannie. “That would be pretty bold. Besides, I think the woman was arrested for animal cruelty. Seems like a pretty bold move. Wouldn’t she just be re-arrested or something?”

Stacy shrugged. “I honestly have no idea. It seems like it. So it must be a scammer. But how do they have Dusty’s picture?”

“Well, he’s listed on the website as pre-adoption so they could have just taken it from there.” Fannie let out a hissing sigh. “I’ll have to call around and make sure that this gets taken down. If you see Aaron before I do, can you let him know about it?”

“Sure,” Stacy said, a stunned feeling smacking her in the face.

Fannie got up and hustled off to do whatever it was she was off to do that morning. Stacy sat down in her vacated chair. She stared at the picture of Dusty on the screen. As much as she told herself that she wasn’t attached to the little dog, her reaction told her that was a lie. She was outraged that someone was pretending to own him, but she had to admit that she was even more outraged to find out that he was up on the

website as pre-adoption. Stacy assumed that meant that if people were interested, they would be able to send in a request form. That way when he went up for adoption, they would be the first people on the list.

Stacy already hated these imaginary people that she was conjuring up in her head. But did that mean that she wanted to take Dusty home with her? She didn't think so. Her heart was still too bruised from losing Buster. But she had gotten so used to seeing Dusty every day. How would she feel when he wasn't there anymore? Bad. The answer was bad. So what was she supposed to do about it?

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Stacy stood and decided to go check in the adoption center for Aaron. If he was there, she could let him know about the fake self promotion page. She could also ask him why Dusty was up for adoption. That seemed like a fair enough question to her. Aaron had always seemed to imply that Dusty would be around the center for as long as Stacy was. He had, hadn't he?

Stacy liked all the animals that she had gotten to work with at this point. She would likely be sad to see any of them go, but she also wanted them all to get good homes. That was the point of an adoption center, after all. Stacy knew she was being selfish in regards to Dusty. That didn't make her feel good, but she couldn't help what she felt. That was something that she was learning in therapy.

The snow from the season's first storm had mostly melted, and they were back to fall weather. For the time being anyway. Stacy glanced up at the sky like everyone here did when they thought about snow. Call it a superstition or some sort of talisman, but the entire town did it to ward off bad snowstorms at the beginning of the season. One year there had been a blizzard on October 1st. No one had been prepared for it. Because of that fact, most ranchers still had their cattle in summer pastures, waiting for the right moment to bring them back to the winter ones closer to the ranch house. This made the herd easier to take care of in the cold months.

That year, though, the blizzard had been devastating. So many people had lost cattle that day. The cattle carcasses had

to be loaded up on special trucks that had taken them to the dump. Stacy shuddered at the thought.

She stepped through the doorway of the building that they were using as the adoption center until the flooded building had been fixed.

“Aaron?” she called as soon as she was inside.

From the other room she could hear all the barking and meowing that came from having a bunch of animals in cages and kennels. “Aaron?” she called again.

Stacy strained to listen for his reply over the noise of the animals, but she didn't hear anything. Feeling deflated, she turned to leave. If Fannie didn't know where he was either, how was Stacy supposed to find him? The property was so huge, and to top it off, Aaron might not even be there. Suppose he had run into town for something. Stacy felt silly for caring, but she really had wanted to see him.

“Stacy, hi,” Aaron said as he emerged from a doorway that Stacy had never been through before. She was intrigued. What was it that her grandmother used to say? Curiosity killed the cat. When she was little, Stacy had thought that was the stupidest thing anyone could ever say. What did she care what curiosity did to a cat? She wasn't a cat, so why did it matter? Now, of course, she realized what it meant.

“Uh, Fannie was looking for you,” Stacy said, feeling caught off guard by his sudden appearance.

“Oh? I thought she knew what she was doing today,” Aaron said with a small frown appearing on his face.

“No, I think she does,” Stacy said. “But she found this crowd funding page that has a picture of Dusty on it. Someone is claiming that he's their dog, but they need money to pay the fees that they owe you here at the adoption center. Ridiculous, of course. Fannie seems to think they got Dusty's picture off the website because he's listed as pre-adoption.”

Stacy let her words linger in the air. There was a hint of accusation in them, even if she didn't mean for there to be. Did she imagine it or did a look of discomfort cross Aaron's face?

This was all absurd because Stacy didn't want to force Aaron into some box that she had pre-set for him. She wanted him to be the fantastic human that she knew he was.

"All the animals from the hoarder house are listed for pre-adoption," Aaron said, his tone neutral.

"I just thought..." Stacy trailed off. She felt stupid for thinking that she was special, that what she wanted mattered. This was Aaron's project, business after all. He was the vet, the rescuer, so he could do with the animals as he saw fit.

Just as Aaron seemed to be about to ask her something, there was a loud clanging from the other room. Stacy followed Aaron as he hurried through to the temporary adoption center. When they got in there, they saw that one of the rabbits had knocked open the door to their cage. The rabbit was sitting on top of the cage. Stacy couldn't help but laugh. The little animal looked so proud of itself.

"Well, I'll be," Aaron said. For just a moment, Stacy caught the hint of a Southern twang, and wondered where he was from. She had never bothered to ask because she liked him just the way he was. "I've never seen any of the rabbits do something like that."

"Why would you have?" Stacy asked. "Do you get a lot of rabbits in through the adoption center?"

"We definitely get all kinds of animals," Aaron said. "As you have seen."

She had. Of course in the past few months, she had seen plenty of animals come and go through the center. There had been plenty of small animals. But she'd never seen any act quite like this. For a moment, the rabbit reminded her of Dusty.

"Well, I guess this is a good time to clean out her cage," Stacy said. She eyed the rabbit as she went to gather the supplies needed to do just that.

Stacy could feel Aaron's eyes on her as she went to the supply closet. She paused and turned to look at him. "What?"

she asked, a smile tugging at her lips. There was no way to contain her crush or her joy at being around him.

“Nothing,” he said, also trying, but failing, to suppress a grin. “You have just been such an amazing addition to this place. Most people who start helping here don’t ever really click or fit in. You definitely have done just that.”

Stacy felt her cheeks flush as she turned away. She didn’t want to make it obvious that his praise meant so much to her, but it did. Aaron’s opinion of her mattered. “Well,” she said, still turned away and busying herself with the task at hand. “I never expected to like this place so much. It wasn’t like I had much choice in the matter, but I’m sure glad that the judge felt like this place would be beneficial to me because it definitely has been.”

“You must be pretty close to finishing out your hours,” Aaron said.

Was she? Stacy frowned. She hadn’t been keeping track. She knew that her probation officer was. The thought of nearly being done here didn’t fill her with glee like she had thought it would. Her heart actually felt like it would seize up in her chest. What was wrong with her? She was nearly free. But if being free meant leaving this place, she sure didn’t want to be free anymore.

“I wish I could still help out here even after I’m done,” Stacy said. Her therapist was working on helping Stacy be more honest.

The woman could get irritating with all the things that she recommended, such as writing motivational slogans for posters or memes online. But Stacy was beginning to see the value in having someone like that in her life.

“I’d love for you to do that,” Aaron said.

Stacy felt her face flush, and she was careful not to turn so Aaron could see it too. She was pleased that he seemed to like having her around. Stacy set to work cleaning out the rabbit’s cage, which was disgusting to say the least. Even though the cages were cleaned once a day, the plain fact of the matter was

that rabbit's pooped. A lot. If they had the manpower, the rabbits would have truly needed cleaning at least twice a day.

As Stacy moved on to clean the next cage, she thought back on her therapy session the night before. The older woman always seemed to start each session by asking Stacy how she was feeling. Stacy had always assumed that that was a trope only found in the movies, but apparently not. At least the woman wasn't having her lie down on some weird blue velvet couch. That would have been way too much for Stacy.

Yesterday Stacy had told the woman that she felt fine, great even. She felt better than she had in a long time, but when asked why, Stacy had clammed up. She had mentioned Aaron before in the context of the work she did at the rescue center, but she wasn't ready to share her feelings about Aaron with anyone yet.

So after they had established how great Stacy was doing, her therapist wanted to talk some more about Stacy's childhood. Even though she pretended not to remember much or to care about any of it, Stacy felt a tenderness for the child that she had been. The angry little girl who no one had been able to reach, which had just made her angrier.

There was no one incident that Stacy could point to that had been a turning point that had triggered her addictive personality into action. There had been a long slide. Little things that had built up. Choices that she had made that compounded one on top of the other. There had been years that had been better than others, but from a young age she hadn't gotten the help she needed. There was no one to blame for any of it either. It had just been a series of things that no one had noticed or that had been overlooked by other things that Stacy struggled with.

That was another thing that Stacy struggled to come to terms with. Why hadn't anyone noticed how much she was struggling? Didn't anyone see how much she had been acting out so that someone would help her?

It seemed so cliché to blame her mother, but a lot of the time Stacy couldn't help it. There was something about the

way her mother had always tended to side with Melinda no matter what the argument that Stacy couldn't shake. Maybe she never would, but her therapist was helping her acknowledge her anger and deal with it in a healthier manner.

There were so many days that Stacy thought it would just be easier to let herself slide back into her addiction. Why not? That was what the addictive side of her brain told her. Who cared if she did? The work she had to do on herself was so hard that at times she wasn't sure why she was even trying.

Just as she thought that, though, she looked up and saw Aaron watching her with a smile on his face, and she was reminded that not all of her reasons for getting clean had to come from her rock bottom. Sometimes reasons presented themselves at just the right moment. Wasn't that something her sister Melinda always said? Stacy was beginning to believe that.



Chapter Eighteen

Aaron pulled Stacy into his arms. Her sobs continued, but her breathing seemed to even out. He didn't know what was wrong, and from the way she was gasping for air between sobs, he knew that Stacy wasn't going to be able to tell him yet. Instead, he held her gently in his arms, hoping that the embrace would be comforting. It occurred to Aaron that he didn't really know what a comforting hug felt like. There had been so few of them in his life growing up. The fact made him sad for the little boy he had been.

"Stacy, what's going on?" Aaron asked.

Stacy looked up at him with tears still shining in her eyes, her cheeks damp. She shook her head, still unable to get the words out. So Aaron just kept his arms around her loosely. Hiccupping, Stacy swiped at the tears still trickling down her cheeks. He could see that she was trying to get herself under control, but he knew how hard that could be. Luckily for him, he'd had years of practice dealing with his parents. Control was the name of the game with them.

"My mom," Stacy said, choking out the words.

"What about her?" Aaron asked.

Stacy let out the saddest sigh that he had ever heard. Just that exhalation of air broke his heart. "She's kicking me out essentially," Stacy said.

"Kicking you out? For what? That seems harsh and excessive," Aaron said.

Alarm bells were ringing everywhere in his brain, all across his body. He knew that if Stacy ended up homeless that she was statistically much more likely to start using drugs again. That idea made him start to sweat. He couldn't let that happen.

Stacy tipped her head back so that she could look up at him. "She says that she wants to sell our house," she began.

“That my recovery is taking too long and that I’m impeding her from living the life she has always wanted to live.”

“That is harsh,” Aaron said.

Stacy gave a frustrated sigh and stepped away from Aaron. He felt her sudden departure like a limb being severed. He didn’t care how harsh and melodramatic that sounded. That was what hit him square in the chest, making it hard to breathe.

Stacy began to pace back and forth in front of Aaron. He watched her, swiveling his head from side to side like he was watching a ping pong match. There were so many things that he could have said, should have said, but all he could think of was how he wanted to be the one to save her. The fact that she really didn’t need saving did cross his mind, but the idea of being a hero, her hero, was too strong of a pull. That was the only thought in his head as he stepped closer to her.

“Stacy,” he said. “Stacy.”

Saying her name twice seemed to get her to slow down. She looked at him again, waiting for him to say something. He wished there was something profound that he could say that would clarify things in her head and in her heart, but he had nothing.

“What, Aaron?” she asked, suddenly looking bone tired and world weary. Her eyes were sad. And his heart broke for her.

It didn’t matter that he had crappy parents too, and he knew how it felt to just want your mother or father to pay attention to you, to give you the love and support that you needed. Stacy needed someone to step in for her, the way Aaron had wished for someone to step in for him all those years. Once in a great while, his grandmother would be there for him. Sometimes there had been a nanny.

But the recurring theme for Aaron was that he had always internalized the notion of the Golden Rule. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* So whatever he had felt that he was lacking in his life, he would try to give to others.

Security? He was the safest person to be around always. Loyalty? He was loyal to a fault. Affection? Well, that was definitely something he struggled with, but he knew that it was something that he could work on.

“You could live here for a while,” he said without thinking.

Stacy narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m not looking for handouts,” she said, the frustration obvious in her voice. “I was just sad and needed a shoulder to cry on. Wait, do you think that I came here looking for you to solve my problems for me?”

“What? No,” Aaron said, although that was just what he was fantasizing about. From the anger on Stacy’s face, he knew it probably wasn’t the best time to be super honest.

“I thought you were different,” Stacy said.

Aaron had the crazy notion that maybe she could read his thoughts and that was what was making this that much harder. He knew that was ridiculous, but he couldn’t stop himself from going down the road to absurdity. He could also feel that whatever tenuous hold he’d had on the situation was unraveling faster than he could comprehend or keep up. At some point, he had gone from hero fantasies to being the villain in a play that he didn’t understand.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Aaron admitted. “I don’t want to solve all your problems for you. All I want to do is make you happy.”

This also appeared to be the wrong thing to say, because Stacy’s face got a pinched look and her eyes narrowed until he could barely see the whites. “You are exactly like every other guy,” Stacy said. “I don’t need saving. I’m a big girl.”

“I don’t want to save you or solve all your problems,” Aaron said. “All I want to do is help you out. I’ve got a spare room that you could have until you find a place of your own.”

“How do I know you won’t just keep trying this stuff on me?” Stacy asked. She shook her head. “I should never have come to you. How could I have been so stupid?”

Aaron wanted to tell her that, of course, she wasn't stupid. She was anything but. She was smart and savvy and brave and beautiful. But he knew that she wouldn't want to hear those compliments. Even as he thought them, he knew that they sounded just like what Stacy was saying. It made it sound like he wanted to save her, put her in a room in a high tower. She was certainly not a damsel in distress, so what was it about her that made Aaron want to be her knight in shining armor?

It hit Aaron right then and there that Stacy brought out all these feelings in him because he was in love with her. There was no going back from that thought now. He loved her, and he knew in that moment that he had to be okay with the fact that she might not love him back.

"All I said was that you could rent a room from me," he said, his voice thick with built up emotion.

"And there's so much more to it than that, isn't there?" Stacy asked. She seemed to want him to deny it, but with his newfound feelings, he couldn't lie to her, but he also couldn't tell her the truth. It was a rough spot to be in. He had a feeling that no matter what he did or said, he was going to lose, so he just stayed quiet.

Stacy shook her head, tears gone, defiance riding high in her eyes. "I'm out of here," she said. "Goodbye, Aaron."



Chapter Nineteen

“What are you doing here, Travis?” Stacy asked.

She had nearly been to her car when she'd noticed him leaning against the side of his SUV. He looked haggard, like he hadn't slept in days. His hair was longer than it had been the last time she'd seen him. She had a feeling he was high.

Travis didn't move from where he was standing, but he stared at her for a long time in silence. Knowing him the way she did, Stacy decided that one of two things was about to happen. Travis was either going to try to guilt trip her into using with him, or he was going to do something to hurt her. Neither was a good outcome, so she started to think of her getaway plan.

The first thing she did was reach behind her, groping for the door handle. When her fingers made contact, Stacy yanked it open and slid inside as fast as she could. Then she hit the power lock. Her sudden movement had jarred Travis out of whatever trance he had been in. And it seemed to piss him off.

Travis stalked across the short space between their cars. He got right up to the glass, and yelled, “Open the window, Stacy!”

“No!” Stacy yelled back.

This seemed to piss him off even more, and Travis raised his fist. At first Stacy thought that Travis was going to put his fist through the window, but instead he brought it down on the roof of her car. The clanging was unpleasant and jarring, but she still felt safe.

That was a mistake to feel that way. Travis began to pummel the roof of her car with both fists. The sound inside the car was deafening. Stacy pressed her hands against her ears to keep the sound from breaking her ear drums.

When there was a pause, Stacy yelled, “What do you want, Travis?”

She had a feeling she knew exactly what he wanted, and none of it was good for her in any way, shape, or form. Stacy felt the warning signs of a panic attack. Her breath was getting shallow, and it felt like a band was tightening around her chest. The sudden lack of oxygen was making her vision blur on the sides. As the panic set in, Stacy could feel her thoughts spinning out of control.

Was this going to be it for her? Was Travis going to kill her? If she did die, how would all the people on her list know that she had been trying to make amends? What did it feel like to die? Was there a heaven like Melinda had always believed? Or would she just be left in an endless void? Why hadn't she ever taken the time to get to know God? Was she being punished for all the bad things she had done while high or drunk? Why had she been so mean to Aaron? He would never know that she was in love with him.

The realization that she was in love with Aaron came as a total surprise right out of left field. Sure, Stacy had known that she had a huge crush on the man, but she hadn't thought anything more of it until this moment. The panic attack subsided as her brain focused on the new thought about the feelings she had toward Aaron.

Travis resumed banging on the roof of the car and alternately trying the handle. Stacy thought about starting the car and just backing up as fast as she could, but the problem with that idea was that as soon as she started the car, the doors unlocked. It was such a huge design flaw that most of the time she couldn't believe it was actually real. The second the door unlocked, Travis would have it open and would pull her out by her hair. So that wasn't an option.

Instead, she just tried to focus on her five senses and how that made her present in the moment no matter how good or bad that moment was. She could smell the musty interior of her car. She really needed to get an air freshener in there. Maybe she could get one of those that made it smell like a new car again. She had never experienced a new car smell in a car of her own, but when she'd gotten rides with guys she dated,

drug dealers she had dated, they often got a new car once a year, so she'd smelled it then.

Stacy gripped her steering wheel and flexed her fingers against the stiff rubber. It was a great way to remain calm. Too bad it didn't work in the face of a very angry Travis. He pressed his face against the window so they were just inches apart, separated only by the glass. Stacy knew that it wouldn't take much for him to break the window, and part of her wondered what was taking him so long. She could see his bloodshot eyes that had a crazed look in them, and she wondered when the last time he'd slept was.

Once, when they were dating, they had gone on a bender for days, and during that time—probably seventy-two hours minimum—Travis had slept for three of those hours. He had been extra mean during those days, but Stacy had been so strung out that she didn't really remember. Her only souvenir of those days was a broken finger that had never been looked at and therefore had never properly healed.

As Travis continued to bang on the roof, Stacy tried to focus on the rest of her senses, but she couldn't concentrate from all the noise. Since hearing would have been her next sense on the list to check off, she realized that the exercise didn't work when one was in the middle of the awful event, whatever it was. She also had nothing to taste except the bile rising in her throat that she assumed tasted a lot like fear.

The panic attack began to return as Travis began a new tactic. He began to circle the car as if he was looking for another way in. He prowled around the car several times, like a predator stalking its prey. And that is exactly what Stacy felt like. Prey. She was being hunted by someone who could do cruel and sadistic things.

Stacy watched as Travis went back to his car. Her brain screamed at her that this was her time to escape, but all she could do was alternately fumble with her keys and watch as Travis opened the back door to the car so he could retrieve something. Her heart was in her throat as she waited—waited for something that she wasn't sure about. That was the worst feeling in the world—the suspense, the thought that she wasn't

safe. Nothing about the situation felt safe to her, but she couldn't move.

When Travis straightened up, Stacy's first reaction was to feel relieved. At least he hadn't gotten out a gun or a knife. The next thing she felt was horror as she realized what it was Travis intended to do. He had his baseball bat that he had wrapped with barbed wire—inspired by a dumb TV show—and he was going to smash the crap out of her car before he moved on to her.

Stacy didn't know what else to do, so she screamed. Her shriek filled the small space of her car and reverberated everywhere, inside of her and out. She shoved her key into the ignition, not caring if the doors automatically unlocked. All she knew was that she needed to get away.

As she threw the car into reverse, she saw Aaron come out of the house. She wanted to stay and warn him to get inside and lock the doors, but she knew that if she did, she wouldn't be saying anything soon enough. Aaron yelled something at Travis, who turned toward him, the bat hovering in mid air, like suddenly Travis wasn't sure what to do with it.

Looking in her rearview mirror, Stacy could see that Aaron had a shotgun in one hand. He yelled something at Travis again. Travis started to approach Aaron with the bat held above his head now with two hands. Aaron raised the shotgun and fired a warning shot into the air. Then he yelled something at Travis again. This time Travis lowered the bat and headed back to his car. That was all Stacy needed to see. She pressed her foot to the accelerator and spun the tires a bit on the gravel drive. If Travis was getting in his car, Stacy knew that she needed to get as far away from there as possible.

She felt bad that she had yelled at Aaron, had accused him of being like every other guy out there. She regretted that she had not seen the need to accept help when it was offered. Everyone needed help. She knew that. It had just been her pride that was getting in the way. It turned out that she had needed saving after all.

Stacy wasn't sure how she felt about needing to be saved. Especially during her recovery, Stacy had grown used to toughing things out, not asking for help, and looking down on those who did. That was flawed logic to be sure. The importance of relying on other people wasn't something she was used to or good at. She knew that she would need to get better at it, though, or she would never be able to build the community that would help her.

Regret engulfed her once again as she thought about how mean she had been. Aaron, the man she was in love with, had been trying to help her. She had gone to him seeking comfort, which he had given to her freely and willingly. Then she had shut down any help he was trying to give her. That wasn't the way to treat someone who you cared about. She'd need to talk to her therapist about this one.

Later she would call Aaron and make sure he knew how much she appreciated his help. Right now, though, she needed to make sure that she could get away from Travis. He would follow her to her mother's house or even Melinda's house, so Stacy knew that she couldn't go either of those places. She didn't want to put her family members in jeopardy. So Stacy just kept driving, up one side street and down another, until she felt certain that Travis hadn't been able to follow her. Then she pulled over, double and triple checked to make sure her doors were locked, and then settled back for a nap.



Chapter Twenty

Aaron woke up in the dark, knowing something was wrong but unable to identify what it was. Then his stomach rolled and he dry heaved as bile rose in his throat. He scrambled out of bed and made a dash for the bathroom. The contents of his stomach emptied into the toilet bowl. When he was done, he sat back and leaned his head back against the door. He didn't think that he could move. If he did, he might have another round of vomiting, and he did not want that.

Another wave of nausea gripped him, and he repeated the process. Every few minutes it seemed that his body was determined to turn on itself. Finally, he sank down to the bathroom floor and laid his head on his bath mat. He had never known how fluffy and soft it felt. It was definitely wasted on his feet. That was his last thought as he drifted off to sleep.

Some time later, he was awakened by someone calling his name. "Aaron? I hope you are in there and that you are dressed because I am coming in."

Aaron recognized the voice instantly as Stacy's. His only thought was that he was definitely glad that she was here. He was sick. That's why she had come. Right? Had he called her? His brain was so fuzzy at the moment that he couldn't remember, but he felt like he must have. Did he have a fever? Suddenly, he was so parched that he knew he needed water immediately. Or he might die.

"Water?" he said to Stacy.

"I think we need to get you back to bed first," Stacy said.

He felt her linking one of her arms through his as she struggled to get him into a standing position. Aaron struggled up, but instantly started to sway on his feet. Stacy wrapped an arm around him, although in his feverish brain he wasn't sure how someone as tiny as her was going to be able to hold up a big guy like him.

"Just need a little water," Aaron said again.

“To bed first,” Stacy said. “And then I’ll bring you water.”

Aaron nodded. That made sense. He was so glad that Stacy understood him so well. He let Stacy guide him back to his bedroom. He found himself wondering how she knew where to go, but then he realized that she had actually slept in his bed before. Not in that way, of course, but during the snow storm.

When he had crawled back into bed, Stacy pulled the covers up to his chest. He felt himself drifting off in a sick, feverish haze, when one thought crystallized and shot through everything else. Struggling to sit up and speak, his tongue felt thick and heavy in his mouth.

“The animals,” he managed to say.

“All taken care of,” Stacy said. “Fannie, Rachel, Nicole, and I managed just fine.”

“That’s amazing. Thank you,” Aaron said, aware that his speech was slurring slightly and the coherent thoughts were melting back into the oblivion.

“It’s the least that I could do. I’ll go grab you that water now,” Stacy said. She turned to leave the room, but then paused at the doorway and turned back. “Hey, Aaron? I’m really sorry about our fight. Sometimes I do need help, despite what I might like to think. And even though I am totally capable of saving myself, sometimes I also need saving too. So thank you. Really.”

“You’re welcome,” Aaron said softly.

He closed his eyes after Stacy left the room, but he didn’t doze off because even in his sick state, Aaron’s brain was humming. Why was she here? How had she gotten in? And how had she known where to look for him? That seemed like an obvious question, but he couldn’t for the life of him come up with a reason.

A few moments later, Stacy returned with a glass of water with a straw bobbing in it. “I thought this might be easier while you aren’t feeling well. Remember to take tiny sips or you’ll probably throw up again.”

“Yes, Mom,” Aaron said. He accepted the cup from Stacy, and was gratified to see that his joke had earned him a smile. “You have a really pretty smile,” he told her.

Stacy flushed, and she looked away. “Yes, well, I’m going to go snoop around in your kitchen and see what kind of sick supplies you might have. Otherwise, I’ll have to do a grocery order. You need Jell-O, popsicles, Gatorade. The works. I’ll even make you chicken noodle soup from scratch. It’s the one thing that I know how to cook. My grandma taught me when I was little. Before I started down my path of bad choices.”

She hesitated in the doorway again like there might have been more that she wanted to say, but couldn’t or wouldn’t. He was too exhausted to ask any questions, but it did seem to him that she might be willing to open up more if he just gave her time.

After she left, Aaron closed his eyes again and listened to her bustling around the apartment. It was nice to have someone else in there. He had the four cats, of course, but often they did their own thing. Independence was in cats’ nature, although all four of them also liked to snuggle. Aaron found himself wondering how the cats would do if he decided to add a dog into the mix. There were so many dogs in the adoption center right now, and Aaron knew that each of them would make a great companion.

He circled back to his original thought about how nice it was to have someone else in the apartment who wasn’t a cat. He wondered if he should say that to Stacy, although he wasn’t sure if it was a compliment or not. He didn’t want to do anything to offend her. The next time Aaron opened his eyes, he found Stacy watching him.

“You really need to get some sleep,” Stacy said, standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, leaning one shoulder against the door frame.

“But I don’t wanna,” Aaron said, knowing full well that he sounded like a petulant child.

Stacy laughed softly, and suddenly Aaron wanted to hear that laugh all the time. He wondered if he should tell her that

or if that was too much truth too soon. His brain felt addled again as he tried to remember the last time that he'd heard her laugh.

“Your body is going to knock out whether you like it or not,” Stacy said. She held up the cup of water with a straw to his lips. He took a small sip. His stomach roiled in protest, but nothing else happened.

Aaron sank back down against his pillow. Stacy was right. He was worn out and his body was going to get the rest it needed whether or not he wanted to stay awake to spend time with her. He wanted to tell her that she hadn't needed to apologize earlier because disagreements happened. He wanted to ask her about the ex-boyfriend who had a freaking barbed wire wrapped baseball bat like he was some kind of post-apocalyptic psycho. He wanted to thank her for taking care of him. And for making sure all the animals were taken care of. He wanted to ask her if she wanted to keep Dusty for herself. He knew that she did, but he was too tired to formulate any actual coherent thoughts.

As he drifted off to sleep, Aaron could have sworn that he felt Stacy's lips brush against his warm forehead. It was after that kiss that he felt relaxed enough to go back to sleep and get the rest he so desperately needed.



Chapter Twenty-one

“You want to do what?” Melinda gave her the most perplexed look Stacy had ever seen on another human being’s face.

“Go on a girl’s trip?” Stacy repeated. “Just to the Lakeshore Inn. I mean, I know it’s not glamorous or anything, but my boss, Dale, gave me a free room for one night this month. I just thought...” Stacy trailed off. She didn’t know how to explain why she wanted to do this little trip with Melinda.

“But you want me to go with you?” Melinda asked, still seeming completely confused by this turn of events.

“Well, yeah,” Stacy said. “I thought it might be a good way for us to get to know each other. As sisters.” She paused, searching for the right words. “Look, I know that hasn’t been our relationship for our whole lives, and that is entirely my fault. But I’ve been doing a lot of work on myself, and if you’ll have me, I’d love to try to create some kind of sisterly bond moving forward.”

Melinda looked stunned. Here was a woman who seemed to have her whole life together. She was married with an amazing family. She had a career. Her friends adored her. She had a faith life and a place in the community. And yet, Stacy had said enough to stun the woman into silence.

“Okay,” Melinda said.

“Okay?” Stacy repeated. She was surprised that her sister hadn’t put up a fight. The two of them had never been close. Not once in their whole lives. Now was their chance to make up for lost time, and not to let the future turn out like the past. A whole new trajectory. That was what Stacy’s therapist called it.

“So when do you want to go?” Stacy asked. She was so excited that she could barely contain herself. “I was thinking tomorrow night, but it’s totally up to you.”

Melinda smiled at her in a way that Stacy wasn't sure she had ever seen coming from her sister before. "I don't work this weekend and neither does Drew," Melinda said. "I'm sure we can make tomorrow night work."

"That's amazing," Stacy said, feeling like a bubbly teenager. "Call me if anything changes?"

"Of course," Melinda said.

Once Melinda went back inside her house, Stacy went to sit in her car. She had been sleeping there for the past few days, never staying in one spot too long. She was worried that Travis would find her. Sometimes in the middle of the night she would jerk awake, disoriented, convinced that she had heard Travis trying to sneak up on her. So she would start her car and move to another spot.

She called the Lakeshore Inn to tell them that she would take her complimentary reservation for the next night. The girl at the front desk made her feel bad, like she was lying about it or trying to take advantage of the Inn. Stacy was near tears when Dale got on to reassure her that she would definitely get the night. He felt so bad for the way the front desk girl treated her that he also gave her money for free dinner at the hotel restaurant.

With nothing to do for the rest of the day, Stacy worried that she would be bored. Boredom could lead to bad choices, so she knew that she had to find something to do. Since her mother was at work, Stacy decided to go get more of her stuff out of the house. If her mother really wanted to sell as soon as she possibly could, there would be nothing stopping her from getting rid of Stacy's things.

Luckily, Stacy had her key, and her mother hadn't changed the locks, which she had threatened to do several times. Stacy parked her car down the block, made sure it was locked, and hurried to the house. It seemed strange to her that her mother had waited until she was in recovery, getting clean and sober, to kick her out. Stacy and her therapist had been trying to work through some of the intense emotions this brought up in Stacy.

Some people just reached their limits. Stacy figured that her mother had reached hers. That didn't make the betrayal any easier. That was how Stacy had come to look at getting kicked out—as a betrayal. She was working harder than she ever had in her life, but it still wasn't good enough for her mother.

Stacy shook her head to clear out any of the negative thoughts that she was having. They were counterproductive to what she wanted to accomplish today. That was another useful thing that her therapist had taught her. That if she set a small goal for the day with concrete actions that she could take, she was far more likely to be successful. And when Stacy felt successful, she had learned that she felt a lot of motivation to keep going.

Today her goal was going to be to sort through her entire room while her mother was at work. She would pack up everything that she wanted to take with her. Anything else she would just leave in her room for her mother to do whatever she wanted with it.

Inserting the key into the lock and opening the front door caused panic to rise in Stacy's chest. Without drugs and alcohol, Stacy found that she was having more and more panic attacks. Her therapist said that if they couldn't get them under control with behavioral modifications, they might have to put her on medicine. But that seemed counterintuitive to Stacy. Hadn't they just been trying to keep her off of pills? So instead, she tried to throw herself into the suggestions her therapist had made.

The house was silent, though, as Stacy stepped inside, so her panic receded. She looked around to make sure that her mother wasn't asleep or anything, but once she was satisfied that she was alone, Stacy decided to grab a snack from the kitchen. It wasn't that she didn't have money to get her own food with. If anything, living in her car made it so that she had fewer expenses to cover. It was just that there was something comforting about eating food from her childhood kitchen. And at the moment, Stacy needed a lot of comfort.

After poking around the refrigerator, Stacy found some leftover spaghetti with homemade sauce. Her stomach growled just at the thought of it. She popped the container in the microwave to reheat it, and when it was ready, she grabbed a fork and took it to her room with her. She sat cross-legged on her twin bed and ate her meal. The taste was definitely comforting, but Stacy had to fight to keep the loneliness at bay. The silence of the house seemed to close in on her. To help, she pulled out her phone and pulled up one of her playlists.

The amount of stuff that she needed to sort through overwhelmed her when she first looked at it. Drawers were overflowing. Her closet was a wreck. There were things wedged under the bed that she was sure she hadn't seen in a decade. Stacy knew that most of it was junk.

There was this concept that her therapist kept trying to teach her about downsizing her stuff so that she could feel more free. There was also this cheesy saying about cluttered life, cluttered mind. Stacy wasn't sure how she felt about these principles or theories or whatever they were, and she had told her therapist as much. Still, looking around the room that wasn't really hers any longer, she decided to embrace the concept, at least for today.

What she needed to do was make a plan. Stacy knew that her mother would only be at work for a few more hours, so Stacy couldn't afford to spend time going through each piece of paper or mismatched sock. She needed a decisive way to get rid of things that were just junk.

Rummaging around on the floor of her closet, Stacy found a few old duffel bags and a backpack. She had a total of five pieces of luggage to bring things back to her car with her. She decided to designate each one to a separate category. One would be clothes from her dresser. Another would be clothes from her closet. The third would be childhood mementos or anything that had sentimental value to her. The fourth would be practical items. And the backpack would hold books and important papers along with a small toiletry bag that she found in the back of her sock drawer.

Satisfied that she had a good plan, Stacy went to work. First, she attacked her dresser, pulling out clothes and sorting them quickly. If she wasn't going to wear it ever again, it went in a discard pile. If she wanted to keep it, it went into the duffel. As she sorted clothes, Stacy also made a sweep of her desk top and her dresser top. A few knickknacks went into the sentimental bag. She was glad that she would be able to keep some of these things. They were her memories. Even when she didn't think that she had had the best childhood, some of these things said otherwise.

Her closet was the biggest challenge, so Stacy decided to clear out under her bed next. There were things under there that she had forgotten about. She pulled out a shoebox, and when she opened it, she found herself face to face with a tiny bag of white powder.

Staring at the cocaine, Stacy could feel herself starting to tremble. Here was something that would take away all the pain and loneliness and confusion, at least for a little while. It wouldn't hurt to just do a little bit, would it? Stacy could feel herself wavering.

But then from somewhere deep inside, she fought back. "No," she said out loud. "I'm not going to do drugs today."

Then she stumbled to her feet and ran to the bathroom. Throwing the baggie into the toilet, Stacy flushed before she could second guess the decision. Once it was down the drain, off into the pipes somewhere far away, Stacy sank to the bathroom floor. Even though she was still trembling, she was so proud of herself. She had faced temptation and stood up to it. She had overcome it. That was amazing in so many ways that she couldn't even articulate.

Part of her was afraid to go back into her room for fear of what she might find. Who knew if she could fight back against the temptation again? She knew she had to, though, and she knew that she was on a deadline, so she pushed herself back up on her feet as she shuffled back to her bedroom.

Stacy finished dragging things out from under her bed. Then she moved on to her desk. She didn't find any more

drugs, although she did find half a bottle of vodka, which she forced herself to pour down the sink. Each time something like that happened, Stacy felt stronger than she had been before.

Even though her closet was stuffed full of everything imaginable, Stacy approached it the same way she had the rest of the room. Decluttering her life to just fill the five bags that she had chosen felt like a good reset for her life. Moving forward, Stacy wanted to have the lightest baggage she could carry with her. Who knew where she was going to end up?

By the time she finished, Stacy knew that she was going to be cutting it close. She also knew that leaving her room a disaster would be a tipoff to her mother that she had been there, so Stacy quickly threw most everything that she wasn't keeping back into her closet along with things being stuffed under the bed. Then she loaded up the bags on both arms and grabbed her backpack, and she headed out of the house, careful to lock the door behind her.

Stacy was just setting her last duffel bag in the trunk when she saw her mother's car pull into the driveway. She had to fight the urge to duck down, like she was doing something wrong by getting her own belongings out of the house. Besides, she was about a block away. There was no way that her mother could see her from that distance.

Sadness and an overwhelming loneliness crept up over Stacy. This was another side effect of her years of being an addict. She had ruined relationships that she now wished she had. It would take a long time to rebuild those relationships, if it was even possible at all. At least she got to try with Melinda tomorrow night. It might not be what she hoped for right away, but at least it was a start.



Chapter Twenty-two

Aaron was feeling better. It had been a terrible day and a half. But there had been a few bright spots. The biggest being that Stacy had made him soup and spent time babying him. He didn't know if anyone had ever treated him that way when he was growing up. So he had soaked it all up. Now he had to find a way to make it up to her, and he had a few ideas.

Even though they had grown up in opposite circumstances, Aaron could see how alike he and Stacy really were when he got right down to the matter. They both had been isolated growing up, and now they were both looking for connection. And now Aaron had an idea that he was sure would bring Stacy great joy.

Aaron pushed himself up off the sofa and walked into the kitchen. Food still didn't hold much appeal to him, but he decided to heat up the leftovers of Stacy's soup. He smiled to himself as he thought about the fact that Stacy had prefaced giving him the food by saying that she had never learned to cook growing up, but that she had been picking up things from working at the Lakeshore Inn. Apparently, one of the cooks there had told her that if someone could read, they could cook.

Stacy could cook. He wondered if she had ever seen herself that way before. Aaron suspected that she had never seen herself as anything but troubled. From what she had told him, even as a little kid, she had been a trouble maker. Aaron knew that the things you were told as a young child definitely became the things that you told yourself. He also knew that you could change the way you thought about yourself. That's what he wanted to help Stacy do.

Lacy patterns of frost spiraled up the window. Aaron gazed at it as he pulled on a flannel that he had found hanging neatly in the closet. It seemed that Stacy had done a lot more for him while he was sick than he had even realized. He hoped that what he had planned would be enough to thank her for all that she had done for him.

As he laced up his work boots, Aaron knew that he had a lot to do now that he was feeling better. He was almost a week behind in his quest to set up his private vet practice. That might not seem like such a big deal to most people, but to him, it seemed like he was years behind. Not only was there that to contend with, but he also had to oversee his first planned adoption event.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Aaron quickly ate the leftover soup. It warmed him from the inside out. He found that he regretted eating all of it right now. It would have been nice to have some more later when he came in from chores. Chuckling to himself, he poured food for the four cats and headed down the stairs.

Fannie was already sitting at the desk with the laptop open, doing something. She turned toward him as the stairs creaked on the way down. Her smile made him realize that she still had a crush on him. That was something that they would still have to deal with. But that was fine. He knew that he wasn't giving Fannie any mixed signals. There was only so much that he could control.

“Aaron!” Fannie said. “You’re down here today. You look good.”

He could see her brighten even further. “I feel much better. I’m going to be out in the vet center working on getting things up and running,” he said. “I’ll be out there until the adoption event this afternoon.”

Before Fannie could say much more, Aaron slipped into the wildlife rehab center. He knew that Fannie could have talked to him for hours. She had always found a way to keep him engaged. Before Stacy, Aaron had never paid attention to that kind of thing, but now he felt like he was hyper aware. Inside the rehab center, Aaron found Nicole cleaning out cages and Rachel doing the feeding.

“Hey, boss,” Nicole said as she transferred a squirrel with a broken leg back into the cage she had just cleaned. “You look human again.”

Aaron laughed. "I'm feeling human again. I'm going to be out in the vet center."

"Are we still doing the adoption event today?" Rachel asked.

"We are," Aaron said. "I need to make sure we get some of the hoarder house animals homes."

After he checked the work that Nicole and Rachel were doing, Aaron headed outside into the brisk day. Winter was definitely coming. He wasn't sure that he was ready just yet. There was part of him that was longing for warm days once again.

When he entered the vet center, Aaron was greeted with a cacophony of barks and meows. He found himself chuckling. "It's good to see all of you too," he said.

He went from cage to cage, checking on the animals. When he got to the cage with Dusty in it, he was glad to see that the little dog was still here. He had been worried that someone might have come to adopt and taken the dog home. Opening the kennel, Aaron reached in to take the little dog out, but the canine had other ideas, and leaped into his arms.

"Hey there, little guy, I have a new home for you, but in the meantime, you're going to come stay with me. You just need to promise that you won't terrorize my cats," he said.

Dusty gave a yip like he understood what Aaron was saying. Aaron set the dog on the floor, and he followed Aaron as the vet went from cage to cage, letting the animals out for some exercise. The cats jumped out of the cages and prowled around the floor, moving from space to space as felines did. Aaron led the dogs over to the door to the outdoor yard space.

Once they were all outside, he proceeded to clean out each cage. He was so engrossed in his activity that he didn't realize that one little dog hadn't gone out with the rest of the pack until there was a pointed yip nearby.

"Dusty, what are you doing in here? You should be out with the other dogs," Aaron said in a scolding tone. He had to laugh, though, at the sight of the little dog sitting with his head

cocked to one side, just watching, like he had been supervising the whole time.

For the rest of the time that Aaron was cleaning out the cages, Dusty followed him around. Aaron knew that the little dog belonged with Stacy, but if for some reason, she didn't keep him, Aaron would.

"You are coming home with me right after we get everybody else settled back in," Aaron said.

Dusty sat down as Aaron began to round up the cats. Once they were back in their cages, he let the dogs in and began the same process. This was one part of his job that he definitely didn't mind. Ever. Sure, the repetition of cleaning cages could be boring, and it was a job that his assistants normally did. But with the surplus of animals they had, it was all hands on deck.

Aaron grabbed a leash off the coat rack by the door and clipped it to Dusty's collar. The little dog walked happily by Aaron's side as they crossed the yard back to the main building. Aaron realized that now that he was planning to use more of the outbuildings, he could turn the house back into a house. When he had acquired the property, that had been his plan all along.

When he entered the office, no one was sitting behind the desk, but since there were only three other people here, that wasn't such a big surprise. He went toward the door to his apartment; it was propped open. He knew that he had closed it when he came down that morning. He would never leave it open since he now had four cats who were most certainly indoor only cats. No one other than he himself had any reason to go in there.

"Hello?" he called up the stairs. Aaron leaned down to grab Dusty. His first thought was that maybe Stacy had come to check on him. That thought made him flush with excitement.

"Oh! Aaron, I didn't think you'd be back so soon."

Aaron stopped short at the top of the stairs to see Fannie sitting on his sofa. She had one of his throw blankets wrapped

around her shoulders while she held a mug with some sort of hot drink in it. She had even turned on Christmas music. The whole scene felt incomprehensible and strange. So much so that Aaron didn't know what to do for the moment.

“What are you doing in here?” Aaron asked. Dusty started to squirm in his arms, so Aaron set him down on the floor. The little dog scampered off, but paused at the sofa for a moment to bark at Fannie.

“Oh, I didn't think you'd mind if I took a little break,” Fannie said. “I've been working so hard on the adoption event for this afternoon.”

“You can't take your breaks in my apartment,” Aaron said.

“I'm so sorry,” Fannie said. “I thought that was why you left the door unlocked and open today. Since it's such a special day and all. Besides, I can't resist your apartment. It's so homey, and I love that you have your Christmas stuff up already.”

Aaron knew that he had closed his door earlier that day. It was true that he never locked it, but there had never been a reason to. Or at least he had thought that there hadn't been a reason to. Clearly, he needed to rethink that.

Just as he was about to say as much, Aaron felt doubt creep in. Maybe he really had given Fannie the impression that she could slip away to this space if she was feeling overwhelmed. Not that he would have ever done that intentionally, but he did know how she felt about him. Instead of reprimanding her, Aaron decided to bite his tongue.

“I would prefer if you used the staff lounge from now on,” he said. “This is my personal space, not part of the rescue center.”

“Of course,” Fannie said, setting the mug down on the coffee table and pushing the blanket off her shoulders. There was something short and clipped about her response that made Aaron think he had been right the first time.

Aaron stepped aside so that Fannie could pass back down the stairs. She paused just a few inches from him, and Aaron

held very still. He knew that she hadn't listened to him about their relationship being specifically professional. He didn't know what she was going to do, but he could guess at what she hoped would happen. A moment passed before Fannie headed down the stairs.

Once the door at the bottom of the stairs clicked shut, Aaron let out a breath that he hadn't realized that he was holding. The fact that he had such a huge problem was not lost on him, but Aaron had to admit that he had no idea how to handle it.



Chapter Twenty-three

Stacy fidgeted on the porch of the Lakeshore Inn. The wind had picked up, turning the already chilly day down right frigid. Where was Melinda? It wasn't like her sister to be late. That made the knot in Stacy's stomach tighten. Maybe something had come up with the kids to make her late.

The doubt had begun to creep in. Melinda had said yes, hadn't she? Stacy started to replay the conversation in her head for the thousandth time, coming to the same conclusion that she had before. Melinda had definitely said yes. So she would be here. That was her personality.

And yet...if that was the truth, where was she? Stacy sat down on the bench on the porch, the cold seeping through her jeans. She gazed out onto the lake that was the same gray as the sky. The dusk was gathering, and Stacy wondered how they survived every winter. Her brain was spiraling with racing thoughts. This had to have been a mistake.

All Stacy had wanted was to try to make amends with Melinda. That was one thing that her therapist talked a lot about in their weekly sessions. Stacy had made some small strides in that goal, but she hadn't been able to make the changes that she craved. Melinda seemed like the one relationship that Stacy needed to put the most work into.

Stacy's phone vibrated. *I can't come. I'm sorry.*

She stared at the text message from her sister. Stacy's fears had been realized. Now what was she going to do? Tears started to roll down her cheeks and she didn't bother to brush them away. Why had she gotten her hopes up? This kind of crushing disappointment always happened to her, so why would this time be any different?

"Are you okay?"

Stacy looked up to see her boss, Dale, standing a few feet away, a look of concern on his face. Stacy tried to say something, but the words got stuck in her throat and she just started to cry harder. Dale sat beside her on the bench. He

patted her shoulder but didn't say anything. The fact that he was just letting her cry without trying to make her stop actually made Stacy feel better. So few people were comfortable with other people's discomfort that it affected her that this person she barely knew was willing to sit with her in her sadness. The only other person she could think of who would do that for her was Aaron.

When her sobs began to quiet down, Stacy wiped her cheeks with the palms of her hands. A moment later, Dale pressed a handkerchief into her hand, and she blew her nose. She hadn't cried like this in a long time. Her eyes felt puffy, she was stuffed up, but she felt lighter. Stacy realized that she had been holding on to so much of her stress that she hadn't actually been allowing herself to feel the emotions that had been cascading over her like a waterfall. The good as well as the bad. Her therapist had been explaining to her why feeling all of her emotions was so important. Stacy thought that she might see now why that was.

"That's better now, isn't it?" Dale said as Stacy's hiccups subsided.

"A little," Stacy said. Her breath hitched in her chest, and she could feel herself spiraling.

"Now, why don't you tell me what's wrong?" Dale suggested.

Stacy found herself wanting to open up to the older man. His grandfatherly presence made it easy to want to do that. She'd never had a grandfather, though, so she wasn't really sure that her thoughts were true. Still, she felt like she needed to tell someone.

"My sister was supposed to join me here for my free night's stay," Stacy said. "It was going to be our chance to reconnect. We...we didn't really get along growing up. I just thought that now that we are adults, we could make things better between us. Is that the stupidest thing you've ever heard or what?"

Dale was silent for a long moment, and Stacy worried that she had overstepped her boundaries or offended her boss.

Finally, he cleared his throat. “Not stupid at all,” he said. “I think that you underestimate how much people want connection. Even when they aren’t able to admit that or do the work that they need to do to make those connections happen.”

“She canceled on me, though,” Stacy said. She hated how much pain was evident in her voice. The fact of the matter was, though, that her heart was aching. She was angry at Melinda for canceling, and she wanted to howl at the moon just to get the pain outside of herself.

“I’m sure she had a reason that felt really important to her,” Dale said. “She may not even really understand what this meant to you. It’s a good first step, though.”

“I just wish that things could be different,” Stacy said.

“You took the first step,” Dale repeated. “That’s the hardest part. I’ve been trying to take a hard first step for a long time. I have five grandchildren who don’t even know they are siblings. My son was a difficult person to love, but it’s my responsibility to make sure that his children connect at some point. The first step is always the hardest. And look at you; you’ve already taken it.”

“So what do I do now?” Stacy wondered out loud. “I have this whole night planned for two people. It seems pretty sad just to do it by myself.”

“Invite a friend,” Dale said. “Don’t think too hard about it. Just pick someone.”

Stacy’s mind automatically lit on Amanda. She had her number from their weekly group sessions, and each time they saw each other, it seemed like they really could become friends. That was crazy, though, right? They barely knew each other. But if anyone could use a night of pampering and fun, it was Amanda.

“Thanks,” Stacy said, smiling at Dale. She really did feel a lot better. “That’s a great idea.”

Dale patted her on the arm and got up. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said to her before he headed back into the Inn.

Stacy looked after him, smiling to herself. He was a nice man. Taking a deep breath, she pulled up Amanda's number on her phone. Before she could overthink anything, she called. As it rang, she found that she didn't know what she wanted the outcome to be. Part of her was nervous for what would happen if Amanda did answer, and part of her was nervous for what would happen if she didn't.

"Hello?" Amanda sounded sleepy or sad. Stacy couldn't tell from the tone of her voice.

"Hi, Amanda? It's Stacy from group," she said.

"Stacy, hi," Amanda said, sounding more excited. "What's up?"

"So, listen," Stacy said. "I have a free night at the Lakeshore Inn. Do you want to come hang out with me? We get free food and a massage. We can use the pool or the sauna. Just a lot of stuff. It might be really fun."

Silence greeted her from the other end of the line, and Stacy couldn't help but feel stupid for calling Amanda. She had probably killed any chance of the two of them actually being friends. Stacy was berating herself when Amanda let out a squeal.

"Are you serious?" Amanda asked. "That's the nicest thing anyone has asked me to do in a very long time."

"I'm very serious," Stacy said, her spirits lifting. She gave Amanda the details, and then went inside to check in.

While she waited for Amanda to arrive, Stacy explored the two-room suite. She knew that Dale had given her an upgrade because the prize had been for a room with two double beds. The room she was in now had a bedroom with two queen-sized beds in it and then there was a living room as well. Two French doors led out onto a balcony that looked out over the lake.

Everything in the room had an upscale rustic feel to it with lots of exposed wood. The sofa was the softest thing that Stacy had ever been on. She let herself sink into the cushions, wishing that she could have something like this for herself. For

the briefest of moments, Stacy was able to pretend that this was her life.

She wasn't that good at playing pretend, though, and soon enough thoughts of her own dingy apartment bombarded her. Someday she would have a nicer place to live. She promised herself that. If she worked hard, anything was possible, right? Right? Just as she was about to spiral into a nest of dark thoughts, there was a knock at the door.

Stacy climbed off the sofa to answer it. Amanda was standing in the hallway, looking uncertain. Stacy pulled the other woman inside, giving her a quick hug as she took the duffel bag that Amanda was holding.

"Wow," Amanda said as she looked around the living room of the suite. "This place is amazing. So fancy."

"Come see the bedroom," Stacy said. Her excitement was bubbling over. She realized that Amanda felt the same way about the Lakeshore Inn that she did. Melinda probably wouldn't have seen the shiny newness of the place. Her life was comfortable, predictable, and settled. Nothing like Stacy's life or Amanda's.

They went into the bedroom and stood in the doorway in awe. "I haven't lived in a place this nice in a long time," Amanda said. "Thanks for inviting me here. Even if it's just for one night, I know this is going to make me feel human again."

Stacy wondered where Amanda was living at the moment. She wanted to ask, but she didn't know how. Having a friend was new to Stacy, and she didn't want to screw it up. "So what do you want to do first?"

Amanda turned to Stacy with her eyes sparkling. "Everything."

The rest of the night passed in a flash. They went to the spa for their complimentary massages, followed by dinner. Stacy found it odd to be served by people she normally worked with, but no one made a big deal out of it. They ordered appetizers and main courses and desserts. They each

tried the other's food. It made Stacy feel like she was on the verge of finding a best friend. That was one thing that she'd never had that she always longed for.

By the time they were back in the suite, they were both exhausted and ready for bed. They got into their pajamas and climbed into bed. There was a movie on TV that they both agreed was the best, so they settled back to watch. For a long time they were quiet, but in a companionable way that Stacy wasn't used to. For her silence was usually the precursor to something dangerous, but she knew that she was totally safe there with Amanda.

"Thanks for inviting me," Amanda said suddenly. "I've never really had any female friends before. Not really."

"Me either," said Stacy. "I never got invited to sleepovers growing up."

"I didn't either," Amanda said.

They both lapsed back into silence again, watching the movie, and pondering how it was that they had found each other here overcoming all the odds that had been placed before them. Having a friend was not something that Stacy had ever allowed herself to wish for. She had never been the girl that people wanted to hang around with. She had always been the bad girl, trouble maker. People told their kids to stay away from her. She suspected that Amanda had been much the same way.

When the movie was over, they were both tired enough to go to sleep, so they took turns using the bathroom. As they turned out the light, Stacy felt an immense amount of gratitude for this moment. Sometimes things did have a way of working out for the best.

She was still sad that Melinda hadn't wanted to try to work things out. There was still time enough for that in the future. For now, Stacy decided that she was going to revel in the moment. Here she was, as an adult, having her very first sleepover with someone who might well become her best friend.

Tomorrow was the adoption event at the rescue center, and Stacy was looking forward to helping with that as well. Life wasn't without its struggles, but she certainly had found a sweet spot in the middle of it all.



Chapter Twenty-four

Aaron drove up and down the streets of Rocky Ridge for hours looking for Stacy. His mind spun away with awful thoughts of the things that might have happened to her. Why had she taken off on foot? He knew how hard her life had been, and he had no idea how to truly relate.

The fact that she had been so upset when she'd realized Dusty wasn't at the adoption event told Aaron that she really did care about the little dog. The problem had been that she didn't stay long enough to find out what he had done with Dusty, what he wanted to happen with the dog's adoption.

Something must have happened to set her off. The Stacy he had gotten to know didn't act like this. Not that he expected her to act in a specific way, but he felt like he knew her well enough to know the nuances of her behavior. This felt like something big had happened.

He was so caught up in his thoughts, his worry for Stacy, that he almost missed his phone ringing. The hands-free option on his car was enabled so he tapped the screen. "Hello?"

"Aaron, I'm so glad that I caught you," his mother said. She really needed to work on her greetings.

"I'm sort of busy, Mom," he said. If she wasn't going to bother with greetings or preamble, why should he? Not that he wanted to be rude to his mother, but at the same time he had more important things on his mind.

"This will only take a moment," she said, sounding just as irritated as he felt.

Aaron turned the car down a side street. He had no idea where he was going or why he was looking where he was. Mostly he was just desperate to do something. Sitting idly by while Stacy wandered around Rocky Ridge in the freezing cold made him feel lower than dirt. So driving aimlessly was the solution.

“Okay, what can I do for you today?” Aaron asked. He did his best to control his annoyance. Ever since his parents had rescinded their support of the rescue center, things had been strained between them to say the least.

Outside a light rain started to fall. It wasn’t enough to use the windshield wipers, but the thought of Stacy out in it made Aaron feel anxious. He tried to concentrate on driving and on the phone call with his mother, but mostly he was just thinking of Stacy out there by herself.

“I wanted to let you know that your father and I heard about this adoption event you are having today,” she said.

“Had. Had today,” Aaron said. “It’s over now.”

“Had today then,” his mother said dismissively. He could see her waving a hand through the air in irritation.

“What about it?” Aaron asked. He turned down another side street. The rain was picking up, and seemed to be freezing as it hit the windshield. Aaron adjusted the defroster and flipped on the wipers. He needed to find Stacy.

“It made the press,” his mother said.

“We made sure to get the word out,” Aaron said. “That’s kind of the whole point of the rescue center.”

He felt like his parents should know what he did for a living. Even when he was in vet school, they hadn’t ever listened to what he wanted to do with the degree. For them, his job should be whatever was the most lucrative. For Aaron, it had always been what would fill up his soul, what his passion was, where he could make a difference in the world.

It didn’t surprise him that his mother and father were paying attention now that there was some buzz about the rescue center. They liked good publicity. Aaron couldn’t complain about the good press either. There had been people at the rescue today from hours away. They had liked what they heard about Aaron’s mission.

Most of the animals had been adopted, and the ones who hadn’t been would be easy to find homes for. Besides that, the press he’d gotten had brought in huge donations. People

wanted to support good work. And Aaron knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was doing good work. Now other people were able to see that as well.

One older woman had walked in and handed him a check for ten thousand dollars. Then she had picked out a pair of bonded cats and left happier than she had walked in. If he could keep raising money like that, then he could expand the rescue center by leaps and bounds. He might even be able to hire a vet to work exclusively with the wildlife rehab side of things. The possibilities felt endless, but he knew he needed to try not to get ahead of himself.

“Well, yes,” his mother said. He could hear the hesitation in her voice. It wasn’t like her to sound unsure of herself. He wondered where this was going. The impatience he’d been feeling at the beginning of the conversation continued to build. Honestly, he just wanted to hang up so he could go find Stacy.

“Mom, why did you call?” Aaron asked. To be perfectly blunt, he didn’t have the energy to deal with her at the moment. Each icy ping of rain hitting the glass on his windshield was like a bullet to his soul. He was failing Stacy every second that he wasted not being able to find her.

“Oh, yes, well,” she said, sounding flustered. “I wanted to tell you that your father and I have decided to increase our charitable donation to the rescue center. We were hoping that if we make a sizable enough donation that you would name a building after us.”

Aaron was surprised, but not totally taken aback. The chance to look good to the world was definitely something that his parents would use their money to buy. He knew that he was being a hypocrite by taking their money, but he also knew how much that money could help his mission to help all the animals he possibly could.

Sometimes Aaron thought that if he could just live in a world without other people, with only animals, that things would be a whole lot simpler. For a long time he had lived under the pretense that he did not need other people. His parents had been distant his whole life, and even as an adult he

hadn't had many friends to speak of. The few people he had working for him didn't even really count as work friends.

"I mean, that's great, Mom," Aaron said. "But didn't you guys think that it was too much for you to continue to contribute to the rescue center? Didn't you say something about the fact that you didn't think it was a worthy charity?"

"Aaron," his mother said. "I never said that. How could you think such a thing about your mother? You know that your father and I support everything that you do."

Aaron had to bite his tongue from making a snarky remark. That wouldn't do any good, and making his mother angry wasn't nice. But he wasn't super concerned about being nice at the moment. His focus was still on finding Stacy. Aaron swung the car down another side street. He didn't know how far she had gotten, but the farther away from the rescue center he got, the more worried he became. He wondered if he should head back and just wait for her to return his calls.

He tried to figure out what he would want in this situation. What it came down to was the fact that he thought he would want someone to come after him. As a little boy, when he got upset enough to try to walk away from his parents, they simply let him go. That had sent him the message that no one really cared how he felt or that anyone was even concerned for his safety. Deep down, though, he had always longed for one of them to come after him, to coax him back with the promise of extra dessert. Or something like that. He might have watched one too many sitcoms growing up.

Regardless, he was taking the whole adage of doing unto others what you would want done unto you literally. He thought that it was the right thing to do. He was almost out of town. The other side of town. Surely, she hadn't made it this far. Wouldn't she have just gone home if she was intending to walk so far? It occurred to him in that moment that he didn't even know where Stacy lived. He could look it up back at the rescue center. The information would be in the computer. But he couldn't go back without knowing that Stacy was okay first.

Aaron made a u-turn on the road and headed back in the direction of the rescue center. Something told him that he would have better luck looking in this direction. While he had been thinking about where to look for Stacy, his mother had continued to talk. He knew the fact that he wasn't paying attention to what she was saying made him a bad son. Once, years ago, Aaron had gone to therapy. The woman had been nice enough, but she had never quite seemed to understand his relationship to his parents.

"Stacy," Aaron said under his breath as he caught sight of her.

"What was that, Aaron?" his mother asked.

"Oh, uh, nothing, Mom," Aaron said. "I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

"What about the building donation?" his mother said.

"Just send the check," Aaron said. "We can work something out later on. I promise to name any building you want after you and Dad. We can have some kind of pretentious ribbon cutting ceremony."

"That sounds lovely," his mother said, clearly satisfied.

Aaron hung up without saying goodbye. His mother hadn't said it either. He doubted that they would ever have any kind of relationship other than totally dysfunctional. Maybe it didn't even matter. Maybe what they had was all that he could expect. He would have to be the one to break the cycle of dysfunctionality that he had learned.

He pulled up alongside Stacy, causing her to jump. He could see that she was soaked and shivering. "Hey," he said. "Do you want a ride somewhere?"

She gave him a barely there smile. "I've always been told not to get in cars with weirdos."

"That might be a problem. I'm a total animal weirdo," Aaron said. He knew that made no sense, but it made Stacy smile wider at him so he didn't care.

Stacy walked to the passenger side of the car and climbed in. Aaron reached into the back seat and grabbed a blanket from his winter kit in the back seat and handed it to her. Then he turned the heat up. There was ice hanging off the ends of Stacy's hair. She laughed slightly as she touched the crystals with her fingertips.

"So where can I take you?" Aaron asked. There were so many other things that he wanted to ask her, but it wasn't the right time.

"I don't know," Stacy said. "I don't really want to be anywhere right now."

"Do you want to go for a drive?" Aaron asked. "I have just the place that might cheer you up."

"I'm game for anything," Stacy said.

That was all Aaron needed to hear. He knew exactly where to take her to cheer her up. He felt like he needed some cheering up too.



Chapter Twenty-five

Stacy watched the lights dance to the Christmas music playing on the radio in Aaron's car, and she felt...festive. That wasn't something she could ever remember feeling. The fact that he had come looking for her after she left the adoption center didn't hurt either. He hadn't pressed her for details as to why she had left either. She appreciated that.

The truth was, Stacy wasn't one hundred percent sure why she had left either. There were a whole host of reasons that she had felt the need to walk away. Running away when things got stressful was a coping mechanism. Her therapist told her that weekly. But one of the things that Stacy had to work on was not running away. She knew that she needed to stay and face her problems. The thing was...that didn't always feel like an option.

She wrapped her hands around the cup of hot chocolate that Aaron had bought from the concession stand along with a bag of popcorn. They had been here for thirty minutes, but no one was hurrying them along since it appeared to be the last show of the night.

"I didn't even know that dancing lights' houses were a thing," Stacy said.

"I come here once a week at this time of year," Aaron said.

"I can believe that," Stacy said. "But why? If you don't mind me asking. I mean, if you've seen it once, isn't that enough?"

"I don't think I can ever have enough Christmas," Aaron said. "That's like saying you can have too many puppies or too many kittens. That just isn't a concept that I can wrap my brain around."

Stacy laughed. She was feeling much better. Warm. Fed. Safe. Happy. When she had left the rescue center, she hadn't felt any of those things. Being with Aaron just made life better. He had asked where she wanted to go, she had said anywhere, and this was where he had chosen to bring her. It took a

special kind of person to share this side of themselves with someone else.

“I never really liked Christmas growing up,” Stacy said. She had shared a little bit about that with him, but she wanted to tell him more. “My mom and my sister didn’t make a big deal about this kind of thing, but the whole Savior’s birth thing was hammered home. I didn’t mind necessarily, but I didn’t understand it either. Add to that the fact that I was the bad seed, the black sheep, and the whole concept of celebrating God’s birth didn’t exactly flow well with me.”

“I used to have my nanny take me to church on Christmas,” Aaron said. “Midnight service, to be precise. I loved all the candles and the carols. There was something so cozy about it. My parents didn’t have time for church, so I wasn’t a church kid growing up. But Christmas makes me wish that I was closer to God. Is that weird?”

Stacy shook her head. “I get what you are saying,” she said. “Getting sober has made me want to get to know God, but I don’t really know where to start.”

“I don’t suppose it makes a difference where you start,” Aaron said. “I think just having the desire to have that relationship with God is the best place to start.”

Stacy nodded her agreement and turned her attention back to the dancing lights house in front of them. They had driven to White Plains and then about seven miles past that town. The house was in the middle of nowhere on a large ranch. The house itself was decked out in hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lights, which moved and danced to music. The effect was stunning, and with each song that passed, Stacy could understand why Aaron came here every week during the holiday season.

“What’s your favorite Christmas song?” Stacy asked after a few minutes of watching the show.

“Ohhh, that’s a tough one,” Aaron said. He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel in time with the song that was currently playing. “There are just so many good ones. Religious Christmas song favorite would be ‘Silent Night’. It’s

just a classic. More recent Christmas song...hmm, I guess I'd have to say 'Santa Claus is Comin' to Town'. It's just the right amount of upbeat and jazzy. What about you?"

"I don't have one," Stacy said automatically. And for a long time that had been the truth, but having been hanging out with Aaron for the past few months, she had actually started to like a lot of the Christmas songs. "Actually, I like that Mariah Carey one. 'All I Want For Christmas Is You'. Is that what it's called? It's just so catchy."

She didn't add that the song was pretty much her heart's desire at the moment. Stacy could barely acknowledge that she was in love with Aaron to herself, much less say it out loud to him. Somewhere over the past few weeks, her crush had morphed into very real feelings for her. She didn't have any reference point for a healthy relationship, so she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do with her feelings except keep them locked away.

"Well, that's a pretty good choice, especially for someone who has a pitifully low standard for Christmas things," Aaron said.

Stacy laughed, but then sobered up. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Aaron said. "Anything."

"Do you know who adopted Dusty?" Stacy asked. "I know it's dumb, but I think I really got attached to the little guy."

Aaron got quiet, and Stacy wondered if she shouldn't have asked. Maybe he felt bad for letting Dusty get adopted without telling her about it first. Not that he had ever been obligated to do that. She just felt like it would have been a nice courtesy kind of thing.

"Sorry, that was stupid. Forget I said anything," Stacy said. She tightened her grip on the styrofoam cup in her hands. The cup crinkled, sending hot chocolate splashing onto her hands. She let out a yelp. Not because it hurt, but because it surprised her.

“Are you okay?” Aaron asked, seemingly just as startled. He reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a stack of napkins. There was something wholly appropriate about Aaron being so prepared.

“It wasn’t hot,” she said. “Just startled me. That’s all.”

She let him mop up the liquid on her hands. It felt nice to have someone take care of her. Even though she felt dumb for asking about Dusty, she was also proud of herself. In a small way, she had stood up for what she wanted to know. The dog had become important to her, even though she didn’t want to admit that. Not even to herself. Not after what had happened with Buster. But that was the thing about life. It was all very unpredictable.

“So about Dusty,” Aaron began.

“Don’t worry about it,” Stacy interrupted. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. It’s not even really my business, is it? It was silly of me to ask.”

“Except it isn’t silly or stupid,” Aaron said. “I know how attached you got to the little guy, even though you didn’t really want to admit it.”

“Was it really that obvious?” Stacy asked, feeling even more embarrassed. She thought she kept her emotions so close to the vest, but clearly she was mistaken about that.

“Just to me,” Aaron said. “So like I was saying, about Dusty. He didn’t get adopted.”

“Of course, he did,” Stacy argued. “He wasn’t there today. He must have gotten adopted earlier in the week.”

“He hasn’t been adopted. Not yet,” Aaron insisted.

“What are you talking about?” Stacy asked. She was starting to feel annoyed, and she resented that because the Christmas music and the dancing lights and the hot chocolate had made her feel warm and fuzzy inside. She didn’t want the feeling to end, but it was going to if Aaron didn’t stop talking in circles. Or riddles. Maybe that was closer to what he was doing. Either way, she didn’t like it.



Chapter Twenty-six

“I had to call the probation board,” Fannie said.

“What did you say?” Aaron asked. He was sure that he had misheard her. There was no way that she’d said that. His heart began to hammer in his chest. Just as things were starting to get good, something like this could mess everything up. He didn’t want to believe that Fannie would do something to intentionally cause harm to Stacy, but this felt like something that was too big to ignore. Sometimes seeing the best in another person wasn’t going to help anyone.

“I called the probation board,” Fannie said. “Stacy missed her shift. It was our responsibility to call.”

Aaron felt anger welling up inside of him. “No,” he said through gritted teeth. “I am the owner and operator of this place. I am the one who set up the program with the probation board. And I am the only one here who makes those calls. That is not now, nor has it ever been your responsibility.”

“You aren’t doing your job!” Fannie yelled. Aaron was so surprised that he took a step backward. “You are so into Stacy that you don’t even see all the trouble she is causing. She’s a loser! Why do you like her so much when I’m right here? I’m a good person. I work hard. I’ve never been in trouble with the law. I don’t even drink.”

All the anger drained out of Aaron as he watched Fannie slump back in her chair. He had known that she had strong feelings for him, but now it was clear that he had underestimated how much it had colored her ability to do her job. There was some truth to what she said too. He was in love with Stacy. It hadn’t been one lightning bolt moment of realization, but had snuck up on him gradually. None of this was something that he would share with Fannie, but it made him see that he had let her stay on here at the rescue center for too long.

“Fannie, what feelings I may or may not have for Stacy have nothing to do with you or your job. I am your boss, and I

don't have romantic feelings for you," Aaron said. He could almost see Fannie's heart breaking. The pain in her eyes was all too real. "I need you to get your things together. Today will be your last day working here."

"What?" Fannie let out a gasp that sounded like her soul was crumbling along with her heart. "You...you're firing me?"

"Fannie, your feelings for me cross a line, and you calling the probation board was so far past the line that there really is no coming back from that," Aaron said. "I will give you a good reference letter. You've always been a hard worker."

"Then don't fire me," Fannie said. "I won't ever call the probation board again."

Aaron felt slightly embarrassed by Fannie's pleading. He knew that he was making the right decision, and he had to stand behind it. "Fannie, it's time for you to go," he said.

It was hard to watch as the young woman gathered her things with tears flowing down her cheeks. When she realized that the crying wasn't getting her what she wanted, Fannie began to slam things down and mutter angrily to herself. Aaron knew that she had been crying crocodile tears, and for some reason that irritated him more than the stomping about. Tantrums weren't a good look on anyone.

Just as Fannie looked like she was about to go into another round of pleading for Aaron to change his mind, the door to the rescue center opened and Stacy stepped inside. She looked distraught, but before she could say anything, Fannie rushed toward her.

"You!" Fannie screamed. "If you hadn't come here, everything would have been perfect."

Before Fannie could get to Stacy, though, Aaron stepped between them. "Fannie, go," he said in a quiet but firm voice. "Leave before you do something that you'll regret. If you take your things and leave now, I will still give you a good recommendation. But that offer only lasts for the next thirty seconds."

Fannie glared up at him for a moment before grabbing her things off the desk. When she got to the front door, she paused and looked back at Aaron. “You’ll regret this,” she said. “You’ll never find anyone like me.”

Then she slammed the door behind her and Aaron was left with Stacy in the echoing silence. He knew that he should tell her about the probation board, but he wasn’t sure where to begin. Explaining everything that had happened with Fannie to Stacy was definitely something that he needed to do, but again where to begin?

“What was that all about?” Stacy asked.

“I had to fire Fannie,” Aaron said. “She crossed a line that she meant to cross. It was time to let her go.”

“She called the probation board on me,” Stacy said.

“I know,” Aaron said.

“You knew?” Stacy asked, a wobble in her voice.

“I found out just before I fired her,” Aaron said. “I’ll call them right away to let them know it was just a vindictive employee trying to cause trouble.”

Stacy let out a huff of air and sighed. “You don’t have to,” she said. “My probation officer could tell that something was off about the call. He actually thinks I’m doing a pretty good job. He also told me that it was a woman who called. He thought that was odd too because it’s usually you.”

“It shouldn’t have happened,” Aaron said. “I’m really sorry about that.”

Stacy shrugged. “I should have expected it, I guess. Just when things start to go well, boom! Something bad happens.”

“You didn’t get in any trouble, did you?” Aaron asked. He hated hearing her be so self-defeating, but he knew that given her past, it was natural for her to feel that way.

“No,” Stacy said with a shake of her head. “It just feels like...I don’t know, I’ve worked so hard to get away from my past, and it’s just always going to follow me, isn’t it?”

Aaron took two steps toward Stacy and reached out to take her hand. “No,” he said. “You are not your past. I mean, all the things that you’ve been through have added up to who you are today, but any mistakes or bad decisions don’t make you who you are. That didn’t come out quite right. I...I love everything about you.”

The words had left his mouth before he could think about them. Had he really just confessed his feelings to her? From the stunned look on Stacy’s face, he realized that yes, he had. His immediate reaction was to back pedal, but he kept still. What he had told her was the truth. She deserved to know that, even if she didn’t reciprocate his feelings.

“I love you too,” Stacy said.

Now it was Aaron’s turn to feel stunned. Was this really happening? He thought that it might be. “I don’t want to stress you out,” he said. “We can take this as slowly as you need to.”

“Honestly?” Stacy said. “I think I’m ready to just jump right in.”

Aaron closed the gap between them, pulling Stacy close against his chest. Their eyes locked, and Aaron bent his head to kiss her. The second their lips met, electricity shot through the air around them. This moment didn’t have a nice, tidy bow to wrap up the mess of their lives, but it made Aaron think that he was so glad to be alive in this moment. They would be able to figure out the rest of it together.



Epilogue

Three weeks later

“Come on, Dusty,” Stacy said as she opened the door to her car.

A fresh dusting of snow had fallen overnight, and the little dog’s paw prints were the first marks on the ground. Stacy looked up at the rescue center. Inside, her whole future was waiting. She knew that. And she was ready for it. This was the first Christmas that she was excited for. Period. There was part of her heart that still ached and grieved the fact that she wasn’t going to see her mother or Melinda today, but she knew that she had to start somewhere. And this seemed like a really great place to start.

She slipped into the rescue center. At first all she heard was the silence. In the past few weeks, Aaron had transitioned all the animals to separate buildings, and he was beginning the renovation to bring the house back to being just a house. She was excited for him...and to be honest, for herself. Aaron was including her in all the plans that he had for the house because they both knew that it was going to be their home for a long time to come.

Then she heard the Christmas music coming from upstairs, so Stacy took a deep breath and headed in that direction. “Aaron?” she called up the stairs. “We’re here.”

Dusty charged ahead, barking to announce his arrival. She heard Aaron say, “Dusty, my man.”

Stacy thought it was cute how Aaron talked to all the animals like they understood what he was saying. She did it too. It had become so normal to talk to the animals. She loved that they were her family. Especially since her own family had seemed to give up on her. A dark cloud came over her, and she had to shake it away. Today was about being in the moment and focusing on what she could control.

“Did you bring your mommy?” Aaron asked the dog, and Stacy felt shivers race up and down her spine. There was

something about being with Aaron that made her able to see a future that she never would have let herself believe in.

“Right here!” Stacy called as she reached the top of the stairs. Even though she had just been here yesterday, it seemed that Aaron had managed to add more decorations to the small space.

It also didn't seem to matter that he had just seen her last night because the way Aaron looked at her made her feel like she was the most important thing in the world to him. She didn't think that she had ever been that to anyone.

Aaron crossed the apartment and swung her up in a hug, lifting her feet off the floor. Just being in his arms seemed to put everything right with the world. It all made a little more sense than it had just a few moments before. When he set her down, she looked around, realizing that there were far more decorations than there had been even yesterday.

“It seems to be more festive in here than I remember it being,” Stacy said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She was teasing him just a little bit. She knew how much he loved Christmas, and his enthusiasm had made her look forward to the holiday too.

“Just one of the many things that you love about me,” Aaron said with a grin. He came over and dropped a kiss on her head. It was small gestures of affection such as this that made Stacy feel special, more special than she had ever felt in her entire life.

“I do love you,” she said, looking up at him in wonder.

“And I love you,” he said.

They stared at each other for a long moment before Aaron cleared his throat. “I, uh, have something to give you before we eat.”

“I thought we weren't doing presents,” Stacy said, although of course she had gotten him something.

“This is special,” Aaron said as he walked toward the tree to retrieve something. A something that looked a lot like a

small jewelry box. Her heart began to hammer in her chest as Aaron dropped down to one knee.

“Stacy Davies, I know that we’ve only known each other for a few months, but I feel like you’ve been in my heart my whole life,” Aaron said. “I can’t imagine a world where I didn’t know you. And I can’t imagine my life without you. I want to spend every day with you no matter where life takes us. What I am saying is, I want to spend the rest of my life with you as my wife. Will you marry me?”

Even though Stacy had hoped that this was coming, she didn’t know what to do except to throw herself into Aaron’s arms, knocking him to the ground. “Yes!” she said. “Yes, I will marry you.”

As Aaron’s lips found hers, Stacy couldn’t believe what was happening to her. The sweetness of the kiss was only matched when they broke apart and Aaron slipped the engagement ring on her finger. She laid her head against his chest, listening to his heart beat.

A moment later, Dusty came up to them and yipped. He waited a moment until both Stacy and Aaron patted him. Then he ran off yipping at one of the cats. Stacy and Aaron sat up. For some reason, she suddenly felt shy, vulnerable in the best way possible.

“I never thought that I could have a Christmas like this,” she admitted.

“Like what?” Aaron asked.

“With my very own family,” Stacy said.

“We’ll have a lot more of them,” Aaron promised.

Stacy believed him because he had never lied to her, but also because she could feel the truth in his words. Even though her mother and sister weren’t in a place where they could let Stacy back into their lives, she was building her own family. Hopefully, in time she could mend those relationships, but until then, she was more than grateful to be where she was right at that moment.



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**SAMPLE OF Close to Home, Rocky Ridge Series Book 8
(scheduled to be published by 01 May 2023)**

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Prologue:

Claudia Mellens pushed a cascade of long black hair over her shoulder. She was perfectly put together today. When wasn't she, though? With deliberate movements, Claudia put both her high heeled feet on the ground before she exited her big, black SUV. Everything about her look today had been thought out well ahead of time.

She was going to surprise her boyfriend, Chad. They had only been together for three months, but she knew that they were in love. Chad was the one. She even loved the way their names both started with the letter "c". It seemed meant to be. Claudia and Chad. Chad and Claudia.

Usually Tuesdays weren't a day that they saw each other because Chad worked late, but this week she was going to be there when he got home from work. He would be shocked, but in a good way. Especially with all the other surprises she had for him.

Smiling to herself, Claudia began to hum a tune under her breath. She couldn't remember the song, but she was happy so she decided that this would be her new theme song. It didn't even matter that the day was freezing cold and a snowstorm was predicted later that night. All Claudia could think about was how she and Chad were going to get all cozy. Just the thought of it all sent shivers of pleasure and anticipation up Claudia's spine.

As she approached the apartment building that had been her home for the past two and a half months, Claudia couldn't

help but think how lucky she was. Yes, she knew how crazy her life looked from the outside. She had agreed to move in with Chad after only dating for two weeks. It had been love at first sight, though, for both of them. And for the most part their lives the past three months had been nothing but blissful. Sure there were times when they could communicate better.

Claudia shook her head to clear the negative thoughts from her head. What she put out into the universe was what she was going to get back. She was not going to take any chances tonight. Everything about her had to scream positivity so that the universe would aid her in having the best night of her life. She took a deep breath, opened her purse to pull out her compact, and checked her make up in the tiny mirror. Yep, still fabulous.

She climbed the stairs to the chrome and glass front doors, punched in the resident code, and stepped into the ultra-sleek lobby with its' wall of windows and blindingly white... everything. Claudia was struck once again how lucky she was to live here. It had to be the nicest apartment building in all of Rocky Ridge, Wyoming. The most exclusive too.

On the elevator ride up to the fifth-floor apartment, Claudia rehearsed her speech. She had spent the better part of the day coming up with ways to tell Chad that she loved him more than she had ever loved anyone. She was hoping that when he heard her renewed profession of love that he would propose. He had been acting secretive these last few days, so she had a hunch that he might do just that. Her heart fluttered with excitement at the thought.

She turned the key softly, hoping that she would be able to catch Chad by surprise. Slipping off her shoes in the entryway, Claudia paused to listen. There was noise coming from the bedroom at the back of the apartment. This was it. If Chad was otherwise occupied, she would definitely be able to sneak up on him. Her surprise would go over so well.

As Claudia made her way through the apartment as quietly as she could, the noise coming from the bedroom got louder. Some of the sounds gave her pause for a moment, but she

pushed the alarming thoughts aside. Only positivity. That was her rule today.

Pushing open the bedroom door, Claudia said, “Chad, I’m home...” Her voice trailed off as she took in the scene before her. When it registered that Chad was not in bed alone, she let out a shriek.

Without waiting to see any more, Claudia turned and hurried back down the hallway to the front of the apartment. Her thoughts were spinning out of control. What was happening here? At the front door, Claudia bent to get her shoes.

“Claudia!”

She turned to see Chad hurrying down the hallway toward her, a blanket wrapped around his waist. His hair was tousled just the way she liked it. She expected to see him look ashamed or embarrassed, like he regretted what she had just seen. She expected an apology. Instead Chad looked...angry.

That couldn’t be right though. She was the one who had been wronged, but as she looked at him she realized that he was furious that she had interrupted...whatever he would call this. His cheating, lying whatever. Claudia felt a flash of anger herself, followed by a wave of nausea.

“How could you do this to me?” Claudia yelled. She swung the shoes in her hand toward him. They didn’t connect, but the fact that she had tried to hit him pissed Chad off more.

“We’ve been over for a long time,” Chad said. “I’ve just felt sorry for you. That’s the only reason I was letting you stay here.”

Claudia felt her heart crumble into a million pieces. “Wh—what?” she managed to stammer.

“You heard me,” Chad said with a hardness in his voice that she had never heard before. “I think it’s best if you leave and don’t come back.”

“You’re kicking me out?” Disbelief echoed in Claudia’s voice. She wasn’t sure if she was truly comprehending what he had just said.

“We can arrange for you to come get your things later,” Chad said. “I’ll pack you a bag.”

Claudia watched him go back to the bedroom where she could hear the murmur of voices. Her mind had gone blank. She literally didn’t know what was going on. How had her immaculately planned day turned so sour? Had she put out bad vibes into the universe? Why was she the one being punished?

When Chad returned with her duffel bag, all Claudia could do was stare at him in disbelief. “So this is it?” she asked.

Chad nodded and held the bag out to her. She took it in one hand, her shoes in the other, and started toward the door. The weight of the situation sat heavily on her shoulders.

“Claudia?”

She turned, hopeful that Chad had seen the light and changed his mind. She would forgive him this one dalliance. Surely they could work through things. Temporary insanity. That’s what she would call it.

“I need your key.”

As Claudia handed it over, it took every ounce of strength she had left to give it to Chad and not collapse into a mess of tears. She saved that until she got into her SUV. It was then that she realized that she had no place to go for the night.

Chapter One:

Claudia sat in the driver’s seat of her SUV, grateful for the seat warmer. How could she have been so stupid to leave her purse upstairs? At least her car keys had been in her coat pocket. She couldn’t imagine the humiliation of having to go back to the apartment to get her keys. Even though she knew she should go get her purse, Claudia couldn’t face Chad again so soon, especially with the other woman in his bed still. She would text him in the morning. They could meet somewhere else so she could get the rest of her things.

Where was she supposed to spend the night though? She didn’t have enough gas to make it all the way to her mother’s house in Jackson Hole. And without her purse she had no way to buy more gas. So that meant staying here in Rocky Ridge.

Since she didn't have her wallet, she couldn't get a hotel room. She didn't really have any friends here, and her only family... well, that wasn't an option. She'd just have to spend the night in her car. People did that right?

Claudia put the car into drive and headed out toward the Blue Jay Bar and Grill. Even if she didn't feel comfortable contacting her half-sister, Faith, Claudia figured that she would at least be safe behind the restaurant, especially now that it was beginning to snow. Big white flakes were landing on her windshield. If this continued all night, she knew that it would make things a mess in the morning.

By the time she got to the Blue Jay, the snow was falling more heavily. It was later than she had realized, and her stomach rumbled. Luckily, she had some granola bars and water stashed in her center console. That was as much winter safety prep as she had done. Oh, that and a blanket that was folded up and tossed casually onto the back seat. Chad had insisted at least on that much. She wished she had listened more to the warnings.

Back in Jackson Hole, Claudia had never worried about winter. It was more of a nuisance than anything else, especially since she didn't ski. But her mother had roadside assistance, and any time Claudia got in a bind, she just called the handy number. It had never occurred to her before that she was not going to have that kind of access her whole life.

Claudia pulled her SUV into a spot in the alley behind the Blue Jay. It was on the other side of what she thought was her sister's car. Shutting off the lights, she hoped no one would notice her here. She knew that if someone called the cops on her, she'd have no way to prove who she was. Claudia decided to shut off the car, just for a little while. It was warm enough in here to last her for a while. Then she could turn it back on again. That would save some of the gas too.

The second Claudia turned off the car, she could feel the cold start to seep in. Momentary panic set in. What was she going to do? Tears burned hot in her eyes, and she let them fall. There was no reason to pretend to be strong when there

was no one there to see her...or to comfort her. Claudia had never felt so alone in all her life.

As the tears fell, she pulled out her phone to see if anyone had messaged her. She knew that what she really hoped was that Chad had come to his senses and had decided to ask her to come home. If he apologized right now, she knew that she would most likely forgive him. Maybe that didn't make her a feminist or whatever, but it would give her the security that she wanted. There was nothing wrong with that.

All her life, she had watched her mother claw and fight for everything that the two of them had. Men had come and gone, and ultimately they had been okay. But Claudia knew that her mother had never felt secure. Chad had given Claudia that sense of security.

After what seemed like an eternity of silent tears falling down her cheeks, Claudia decided that she was too cold to keep the car off any longer. She turned it back on and felt relief as warmth flooded the SUV. She reached into the backseat to grab the blanket. Then she turned her attention to the bag that Chad had packed for her. She decided that had to be his way of showing her that he still loved her, even if he was making very bad choices at the moment.

There wasn't much in the bag if she was being honest. She did find a pair of her sweats, though, and a sweatshirt. Although it was difficult in the driver's seat, Claudia did manage to wiggle the pants on under the tight skirt of her dress. Then she pulled the sweatshirt on. Somehow she managed to get the dress off. She stuffed it into the bag. Unfortunately she didn't find any socks so she was stuck with cold feet, but she decided not to put her heels back on. That just seemed ridiculous given the circumstances.

“What am I going to do?” she asked out loud.

As strange as it seemed, just hearing her voice ask that question gave her a measure of peace. But it also brought home the reality of her situation that much more. What was she going to do? The immediate answer was that she was going to eat a granola bar, drink some water, and cry some

more. Other than that, Claudia couldn't get her brain to wrap around what had happened. She had sincerely believed that Chad was going to propose to her.

"I'm so stupid," Claudia whispered as the tears began to fall again. The snow had begun to pick up again, and she turned the windshield wipers on for a moment so she could see out the front of the SUV. She wasn't sure why that seemed important to her. All she could see was the brick wall of the back of the Blue Jay. The wipers made a grating sound against the glass that set her teeth on edge. She settled on putting the defrost on.

Claudia pulled a granola bar and a water from the center console. As hungry as she was, the first bite made her stomach turn. She must have been hungrier than she'd realized. When was the last time she'd eaten anything substantial? Honestly, she couldn't remember.

The past few days had been a lot of nibbling on things here and there. Even though she was hungry a lot of the time, she had been experiencing a lot of nausea. Claudia had just chalked it up to the fact that she was nervous about surprising Chad for their three-month anniversary. Now she wondered if she had some kind of stomach bug.

As she was considering this possibility, her stomach heaved. Yep, she definitely had a stomach bug. Claudia barely got the door open in time before she emptied the contents of her stomach onto the pavement below. When she was finished, she slammed the door shut.

Shaking and shivering, Claudia leaned back against the seat. She longed for a bed to curl up in, but the silver lining was that now that she'd thrown up, she felt better. Not a lot better, but enough that she could take a drink of water without her stomach twisting and turning.

Okay, she needed to make a plan. She knew that was the thing that was going to make her feel better. A plan. But how could she make a plan without any of her essential items with her. Part of her wanted to call her mom, but what good would

that do? She didn't care, she decided that she was going to do it anyway.

She tapped on her mother's number and waited while the phone rang. And rang. And rang. Claudia thought it was going to go to voicemail. She wasn't stupid. She knew that her mother screened calls all the time, even from her daughter.

"Claudia? What are you doing calling me at almost midnight?" her mother asked, sounding annoyed more than anything else.

Claudia wanted to tell her what had happened. She wanted to ask why her mother didn't ask her if everything was okay. She wanted to cry. But she didn't do or say any of those things. Instead she took a deep breath.

"I didn't realize it was that late," Claudia said.

"You're lucky I had work to catch up on or I would have already been in bed," her mother said.

"Yeah, lucky," Claudia echoed.

"So why did you call?" her mother asked. She didn't wait for an answer. "You haven't been to see your grandmother lately. She told me last week that it's been over a month. Part of our agreement when you decided to move to Rocky Ridge was that you'd go see your grandmother every week."

"She doesn't want to see me," Claudia said, leaning back against the head rest and closing her eyes. Suddenly she was just exhausted.

Claudia's mother let out an exasperated sigh. It was a sound that Claudia was well accustomed to. "You know that is not true. Why do you always have to be so melodramatic?"

"I'm not being melodramatic," Claudia said. Anxiety gripped her in the chest, squeezing the air out of her lungs. Talking to her mother always made her feel this way. Why had she thought this time would be any different? It had to be the loneliness that was tricking her.

"Well, you need to go see her. And soon. You should take Faith with you," her mother said.

“Yeah, like that will happen,” Claudia said, mostly under her breath, but she knew her mother heard her.

“I thought that you said you were going to work on your relationship with Faith as well.” The disappointment in her mother’s voice was enough to make Claudia feel like the lowest form of scum.

She had intended to work on her relationship with Faith. What was the saying about the road being paved with good intentions? There had never been a good time to start working on that relationship, though. Claudia had done some things that she wasn’t too proud of in the recent past, and that had hindered any sisterly bond that the two of them might have established.

“Faith doesn’t want a relationship with me,” Claudia said.

Her mother made a disapproving clucking noise with her tongue. “Playing the woe is me girl again. That’s not a good look on anyone.”

“Why does it matter?” Claudia asked wearily. “It’s not like there are that many people in Rocky Ridge who care about me.”

“You made the choice to move there,” her mother reminded her. Claudia could feel the lecture that her mother was gearing up to give. There was always a palpable change in the air when her mother got ready to lay into her. Of course, her mother would say that it was for her own good. That Claudia had always needed more guidance than most people her age. How that could still be true was a fact that eluded Claudia. She was almost glad when her stomach roiled again.

“Sorry, Mom, I have to go. I think I’m going to be sick again,” Claudia said.

She threw her phone into the passenger seat as she scrambled to get the door open again. Once more she upended her stomach onto the pavement below. As she leaned back against the seat and shut the door against the cold again, she wondered what was wrong with her. She pulled the blanket up around herself and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Two:

Adrian Walker surveyed the small kitchen at the Lakeshore Inn. He was used to much grander spaces than this, but it would serve its' purpose for the time being. The staff here left a lot to be desired, but he had a reputation for being able to whip people into shape. That's what he was attempting to do tonight. He'd already made one waitress cry, but that came with the territory. She would be okay.

"That is not how you make steak tartare," Adrian said, in what he considered a perfectly reasonable tone.

The sous chef who was butchering the whole process—Adrian smirked at the pun—looked up at him with the terrified look of someone who knew they were about to be fired. It wasn't that he relished being the bad guy, although there was a part of him that found it supremely satisfying to weed out the weak, but someone had to do it.

"I—I'm doing my best," the girl said. He thought he remembered her name being something like Tara or Tammy, but she wasn't wearing a nametag so it could honestly have been anything. "I've never made this before."

Adrian let out a long-suffering sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. How hard could it be to follow simple instructions? This was the question that Adrian came back to over and over again. "We went over how to do this during the briefing earlier about the new menu," he said.

The girl looked like she might cry and she swallowed several times before she replied, "Right, but the thing is, no one here wants to eat raw beef."

"How would you know if it isn't on the menu?" Adrian snapped.

Steak tartare had been on every menu he had ever created. It gave the restaurant an air of luxury. Besides, he was a firm believer in the fact that people didn't know what they wanted until they were told. That wasn't the point here, though. Steak tartare was a test to see how the people in this restaurant

kitchen learned, adapted, grew to face challenges. So far it appeared that none of them would be staying on the staff.

Adrian gritted his teeth. “Let me show you what to do,” he said. “Again.”

The girl stepped aside. Adrian stepped into her station. It was a mess, so the first thing he did was to tidy it up. That was another pet peeve of his. If these people were going to work for him, then they were going to have to learn to keep their stations neat and clean. Just because cooking could be messy work, that was no reason not to keep things organized. Adrian felt that it said a lot about a person, the way they kept their station.

“The first thing you are doing wrong is the way you are cutting the meat. This is a prime cut of beef, and you are hacking at it like you’ve never used a knife before. You need to make small, clean cuts that create strips of beef, not chunks.” Adrian paused and looked up at the girl. “Which would you rather eat? My strips or your chunks?”

“Your strips,” the girl muttered. She looked like she was going to grow increasingly sullen, but this was Adrian’s job. If he didn’t correct the behavior now, then it would continue to deteriorate. That was just plain unacceptable to him.

Around the rest of the kitchen, Adrian could tell that the rest of the staff was paying attention to his lecture and presentation. Good. They should all know that he was watching their performances tonight. Nothing they did was going to escape his attention. Adrian continued to cut the meat until he had a nice pile on the cutting board in front of him.

“Now it’s time for the mix-ins,” he said.

“The mix-ins?” the girl repeated, sounding panicked.

Adrian let out a long-suffering sigh. “If you had been paying attention to my presentation earlier, you would know that the mix-ins are one of the most important parts. Tonight we are adding parsley and capers. Shallots are another nice option. Tomorrow we might do a sweet-spicy pepper combo. You can add cheese. There are all kinds of options.”

One of the other line cooks had come over to watch what he was doing. Adrian thought the young man's name might be Dave, but again, he wasn't sure. At thirty-six, he was at least a decade older than most of the staff here at the Lakeshore Inn. He had no patience for the ridiculousness that resulted in none of the people in this kitchen knowing even the most rudimentary ways of high cuisine.

Dave seemed interested in what was going on, so Adrian made a mental note to draw him aside later on. Adrian knew that he would need to promote someone from within to make this transition smoother. That was another strategy that Adrian had taken from one place to another. Getting one person on the old staff onto his side served everyone well when Adrian brought new staff in. The new staff was inevitable. Most people didn't stay when a new chef came on.

"I still don't think that people around here are going to want to eat raw beef," the girl said.

Adrian could feel his blood pressure rise. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. Tricks that his therapist had taught him to do so that he wouldn't say or do something that he might regret later. Adrian had fired that therapist because Adrian never regretted anything later. Still, it was useful to have a toolbox full of tricks that helped him remain in control of his emotions.

"If you don't like the changes that I'm making, you are free to leave," Adrian said.

The girl blinked at him in surprise. Clearly she had never been chastised for her attitude before. But that kind of insubordination from his staff stopped here. Adrian didn't know what the last head chef had been like, and he didn't care. When he came into a new restaurant, he took over as himself. There was no thought to what the current staff was used to. Though if this girl was any indication of how the former head chef ran this place, it didn't seem like it would take much to make an improvement on things.

"Emily never would have said something like that to me," the girl said.

“Then Emily was an idiot,” Adrian snapped. “Attention everyone! If you have a problem with the changes that I am making to this kitchen, then I suggest that you leave now.”

There was silence so loud that he could hear the clock ticking above the doorway. In the past, Adrian had been accused of doing things for the shock factor, but that simply wasn't the truth. Certainly he made decisions on the spur of the moment that others found crazy. Adrian didn't agree that they were bad decisions, though. His gut instinct was always right.

“Then I quit,” the girl said. She stared at him with a stubborn set to her jaw, but Adrian could see the sheen of unshed tears in her eyes and the wobble of her lower lip as she fought to stay strong in front of him.

“I accept your resignation,” Adrian said.

The girl took off her apron with shaking hands and set it on the counter. Without another word, she headed toward the staff break room, presumably to gather her things before she left. Good riddance. One down, how many more to go? Adrian didn't say anything else but looked around the kitchen at the staff that had all but frozen in place.

Then there was a ripple through the space, and suddenly people began to move. No less than five more people took off their aprons and set them on the counter. As Adrian watched the exodus, he felt a sense of satisfaction. Dave was staying for the time being it seemed. Clearing out the staff that didn't want to be there always made Adrian feel like that was the point he could actually get started at.

“Excellent,” Adrian said. “Now, everyone left, let's finish this dinner service.”

Just then a waitress came through the double doors, looking rather frantic. “The customers in my section are getting pissed off. What is taking the food so long?”

Adrian was just about to respond when another waitress came through with a similar complaint. Adrian sighed and

headed to the stove to plate some of the orders himself. Sometimes these things just had to be done.

“What’s going on in here?”

Adrian turned to see Dale, the owner of the Lakeshore Inn, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. The old man looked apoplectic; his face red from anger. If he hadn’t sensed how serious the situation was, Adrian might have laughed. There was something comical in the way the old man looked, almost like steam would blow out his ears at any second.

“Some of the staff has decided that they would like to exercise their right of employment at will,” Adrian said. “And at the moment that means that they are quitting with no advance notice.”

“Excuse me?” Dale said. “You have a dining room full of customers who are waiting for their food, and you are letting staff go?”

The old man squinted at Adrian, who looked back at his boss with the kind of unwavering gaze that had made Adrian a legend in the culinary world. Apparently it didn’t work on hotel owners in Wyoming. Dale kept on staring at him, and Adrian felt an unfamiliar sense of unease settle over him.

“We’ll make do for tonight,” Adrian said. “None of your customers will know what is going on back here.”

“I didn’t hire you for chaos to ensue,” Dale said. “I hired you because you came highly recommended to me.”

“There won’t be any disruption to service,” Adrian said through clenched teeth.

“You’re going to need to fix this,” Dale said. His voice was low and serious.

Adrian balked at the tone. He wasn’t used to being reprimanded. Usually he was the one telling people what to fix. It felt...bad. He didn’t say anything to Dale in that vein, though. Instead he nodded to indicate that he fully understood the implications of what would happen should he not fix this mess. His job was not as secure as Adrian would have liked it to be, but he had no doubt that he could make

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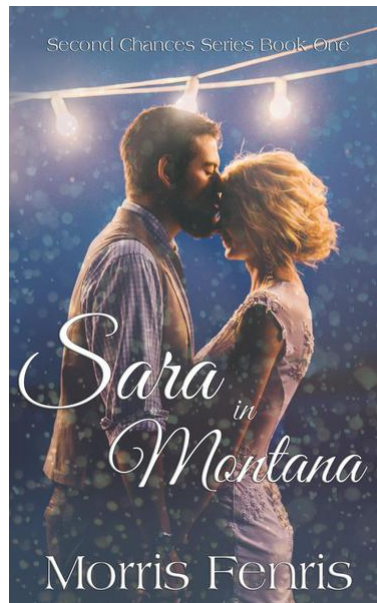
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About the Author

With a lifelong love of reading and writing, Morris Fenris loves to let his imagination paint pictures in a wide variety of genres. His current book list includes everything from Christian romance, to an action-packed Western romance series, to inspirational and Christmas holiday romance.

His novels are filled with emotion, and while there is both heartbreak and humor, the stories are always uplifting.

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