

BILLIONAIRE BACHELOR
MOUNTAIN COVE



HER

Billionaire
RIVAL

KAYLEE BALDWIN

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KAYLEE BALDWIN

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Her Billionaire Rival

A simple case of mistaken identity...

He only wants to meet the girl he's fallen for over emails.

Too bad he's opening up the rival pet store across town.

She only wants to keep her pet store open.

Too bad she's falling for her handsome billionaire rival.

What's a woman to do when the truth is revealed?

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Prologue

From Wags to Wishes.

Cute, Xander thought as he stared up at the wooden store sign over the door of the boutique pet store he'd spotted during his business lunch. His grandpa would have gotten a huge kick out of the play on words.

Downtown Bentonville could be the set of a small-town movie, complete with a grassy town square, an active fountain, and brick churches. People even waved hello to one another as they walked around the square—a far cry from the hustle, bustle, and bright lights of his home in Los Angeles.

He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes until he absolutely had to leave in order to get to the hangar in time for his scheduled flight.

A jingling bell on the door announced his arrival. He was surprised to see so many people in the small space. He stayed near the back, checking out the selection, and gave a low whistle at their wide stock of organic dog foods, impressed at the selection. He'd love to stock something like this at his store, but it would be too pricey to fit within their business model. Perhaps he could offer one or two organic brands, just above cost.

The store had the kind of energy he wished he could recreate. People had brought their pets with them, from little purse dogs to pets on leashes. His dog, Jax, wouldn't know what to do in a place like this. Mark everything, probably. He smiled wryly at the thought. No, maybe he would have tried

that once, but in the four years since Jax had come into Xander's life, they'd both changed quite a bit. Gotten softer. Better. They were both a bit more social with strangers.

He wandered to the treat case, drawn in by the intricately decorated selections.

"Can I help you?" a woman asked. She smiled at him, and he was struck by the sheer openness of it—another rarity in L.A. Her southern accent was endearing as well, nearly invisible, but with just enough of a hint to make him smile.

"I'm just looking around," he said.

"What kind of pet do you have?" she asked.

"A terrier. Jax is good-natured, but a handful."

"Handful in what way?"

"In the perpetual puppy way. Also in the 'always getting into mischief, too smart for his own good' kind of way."

She laughed, and he loved the sound of it. When was the last time he'd noticed a woman's laugh? He'd been so busy with work, and it seemed as if most of his dates for the last year had been for show: pose for this magazine with this actress, attend the charity ball with that model he'd met only five minutes earlier, and pretend that he knew how to talk well with people and that he was comfortable in crowds.

She leaned onto the waist-high case, resting her forearms on it as she took him in. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"California," he admitted. He'd learned quickly that telling people in Arkansas that he was from California got him mixed results: some people were excited, and some people wanted to lecture him on politics. And if they recognized his name? There was a reason he'd started going by Xander in private.

"Never been," she said. "Someday."

The bell on the door rang, and a family with several young children walked inside. They separated upon entering, the kids heading to the pet toys section, zeroing in on every squeaking toy on display.

Xander winced, but the woman smiled and waved to the parents, who had headed toward the organic food section. A line had formed behind Xander, and he realized then that he'd been holding up actual customers. It was rare he could talk to someone with ease, but Jax was definitely one of his favorite subjects.

"Sorry," he said, stepping to the side.

"Tell you what," she said. Her silver-blue eyes were lit up with amusement. She grabbed a paper bag and took a heart-shaped dog treat from the case. "I know it looks good, but don't eat it. Tell Jax it's from me."

"How much?" he asked, reaching for his wallet.

She waved him away. "On the house." She smiled softly. "I grew up with a mixed-breed terrier. He died about a year ago. I wouldn't have survived my teenage years without him."

He wanted to ask her about her teenage years, ask her to take a walk with him, or go to a café and grab a bite to eat. But she'd already moved on to the next customer, and when he looked around the store, he knew she'd be busy for a long time. He was going to be late getting to the hangar as it was.

On a whim, he snagged one of her business cards from beside the register. It was simple: a brown card with peach typewriter script.

From Wags to Wishes

Owner: Callie Irving

Business Phone: (479) 555-4468

Email: fromwagstowishes@quick-email.com

"Thank you," he said to her before walking away.

She gave him a friendly wave, then turned back to the next customer in line. Before he'd even left the store, his brother was calling him about a decision that needed to be made right away, and real life popped the bubble he'd been in.

* * *

In the bustle of traveling and the excitement of outlining a plan for opening his new store in Bentonville, Xander forgot about the interaction with the owner of the organic pet food store. It was one of many contacts he'd had that weekend, after all. One smile, one laugh, although significant at the time, seemed less poignant as the days went by.

Until, over a week later, he found a paper bag sitting on the counter with a note from the laundry service.

Found this tucked between the clothes in your laundry bag.

They were endlessly finding items in his piles of clothes after he traveled: his watch, menus from restaurants ... Once they even found a handcrafted puppet he'd been gifted in India.

He opened the bag and dumped out the treat. From Wags to Wishes, and its owner, immediately came back into his mind. "Jax!"

Jax bounded into the room, pleased as ever to get called in for attention. Xander rubbed his ears for a moment and then made him sit before setting the treat on the ground in front of him.

Jax, who was untrusting of new things under nearly every circumstance, sniffed at the treat, then ate it in one happy gulp, his tail wagging eagerly as he sniffed Xander's hands for another.

Later that night, Xander dug out the business card from his wallet and sent an email.

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: February 20

subject: Online Treat Order

Ms. Irving,

I was in your store a couple of weeks ago (from California) and got a treat for my dog, Jax. I checked out your website but couldn't find a place for online ordering, so I thought I'd reach out. Can I order six dozen assorted treats and have them shipped to me?

Best,

Xander

* * *

Callie rarely checked the store email, so she didn't get the message for another couple of weeks after her first meeting with the stranger from California. By then she'd given out at least a dozen free treats and had so many tourists stop in from all over the western United States, she couldn't keep one straight from the other.

Jax, though. That name sounded familiar. The bicyclist with the pit bull, maybe? She tried to picture him, but struggled. Was he the older gentleman with the bowler hat? Or the handsome man who had worn a suit into the store? A parade of faces, some more clear than others, went through her memory, but she couldn't pin down a Xander.

Either way, how could she turn down an order like that?

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: March 8

subject: Re: Online treat order

Xander,

Absolutely! I've attached an invoice, and once it's paid, I'll ship the treats. Thank you for your business.

Callie

Chapter One

One year later

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: March 24

subject: Lord of the Treats

Callie,

Your St. Patrick's Day dog treats were the hit of the dog park.

Unfortunately, we're also now banned from said dog park. I'd hoped that bringing treats to share would help Jax to socialize and make connections with other canines. My mom did that for me once, when I was in preschool and struggling to make friends. She made Rice Krispies Treats with melted peanut butter chocolate on the top, and I brought them to school. Boom. Most popular kid in class that day. I hoped the same principle would apply.

(Except now that I'm writing this, I'm remembering that one of the kids had an allergic reaction and broke out into hives, and his mom had to come pick him up. The school banned homemade treats from that moment on. Huh. That would have been good to remember, because my treat-bringing story is more of a cautionary tale rather than a victorious moment.)

Well, Jax was quite a bit more territorial of his treats than I'd anticipated. A dog fight broke out, Jax in the center, and I had to wade into it to get him out, requiring three stitches on my leg from a vicious Chihuahua. (Don't tell anyone I was bested by the smallest dog in the park. He was clearly trained by professional fighters.)

Jax then ate every single treat I'd brought in one gobbling feast, probably to make a point, and then threw it up on our walk of shame from the dog park. The dogs then started to fight over who would eat the mess.

Needless to say, we are out of treats.

But instead of mailing them, I wondered if I could pick them up? I'll be in town for a few weeks.

Xander

* * *

Callie Irving brought a spoonful of biscuit dough to her nose and sniffed it, searching for the right notes of sweetness and savory. Perfect. She'd been working on this particular recipe for a couple of weeks now, trying to refine a healthier, but still delicious training treat option for the puppies that came into her store.

She sold pet supplies and food, but she was most known for her handcrafted organic treats, which were meticulously researched, baked, and decorated to the very best quality. Darcy, her chocolate lab puppy, sat at her feet, her tail wagging as she eagerly waited for the chance to test out this latest treat.

“Morning,” Cole, Callie’s sixteen-year-old brother, mumbled as he shuffled to the fridge and pulled out a carton of orange juice. He pointed to a plate of muffins she’d placed on the table. “Dog or people?”

That was an important question in their house. He’d accidentally bitten into more dog treats than any teenage boy should ever have to. “People. I made them this morning.” Sometime after midnight, anyway.

He grunted and slid one onto a napkin.

Callie focused on shaping her dog biscuits into mini Easter eggs, while she tried to come up with something to say to her brother that hadn’t already been said the night before when she’d picked him up at the Eureka Springs police station.

Hey, are you trying to be like Dad? If so, good job!

So jail, huh? How was that for you?

Was it a mistake, making you move to Bentonville with me?

None of those questions would change anything. He’d been caught trying to hot-wire a tourist’s car in Eureka Springs with a couple of his friends. Court date pending, but Marcus Price—the Eureka Spring sheriff and longtime father figure to them both—had let her take Cole home with the warning that she get him under control somehow, or find someone else who could.

How? she asked herself for the millionth time since walking through the door last night. Cole had a chip on his shoulder, and nothing she’d done so far had helped. When sleep had eluded her, she’d gotten out of bed to do what she always did when stress got to her. Bake.

She was surprised to see Cole up so early. Usually, she had to wake him up for his Saturday morning shift at From Wags to Wishes.

“Do you need me to drive you this morning?” she asked casually, making sure most of her focus was on the biscuits and not on studying her brother’s reaction.

“Can I borrow the car?”

She got her fingers damp and smoothed them over the surface of an egg biscuit to remove any finger imprints. He'd gotten his license only three weeks before and always looked for any excuse to drive. If he took the car, she'd have to walk the two miles into work. But Darcy could use the fresh air and exercise, and another battle with her brother did not sound appealing. "Sure. But you'll need to take Darcy home with you after your shift."

He huffed out a breath in what she assumed was agreement, before stuffing another muffin in his mouth, grabbing the keys from the hook by the door, and taking off without another word.

Darcy barked at her heels impatiently.

"Soon." Callie slipped the latest batch of biscuits into the oven to bake and then opened her laptop on the counter. Another thing to keep her up at night—the struggling financial situation at From Wags to Wishes. Sales had steadily declined over the last year, and she worried that the new Pets and More opening up next weekend would ring the final death knell over her store.

"Of all the towns in the entire world, they had to come here," she muttered. She went through the day's previous totals, taking breaks only to put additional batches of goodies into the oven to cook. If she made enough money on just treats, maybe her store wouldn't be failing.

Callie yawned, ready to shut the laptop down and hopefully get an hour of sleep, when Xander's email caught her eye.

Her heart skipped a beat as she read and then reread it.

He wanted to meet.

What started out as Xander being her only online customer had turned into an unexpected friendship. It was freeing to email someone who wasn't from the same small town as her, who didn't know every piece of her past, and who didn't think they could guess her future, too. She didn't have an official

online store, but she'd made an exception for Xander when he'd emailed her last year. She was so glad she had.

Over the last year, she'd found herself opening up about things she'd never told anyone, and she looked forward to seeing a notification from him. She knew things about him too: he got along better with his mom than with his dad, he missed playing baseball but didn't have time to join a community league, and he lived under massive amounts of pressure to be successful. But really, how much could you actually know about someone you'd only met once in real life—and couldn't even remember meeting?

What if it was awkward? What if meeting in person ruined everything? Soon after they'd started emailing, she'd given in to the urge to search for him online, but over seventy-five people on Facebook had the same name for their profile, and she had no way of knowing which was his.

She shook her head. She was being silly. Of course she wanted to meet Xander. Before she could change her mind, she wrote him back a quick note. She then pulled the remaining treats from the oven and started decorating, knowing that sleep would still be a long time off.

Chapter Two

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: March 25

subject: Re: Lord of the Treats

Xander,

Somehow you must have known I really needed a laugh today.

I would love to meet you. The store hours are 9 a.m.–7 p.m. Come in any time.

Callie

* * *

Xander sat in his makeshift office at Pets and More in Bentonville, going over the final details for the grand opening. Everything was in place for a fantastic event, including the colorful strings of triangle flags hanging from each light post in the parking lot.

Xander had been to many grand openings, but this was the first store he'd completely taken care of all the details himself, from buying the land to negotiating with the town, to this very moment, watching the shelves get stocked and the new employees get trained.

The only thing that would make it better was if his dad could be here. This would be the first Pets and More grand opening his dad couldn't personally attend, due to health reasons. Dad didn't want to admit it, but his health was declining quickly, and no amount of "bootstraps" thinking was going to change things.

At least Liam could come, and he was going to bring Jax with him, which probably won him the lifetime award for best brother.

Xander had a few minutes before he needed to make a phone call, so he pulled out his personal phone and opened up the latest email from Callie. She sounded more businesslike than he'd hoped—he'd rather meet for dinner than at her store—but he had to admit that she was doing the smartest thing for a meeting with someone who was essentially a stranger. Hopefully they'd hit it off in person, and dinner would naturally follow.

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: March 25

subject: Re: Lord of the Treats

Callie,

Why did you need a laugh today?

Xander

A few minutes passed, and to his surprise, he got another message. Usually one or both of them were so busy, days could go by without a response.

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: March 25

subject: Re: Lord of the Treats

Xander,

My younger brother was arrested last night. Not for the first time, unfortunately. He's a good kid. I genuinely can't figure out what he's thinking right now.

Callie

Xander sat back in his chair and let out a long breath. She'd told him that she was her brother's guardian, but he didn't know what circumstances had led to that arrangement.

He tapped out a few responses, but they all sounded pithy, and he deleted them. He recalled the stress he'd put his mom through when he was a teenager, and regret filled him once again.

Maybe now was the right time to go meet Callie. He'd driven into town a little over a week ago, but something had held him back from going to see her.

Not just something ... he was nervous that he'd go there and clam up, as he tended to do. In an email, it was easy to say what he was thinking and to tell stories. In person, for some reason, his mind went blank and he often said the wrong thing. Especially if he was nervous.

But he couldn't put it off forever. Or at least, he didn't want to.

He closed down his computer and strode out of the office, his stomach rumbling. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten a real meal. His personal assistant had brought him a smoothie at some point yesterday, and he recalled downing a protein bar before dropping into bed. He'd set a punishing pace for himself here in Bentonville, partly to keep his mind

off of leaving Dad in the hospital, but mostly to prove to everyone and himself that he was up to the task of opening a new store.

Xander got into the old red truck he'd been driving since he was sixteen, inherited from his grandpa. He had much nicer cars at his home in California, but none that he loved more than this. None of the others anchored him to his roots like this truck. When he did interviews on television or posed for "The Most (fill-in-the-blank) Bachelor" photos for magazines, or had a team ready to do as he asked, there was something grounding about getting in his grandpa's old truck at the end of the day.

He called his brother and stuck his Bluetooth headphone in his ear, then pulled out of the parking lot and headed into town.

"How's the opening going?" Liam asked without preamble.

"As good as can be expected." Xander knew it was killing Liam not to be there. "How's Dad?"

Liam's hesitation told Xander everything he needed to know. "He sleeps a lot. I think Mom's going crazy, being cooped up in the hospital, but she doesn't want to leave him."

"Maybe you can convince her to fly out here for the grand opening." Xander would love to have one of his parents to cheer him on and see how far he'd come.

"I'll try," Liam said, sounding distracted. "I'm getting another call. Message me if something comes up."

He hung up before Xander could say goodbye. Liam had always been an overachiever, the one their parents didn't have to worry about. But he'd taken on a heavier load since Dad's heart attack, and Xander worried about him doing too much.

Xander turned the corner onto Bentonville's town square, once again feeling like he'd entered the set of a small-town movie. A running fountain with a statue of a war hero was displayed in the middle of the grassy square, with oak trees lining the sidewalk around it. Tall brick buildings with

marquees straight from the 1950s surrounded the square. The shops and restaurants were all upscale and locally owned and operated.

The memory of his last time here, just over a year before, made Xander nostalgic in a way he couldn't explain. Downtown Bentonville wasn't a great fit for the huge Pets and More he'd envisioned—and it was company policy to own their buildings rather than leasing them—but he'd found a lot only a couple of miles away.

He followed the square around and parked on the street in front of From Wags to Wishes. The store was dark. He got out of his truck and checked the door. Locked. They should have opened at nine, and it was almost one.

He frowned. Maybe things with her brother were worse off than she'd let on. Most small business owners couldn't afford to shut their stores down, especially on a weekend.

He walked a couple doors down to grab a turkey sandwich and bag of chips, which he took outside to eat. He finished off his sandwich and walked toward the trash bin near his truck, when he heard an excited bark. A woman came around the corner, jogging with her chocolate lab. A puppy, from the looks of it. Maybe six or seven months old. His heart leapt as the woman got closer, and he saw her face.

Callie.

She looked the same as he remembered her, blond hair pulled into a ponytail, her blue eyes clear and bright. He smiled, but her focus was on something behind him. She frowned, not seeming to notice him at all. Her puppy, which must have been Darcy, did notice him, though. She darted in front of Callie, with all of her puppy enthusiasm, to lunge at Xander.

Callie's feet got tangled with the dog's body, and she tripped over Darcy, calling out in surprise. Xander rushed forward, but he was too late to save Callie from crashing to the ground in a heap.

Chapter Three

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: March 25

subject: Help?

Callie,

Is there something I can do to help? I have been in a similar situation before—more like your brother than you, unfortunately—but it has given me some experience.

Xander

* * *

Of course. This was exactly what her day needed. First she'd been up all night. Then she'd burned her last batch of biscuits when she'd gotten distracted with her finances. Now she'd arrived to find that Cole had not opened the store like he was supposed to.

So yes, all of that being topped off by skidding across the ground in front of a handsome stranger? It just made sense.

“Are you okay?” the man asked.

She heard him rush to her side, but kept her head turned toward the store. She needed a do-over. A whole life do-over.

“Hey,” he said gently. He placed a warm, firm hand on hers and unlaced the leash from her tight grasp. The relief on her fingers was instant as he took Darcy, who barked and jumped about with no indication of awareness that she’d just made Callie fall.

Callie took stock of her body. Her entire right side burned, and her right wrist felt numb when she used it to try to sit up.

“Can I help?” The man held out his hand, and Callie placed her left hand in his. As he tugged her up, she finally got a good look at his face and caught her breath. No one should be allowed to be this handsome. Or have teeth that nice. His brows furrowed as his eyes flitted over her, checking for injuries. Every flit felt like a touch, and she found herself breathless.

Stop it, Callie. You’re breathless because you just got the wind knocked out of you.

“You’re bleeding,” the man said. “I think I have a first aid kit in my truck. Can you stand on your own?”

She realized that she still had her left hand in his, relying on him for balance more than she actually needed. “Yeah. Sorry. I think I’m still a little stunned.”

“You went down pretty hard.”

“Is Darcy okay?” she asked, realizing that she’d nearly forgotten her dog in all of this. She peered around the man to find Darcy sniffing the bottom of his pants before tumbling playfully over his feet. “I think she’s fine,” she answered herself dryly. *And just as smitten as me.*

The man removed his hand from her grasp and jogged over to his truck while she walked to the From Wags to Wishes store and used her code to unlock the door. She stepped in and

turned on the lights, glancing around for any sign that Cole had been there. Was it too much to hope that he'd gotten hungry and stepped out for a few minutes to get lunch?

Now that she was walking around, she realized that her wrist really hurt. She moved it in a circle, hoping it wasn't broken. Her exercise pants had ripped at the knee, and a trail of blood ran down her leg and elbow. She lifted the hem of her shirt slightly and saw that she'd gotten road rash on her stomach and hip bone. Her chin felt tender, and she guessed she'd skinned that as well. She could only imagine how graceful she'd looked.

The man came into the store moments later with Darcy and a white first aid kit under his arm. "This was my grandpa's. I have no idea if any of this stuff is still good."

"Thank you." Callie eased herself onto the stool behind the counter and opened it up. Gauze, small bandages, alcohol pads. She opened one to find it dried out. She took a couple of bandages from the box and a packet of anti-inflammatory pain relievers she hoped might help the pain in her wrist. She then slid the first aid kit across the counter to him. "I don't want to hold you up."

"I'm not in any rush." His quick glance at his watch made her think otherwise.

"Okay. I'm going to take care of this, then. Have a look around." She took Darcy's leash and tied it to a pole before heading into the bathroom to clean up. There wasn't much she could do for the scrapes, but she did put a couple Band-Aids on her knee and made sure to clean the dirt off of her face. Her ponytail hung askew, so she straightened it, and she wished for some lip gloss or something. But there was no coming back from falling in front of someone. Besides, a man as handsome as that was definitely taken. Even if she was in the market for a relationship.

Which she wasn't.

She took in her bedraggled appearance and sighed. Nothing could be done for it at this point.

She pulled out her phone, aware of the time ticking away with a customer in the store, and she sent Cole a quick text.
Where are you???

Chapter Four

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: March 25

subject: Re: Help?

Xander,

Thank you, but I'll figure it out. I always do. It's mostly just boring business and money stuff, nothing that everyone else in the world doesn't have to deal with as well.

Really, the hardest thing is that I took my brother to see our dad last weekend. The prison does these family days every once in a while where we can bring food and eat with him.

Sometimes I drop my brother off; sometimes I stay. This time I stayed, because last time the visit set my brother off, and he acted out the whole next month. Staying didn't help, I guess, seeing as how my brother got arrested the weekend after getting home.

Though I did get to see my dad, who—despite everything—I still love.

Sometimes all I can remember are the bad things: the drinking, getting arrested, feeling humiliated at school, spending a night here or there in foster

care. But other times, I remember him buying me ice cream from the ice cream truck. Or picking me up from school when it was cold and raining outside, so I wouldn't have to walk.

Life is complicated, isn't it? (And so are people.)

Callie

PS. Keep the stories coming, okay?

* * *

“**S**orry about that.” Callie came out of the restroom with a wry smile on her face, wiping her wet hands on a paper towel before throwing it into the trash. “I appreciate your help.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She waved her right hand, then used it to support her left wrist, almost subconsciously. “Just embarrassed.”

“It happens.”

“For some reason, I have a hard time picturing you sprawled out on the ground because of your dog.”

There had been more than once when he'd done exactly that. Jax was a rascal. “You'd be surprised.”

He walked to the bakery display, working up the courage to introduce himself, while Callie unhooked Darcy's leash and led her into a crate near the counter. Darcy happily curled up on her pad.

“New in town?” Callie asked him as he perused the treats. It made him miss Jax even more.

“Yeah. I'm here for business, but I just bought a place in Eureka Springs.”

“That’s where I’m from. Whereabouts did you get a house?”

“Fifteen minutes out of town, in a development tucked into the Ozark Mountains.”

“It’s gorgeous there,” she said, then laughed. “But you already know that, of course.”

It was the view that got him: the leaves that changed colors to brilliant shades of gold, red, and orange; the sparkling blue lake; and the fresh, earthy scent, so unlike the pollution in the city. Growing up, his mom had often said she was raising a country boy in the city, something they’d all laughed about, but it was true. The city always felt confining to him, and when he’d walked into the Mountain Cove development, it had felt like coming home.

He’d convinced Liam to buy the lot right beside him and build a home, though he couldn’t imagine his brother ever stopping work long enough to visit it more than once a year.

He continued to look at the sweets, trying to come up with how to introduce himself. *Hey, I’m Xander. From the emails.* Or maybe he just needed to say, *I’m Xander*, and then wait for her to put it together.

He was definitely overthinking this, but nothing was going according to plan so far. He tried to imagine what his brother would do. Probably just walk in with his signature charming smile and announce who he was first thing. Not wait fifteen minutes into a meeting, when it had already veered straight into awkward for waiting so long.

“Oh no,” Callie said, pulling him from his thoughts. She was staring at her phone, a frown on her face.

“What?”

She looked up, almost surprised to see him standing there. “You don’t happen to be an accountant, do you?”

“I’m not. But I do own my own business, so I’ve done plenty of accounting.”

“I was just joking. I’ll figure it out.”

“I can help,” he said.

“You have already helped me more than any customer should have to.” She put her phone in her pocket and let out a long breath that seemed to carry more than her share of stress. “The question I should be asking is, how can I help you?”

I’m Xander, he should say. Instead, he pointed to the treats case. “Can I get a dozen assorted treats?” He internally kicked himself for stalling. *Just say it.*

But what if he wasn’t what she expected? What if he was pushing things too far, meeting her now? He looked forward to their emails. They were a bright spot in his busy life. Something about the anonymity of typing things had made him more open with her than he usually was with people.

Generally, he couldn’t afford to be open with anyone. He and his brother had both found out the hard way that there were people you just couldn’t trust. Not that Callie was one of those people; he knew that for certain.

Still, the words wouldn’t come. It was like his tongue was stuck.

Ugh. He hadn’t had an attack of nerves like this since his early college years. He’d worked hard to overcome it, but all that growth was woefully out of reach in this very moment.

“You definitely can.” She grabbed a box. Her fingers were long and delicate as she reached for a treat. “Any preference?”

He shook his head. “My brother is driving my dog into town next week. They’re both going to need treats after that.”

“Is your brother not a dog person?”

“My dog is not a people person.”

She laughed, lightening all the stress in her face, and he felt almost as if he’d won something. “Well, he’s not a person at all, I guess.”

“It feels like they are, though, doesn’t it?”

She smiled at him, and they both got caught in it, him smiling like an idiot back at her. She looked away first, her

cheeks a delightful shade of pink. “Anything else I can get for you?”

Now's the moment. Just do it. It's not going to get any easier. “Yes,” he said, taking a deep breath. “Here goes. I'm Xa—”

The bell on the door jangled before he could finish, and a teenager came into the store with a scowl dark enough to match his black eye.

“Cole!” Callie rushed around the counter. “What happened?”

Cole looked at Xander as if he didn't want to say anything in front of him.

“Sorry,” Callie said to Xander. She turned to Cole and said in a low voice, “Go in the back. I'll be there in a second.” She then went back behind the counter, more flustered than before. She rang up Xander, but her mind only seemed to be fractionally on the transaction.

Could Cole be the brother? Who else could he be? A teenager who definitely appeared to have gotten into some trouble. In the few moments he saw them together, he could see a distinct family resemblance. He'd heard a lot about Cole over the last year, though Callie never referred to him by name, only as her brother.

She handed him the box, looking over her shoulder toward the back room distractedly. “Thank you for your business.”

He'd missed his window to tell her who he was. He'd hesitated too long, waiting for the perfect moment, and any moment he could have had blasted past. It would be awkward now. It would be a “thing” instead of just a casual “isn't this interesting” mention.

On a whim, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his business card. “If you change your mind about that accounting question, call me.”

She took the card and glanced down at it for a second, before her mind seemed to register something and she stared at

it, her eyes growing darker by the second. “Do you think this is funny?”

He nearly took a step back at her snappy tone. “No, of course not.” She’d figured it out, but he thought it would just be awkward between them. Not that she’d be angry. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” Her voice sounded higher, more intense than before. “For what?” She threw his card down on the counter. “For trying to run me out of business, or for coming here so you could rub it in my face?”

He blinked. This was definitely not going in any way he’d planned.

She let out a humorless laugh. “Of all days, of course the owner of Pets and More comes into my store today.”

He glanced down at where she’d thrown his card onto the counter, but he didn’t need to see it to know exactly what it said across the top in bold letters:

Alex Nichols, CEO

Pets and More

Not once had he thought she might be upset with him. Their stores sold such different things, catered to different clientele. An organic, handcrafted business like hers had to be booming with online sales, while Pets and More focused more on local, face-to-face business.

Yet he had to admit, he hadn’t told her the details of what kind of business he owned. He’d wanted to remain anonymous—once people realized who he was, they always wanted something from him. But he trusted her now.

“Do you even want these treats?” she asked angrily.

“My dog genuinely loves your treats,” he said, grasping for something to say that would bring back her smile. “I think there’s been a huge misunderstanding.”

A storm whirled behind her eyes. “Are you Alex Nichols?”

“Yes.”

“Do you own Pets and More?”

“Yes. But I’m not trying to run you out of business. Or rub it in your face.”

“Well, you probably don’t have to try for a lot of things, do you? They just get handed to you.”

His back stiffened. He’d be the first to admit that he’d had a huge leg up in life by inheriting the business his dad had started so many years ago. But he’d worked hard to qualify for this: he started as a clerk at their first store in California and had worked his way up, while also getting a master’s degree in business.

“Thank you for the treats,” he said stiffly. “I hope you feel better.” He took his box and walked from the store as anger, and quite a bit of disbelief, accompanied his every step to his truck. He’d been worried about awkwardness? He laughed humorlessly. He’d had no idea.

Chapter Five

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: March 25

subject: Complicated

Callie,

I'm sorry you're going through such a difficult time right now. I really wish you didn't have so many hard things on your plate. I think it's normal to still love someone, even when you've been hurt by their actions. Don't be so hard on yourself, okay? I know you're doing your best, more than most people would, and you're doing a great job.

And yes, people are complicated. So, so complicated. Like really, you may think they are one way when they are actually another way.

People are also awkward. Take me, for example. I know this may be hard for you to believe (ha ha), but I communicate way better in email than I do in person. I'm always worried about saying the wrong thing. I was shy as a kid, and still have to fight against that tendency in my job and in other social obligations I have. "Fake it until I make it" is usually my motto. I was ashamed of being shy for so long—my dad definitely considers it a weakness—and now a lot of people believe that I'm aloof or

rude. I've come to terms with it, mostly. Except when it occasionally messes things up.

Xander

PS. Jax ran away from the dog walker this morning. He's fine. More than fine. He found his way to a Mexican restaurant and made himself at home in the dumpster, eating away. The dog walker quit. But Jax was happy as could be. I miss that dog. Also, I need to find a new dog walker, ASAP.

* * *

Callie took a few deep breaths to center herself before going into the back room to talk to Cole. She would've been angry enough at the fact that her brother had blown off work to go out and get into trouble. But added to that, seeing Alex Nichols in her store had shaken her.

Overall, he was nothing like she'd expected. When she'd thought of Pets and More at all, it had been run by a faceless old man who was coming into her town to take over, not someone young and handsome. And so likable.

Yes, she'd liked him before she knew who he was. How could she not? He'd been helpful. Charming. Tall, dark, and mysteriously quiet. He had a first aid kit in his truck, for heaven's sake. All he'd needed to do was offer her a hanky, and she'd have been gone.

She dropped her head and rolled her shoulders. Darcy must have sensed that something was off, because she came over and rubbed her nose along Callie's calf.

"This is your fault," she said.

Darcy looked up at her with large, brown eyes.

“Okay, it’s not your fault. Even if you did trip me.” She knelt down and scratched behind Darcy’s ears. “What am I going to do?”

As angry and as upset as she was feeling that morning, it couldn’t mask the most real feeling she had deep down. Fear. Fear of losing everything she’d worked for. Fear of losing her brother.

She stood and went into the back room to face Cole, who sat in her desk chair, his feet resting on her desk, his nose buried in his phone. She smacked at his feet, and he looked up, the dark bruise under his eye catching her off guard once again. Here, in this store, he looked so innocent. So much like the ten-year-old she always saw when she looked at him. But he wasn’t ten anymore, and he didn’t like her as much now as he had back then. Then, she’d been his hero. Now, she felt like his jailer. Or his almost-mother, which was uncomfortable for both of them.

“What happened?” Her attempt at keeping her voice level was successful.

“Nothing.”

“So a black eye spontaneously erupted between now and when I saw you this morning?”

“Something like that.”

Callie groaned, some of her patience slipping. “Cole. You have to give me something here. I trusted you with my car so you could open my shop!” She paused, a thought occurring to her. “Where’s my car?”

“Parked out front,” he said sullenly.

She released a long breath. She couldn’t afford another car, not right now. She sat at the edge of the desk and folded her arms, staring at him until he started to squirm uncomfortably.

“Stop looking at me like a creeper.”

She raised an eyebrow but didn’t move her gaze.

He looked up again and caught her glance, then tossed his phone on the desk, frustrated. “Fine. I stopped to pick up

Bracken and Whit on my way to the store. Whit needed to run into Eureka Springs for something—”

“You drove all the way into Eureka Springs without telling me?” A headache pulsed behind her right eye. “Okay, what else?”

“There were these guys there. At the gas station.”

At least he’d filled her car up with gas. Or more likely, he’d just gone inside for some junk and coasted it back to Bentonville on empty.

“They started talking, and we couldn’t just let it ride.”

“So you got into a fight?”

“The guy got in one lucky punch.” He smiled. “I got in at least two before the clerk broke us up.”

She groaned in frustration. “Please tell me you’re not proud of this, Cole! What if the police had been called?”

He had the grace to look at her guiltily this time. “They were. We raced out of there before they showed up.”

She stood and threw out her hands. “Do you understand that you will go to jail if you’re caught again? I can only do so much to keep you out! It’s like you don’t even care.”

“I don’t know why you care so much! It’s my life!” he shouted.

“Because I love you!” she yelled back. “But love alone isn’t going to change you, is it?”

“You always want to change me. Make me different. I am who I am, Callie! And that’s not you!” He stood, grabbed his phone, and stormed out of the store, the door slamming behind him with a bang and a lingering jingle of the bell.

Chapter Six

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: March 30

subject: Re: Complicated

Xander,

*Oh, Jax. He just needs to find the right dog walker!
How long until you're reunited with him?*

I would have never guessed in a million years that you were shy. That doesn't come through in our emails at all, but we all have our thing, right? My brother says that my thing is my pride. So nice of him to let me know what I should work on! I guess that's what brothers are for.

For the record, I wouldn't call myself proud. Just independent. Self-sufficient. Determined to make my own way.

So get this ... there's a new pet store in town, and they're sending in their top people to harass me right now. It's bad enough that they have to come here and steal my customers, but they could at least have the decency not to come to my store and make it a thing.

I expected to see you by now. Plans change?

Callie

*PS. Darcy tripped me in front of the Pets and More
CEO last week, and I fell gracelessly on my face.
Not quite Jax-level antics, but pretty dang close.*

* * *

Xander stood outside of Pets and More with Liam, taking it all in. It was still dark outside, just the faintest bit of sky turning a lighter blue at the edges of the horizon promising morning. The “Grand Opening” banner strung across the front of the store fluttered gently in the wind.

Pride swelled in his chest. This was the culminating moment of so much hard work.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said to Liam, who had flown in from New York late the previous night. He’d been planning on driving from California with Jax, but a crisis at their New York office had changed his plans. Jax was now with one of Liam’s assistants, and for now, they were going to stay put in California until his assistant, Frank, could make it out. It was probably for the best, seeing as Xander didn’t have a lot of time to play anyway.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Liam said around a yawn, looking exhausted as usual. His extended work hours were starting to show in the deepening lines around his red and weary eyes. Xander was only a couple of years younger than Liam, but Liam had lost a lot of the vibrancy he’d once had, making him look older.

“This job is going to kill you,” Xander said.

“Nah,” Liam said, waving the words away with his hand. “Get me some caffeine, and I’m good to go. Today is about

you, little brother.”

“Just think about taking some time to relax. You bought a Mountain Cove retreat, and this is the first time you’ve been here.”

“Second,” Liam said. “I came once, when we were picking out the spot for the store, remember?”

“Your house wasn’t finished.” They’d only just broken ground on the other houses in the development then.

“Still counts.”

Xander shook his head but let it drop. He wasn’t going to convince Liam of anything today.

Liam put a friendly arm around his shoulder. “It’s almost time for everyone to show up. Ready for this?”

Nerves and excitement swirled in Xander’s stomach. This was the moment he’d been looking forward to all year. Yet he’d always pictured Callie there too. He’d planned to invite her, but after her reaction to meeting him, it wasn’t going to happen. As it was, he felt lucky to still have an email buddy and a supplier for Jax’s doggie treats. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Liam motioned for him to lead. “Then after you.”

* * *

A line formed outside the store while the new manager briefed the employees and prepared everyone for how busy the day would be. They were giving out free stickers and cookies for the humans, and treats for the animals. Plus, the first hundred people would receive a vet discount, and everyone, all day long, got twenty-five percent off orders over a hundred dollars.

Right at nine, the manager opened the doors, and people flooded inside. Throughout the rest of the morning, the crowd

stayed steady, new people replacing the ones who left.

There were drawings for coupons up to fifty percent off, to be used at any time, and the energy remained high. Xander walked around the store most of the morning, greeting customers and animals, missing Jax more and more every time he saw a terrier.

Morning slid into afternoon, and Xander kept watch for a familiar, beautiful face. Chances were she wasn't going to come to the grand opening of this store. Still, every time he saw someone with blond hair, his heart skipped and he did a double take.

In the week since he'd seen her, he'd realized how it might have looked, having the owner of a rival company show up. He hadn't thought of himself as a rival, but she certainly did. He was still ruminating on it when Liam approached.

"Things are going really good. I think we have a better turn out here than we did at the Sacramento opening."

"Good," Xander said. He'd had to fight to get a store placed here, and for it to be going well would be a huge point in his favor with his dad. "Hey, I'd love your thoughts on something."

"Sure," Liam said, folding his arms. Around them, people milled about, shopping carts filled with animal food and other supplies.

Xander lowered his voice. "There's another pet store here in Bentonville—"

"From Wags to Wishes," Liam interjected.

"Right," Xander said slowly.

"Well, I wouldn't worry about them at all. I had my assistant look into it. Did he not send over the information?"

"Maybe, but I didn't see it," Xander said. He had skimmed, or completely skipped over, more than one of the many, many emails his brother had sent while they prepared this location for the store. Liam tended to micromanage if

given half a chance, a holdover from when Xander was still struggling.

“Oh. Specialized organic dog treats, organic pet food, and toys. Small space. Locally owned. The website is a disaster. No competition. You’ll run them out of business in less than three months.”

Xander saw movement out of the corner of his eye. A flash of blond hair racing away, quickly swallowed up in the crowd. His stomach dropped.

That couldn’t be Callie.

But he found himself leaving his brother behind, mid-sentence, to catch up with the woman.

Chapter Seven

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: April 1

subject: Ouch

Callie,

How are you feeling after the fall? I know those things can hurt.

As you know, Jax has tripped me on multiple occasions. I don't think I told you the best Jax-tripping story yet. It was right after I first adopted him, so he was terrible on a leash (more terrible, I should say). He unexpectedly yanked me in front of a well-dressed couple. Who were posing for their wedding pictures in front of a fountain. Jax is such a camera hog. There's nothing like having a picture of you flying into a fountain to cherish for the rest of your life.

Xander

PS. Some unexpected complications have come up in regards to visiting you. Working on it.

* * *

This had been a very, very bad idea. Callie pulled her scarf up higher on her chin and pushed through the crowds of people in the aisles of Pets and More. More people than her boutique saw in a year were crowded in one moment in this store.

Her eyes stung with tears as she heard the words again in her mind: *No competition. You'll run them out of business in three months.*

Three months. That was optimistic on their part. She would be lucky to make it another three weeks. The weight of her collapsing dream—the unpaid bills, red notices, the responsibility of taking care of her brother, of how hard and how long she'd worked for this—nearly crushed her.

“Callie,” someone called from behind, and she increased her speed. She didn't want to see anyone or talk to anyone right now. Not in this state. Not with tears trailing down her cheeks that she angrily swiped away.

Alex Nichols had come into town and done this. She pictured him again, in her store, his disarming smile, business card pinched between his fingers. About to implode her entire world.

“Callie, wait!”

The automatic doors opened, and she stepped outside. The day was turning cloudy and gray, but it didn't deter any new customers from arriving. She'd had to park at the back of the lot. She tugged her sweater closer around her torso, stopping only when a hand touched her gently on the back of the arm. An electric jolt flew through her, and she stepped abruptly away.

“Callie. Please.”

She whirled around, her face hot, to find Alex Nichols standing behind her, his expression chagrined.

“I don’t know how much of that you heard ...”

“All of it,” she said, folding her arms. “Why did you come into my store?”

“To meet you,” he said, his eyes shifting away from her face.

“To check out the competition,” she countered.

“No.” He put his hands behind his head in frustration. “I swear I didn’t know we would do that to your store.”

“How could you not know?” she asked bitterly. “You come in with your endless shelves of low-priced items, and you think you won’t close down a store like mine?” She laughed humorlessly. “The sad thing is that this is just another store to you. One of many. Mine was my dream. My life. I’ve put everything into my store.”

“This Pets and More isn’t just another store to me,” Alex said. “I’m even relocating to Eureka Springs to be close to it. It’s my dream, too.”

“You could have gone anywhere.”

“I wanted to be here,” he insisted. They’d moved closer without even realizing it.

“Me too,” she said. Sparks flew between them. “But there’s not room enough for both of us.”

“Your store is fantastic,” he countered. “Organic and homemade treats. We’re different enough for you to survive.”

“Maybe if I was doing well before you came. But I’m struggling as it is. So congratulations. It probably won’t even be three months before I’m gone.”

Alex stepped back as if shocked. Callie shook her head clear of all the feelings being close to Alex stirred in her.

He swallowed. “This is not what I wanted. I never intended for this to happen.”

Callie backed up a step. Then another. She needed to get out of here. Away from these swirling emotions—anger, and yes, desire—to somewhere she could think clearly again. “Well, intentions don’t always mean a lot, do they?”

“Callie ...” he said, sounding tortured.

“I’m not your problem,” Callie insisted.

He looked up at the sky, and then at her again. “Somehow I keep messing things up with you. I don’t want to fight.”

“Well, that’s easy, because there’s no reason for us to be around each other.”

With that, she turned and strode to her car, grateful he didn’t follow. The nerve that of that man. Coming to her town, to her *store*, wrecking everything, and then pretending he cared.

Except she couldn’t help but picture him after she’d tripped over Darcy in front of the store. His compassion. His guileless smile. The flutter of butterflies she’d felt when he was close.

So which one was he? The smug business owner, or a disarmingly helpful man?

You know what? It doesn’t matter, she told herself, pushing any and every thought of him away. Because I am going to make sure I never see him again.

Chapter Eight

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: April 1

subject: Re: Ouch

Xander,

Unexpected complications? Should I be worried?

Callie

PS. Oh, Jax. Is it possible to be in love with a dog I've never met?

* * *

It was dark when Xander finally left his office. Everyone else had already gone, but he'd remained behind wanting to make sure everything was perfect for the morning. As it was, he might get about four hours of sleep before he'd have to wake up and be back here in the morning for day two. The grand

opening had been fantastic, and he couldn't have asked for a better result.

Except for Callie.

Regret over how he'd handled that, over playing any role in hurting her, had eaten at him all day. He wanted to fix it, wished more than anything that he could come up with an idea to make everything better, but came up blank.

He walked outside and heard a familiar clanking sound he couldn't quite place. He quietly locked the back door of the store and headed to the parking lot, moving slowly.

He'd parked his truck near the middle of the lot, not near a light post, but close enough for shadows to drape across his vehicle. A dark figure darted around the side of his truck, too fast for Xander to get a good look at him. Another clanking sounded, and this time Xander saw a spray paint can drop to the ground and roll away from the front tire.

His heart rate sped up, and a buzzing went through his ears. He'd spent plenty of nights in his youth out spray-painting squiggles on walls—he'd had no artistic talent and was only in it for the adrenaline high that came with destroying someone's property.

A crash sounded, and the light filtering down weakly from the post caught the shards of glass like scattered glitter. Xander picked up his pace, not worried about stealth now. Another crash sounded just as he rounded the hood of his truck.

The figure swore, spun on a heel, and started to run. Xander followed, the burn in his legs a welcome feeling. He might not have been good at school, but he'd always been athletic, and without Jax here to keep him motivated, he'd spent too many days sitting at a computer and not running.

He reached out a hand and snagged the fabric of the black hoodie, yanking it back and revealing a head of short, blond hair. The teenager struggled against Xander's firm grip and swore again before the fight seemed to go out of him.

"If you run, I'll tackle you," Xander warned grimly. He waited for the quick nod of acknowledgment before releasing

the boy's hoodie. The boy shook out his shoulders, then tensed as if debating another dash. He put one foot forward, and Xander snatched the back of his sweatshirt, this time yanking him backwards with a quick jerk that pulled the kid to the ground.

"You can't touch me!" the kid yelled, whipping toward Xander, his face a wall of anger. His right eye had a smudge of darkness around it.

Xander squinted, and then the reason the boy looked so familiar made him take another step closer. "Cole?"

The boy scowled darkly. "How do you know my name?"

"I know your sister."

"Because you're ruining her life."

Xander rubbed wearily at his face. "Let's go see the damage." He waited for Cole to stand, then made him walk in front of him while they went back to the truck, on alert in case he took off again. It was too dark to see exactly what Cole had spray-painted on his truck, but Xander could make out a mass of dark, dripping lines along the entire body. Two windows had been smashed out.

Anger rushed through him hotly. This truck had been his for over a decade, and his grandpa's for at least thirty years before that. In all that time, it had never even been in an accident. To now be destroyed so senselessly ...

It took considerable effort for Xander to not shake Cole, who started defiantly at him. "Do you have any idea how much time it's going to take to fix this?"

"Do you have any idea how little I care?"

Blood rushed behind Xander's eyes. Time to call the police before Xander gave Cole another black eye to match his first, which had mostly faded. He pulled out his phone, his resolve weakening when he saw the flicker of fear run through Cole's eyes.

Xander thought of Callie. He imagined her getting another phone call from the police, rushing into the station, learning

that Cole would have to serve time. She couldn't take one more bad thing, and he certainly couldn't be the person who started that ball in motion either. Not this time. Especially not when Cole was looking younger and more vulnerable every moment they stood out here in the parking lot. "What's your sister's number?"

"I'm not telling you that."

Xander scowled. "It's either Callie or the police. You decide."

The kid remained silent, staring at Xander like they were caught in a game of chicken. Xander kept his expression hard and unyielding.

"I don't have Callie's number memorized."

"I'm sure you have your phone on you."

Another moment passed where Cole seemed to be battling with himself before he pulled out his phone and rattled off a number to Xander.

Xander punched the number in, and when he heard Callie's familiar voice say, "Hello?" it nearly took his breath away.

"Hello, Callie. Sorry to call you like this, but I caught your brother vandalizing my truck."

She audibly caught her breath, and when she spoke again, her voice was wobbly. "Who is this?"

"Xa—" He cut himself off. He didn't want her to realize who he was this way. "Alex Nichols. We're down at the Pets and More parking lot."

The line was so silent, Xander wondered if the call had dropped. "I'm on my way," she finally said, sounding tired and resigned.

Xander ended the call and settled against his truck, thumbing through his phone to read an email that had popped up from Callie sometime while he'd been chasing Cole.

Cole backed up a step, probably attempting to take advantage of Xander's distraction.

“Don’t even think about it,” Xander growled, then put his phone in his pocket to save Callie’s email for later, when he wasn’t so angry.

Chapter Nine

*to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>
from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>
date: April 2
subject: Re: Ouch*

Callie,

I'll worry enough for the both of us. Sorry I'm being vague. I'm working through a few things right now—both professionally and personally. But it's going to work out. I hope.

Xander

PS. Yeah, I'm pretty fond of that dog too.

*to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>
from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>*

*date: April 2
subject: Re: Ouch*

Xander,

I'm rooting for you! Let me know if there's something I can do from my end of the world to help.

Callie

PS. We lucked out in the dog department, didn't we?

* * *

Callie pulled into Pets and More, only hours after she promised herself she'd never have to see Alex Nichols again. Why? Why was life this way? Couldn't she have things be easy for once? Have the final word?

She turned in to the parking lot with a little more frustration and speed than she'd realized, and her tires squealed across the dark night. Her light caught two people—Cole and Alex—who quickly swiveled in her direction.

Alex leaned against the side of his truck, looking more handsome than she remembered, which seemed impossible, because try as she might, she hadn't been able to get his handsome smile out of her mind. Cole, on the other hand, stood with his shoulders hunched, his hands in his hoodie pocket, and every part of him screaming that he was looking for a fight.

A fight she didn't want to give him.

She parked a few spaces away from the truck. Her lights illuminated the crass figures her brother had spray-painted on the body, white and black streaks against the red paint. The side and back windows looked as if a rock had been thrown through them. The side window still had the outline of a circle, with shattered glass surrounding it, while the back window had been completely shattered, other than a few shards protruding from the edges.

She felt their gazes on her when she climbed out of the car. Cole's was defiant, and Alex's ... She couldn't place his expression, but his strong jaw was clenched tight. Although his eyes seemed to soften when they alighted on her. Callie turned away from him quickly. She'd have to talk to him at some point, but not right now.

“Cole,” she said, then stopped, not even sure what she wanted to say. Up close, she could see the damage even better, and stress sent a sharp, shooting pain straight to her stomach. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to take a deep, calming breath before she said something she might regret.

“He’s running you out of business. He deserves this,” Cole spat into the silence.

“This isn’t the way we do things!” she yelled back, despite her commitment to remain calm. Maybe if she hadn’t come to Pets and More earlier and seen how real it was—maybe if she hadn’t already butted heads with Alex and had to face the real possibility of her store closing—maybe then she could have been more relaxed. But she *had* done those things, and on top of it, she was going to lose her brother to jail.

The thought was almost enough to make her lungs seize in her chest.

“Why not? He ruined your business; I ruined his truck.” The edge of defensiveness in Cole’s voice brought Callie back to when he’d first moved in with her, when he was thirteen and everything he’d said had sounded like that. Their dad had just been sentenced to ten years in prison, and their stepmom had dropped Cole off with Callie and taken off. Even now, even knowing that he did this out of some misguided show of love and loyalty, she knew he still worried that she’d take off one day.

“Cole, this is wrong! You know it’s wrong! Do you want to go to jail?” Her voice broke.

He rolled his eyes, making her want to strangle him. She loved him, but that eye roll nearly did her in.

“I’m being serious! Because this is it.” She swept her hand out in front of her. “The final strike.”

“I don’t care.”

His petulance was like another knife of pain in her stomach. “Well, I do! I do care, Cole.” She stuck her fingers in her hair, her elbows out, and turned away from him to take a deep breath. “On top of that, we’re going to have to pay for

repairs. I don't have the money for that. Do you care about that?"

She turned back to find him looking sullenly at the ground. Alex moved, and her gaze darted to him, embarrassed suddenly that he'd witnessed all of that. It wasn't enough that he had to run her out of town; he had to see her at her very worst, most vulnerable moments, too.

"Did the police say when they'll arrive?" She forced herself to speak the words, even though she didn't want to know the answer.

Alex looked at her, his expression indiscernible. "I didn't call them."

"Why not?" Her heart raced. Even Cole looked up from where he stood, kicking at rocks on the ground.

"I have an idea." He hadn't moved from his arm-folded stance, the shadows emphasizing his biceps even beneath the long-sleeved button-up shirt he wore. "An alternative to calling the police."

Callie straightened, confusion warring with relief. She nodded to indicate that she was listening, then held her breath with hope.

"He can work for me to pay off the repair costs."

Callie's stomach dropped. "At Pets and More?"

"No," Alex said firmly. "Not at the store."

"Then where?" she asked.

Alex unfolded his arms, and instead of answering, he turned to Cole. "I was a lot like you when I was a teenager."

Cole rolled his eyes again, and Callie smacked her brother on the arm. "Show some respect. He's offering you a chance to stay out of prison, and as tough-guy as you want to play it, we both know what prison is like." They'd visited their dad enough times over the years to imprint it into their memories. Sure, Cole would go to a younger version of it, but what kind of life was that? Not one she wanted for her brother.

Cole rubbed his arm and scowled, even though she hadn't smacked him that hard, but he listened.

"Have you ever worked on cars before?" Alex asked, and Callie knew Cole well enough to see that he was intrigued.

"He hasn't. But he's smart and a quick learner," Callie answered for him when he didn't respond. Their dad hadn't been the "work on cars" kind of father. Or the "teach my kids how to do things" kind of father. Maybe when they were younger, but for sure not after their mom left.

"I love fixing up old trucks," Alex continued. "In fact, I restored this one with my grandpa before he died."

"Cole," Callie said under her breath, horrified that her brother had vandalized a truck that had such sentimental value. Cole swallowed, the only indication that he was listening.

"He can fix up my truck, do some other community service, help out with my dog when he gets to town, and we'll call it even."

Cole shook his head. "Man, that's not even. I'll help with the truck, but—"

"It's the deal, or I'm calling the police," Alex said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Callie held her breath. If she'd learned anything over the last few years, it was that she couldn't force Cole to do anything. But maybe, just maybe, he'd find an ounce of self-preservation, and see this as a rope to pull him up from drowning.

It might be too much to hope for, but it was all she had.

"Fine," Cole mumbled, and she had to keep herself from jumping to him to tackle him in a hug. Instead, she nudged her shoulder quickly against his. "But I'm not working at the store."

"I won't ask you to," Alex promised.

"Get in the car," Callie said to Cole, wanting to get out of there before Alex changed his mind. Cole didn't have to be

told twice, and he skirted around the truck and disappeared into the passenger's seat of her car.

Callie turned to Alex reluctantly. Had it only been a few hours since she'd sworn they wouldn't have to see each other again? Gratitude warred with her reluctance to accept this. "Are you doing this to hold it over my head? So that I'll owe you or something?"

Alex shook his head before she'd even finished. "No," he said vehemently. "I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I promise there are no strings attached, other than paying off the damages on my truck. I can even have my lawyer put it in writing."

"But why? Why would you do this?" Especially after everything she'd said to him that afternoon.

Alex scrubbed his hand along his chin and then back through his hair. The yellow parking lot light hit the shadows of the faint promise of facial hair on his strong jawline. Callie forced herself to look away from his jawline when he spoke. "I was a punk teen, too. Never vandalized a truck, but a bunch of other things. My grandpa believed in me, and it changed everything."

"Thank you for believing in him," Callie said quietly. She tried to picture this man in front of her as a troubled youth, and it was hard to imagine.

"I don't know Cole," Alex said. "I don't know if this will be a mistake or not." He paused, his piercing gaze holding her in place, seeming to see right through her swirling emotions. "But *you* believe in him. And that's enough for me."

The intensity of his stare held her in place.

"Thank you," she whispered. "This time you didn't mess up."

He chuckled at that, the sound hitting her like a warm blanket on this cold, damp night. "Well, there's a first time for everything."

"I guess so."

He smiled, and she found herself wanting to sway into him, to feel her body close to his, to inhale the scent of him, and see if an electric zing ran through her once again at his touch.

“Are you coming?” Cole called from the car.

Callie blinked. “I’ve got to go,” she said, her voice sounding confused even in her own ears.

“Okay. I’ll contact you about a time,” Alex said casually. Apparently he wasn’t affected by their closeness in the same way as she was at all.

She got into the car, giving in to the urge to look back at him one last time. He stood by his truck, a solitary figure, strong and masculine in a way that stirred feelings inside of her she struggled to push away. But she needed to. No matter how handsome he was—or kind, or helpful—his giant store had the power to completely stamp out her tiny, beloved one.

That was never going to change.

He glanced her way, and their eyes met, sending an extra jolt to her heart. She hurriedly turned and pulled away.

Chapter Ten

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: April 6

subject: I Ate a Dog Treat

Callie,

It's true. Not the whole thing. Just a bite. It looked so good, and Jax gobbles them up so quickly, I had to see how they tasted. I confirmed it is indeed a dog treat, nothing like a human treat.

Please tell me I'm not the only person who has ever admitted to this before.

Xander

PS. I'm going to need more treats. For the dog. NOT for me.

* * *

Xander relaxed on the deck, reclined in a chair, listening to the sounds of the woods all around him—wind rustling

through the new leaves on the trees, insects chirping and buzzing, and the lap of water hitting the shore of the lake. The full moon sent a glint of light across the vast lake, and he took a deep, relaxing breath, feeling the knots in his shoulders loosen.

He'd been so busy since arriving that he hadn't been able to enjoy his new home in the Ozarks. What was the point of being a billionaire if you never had the time to enjoy it? He'd survived opening weekend, even with his truck getting vandalized, and he was ready to take a huge step back from working at the store seven days a week, from dawn until nearly midnight.

He checked his phone again, hoping for another email from Callie, even though it had only been an hour since he'd emailed her. It was past midnight, and if he were smart, he'd be in bed, not sitting on his deck, contemplating how he'd gotten into such a mess.

The mess, of course, was the fact that he'd fallen hard for Callie Irving. He'd been falling for her slowly over the last year through their emails, and at some point he'd become so far gone, he had to admit he'd hoped for something more. Then, seeing her again in the store, it was like being taken under by a totally and completely unexpected wave of feelings—stronger than attraction. Stronger than when he was with an acquaintance whose company he merely enjoyed.

Strong enough to be sitting out here when he should be sleeping, trying to figure out if things were already too far gone. His dad would tell him to cut his losses and walk. But his grandpa? He never gave up on anything he wanted. Not unless he absolutely had to.

Liam had gotten that quality from their grandpa as well. Xander had seen him bring a failing store back into the black by not giving up. Liam had never given up on Xander, even when anyone in their right mind would have.

But it was probably hopeless at this point. Maybe he could get her to fall for the Xander she knew from emails ... but

Alex? She'd never give him a second look, not after so many missteps.

He tapped his finger on his knee. There had to be a way to solve this problem. He tried to look at it from a business angle. The missteps—and her ensuing reaction—those weren't the core problem, but merely offshoots of the main problem.

The main problem was that she felt as if Pets and More was putting her out of business—which, according to Liam, wasn't an unfounded accusation.

The solution, then? He needed to save her business, somehow make it so they could coexist. From Wags to Wishes and Pets and More. Bentonville needed both of them.

But in the meantime ... An idea popped into his mind, one he couldn't believe he didn't think of sooner.

Even though it was past midnight, he pulled up his lawyer's email and shot off a note about what he wanted to do. Xander knew he'd have the requested documents in his inbox first thing the next morning.

Pumped with a sense of finally doing something right with Callie, he searched for a list of community service options to do with Cole. He'd have his personal assistant set it up, but he wanted an excuse to reach out to Callie now.

He found a few promising starts—volunteering at a local 50-mile bike race for cancer research and a once-a-week opportunity to work at a community-run food bank. He sent both of those options along to Callie in a text to see if either sounded like a good fit. He also mentioned the help he'd need around his house.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, satisfied at the way things were turning.

To his surprise, his phone vibrated against his leg only a few seconds later. It was almost one in the morning.

Callie: Those all sound fine. Get me the details, and I'll make sure he's there.

Should he leave it there? They weren't friends—far from it, if you asked her. But still, he couldn't resist sending another text.

Xander: *You're up late.*

He waited a minute but didn't receive a response. He tried to push down his rising frustration. He shouldn't have expected a response. One returned text, and a good idea on Xander's part that she didn't even know about yet, didn't change their relationship.

He needed to go to bed and get what little sleep he could. Yet he remained where he was. He'd always loved being outdoors more than indoors, and this house was the perfect blend of both.

His phone buzzed again, and his heart rate ratcheted up way too high in response to a simple text.

Callie: *I bake when I'm stressed, so I currently have five dozen doggie treats cooling on my kitchen counter.*

Xander had overnighted the treats he'd purchased to Liam's assistant, who had the unenviable task of dogsitting Jax. He started to type that to her in a text, but paused and deleted Jax's name at the last minute. Was he actively trying to hide his identity now? At first it had been merely a timing issue—it had just never seemed like the right time to bring it up. But now? He didn't want her to know until she hated Alex less—he cringed—if it ever came to that point.

Xander: *I overnighted the treats I purchased from your store to my dog sitter. I imagine he's very grateful.*

Callie: *The dog or the sitter?*

Xander: *Both. My dog is not the most well-behaved, but love and affection can be bought with treats.*

He didn't hear a response after that. To keep from texting her again, he stood from his comfortable chair and used his phone light to walk down the steps of his deck to the private lakeside dock on his property, just below the hill his house sat on. He walked to the edge and sat, his feet dangling above the water, then lay back, gazing up at the sky.

He could fall asleep right here, right now, and love every second of it.

His phone lit up again.

Callie: *Well, thank you for your business.*

He knew a conversation closer when he heard one. He pictured her in her kitchen, surrounded by five dozen treats, and wanted to write her a message—a real message from Xander, not these surface-level Alex texts that she clearly wanted to end. Still, he typed.

Xander: *When can you come by my house with Cole?*

Callie: *Saturday? I open at nine, but we can come by early.*

Xander: *Let's meet at seven, then.*

He followed up with his address, and then smiled up at the night sky. Was he actually glad that his truck had been vandalized? No, of course not. It hurt him in an almost visceral way to see his truck damaged to such a degree. But he had to admit he was glad for the excuse to see Callie again, regardless of the circumstances. By Saturday, he'd have a fully formed plan from his lawyer, which would most definitely get them on better terms.

She texted him a thumbs-up emoji, and he knew the conversation was over. At least it was a start. He fell asleep on the dock, his feet inches above the water and his phone resting on his chest, and looked forward to four days from then.

Chapter Eleven

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: April 10

subject: Re: I Ate a Dog Treat

Xander,

I can't tell you how many times my family used to accidentally eat dog treats. They would get so frustrated with me for leaving them out—especially my stepmom. I swear, my dad didn't even realize he was eating a dog treat half the time, which may tell you more about my dad than I intended ... My brother won't eat a single baked good without clarifying with me first if it's for dogs or for humans.

The other option to consider, of course, is that your "complications" are driving you to odd behaviors ...

On another note, things aren't looking good for my store. But no worries for you or Jax. Even if my doors shut permanently, I'll still keep my favorite customers stocked up with seasonal treats ... as long as I can, anyway.

Callie

* * *

Callie unrolled her car window at the guard station, looking through the gate and imagining houses beyond the thick, tree-lined dirt road. None of this had been here when she'd been growing up in Eureka Springs. Granted, she'd grown up in the downtown area, in a falling-apart Victorian house that had been in her family for over a hundred years. Her dad had deeded the house to her before going to prison, much to their stepmom's chagrin (and probably the final straw that sent her packing), but Callie hadn't been back to it once since.

It wasn't that the house itself had bad memories—more like it represented everything she wanted to escape. Her family's reputation. Their inability to ever leave, unless it was by police escort to prison or by coffin. Most of all, it represented who she was afraid she might become if she stayed in Eureka Springs. Selling it was out of the question, because even if she didn't want to acknowledge her Eureka Springs roots, they were there, and they were deep.

She'd pulled out the deed and looked at it just the night before, then stuffed it back into the bottom of the desk drawer she kept it in. Things weren't that dire. Not yet.

"Callie Irving," the man repeated. "Can I see some ID? You too." He nodded in Cole's direction.

Callie handed over her driver's license, and Cole did the same, grumbling something under his breath Callie was glad she couldn't hear. He hadn't been happy to wake up so early on a Saturday morning, but even unhappy and grumbling, at least he'd come.

The guard checked them over, then eyed Callie closely. "Who are you visiting?"

"Alex Nichols."

The man watched them for another moment before he picked up a phone and pressed a button. “Mr. Nichols. I have Callie and Cole Irving here to see you.” He paused. “I’ll send them up.”

He hung up the phone, then handed them their IDs. “Drive through the gate, past the huge tree in the road, then hang a left onto Country Road. Follow it all the way to the end, and it’s house number 20. The entire top floor of his house is made of glass. You can’t miss it.”

The majestic, wrought-iron gate opened slowly, and Callie eased her way into the development. She nearly gasped when she saw the tree in the middle of the road. How had she forgotten about it? It was carved with the initials of many newlyweds from Eureka Springs. She had once tried to find her parents’ initials on the tree, maybe fifteen years ago when she’d come with a friend’s family to the lake. Although she’d searched for at least an hour, she hadn’t found them. Which wasn’t all that surprising. Romantic gestures hadn’t been either of her parents’ styles.

“Wow,” Cole said, some of his grumpiness fading with awe as they drove around a bend in the dirt road and the mansions began to come into view. Every one was a unique architectural marvel. One was suspended over the lake in a way that made Callie catch her breath. Another seemed to be made entirely of glass. The sun glinted off of it in such a way it sparkled like a massive jewel. Another fit in so seamlessly with the surrounding forest, it was almost camouflaged.

She drove slowly down Country Road, taking in each new mansion, really realizing for the first time what different worlds she and Alex Nichols lived in. She tried to imagine him seeing the house she’d grown up in, and cringed at the thought. Peeling white and yellow paint on the moldy siding, a broken window covered up with duct tape and foil-covered cardboard, the entire front yard slumping toward the street, held up only by bricks she hadn’t checked in years ...

It had to look even worse now.

She turned the corner and drove to the end of the dirt road, spotting the house at the end through the thick trees. With the entire top floor of windows, it looked almost like a greenhouse. She pulled into the long, pebbled driveway and parked beside his closed garage.

“I guess we just go up and knock,” she said, trying to steel herself for the action.

“It’s too late to turn back now,” Cole said, sounding as nervous as she felt. “The guard already told him we’re here.”

Callie glanced at her brother, struck by how vulnerable he looked. She recalled Alex’s words about not giving up on him and straightened her shoulders. For Cole, she’d meet with Alex. For Cole, she’d do almost anything.

She got out of the car, took a deep breath for courage, and walked up the front steps to the door to knock. It was an intricately carved wood she was too anxious to study closely, but she caught the curve of a flower petal when the door opened.

Alex Nichols stood before her wearing a worn army-green T-shirt that hugged every muscle perfectly, along with well-fitting, dark jeans. He also had dozens of red dots all over his face and arms. He winced when he caught her studying them. “I made the mistake of falling asleep out on the dock a few nights ago. Got eaten alive.”

“Looks like it.” Some looked like angry welts, while others were a softer, smaller pink. “The bugs in April are kind of vicious.”

“Lesson learned the hard way. Which is how I seem to learn most of my lessons.” He gave her a sardonic smile before shifting his gaze behind her. “Hey, Cole.”

She turned. She hadn’t even realized her brother had gotten out of the car and followed her up the stairs, she’d been so wrapped up in Alex.

In Alex’s bug bites. Not in Alex.

She motioned for Cole to lead the way in following Alex into his house. If the outside had been awe-inspiring, the

inside was breathtaking. From outside, the house looked at least three stories tall, but once inside, she realized that it had been built at the edge of a slope and was even bigger than she'd suspected. The entryway was open all the way to the glass ceiling several stories above them, and the light that entered made the entire room feel warm and magical.

"This is gorgeous," she said, turning in a circle.

"Thanks." Alex rubbed the back of his neck, scratching at his bites.

Without thinking, she grabbed his forearm and tugged it away, warmth shooting through her at the touch. She dropped her hold as if burned. He lifted his dark brows at her.

Realizing what she'd done, she blushed and took a step back. "They won't heal if you keep scratching at them."

"Thanks," he said. "I don't even realize I'm doing it half the time."

"It's the mom in me," she joked, then winced, wishing the words back. *The mom in me? I'm not even a mom! Gah.* She'd somehow become the queen of making an awkward situation even more awkward.

He laughed and led them through the house, past the enormous kitchen—she definitely did a double take when she saw multiple oven ranges and the enormous granite countertop—until they arrived at the garage. Alex flipped the light switch, illuminating a space large enough to fit at least six trucks. One side had a couple of WaveRunners and a white truck. On the other, parked in the middle, was his red truck.

Under this light, Callie could see how much damage had been done, and she took in a quick breath. Cole had gone to town on it, and she couldn't help but see the anger manifested in every stroke of spray paint or outward crack of glass.

"He's got school from seven until two," Callie said. "I also need him in the shop on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. Otherwise, he's available to come here."

"I'll get with my assistant, and we'll make up a schedule that I'll text over to you to look at. In the meantime ..." He

opened the garage door, and light from outside flooded in. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some keys that he tossed at Cole. “You know how to drive?”

“Yes,” Cole said, holding the keys out from him as if they were contaminated.

“Back my truck out of the garage. Then you can use the shop vac to vacuum the glass from the interior.” He pointed to a shop vac along the side wall of the garage.

“Fine. Whatever.” Cole got into the truck and turned it on, revving the engine a few times with a wicked smile.

Callie stepped forward to say something, but stopped when Alex laughed. “That truck was made for revving. I used to do the same thing to drive my dad crazy, but my grandpa made it to sound that way.”

“Okay,” Callie said slowly. Maybe it would be better for her to not be here for these sessions. Cole was likely to drive her up the wall with his disrespect and pushing the boundaries, and Alex was likely to drive her up the wall ... for other reasons she didn’t want to think about.

Cole finished backing up the truck, then got out and went straight to the shop vac without a word of complaint.

“While he’s busy, do you have a moment to talk?”

Callie frowned. “Sure.”

She followed Alex back inside the house, through the kitchen she coveted more and more every time she saw it, and to an office space she hadn’t noticed before, adjacent to the huge circular room they’d first stepped into when they’d arrived. Its back wall was made up of floor-to-ceiling windows. She took in the view: the sloping, tree-covered hill that led down to a calm lake. The room was decorated simply in creams and tans, making the spectacular natural view the true focal point of the room.

“There’s the dock,” she said, her gaze drifting down to the lake.

“The very one.” He shrugged. “In all fairness, it wasn’t the dock’s fault I decided to sleep out there.”

“Or that you’re so tasty.” Callie clamped her mouth shut, mentally berating herself for the flirty words, but Alex only laughed.

“Well, I’d like to think so,” he teased. Thankfully, though, he moved away from the windows and sat down at a leather chair near his desk, indicating that she should take the one beside him. She sat carefully, realizing at once that she’d never been in so comfortable a chair. Especially in someone’s office. Generally, those chairs seemed to be made for quick visits and speedy departures.

He reached onto his desk and grabbed a few papers he had sitting there. “I have a business proposal for you,” he said without preamble.

“Okay,” she said slowly.

“But first ...” He leaned forward in his chair and looked at her earnestly. “I need to apologize for the conversation you overheard. It has never been my intention to run you out of business, despite how my brother made it sound.”

She felt her back stiffen and wished she’d insisted on staying with Cole. She didn’t want his meaningless apology. The words blasted back in her mind: *No competition*. Yes, the words hadn’t come from Alex, but he hadn’t disputed them. No, he’d agreed with them. Honestly, she would have agreed with them too. But they still hurt, hurt in a way she didn’t want to analyze, to hear Alex agree. “That’s not necessary,” she said, hoping her expression didn’t show any of the myriad of feelings racing through her at the moment.

“It is. It was a horrible thing for him to say.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it?” She shrugged like it didn’t matter to her. “My store can’t survive up against yours. I can’t compete with your price model. In the end, people want savings, not quality.”

She knew the dig was low. He cringed as if the hit had landed, but otherwise didn’t acknowledge it. “I never wanted

us to be in competition,” he said. She was surprised to hear that he sounded ... sad? Not Alex Nichols. She must have been projecting her own feelings on to him.

“We’re not,” she said, resigned. “We never were, Alex. The second your store broke ground, it was over for me. It’s only been a matter of time.”

It was the first time she’d said the words out loud, but they were true. She couldn’t fight against the mounting bills, all stamped with red overdue notices. She couldn’t keep dumping water out of a sinking ship all alone.

Again, the deed to the yellow house flitted through her mind. She’d known why she’d pulled it out the night before, and it wasn’t because she thought she could sell the house for any reasonable amount of money.

No, it was because she was contemplating the very last thing she thought she’d ever, ever do *again*.

“You sound like you’ve given up,” Alex said. She looked up, surprised to see his eyes alight with fire.

“You win, Alex. Happy?”

“No.” He stood and handed her the papers, sounding frustrated. “Not even a little happy. I want you to fight for your dream. I want to help you.”

She glanced down at the top paper in her lap and read through it, not comprehending it with how hard her heart pounded. She read through it a second time, every word hitting her like Cole’s rocks had hit the truck. “What is this?” she asked quietly.

“An agreement. We’ll sell your treats on consignment at Pets and More.” He had the audacity to smile. “It’s like I’m giving you a corner of my store. Just for you.”

She took a long deep breath. “A corner of your store.”

“Yes,” he said. “You can sell your treats there, and I think you’ll see that our lawyer came up with a generous figure, although it’s negotiable, of course.”

“A corner of your store,” she repeated, looking up at him.

It finally seemed to dawn on him that she wasn't thrilled with this offer. "Yes," he said, more cautiously this time.

Did he really not hear how patronizing this sounded? How it felt like he was offering her a second-rate consolation prize? How she could never make enough on consignment to stay in Bentonville, so it was merely a cruel, dangling carrot she could never actually reach?

Furious, she stood and threw the papers down onto his desk. "No, thank you."

"Excuse me?" he asked, clearly stunned. He followed her from the room as she raced toward the garage.

She swiveled around to face him, and he nearly barreled into her. They were so close, she could feel the heat radiating off of his body. "No!" she said, letting her frustration at not only his offer, but also her misplaced, sizzling attraction for him, come out with every word. "Do you have any idea how condescending you are?"

He shook his head, his own frustration evident. "It's a good offer, Callie. One I had to fight for. Pets and More has never sold handcrafted baked treats like this before. But I'm willing to take a chance because I know you have a good product."

"But it's not my store!" She took a step back, and then another. "If you can't see how that doesn't change everything, I don't know how to explain it to you."

She turned and went into the garage to find Cole just finishing up with the vacuuming. "I've got to get back to open up the store. For as long as I still have it." She threw the parting shot at Alex, but it didn't make her feel as good as she thought it would to say.

Instead, Alex just looked serious. "I can bring him home when I go into Pets and More this afternoon," he said stiffly.

"Fine." She turned to her brother. "Work hard. I'll see you soon." With that, she felt both sets of eyes on her as she walked to her car and got in, her hands shaking with anger, her

eyes watering. She swiped at the tears angrily and backed away.

A corner of my store. Really.

Well, at least it wouldn't be as hard to forget that he was Alex "Pets and More" Nichols from here on out, heart-stopping smile or not.

Chapter Twelve

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: April 7

subject: Re: Store

Callie,

I am truly so very sorry about your store.

Xander

*PS. My odd behavior is more likely causing the
“complications,” and not the other way around,
but thanks for the vote of confidence.*

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

*from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-
email.com>*

date: April 7

subject: Store

Xander,

Thanks.

Callie

*PS. Next time you order treats, I'll add in some human
cookies too. Just to help with the odd behaviors
and all. :)*

* * *

One thing Xander could say about the top-of-the-line truck he'd bought to use while the red truck was being fixed was that parallel parking was a lot easier with automation. Cole stared out the truck window beside him, quiet since they'd left Xander's house—and work on the truck—to come to a Eureka Springs town beautification event. Xander had read about the event online while doing research for things Cole could do for community service and was immediately intrigued by it.

They parked on a downhill-sloping narrow street and walked to where a large crowd congregated in a courtyard between a six-story, V-shaped hotel and a tiny, but packed snack stand.

“Cole!” A petite woman in overalls, with long, wavy auburn hair, pushed through the crowd and pulled Cole into a hug. “What are you doing here? Where's Callie?” She glanced at Xander with a lifted brow. “Who's this?”

“This is Alex Nichols,” Cole said, with the least mumbly voice Cole had heard from him.

“Nichols. Nichols.” She paused, tilting her head as she studied him. Xander resisted the urge to squirm under her perusal. “That sounds so familiar. Have we met before?”

“He owns Pets and More,” Cole interjected before Xander could say anything.

The woman's brows furrowed for a moment, before her eyes popped wide, and he knew she understood the connection now. “Oh. Chillin' with the enemy now?” She punched Cole lightly on the shoulder. The teen smiled, his cheeks a little pinker than before.

“I’m not the enemy,” Xander felt he needed to say. Although, would Callie agree? Probably not.

“Hmmm.” The woman turned to him and held out her hand. “I’m Viola Nightingdale. Callie’s best friend since forever.”

Xander took her small hand in his, impressed at how firm her handshake was. “Nice to meet you.”

Viola turned to Cole again. “But seriously, what brings you here today?”

Cole looked to Xander, as if he wanted Xander to step in and tell her. But Xander kept his mouth shut. He could tell the teen had a crush on his sister’s best friend, and he wasn’t interested in embarrassing him.

“Community service,” Cole said, his blush deepening. “I kind of trashed this guy’s truck—” He tilted his head toward Xander. “—and this is my punishment.”

Viola nodded slowly, looking at Xander in a new, even more appraising way. “Interesting. Well, I couldn’t think of a better way to get punished.” She glanced around at the crowd. “Your sister here?”

“No, she’s working.”

Viola sighed. “I think she’s been avoiding my phone calls lately.”

Cole shrugged. “She’s super busy. Baking all night, at the store all day. She might just not see them.”

Viola gave a look that let Cole know how unlikely that possibility was.

“She’ll be home tonight after eight,” Cole offered. “If you want to stop by.”

“I think I will. Thanks, Cole.” She leaned close. “But don’t tell Callie I’m coming.”

Cole nodded, and his chest puffed out a little more than it had been before.

“I’d better get this show on the road.” Viola winked, then disappeared back into the crowd for a few seconds, until they saw her again, standing on a bench with a megaphone in her hand. “Welcome to Eureka Springs, everyone! How many of you are locals?”

A handful of people clapped and cheered.

“How many are visitors?”

Over half of the crowd whooped at that.

Viola looked around, impressed. “Look at you! Coming to help beautify Eureka Springs on your vacation. My name is Viola, and I’m one of our town’s restoration specialists. As many of you know, Eureka Springs has a long history with indigenous cultures who visited the healing springs for sacred purposes. Then, in 1856, Dr. Alvah Jackson discovered its healing waters as well. The rumor is that upon discovery, he yelled, ‘Eureka!’ Thus the name of our town. People came from all around to be cleansed and healed by the water. Right below this grate is the original spring.”

Xander peered over the railing and down into a lit spring of water at least eight feet down from where they stood. While Viola continued to give a brief history—including mentioning their several resident ghosts—Xander took the time to turn and take in his new town. His house was on the outskirts, about a twenty-minute drive from the downtown area, so he hadn’t been this way yet.

In every way that Bentonville was the small-town movie set, Eureka Springs was the eccentric next-door neighbor. Upscale handcrafted jewelry stores were tucked right beside T-shirt and fudge shops. The streets ran every which way, and he couldn’t tell where any of them would lead from where he was standing. On the way there, his GPS had tried to send him into a narrow, dead-end alley, as if it had become haunted the moment he crossed into the town proper. Cole had informed him that the GPS did strange things all the time in Eureka Springs.

“I’m going to hand out assignments,” Viola was saying when Xander turned back to her. “So if everyone can hang

tight with your group, I'll make my way over to you with an explanation and supplies." Viola came to them first, holding two small shovels. "How do you guys feel about replanting flowers along Spring Street, right by the Baptist church?"

"Mr. Merrick ran them all down again?" Cole asked.

"Every year," Viola said with a sigh. She turned to Xander, and she must have seen his confused expression, because she explained, "Robert Merrick is one of our older trolley drivers. He does a great job and is a town favorite, but every year, at least once, he gets distracted—usually waving at someone he knows or calling his greetings to another trolley—and will take out an entire block of flowers."

Xander couldn't imagine people knowing a random trolley driver's name in L.A., much less taking the time to replant the flowers he inevitably ran over. "Sounds good. Cole?"

"Yeah, we can do that."

"I've got a few flats of flowers over in the bed of my truck. Do you guys think you can do four of them?"

"Sure," Cole said.

Xander didn't have a good idea of how many flowers were in a flat, but he'd scheduled his whole morning to help, so it didn't matter. He was pleased to see Cole have such a good attitude. It was amazing the influence a pretty woman could have on a teenage boy.

Viola moved on to the next group, and the two went to Viola's truck. It turned out that a flat was a plastic box, measuring about two square feet, filled with other smaller plastic containers with flowers. He gave Cole one flat to carefully balance on each arm, and then took another two himself.

"Lead the way," he told Cole.

They walked up a long street, a handful of people yelling their hellos to Cole.

"You're a popular person here."

“Small town. Been here my whole life. Well, until I had to move to Bentonville.”

“You didn’t want to move to Bentonville?” Xander guessed, based on the tone of Cole’s voice.

“No. I didn’t.”

The short reply didn’t leave a lot of room for more questions, so Xander remained quiet until they arrived at a patch of soil beyond the shops, in front of a row of gingerbread-type houses that indeed looked as though it had been flattened by a set of large tires.

“Ready to do this?” Xander asked. He set down his flats and crouched beside the soil. They were going to have to dig up the old flowers first, then plant the new ones.

“Yes.”

They worked in silence for a while. The weather was perfect for a day of being outside like this. Not for the first time, Xander wished he could be outside more, and behind a computer less. He really couldn’t complain—he knew he was lucky to be a part of the Pets and More empire—but he needed to take more time for moments like this. To feel the soil between his fingers and the sun pleasantly warming his back and neck, to really live life.

“Cole!” A group of teens in a jeep drove up beside them, their music blaring. The top was off, and the jeep looked like it had seen its fair share of muddy back roads.

Cole stood and dropped the shovel he’d been holding as if it were on fire. “Hey, guys,” he said in a lazy drawl.

“Are you planting flowers?” one of the guys said.

Cole shrugged like he didn’t care, but Xander saw his back tense. “Community service. You know how it is.”

“This your parole officer?”

“Something like that,” Cole said. “Catch up with you later.”

“If you’re done planting daisies.” The boys laughed obnoxiously, bringing Xander right back to being a teenager and aching to be cool in front of his friends. They zoomed off, hitting a puddle of rainwater just right to splash Xander and Cole.

“Nice guys,” Xander said sarcastically as he swiped filthy street water off of his face.

“They’re cooler than you.”

Any openness they’d had between them before was completely closed off now with the reminder of why they were there. Xander decided to let the lame rejoinder go and instead focused on planting.

“I don’t know why we have to do this anyway. It’s so stupid. I wrecked your truck, so I’m fixing it. That makes sense. But you had to drag me out here to make me look like an idiot in front of my friends.”

Xander pressed the soil around the base of the flower he’d just transferred from its plastic pot into the ground. It was a pretty silvery-blue, darker on the edges and growing lighter the closer it got to the middle. He wished he knew the name of it. That light blue reminded him a little bit of Callie’s eyes. “When I was your age, I broke every single piece of china in my mother’s china cabinet. And I wasn’t even mad at her. I was mad at my dad, but it was the first thing I saw to break, so I did it.”

Cole didn’t respond, but he’d stopped pacing for a second, so Xander continued. “My parents were so furious, they sent me to live with my grandpa. Who put me to work on his property until I earned enough money to pay for the china.” Now that Xander was a little older, he knew there was no way he’d earned enough to cover every piece of china, and that worse, there were several irreplaceable pieces.

“Exactly,” Cole said. He sat on the curb, his toe kicking at some of the dead flowers they still needed to clean up. “You broke the china; you worked to pay it back.”

Xander shook his head and gave a short laugh at the memories. He'd been so angry at the time, so upset with life. If he'd known how finite time was, how few years he'd have left with his grandpa, he might not have fought so hard against every good thing he'd tried to do for him. Yet he couldn't regret the year he'd lived with him—the year that was his turning point. Until his grandpa died, and Xander almost fell back into his old habits, and Jax arrived when Xander needed him most. Xander liked to think that his grandpa had sent Jax at just the right time. It was something his grandpa would do. Jax's personality was just another sign that Grandpa was involved.

“Working on the property was the tip of the iceberg,” Xander said. “That's what I had to do to pay back the china. But Grandpa said I'd put ugly into the world with my actions, and it was my responsibility to put beauty back into it.”

“So that's what we're doing here?” Cole said derisively.

“In a very literal way, yes.” Xander grabbed the next pallet of flowers and pulled out a yellow bunch. “Grandpa wasn't quite this literal—he made me volunteer at the hospital, delivering meals to the ill, and also serve meals at the homeless shelter. He thought I was acting spoiled and entitled and set out to show me how my community looked outside of the gated walls we lived in.”

Xander shrugged. “But I've always loved the symbolism of making sure we actively put more good things into the world. Always would be ideal, but especially when we mess up. Thus the flowers.”

Cole was quiet for a bit, but at least he'd started half-heartedly digging up the remaining dead flowers and placing them into one of the empty flower pallets. They worked in silence for another hour, only speaking when necessary, but it didn't feel like a heavy, uncomfortable silence.

It might have been too much to hope that Cole was thinking about the things that Xander brought up, but he still hoped something would get through to him eventually. Already, he saw some changes in Cole. He wasn't a bad kid,

not in the way Xander had first thought when he'd seen him with the black eye and then again vandalizing his truck.

They finished the flowers and dropped their trash back at Viola's truck for her to take to the dump when everyone was done. Viola was out helping other groups, so they got into the truck to leave.

Instead of pulling a U-turn—impossible with so many people milling about—Xander drove straight through town, wanting to see it with clear eyes.

“Hey, turn right here,” Cole said.

Xander did and then followed Cole's instructions to turn left again. They'd entered a neighborhood, passed the town Carnegie library, and finally turned onto a tight residential street.

“That's our old house,” Cole said, pointing to a faded and peeling yellow house at the end of the street. The grass looked like it hadn't been cut in years, and several of the windows were destroyed. “It used to look better than this. Before.”

“Before what?” Xander asked quietly. He tried to picture how it might have been, bright and cheery, filled with Callie's baking and family chatter.

“Before Dad went to jail. The first time,” he added. “This last time was when I moved in with Callie.”

Xander remained quiet, hoping Cole would continue.

“Theft every time. But he was armed. This last time, he actually shot someone. They didn't die, but still.” Cole tugged on the strings of his hoodie as he stared at the house. “It was a bigger deal.”

Xander wanted to ask how many times their dad had gone to jail, but thought better of it.

“My sister is really angry at you, you know.”

“I know,” Xander said.

“She doesn't want to come back here.”

Xander thought he might finally understand why. “Do people treat her differently?”

Cole shook his head. “That’s the thing. We’re like this one big super weird family in Eureka Springs, but I love it, you know? For some reason, Callie’s never trusted it.”

Maybe because she couldn’t trust her own family. Or her dad, at least, it sounded like.

“I’m going to go check it out for a minute,” Cole said.

“Okay,” Xander said.

While Cole walked around the house, Xander pulled up Callie’s name on his phone. He tapped the dash. He felt like maybe he should apologize, but he didn’t quite understand what for. With misstep after misstep, he wondered at what point he should throw in the towel, decide that they just weren’t meant to be.

But still, he’d hurt her. Regardless of his intentions, or even his lack of understanding in the situation, he’d caused her to feel bad. For that, he could apologize.

Xander: *I’m sorry about Saturday.*

Callie: ...

He saw the dots start up, then stop. Then start again, then stop. Finally, he saw her reply: a thumbs-up emoji.

He threw his phone onto Cole’s seat in frustration. Maybe it was time to walk away.

Except ... He thought about the email he’d gotten from her that morning and closed his eyes. He wasn’t ready to give it up. Not yet. Even though this seemed completely impossible.

His phone buzzed again, and he grabbed at it, nearly dropping it in his haste. It wasn’t Callie. It was his brother’s assistant, Frank. Xander frowned.

Frank: *Getting ready to head your way. ETA two days.*

Two days. Cole would still be coming to his house in two days to work on the truck. They had at least another month of work to complete it. If Callie stopped by and saw Jax, it wouldn’t be

hard for her to put two and two together, and he could forget any effort to win her over after that.

Xander: *One more month, and I'll double the regular weekly pay.*

Frank usually responded to Xander's texts immediately, but this time it took several minutes.

Frank: *Triple.*

Frank: *Please. And send another box of those treats Jax likes.*

Xander shook his head. Ever polite Frank.

Xander: *Done.*

He looked at her email again, the one he'd read that morning. It wasn't fair to her for him to know her identity when she didn't know his. Xander was going to have to take a huge step back out of her life, if Alex was ever going to have a chance at all.

One month. Xander was going to give himself one month to convince Callie that Alex wasn't the beast she thought he was. One month, and then he'd have to tell her who he was.

Either she'd let him be in her life, or he'd have to watch her walk away for good.

Chapter Thirteen

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: April 8

subject: People are STILL Complicated

Callie,

Remember those complications I mentioned earlier?

They're still happening, and as a result, I'm not going to be able to email for a while. Hopefully I can explain everything soon.

These emails really have come to mean a lot to me. I've loved every moment of getting to know you better. I don't let a lot of people into my life like this. I'm a very private person, and it's hard for me to open up. Please know that I would never halt our correspondence unless I felt I had no other choice.

I wish you the best.

Xander

* * *

Callie walked in from work to see a small bunch of flowers in potting soil, sitting on her table. Darcy bounded toward her, licking at her hands, her tail wagging enthusiastically.

It had been a long day at the shop. There'd been only a handful of customers; all but one had been tourists.

“Cole!”

“In here!” he yelled from his room.

She went down the hall and popped her head through the open crack of his door. “When did you get back?”

“A few hours ago,” he said. She was surprised to see him at home so early. Usually, she had to text him to see where he was.

“Did you get dinner?”

“Alex got us tacos,” he said. “He got some for you too. They're in the fridge.”

Callie didn't quite know what to do with that information. Just on principle, she wanted to refuse the food, but her stomach rumbled. It seemed silly to let something go to waste out of spite.

She went into the kitchen and peeked inside the fridge to find three tacos waiting. She heated them up and sat back down at the table, eyeing the flowers. “Where did the flowers come from?” she called down the hall again. She reached forward to gently touch one of the soft bluish-silver pedals. “They're pretty.”

“From Alex,” he called back. “They're for you.”

She yanked her hand back. What was his game this time? But they were pretty, and she needed the pick-me-up after getting Xander's email.

She shouldn't feel so down about it. He was merely a customer. A customer she didn't even know in real life. For all she knew, he was married. Or a creep. Maybe he didn't even have a dog. He did admit to eating the dog treat himself.

Maybe he was a married, dog-treat-eating creep, and she'd dodged a bullet.

But try as she might, she couldn't believe it. Her appetite waned, and she couldn't eat the final taco. Well, the timing was probably for the best. It wasn't like she'd have a store much longer to mail treats from anyway.

A light knock sounded on her door, making her sit upright. Was it Alex?

She peered through the peephole, surprised to see Viola on the other side. She threw the door open, and her friend immediately stepped forward and pulled her into a tight hug. Viola had always given the best hugs in the world—she wrapped a person up in warmth and light and love all at once in a way no one else in Callie's life had ever managed.

"I met Alex today," Viola said without preamble. "You didn't tell me he was so handsome."

"I didn't notice," Callie said as she followed Viola.

"Liar." Viola fell back into the couch and pulled a cushion onto her lap to lean on. "Now the question is, why didn't you tell me he was attractive?"

"No," Callie said, sitting on the other side of the couch. She slid her shoes off and tucked her feet under her. "The question is, why did you see Alex today?"

Viola's eyebrows shot up. "You don't know?"

Callie shook her head, wondering what she was missing.

"Alex and Cole came to my Eureka Springs Beautification Day."

"I totally forgot about that! I'm so sorry! How did it go?"

"It went great. I'd underestimated how many volunteers would show, which was a nice problem to have. Alex and Cole planted flowers."

"That explains that, then." Callie nodded her head toward the flowers on the table.

“My flowers didn’t look like that.” She paused. “I mean, we did have flowers like that, but in different pots. Those look like he picked them up from the Lily and Rose flower shop. Which brings me back to my original question of why you didn’t let me know he was hot.”

“Viola. It’s irrelevant. It really is.” To Callie’s horror, tears filled her eyes. She hated crying in front of people. Hated it with a passion. She wanted to appear as if she had it all together, even when everything was falling apart. She turned her head and swiped at her eyes quickly. “Sorry. This is stupid. I’m fine, really.”

“Hey.” Viola scooted closer on the couch and grabbed Callie’s arm so she’d stop swiping at her tears. “It’s not fine. What’s wrong?”

Callie looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath, but the tears would not stop coming.

“I’m your best friend,” Viola said. “If you can’t tell me, who can you tell?”

She was right, of course. Viola had seen her at her best and at her worse, and it was silly to keep hiding everything from her. She just wanted people to think that she’d made it, that she’d achieved her dream, not that she was failing—a staple of the Irving family, of course.

“I have to close down From Wags to Wishes.” It was the first time she’d said the words out loud, and as much as it hurt her chest to say it, it also gave her a bit of relief.

“What? Why? When?”

Viola’s signature barrage of questions made Callie laugh through her tears. She never should have avoided Viola; she needed her friend, now more than ever. “Pets and More. And in the next couple of weeks.”

Viola sat back with a whoosh of air. “Weeks? It’s that bad?”

Callie nodded. “I can stay open through April, but then I’ve got to close my doors for good. I don’t have enough money for rent, much less inventory or baking supplies.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

Viola sprang up from the couch, excitement lighting up her face. “What if instead of closing down, you relocate?”

“No.”

“Rent is so much cheaper in Eureka Springs.” She gasped. “In fact, I just helped restore the most perfect rental space.”

“No,” Callie said, more vehemently this time.

“I can totally picture your store there. It’s only about a block from my office, and we could totally get lunch sometimes. You still have the house there, right?”

“No!”

Viola paused. “You sold the house?”

“No, of course not.” Callie stood, unable to sit still a moment longer. “I can’t move to Eureka Springs. I waited my entire life to get out of there.”

Hurt flashed across Viola’s face but quickly went away. It was never a secret that Callie wanted out, while all Viola wanted to do was build her life there.

“Okay.” Viola took a deep breath and seemed to rein in her excitement. “What are some other options you have? Are you absolutely certain you can’t revive your business here?”

“It’s hopeless.”

“Alex offered her a corner of his store.” Cole walked in and went straight to the table, pointing at the last taco. “Are you going to eat this?”

Callie shook her head, avoiding looking at Viola.

“Callie, what does he mean?”

When Callie didn’t answer, Cole popped back into the conversation, his mouth full of food. “He told her she could sell her treats at the store for commission or something like that.”

“On consignment?” Viola asked, and Callie nodded reluctantly. “You told him no?”

“She threw the papers down and stormed out,” Cole said. “I missed the paper-throwing part, but the storming out was nicely done.”

Callie’s cheeks burned. “It was so patronizing, Viola. ‘I know I ran you out of business, but here, take my pity as a consolation prize.’” She mimicked Alex’s deep voice.

“That sounds like a great option to take if you want to stay in Bentonville.”

“Even if I got one hundred percent profits, I don’t have enough money to stay here on that alone.” She sat back down, all the pomp draining out of her. “What am I going to do?”

“First,” Viola said, “you are going to very seriously consider his consignment offer.” She cut off Callie’s objection. “It’s good business practice, whether it comes from a place of pity, or guilt, or charity, or whatever motives you’re worried about him having.”

“I’m not doing it,” she said stubbornly.

“Second,” Viola continued as if Callie hadn’t spoken. “I’m going to send you the rent estimate on the property I was telling you about. It won’t kill you to look,” she said loudly over more of Callie’s arguments of how she was never, ever going to move back to Eureka Springs.

“And third?” Viola paused as if realizing, just now, that she didn’t have a third point. She bit her lip, the classic Viola sign of thinking deeply. Her eyes lit up.

Cole, and even Callie, looked at her expectantly.

“Third,” Viola continued, holding her finger up this time to point at Callie. “You are going to realize that you’re not in this alone, girl. I’m here for you, even when you try to cut me out. So knock it off.”

Callie nodded and let Viola pull her into another tight hug.

“We’ll figure this out. One way or another, okay?” Viola tilted her head to the side. “Get over here, Cole.”

He came over and let the women pull him into a hug.

“Together?” Viola said.

“Together,” they both agreed.

Chapter Fourteen

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: April 12

subject: Re: People Are STILL Complicated

Xander,

I'm not quite sure what to say. I guess, yes, people ARE complicated. Best of luck.

Callie

* * *

“Darcy!” Callie called out when her dog didn’t come right to the door as she came home from the store. She had a bag of ingredients to try out a new recipe she’d been up half the night thinking about and developing. From Wags to Wishes had been slow all day, giving her time to write out proportions—and avoid having to think about Eureka Springs, Cole, Alex Nichols, and everything Viola brought up the night before.

She whistled, surprised that Darcy still wasn't meeting her. She set her bags down on the table, and glanced around the room, concerned. Perhaps Cole had taken Darcy for a walk. He'd never done that before, but there was always a first time for something. Cole had changed since working with Alex, even though it had only been a couple of weeks. She would have never believed it possible if she hadn't seen it herself.

She grabbed the perishables and put them in the fridge, then glanced around the kitchen. Darcy's leash hung on the hook by the pantry. Something felt off, though she couldn't explain what.

She rushed into the living room. "Darcy!"

This time she heard a whimper in response and found Darcy in her crate, which was in the corner of Callie's bedroom, curled up in a trembling ball. Callie knelt beside her and noticed that the dog had thrown up all over her pad. Darcy looked up lethargically before resting her head back onto her paw with a whimper.

Had she eaten something bad? Swallowed something inedible?

Panic flared in Callie, and she hurriedly pushed it down. Panic would accomplish nothing. She needed to get Darcy to a vet and get her checked out.

She pulled out her phone and searched for twenty-four-hour vets near her. Only one result came up.

She closed her eyes and let out a short, resigned breath through her nose. There was nothing to do for it. Darcy needed help, and Pets and More was the only place close enough to do it.

* * *

Callie pulled around the store to the back, where the vet office had its own separate entrance. A bright light shone above the door, and even though it was only nine at night, it felt so much later.

Her phone buzzed.

Cole: *Where are you?*

Callie: *At the Pets and More vet with Darcy. She's sick or swallowed something.*

Cole: *Is she okay?*

Callie: *I hope so. I'll let you know what the vet says.*

Callie had to help Darcy out of the car, and even then, Darcy walked slowly into the vet's office. The room was empty, so Callie signed her name in on the clipboard and took a seat. Less than a minute later, a vet came into the waiting room, accompanied by a young tech, and ushered her and Darcy back.

"I'm not sure what's wrong," Callie said, feeling the panic creep up again.

"We'll get it figured out," the vet said. They weighed Darcy and then felt around her stomach. The vet frowned. "Did she have anything to eat that you know of?"

"I didn't see anything."

"We're going to do some X-rays." The vet took Darcy back, and Callie twisted her fingers in worry. She didn't even want to contemplate anything serious happening to Darcy. What if she needed surgery?

After about ten minutes of waiting, the vet came back in, without her dog. "We don't see any obstructions, but there is definitely something foreign in the stomach," he said. "Are you sure she didn't get into any food?"

"I don't know. Maybe? I got home and just saw her sick and rushed right over here. I didn't look around much." She pulled out her phone. "Let me text my brother."

Callie: *Do you see any food that Darcy could have gotten into?*

Only a moment later, Cole sent her a picture of an empty bag of chocolates, wrappers scattered on the floor.

Cole: *I forgot to close my bedroom door when Alex picked me up to work. It looks like Darcy got into this.*

Callie turned her phone so the vet could see the empty bag. He nodded. “That’s what I suspected. Chocolate is toxic to dogs, and the wrappers can present a problem as well. Darcy is really dehydrated and needs to be watched closely. I’d like to keep her here tonight, and I’ll give you a call in the morning.”

“Is she going to be alright?” Callie asked. She hated to leave Darcy there, but she knew she would be in the best hands with a vet.

“I think so,” the vet said. “We’ll keep her hydrated and comfortable. I also want to make sure none of the wrappers she swallowed cause a bowel obstruction. But she’s not exhibiting any of the shortness of breath that I’d be really concerned with.”

Callie let out a long breath. “Okay. Thank you.”

“My tech can show you out and make sure you get the paperwork filled out for Darcy.”

Callie followed the vet tech, an older woman with short curly hair. “You own From Wags to Wishes,” the woman said.

“I do,” Callie replied tiredly. *For now.*

“I love that store. I haven’t been there in a while ...” Her voice drifted off as if she realized why she hadn’t been there in a while.

Callie filled out her contact form, and the vet tech printed off a billing statement. Callie’s stomach twisted at the amount. Almost five hundred dollars. That included the X-ray and the overnight stay, but it represented the very last bit of her savings.

She handed over her credit card and paid the money, her hand shaking a little as she signed the credit card slip. As she

went to hand it back to the tech, the door between Pets and More and the vet's office opened.

“Marnie, is Dr. Lovell available?” Alex said, looking down in a tablet in his hand. “I have a question for him.”

Even now, in her state of stress and exhaustion, she couldn't help but soak in Alex's presence. He filled her with a strange, heady mixture of emotions—from blinding anger and resentment, to distracting attraction, and most recently, an intense gratitude for everything he'd done with Cole. The room felt warmer after he stepped into it, his attention still on his tablet, and she took the unaware moment to attempt to observe him objectively. It was impossible with the array of feelings rolling through her, but her heart felt like a ping-pong ball ricocheting painfully through her chest, unsure of where to land.

He was handsome. Gracious when he got angry. Believed in Cole. Whatever he was doing with Cole was pure magic. That boy had changed, even in such a short time.

He was running her out of business. Condescending. Too wealthy to understand what life was like for her. Wanted to give her a corner of his store.

That last one still rankled.

Still, shame filled her at how she'd treated Alex after his offer, especially since talking to Viola. She didn't want to take him up on it, but she probably hadn't needed to take it so personally.

Now for him to find her in his store, when she'd done nothing but complain about this store's existence ... She wished she could duck out of the room and escape before Alex looked up and saw her, but the tech was distracted from taking the credit slip from her.

“Sure, honey,” the woman said. “Dr. Lovell is with a sick dog. Let me just finish up with this young lady and I'll take you back.”

Alex looked up then, his expression registering surprise when he saw Callie. He powered down his tablet and set it on

the counter, concern reflected in his eyes. “Is something wrong with Darcy?” he asked.

She started, surprised he remembered Darcy’s name. She’d told it to him once, the first afternoon they’d met when she’d been out jogging. *Good memory.* “She got into some chocolate and wrappers. Dr. Lovell is going to keep her overnight for observation.”

Alex took a step toward her, but then stopped. The air was heavy between them. “She’ll get the very best care here,” he said. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thank you,” Callie said. Marnie, the tech, finally took the slip from Callie, openly watching Callie, Alex, and the blatant tension between the two of them.

“How have you been?” he asked, somewhat formally. He then winced. “I mean, other than this.”

“Not great,” she said, honestly. She stared down at her shoes, but the draw of his gaze was just too much, and she found herself looking up and being drawn in by his deep, expressive eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I feel like your life was certainly better before I showed up.”

“In some ways, yes,” she said, on a reflex. He cringed, and she berated herself. She was going to do better. Be better. “But what you’ve done with Cole ...” She swallowed, then forced herself to say the words. “I’m very grateful.”

To her surprise, once they were out, she felt as if a weight had been lifted. It was a lot of energy to stay angry at Alex, to blame him for everything. It took a lot of energy for her emotions to keep fighting this war over him—attraction versus anger, resentment versus gratitude. It was energy she didn’t have anymore. Not tonight, anyway.

“Cole’s a great kid,” he ventured carefully.

“You’re kind to think so.” She smiled, but it was sad and weighted. “Not many people could say that after what he did to your truck.”

“I love my truck,” he said with a nod. “But in the end, it’s just a thing. People mean more.”

She nodded. Only a rich person could shrug off a vandalized truck as just a thing. She’d just spent her last five hundred dollars, and she couldn’t imagine what she’d do if someone had destroyed her vehicle on top of it. But she did appreciate the sentiment.

“I once told Cole that I once broke my mom’s china,” he said suddenly. “Did he tell you about that?”

“He’s not much of a talker.” With her, at least.

“Well, I broke every single piece of it. It had been her grandmother’s china. Priceless because of sentimental value. It’s one of my biggest regrets.”

Callie shook her head, trying to picture it. The Alex she’d seen was calm and collected, constantly forgiving. “Did she kill you?”

Alex laughed. “No, amazingly enough. She sent me to my grandpa, who made me do community service.”

“Ah,” Callie said, all of it coming together. “Your grandpa must be a great guy.”

“He was one of the best,” Alex said.

Callie didn’t miss the past tense in his sentence. “I’m sorry,” she said.

He nodded.

Movement near Callie made her glance over at Marnie, who was waving the receipt for Callie to take.

Callie reached for it, but Alex took it before she could. He looked down at it and frowned. He turned to Marnie. “Refund her. This one is on us.”

“No,” Callie said firmly. “I’ve got it.”

“It’s no big deal. We’ll cover it.” He paused. “It’s the least I can do.”

She let out a frustrated groan and snatched the receipt out of his hand. “I don’t need your pity, Alex.”

“It’s not pity,” he said, sounding equally frustrated.

“Then I don’t need you to save me. I’ll be fine. I always find a way to make it.” As she said the words, she knew they were true. She would be fine. Even if her future didn’t look how she hoped it would.

“Callie,” he started, but she cut him off.

“Alex, I appreciate everything you’re doing for Cole. I really do. But I don’t need you to solve my problems out of some misguided sense of guilt, okay?”

“It’s not guilt,” he said, his jaw tight.

“Okay,” she said, not believing him, but not willing to fight about it tonight. She turned to Marnie. “I’ll call in the morning. Good night.”

She walked out the door, her back tense, waiting for Alex to follow, but he never came. She was upset at herself for expecting it, almost as much as she was at the disappointment she felt when it didn’t happen.

Chapter Fifteen

*to: Callie Irving <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>
from: Alex Nichols <ANichols@petsandmore.com>
date: April 15
subject: Apology*

Callie,

I hope it's okay that Cole gave me your email, but I didn't want to write this through text. Somehow I always seem to mess things up when we speak, so I thought I'd try email, to see if I did better this way.

You mentioned pity and misguided guilt at the vet's office, and I've sat on that thought all week. There are a lot of things I feel right now for you, but pity is not one of them. Admiration. Respect. Awe. And though I do feel guilty for how some of my actions have affected you, I don't think it's misguided.

We got off on the wrong foot, due to a misunderstanding. When I came to your store that first morning, I was not coming to gloat about Pets and More, but to see you. Again. I don't think you remember, but we met for the first time, just over a year ago. But nothing went as planned when I came to see you this time. I didn't think of what you might think when I handed you my business card. I love your store and would never celebrate its closing.

As for my offering to cover your vet fees, I genuinely feel as if it's the least I could do. I know Pets and More has caused your business to struggle, and for that I am sorry. (Though I'm not sorry for offering to cover your vet fees. But I will respect your wishes that I not do so.)

I know we will meet on occasion over the next few weeks, while I continue to work with Cole. He is a great kid, and he's lucky to have you for a sister.

Best wishes,

Alex

* * *

Xander's phone rang just as Cole had popped the hood on the truck. Today, Xander wanted to show Cole how to change the oil on an old truck like this. If Callie let him give Cole the truck, an idea that was feeling more and more like the right thing to do, then he'd need to know how to do this kind of thing. The exterior looked nearly brand new; they were only waiting for the custom red paint to come in.

It was his brother. "Hey."

"What are you doing right now?"

"Working on the truck with Cole. Why?"

"I need your help. Can you come down to the store today?" Liam had flown in the night before, just a pit stop on his way to Europe, but he couldn't help going into the office.

"On my way." Xander hung up the phone. "I need to go into the office, so I'll have to show you this later."

Cole nodded, but his disappointment was evident.

“Want to come shadow me?” Xander asked, on impulse.

“I don’t know if I should,” Cole said. “Enemy territory.”

“If you think it would upset your sister, then don’t worry about it.”

Cole shrugged. “She doesn’t seem as angry about Pets and More. I haven’t heard her ranting about you in a few weeks.”

That was good, he guessed. Maybe his email had made a difference. She still hadn’t responded to him or opened up like she had when he was messaging as Xander, but he still thought emailing her as Alex was a step in the right direction.

“It’s up to you,” Xander said.

“I’ll come. I’m curious about what you do to make this much money.”

Xander laughed. “Then let’s go.”

* * *

Cole followed Xander into his office, where Liam sat at the desk, his face strained with stress. “What’s up?”

“The website is down, and I can’t get a hold of anyone. Don’t we have these guys on retainer?”

“It’s the Friday before Easter,” Cole said. “It’s why I don’t have school.”

Liam looked back at Cole blankly.

“Good Friday,” Xander explained. “They probably have it off of work.”

Liam grumbled, then turned the computer around to face Xander. “Didn’t you take a programming class in school?”

“One class, yes.” Xander logged in to the back end of the site. “That doesn’t mean I know what I’m doing.”

“My school had a few website design classes,” Cole said. He leaned over to look at the computer. “I might be able to help.”

Liam gave Xander a skeptical, lifted-eyebrow look.

“It’s better than nothing,” Xander mouthed.

“Is it?” Liam responded.

Xander abdicated his seat for Cole. “See what you can do,” he said. He and his brother stepped out to talk.

“He’s going to mess it up,” Liam warned.

“Then our web guy will fix it once we get a hold of him.” Xander shrugged. “Let him try.”

“All the missed orders are on your head.”

“Fine.” Xander took in his brother’s exhausted appearance. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

“Couldn’t. The shareholder’s quarterly report is due in just a few weeks, and Dad’s still not in a position to do it himself.”

“Can’t Greyson do it?” Greyson was Pets and More’s CFO, and between him and Liam, he was the reason the company could run so smoothly without Xander’s dad.

“He’s dealing with the Albuquerque mess.” They’d had a store manager in Albuquerque who had been embezzling funds for almost two years. It had been a logistical and legal nightmare to sort out.

“You can’t keep going like this. You’re not a robot.”

Liam smiled wearily. “I’ll be fine, Xander. You just worry about keeping this store running well.”

Xander frowned.

Liam checked his watch. “I’ve got to catch a plane. You’ve got this covered?”

“Yeah.”

Liam left, and Xander went back into his office to check in on Cole.

“Did he just call you Xander?” Cole asked, not looking up from the screen.

Xander’s heart stopped. “Yeah. It’s what my family and friends call me,” he said carefully.

“Cool.”

Xander waited for more—maybe to be called out as emailing his sister or hiding a secret—but Cole had gone back to working on the website. Xander let out a short breath. He couldn’t keep doing this for much longer.

Cole hit a few more keys, then turned to Xander with a smile. “Fixed.”

“Really.” Xander didn’t mean to sound so skeptical, but maybe Liam was rubbing off on him a little.

Cole turned the computer toward him, and sure enough, the home page of Pets and More in Bentonville was showing again. He explained what he’d done to fix it, but Xander only vaguely understood the fix.

“You’re really good at this,” Xander told him. “Have you ever thought about designing websites?”

Cole shrugged. “There’s not a lot of use for it out here, it seems.”

“There’s use for it everywhere,” Xander said. “Did you design the From Wags to Wishes site?”

“She has a website?” Cole turned the computer back toward him, and when it loaded, he winced. “Oh, this is bad.”

Xander opted not to say anything.

“Mr. Nichols.” The store manager popped his head into the room. “Do you have a moment?”

“Sure. You okay in here, Cole?”

Cole waved him away, buried deep in his sister’s website, frowning and shaking his head, while Xander went to take care of another problem up at the front. But he didn’t mind this kind of problem. It was easily fixable—unlike the problem of

how to get Callie to see past Alex Nichols to the man who had been emailing her for the last year.

Chapter Sixteen

to: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>

from: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

date: April 16

subject: Re: Apology

Alex,

I've tried to think of when we could have first met, but I can't. Did you come into the store?

Thank you for respecting my wishes in regards to the vet visit. Darcy is doing a lot better, back to her energetic self, thankfully. We have banished all chocolate from the house for now, though. My heart can't take that again.

Thank you for everything you're doing with Cole. He's a changed kid. He looks forward to the days he gets to work with you. He hasn't missed a shift at the store, and he's been talking about buying an old truck to fix up so he has independent transportation.

Callie

to: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

from: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>

date: April 17

subject: Truck

Callie,

I'm glad to hear that Darcy is doing better. I haven't seen my dog in over a month, and I've been surprised by how much I miss him. He's been a part of my daily life—aside from business trips here and there—for the last four years.

Cole has told me about his truck plan.

I want to ask you something, but I don't want you to get angry or take it the wrong way.

With that intro ...

I would like to gift Cole my truck. I fixed it up with my Grandpa, and it changed me. Sometimes just being in the truck was reminder enough that I didn't want to go back to how I'd been. I'd love for Cole to have that reminder as well.

I haven't said a word to Cole, and I never will if you say no.

Alex

to: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>

from: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

date: April 20

subject: Re: Truck

Alex,

I've been thinking this over for three days, and I still don't know. I've got a lot on my mind right now, between closing up the shop and finding a new place to live.

Promise me this isn't a pity gift.

Callie

to: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

from: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>

date: April 20

subject: Re: Truck

I promise.

Alex

* * *

Callie flipped the closed sign over for the last time. She had three days to be out of this space, and it would take the entire time to box up and clean everything. She'd signed the rental papers for the Eureka Springs location, sight unseen, at Viola's urging. She'd used her credit card to rent a trailer she'd pick up tomorrow, and she and Cole would start loading all the store's belongings into the back of it.

But for now, tonight, it was just Callie and her store.

She'd dreamed of owning From Wags to Wishes since she was a child. When her parents were fighting. When her mom had left. When her dad was tossed in jail for a night here and there, usually to sleep off whatever he drank. Sheriff Price would come by with a social worker to make sure she and Cole were okay, and more than likely would find Callie. Back then, she'd made more people treats than dog treats.

Then she'd started volunteering at the animal shelter after school and on the weekends. When the people in town judged her, the dogs at the shelter never did. Soon her baking specialty turned to dogs, and if her dad, or later her stepmom, ate a dog treat by accident ... well, that couldn't always be helped. People shouldn't just assume that any treat they saw was for them.

She'd worked so hard to escape from there. To come to Bentonville, where no one knew her or her family, where she

could reinvent herself. Not be Tom Irving's daughter.

To go back? It felt like failure. Like she'd had a rubber band attached to her waist all along, and now it was yanking her back.

She'd told Cole the night before that they were moving back to their old, yellow house, and he'd been ecstatic. She had no idea how she'd find the money to make it livable, but that was what credit cards were for, she supposed.

So for Cole, she could be glad they were going back to Eureka Springs. Plus, she was excited to be near Viola again.

But it wasn't Bentonville. It wasn't *this* store.

Her eyes stung, and she blinked rapidly. She didn't have time to cry. She needed to pack. So she did. For a couple of hours, she worked hard to pack away all the little items she'd transfer over to her new location in Eureka Springs.

Someone knocked on the store door, and she opened it when she saw her brother through the glass. Alex stood with him, his thumbs hooked in his pants pockets casually, though something about him seem charged.

"Can I redo your website?" Cole asked first thing. "I was going to just do it, but Alex said I needed to ask you first."

"My website? Why?" She glanced over at Alex, but his expression was unreadable. They'd been emailing for the last couple of weeks, and since his apology email, something between them had shifted. At least it had for her. She realized she'd judged him pretty harshly for his actions the first day they'd met, assumed a lot of things that weren't true. But try as she might, she couldn't recall meeting him before then. She did think he looked familiar, but that was probably because she'd seen his face on the cover of several magazines.

But since he'd promised that the truck wasn't a pity gift, she'd been afraid to email him back. Afraid of how that offer made her feel. Because she hadn't been angry. Instead, she'd been touched. She'd felt, for the first time in a long time, that she wasn't alone.

Principle alone made her want to turn down the offer; she didn't know how to accept something as generous as that. Yet the thought of Cole's face if he got to keep the truck, knowing the truck was a reminder to him of everything he'd once done and who he had become ... She didn't know how to turn that down.

"It's embarrassing," Cole said. "I didn't even know you had a website, and now I can see why you don't advertise it at all."

"Why would I need a website other than to have our address and phone number, Cole? We're a local shop."

"But you could be so much more. So many businesses use their website to do really cool things." He was nearly pleading with her now.

She sighed and glanced quickly at Alex, before saying to Cole with a low voice, "Websites are expensive. I can only afford the basic hosting fee."

"We worked with your hosting site in school. I can make it look good for free."

She bit her lip, debating. She hadn't seen him this excited about anything in a long time. "Sure," she said. It probably couldn't be worse than what she'd already done.

"What's your log-in?"

She gave it to him, then turned, surprised to find Alex still there.

"Do you need any help?" he asked as their eyes met.

An electric zing ran through her, almost as if they'd physically touched. She'd never felt anything quite like it ... except the other times she'd been around Alex. Flustered, she took a step back. "You just want to get me out of here sooner." She'd meant for it to come off as a joke, but it fell flat.

He shook his head sadly. "I'll just head out, then."

"Wait," she surprised herself by saying. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong."

He paused and turned to face her. “We seem to have a problem with that.”

She let out a short laugh. “We do, don’t we?”

He smiled then, and she found herself smiling back at him, getting lost in it.

“What’s your password again?” Cole called from the back room.

Her cheeks turned hot. She grabbed a pen and wrote down the password for Cole, took it to him, and then motioned toward the dog toys in the corner. “I’m just packing these up right now,” she told Alex. “If you’re serious about helping.”

“I am.”

She tossed him a box, and he caught it, then set it on the ground and started loading the toys in it.

“Any rhyme or reason to this?” he asked.

“Just in the box, then label it toys.”

They worked in companionable silence for a while, the clacking of Cole’s keys their only background noise, but Callie was relieved that any awkwardness had dissipated. Yet she’d been alone and silent in the store all day, and the urge to talk to someone—and not just anyone, she had to admit, but to Alex—was eating at her.

“How’s your dad doing?” she asked him as she stretched a long strip of packing tape over a box of pet hygiene items and marked the box.

“How’d you know my dad wasn’t well?” He seemed more on guard about it than she’d expected. Perhaps it was a touchy subject, one she shouldn’t have brought up so casually.

“Cole mentioned it.”

“Oh.” For some reason, he seemed disappointed by this. “He’s not doing well. I’m going to fly out there next week and see him.”

“I’m sorry,” Claire said.

Alex nodded. “Thank you. We aren’t very close—I think I pushed him too far too many times when I was a teenager—but he’s still my dad.”

“I’m not very close to my dad either,” she said. “Cole told you about him?”

“A little,” Alex said. He’d finished packing his first box of toys and grabbed the second one. “He’s in prison.”

“Yep.”

“Do you ever visit him?” he asked cautiously.

“We go a few times a year,” Callie said. She hated going, but like Alex said, he was her father.

“That’s tough.”

“It’s not even just seeing him there in prison. It’s grieving what life could have been like if he’d made different choices.”

“You seem to be doing pretty good for yourself. And for Cole.”

Callie looked around the store. “Maybe at one time.”

“You still are,” he countered. “You’re running a business. You come up with amazing treat ideas in the middle of the night—and then make them happen. No one makes their middle-of-the-night ideas happen. Or only the most motivated do, anyway. You took your brother in and gave him stability. Yes, this is a ... rough patch with the business, but I have no doubt that you’ll pull through.”

“At least one of us has no doubts here,” she said distractedly, her mind still caught on something he’d said. “How did you know I get treat ideas in the middle of the night?”

Alex’s eyes flickered with some emotion she couldn’t place. Worry? Panic? Her own brows furrowed. She didn’t think even Cole knew she wrote her best recipes at three in the morning.

“I must have heard it somewhere,” he said, then hurriedly continued. “All I’m saying is that you have the grit it takes to

make it.”

“That’s nice of you to say, seeing as how we’ve only known each other for a couple of months.”

“But we met over a year ago, remember?” His eyes twinkled.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “I’ve racked my memory, and I swear I would remember you.”

“Maybe I’m just not that memorable.”

“Oh, you are,” she said without thinking. She glanced up to find him smirking, and she threw a squeaky ball at him. “Stop. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He caught the ball with ease. “How did you mean it?”

“Just, you know. You make an impression.”

He tossed the ball into his box, still smiling in a way that irritated her while making her stomach dip and swirl in a distracting sort of way.

“Not always a good impression,” she added as a caveat, making him laugh out loud. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever heard him laugh before, but it warmed her from the inside out. Made her want to hear it again. The laugh lines in his face were solid, as though he made a habit of laughing, but there hadn’t been a lot to laugh about between the two of them. A yearning to change that blindsided her.

This is Alex Nichols, she reminded herself. Pets and More.

But the reminder didn’t hit her in like a punch to the gut like it usually did. Not when he was smiling at her that way, the corners of his eyes crinkling, his lips turning up invitingly. Deliciously.

She tore her gaze from his lips. “Is it hot in here? A little bit?” She stood and went to the door, propped it open with one of the boxes, and closed her eyes against the cool night breeze across her face.

A moment passed while her mind cleared. What in the world was going on with her? Of course she was attracted to

Alex. Who wouldn't be? But to let him get to her like this?

"I'm all finished with the toys. What can I do next?"

She turned to find him behind her, closer than she expected. She looked up, met his gaze, and swallowed at the sudden dryness in her throat. She hadn't been close enough to him before to notice that he smelled like a heady combination of a sporty aftershave and mint. The scent was light enough that she wanted to lean in closer, to bury her face in his neck and inhale.

He swayed closer as well. Every part of him filled the already small space, and her heart raced at his closeness. How? How did being close to him do this to her?

"You have dust in your hair," he whispered. He brushed it out, his fingers lingering for a moment behind her ear, igniting her body with fire.

She swallowed.

He dropped his hand, his cheeks pink. Was he blushing? He looked away, and she gave in to the urge to let her fingers brush lightly against his.

Alex stared at her at the touch, his eyes dark and intense.

"I think we're good for tonight," she said breathlessly, not quite sure what to say or where to go from here. If that email had shifted the dynamic of their relationship, then she had no idea what a moment like this did.

He nodded and took a step back. She didn't welcome the space between them. "I think we are. Good for tonight."

She caught the double meaning of his words and couldn't help but agree. She cleared her throat. "Thank you for your help."

"My pleasure." His low voice was intimate, for her alone. He motioned that he was going to walk past her toward his car parked in front of the store.

She took a small step back, but his arm still brushed hers when he walked past, and her knees nearly buckled.

“Good night,” he said, giving her a half smile she hadn’t seen before. It was almost shy, but it couldn’t be. Not from the famous Alex Nichols. Then he was in his truck and gone, and she was still standing in the doorway, watching the empty street where he’d been.

Chapter Seventeen

to: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>
from: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>
date: April 21
subject: Re: Truck

Alex,

Are you absolutely sure you want to give Cole your truck? I can't promise he'll treasure it like you do. We have zero to give in return. Will Liam mind?

Callie

PS. Did Cole leave his phone at your house? He can't find it anywhere.

to: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>
from: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>
date: April 21
subject: Re: Truck

Callie,

I'm one hundred percent sure I want to give Cole the truck. Liam never cared for it—he'd be thrilled I was giving it away, actually. I don't expect anything in return.

Alex

PS. I had my cleaner look around, and she found his phone in the garage. Can I bring it by next time I see you?

to: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>

from: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

date: April 21

subject: The Phone

Alex,

Yes, thank you. I'll be in Eureka Springs. Text me when you get back and I'll send you my address.

Callie

PS. Good luck in California.

to: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

from: Alex <ANichols@petsandmore.com>

date: April 21

subject: California

Callie,

California is ... interesting. Text?

Alex

**** * ****

CALLIE: *Sorry! I've been busy packing my apartment. I just saw your email this morning. What's up?*

ALEX: *Just going over business details with my dad. He's not supposed to be doing this, but he can't stop working.*

CALLIE: *Can your mom step in?*

ALEX: *She's tried. He's a force. Watch this.*

Callie leaned against the wall in her empty kitchen to open the link he'd sent. She watched a short clip of his dad in a board room, his face red, a vein in his forehead sticking out prominently as he chewed everyone out. It was no wonder the man suffered from health problems now.

She hadn't been able to stop thinking about her fingers gently touching Alex's, or his nearness, since last week. Had he felt something too?

"Slacking on the job?" Cole called out to her. He was carrying a box from his room to the moving truck she'd rented. A couple of his friends had come over that morning, along with Viola and a few people she'd rounded up, to carry the beds and furniture to the moving truck. All that was left now were the final few things, and when Callie paused to get a drink, she'd noticed an email from Alex. Her heart skipped a beat when she'd opened it, and the next thing she knew, she was texting him.

"I'm messaging someone."

"Sounds like you're watching a show," he retorted. They were both exhausted, having been up most of the night packing.

"Alex's dad," she said, turning the phone toward him. "Alex sent it to me to watch."

"When's he coming back?"

He would never say it, but Callie knew that Cole missed Alex. He'd been working nonstop on her website, spending a lot of time researching online exactly what he wanted to do, but he wouldn't show it to her yet, which made her really nervous.

"I'll ask him."

Viola came into the kitchen then, her hands on her hips as she surveyed the room. "Anything else?"

“This is mostly everything. I couldn’t have done it without you. I don’t know how you managed to gather so many people to help.”

Three men were outside, rearranging things like a stacking game, because she’d only been able to afford the smallest moving truck. Sheriff Price had come, along with his son and a couple of Callie’s friends from high school. Callie hadn’t kept in touch with them, hadn’t kept in touch with anyone except Viola and the sheriff (and that was reluctantly, on account of his calls to her about Cole), but they’d shown up anyway.

“You are loved,” Viola said, giving her a tight hug. “As soon as they’re done, we’re going to grab a bite to eat and then meet you down at the yellow house, okay?”

Callie wished she could treat everyone to lunch, after all their hard work, but the most she could do was give them all some free dog treats once she got her store in Eureka Springs set up. She was going to get the keys to it on Monday.

She said goodbye to Viola and waved to everyone else, knowing she’d see them in a few hours at the yellow house, and then looked down at her phone to find a couple new messages from Alex waiting for her.

ALEX: *Did you watch it?*

ALEX: *That is vintage Dad. Imagine that, only he’s in bed, with me and Mom as his audience, and you’ll have an idea of what the last week has been like.*

CALLIE: *That video was intense.*

ALEX: *Welcome to the Nichols Family, where we specialize in intensity. We’re all in on everything. If I’m going to break something to make a point, it’s going to be the most priceless thing in the house.*

CALLIE: *If you build a house in Eureka Springs—of all places—it’s going to be the most amazing house anyone has ever seen in these parts.*

ALEX: *I miss it.*

CALLIE: *You called it home in your email.*

ALEX: *It does feel like home. More than California ever has. I can breathe in Eureka Springs.*

CALLIE: *Cole is wondering when you get back.*

ALEX: *Well, if COLE is wondering, let him know it'll be on Monday.*

CALLIE: *Of course it's Cole. Who else would it be?*

ALEX: *Good question ...*

CALLIE: *I've got to run.*

ALEX: *Okay. Good luck with everything.*

CALLIE: *You too.*

* * *

Callie turned onto the main street of Eureka Springs for the first time in years. When she'd passed the turnoff into the lake development where Alex lived, she'd longed to follow that road instead, go hang out in his dream mansion, and forget that this arm of Eureka Springs ever existed.

Everything looked the same as when she'd left: tall brick buildings side by side; people milling from store to store, often not even looking before they stepped into the street, signs left and right, boasting of ghost hauntings or famous people who frequented their hotel or shop; and the musty scent of the damp, underground tunnels that ran the length of the entire city. They'd been closed off years ago—except for one area, maybe a hundred feet long, kept open for tourists to explore.

“Home sweet home,” Cole said sarcastically. His feet were kicked up on the dash as he stared out the window, a bored expression on his face.

“I thought you wanted to move back here.”

He shrugged. “I thought I did too.”

She left it at that. She hadn't seen his Eureka Springs friends come by since the truck incident, but she had been grateful enough not to question it. Perhaps more was going on there than she realized. Hopefully, coming back to Eureka Springs wasn't going to prove to be a really, really bad idea.

She turned onto their old street, preparing herself for the worst. The yellow house had been in disrepair when she'd moved out years ago and completely neglected since then. Was it even livable? She should have checked before deciding to move back in.

The moving truck was already there in front of the house, and as Callie drove around it, her eyes opened in shock. The faded yellow house had a fresh coat of paint. The white trim had been refreshed as well. Where the front yard was starting to droop into the street, new paving stones had been laid to bolster the land up and keep it from falling.

She went inside, the scent of fresh paint washing over her. Every room had been updated from the floor, which had new laminate flooring, to the ceiling, where new light fixtures hung.

With every step, anger filled her more and more. Alex had done this. After she'd told him she didn't want his help anymore. He'd ignored her and done what he wanted. She'd told him again and again that she could do this on her own, and he didn't believe her. This was not what she wanted from him. Not at all.

All of her soft feelings turned hard and cold in a moment.

She pulled out her phone without thinking and pressed call.

"Hey, Callie," Alex said, sounding surprised.

"I told you I didn't want your help." She bit the words out, realizing how angry she sounded. She tried to reel in her emotions, to not be so upset, but it was impossible.

"I'm sorry?" he said, sounding confused.

"You warned me, in a way, so maybe this is my fault." She gave a humorless laugh. "I said you could give him the truck.

That didn't give you carte blanche to come in and mess with my life."

"Callie, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The house, Alex! I don't need your pity, okay! I told you I can take care of myself." To her horror, her voice caught, and she choked out through the emotion, "Forget the truck. I'm so stupid. I thought we were friends, but I'm just a project, right?"

"Wait! Callie!"

She hung up the phone before he could finish what he was saying.

Viola walked in from the back, a bright, anticipatory smile on her face. "What do you think? Gorgeous, right?"

"You knew about this?" She gripped her phone tightly in her hand, and Viola seemed to sense that everything was not as happy as she thought it might be.

"Of course. What's wrong, Callie? Did something happen?"

"Just Alex coming into my life and messing everything up."

"Oh no. What else happened?" She gasped. "He's not opening a Eureka Springs Pets and More location, is he? We'll boycott it."

"No! It's this!" Callie threw her hand out to indicate the entire house. "The paint. The floors, and lighting, and fixing up the yard. I don't want to owe him anything, and yet he can't help himself."

Viola's eyes widened, and she shook her head quickly. "Oh, honey. Alex didn't do this. I did. I had my crew come out for the last week and fix this place up as a housewarming gift."

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and when they did, Callie dropped to her knees. "Are you serious?" she whispered. "He didn't put you up to this? Anonymously pay or something?"

“I used leftovers from other projects. Most of the rooms are painted a different color because of that, but I think it turned out kind of cool.”

Callie looked around, feeling a bit dazed. “It does look cool.” She moaned. “I’m such an idiot. I just told Alex off for doing this, and he would have no idea what I was talking about.”

Viola knelt in front of her. “Just call him back. Tell him it was a misunderstanding.”

“I can’t! I was so horrible. There’s no way he wants to talk to me again.”

“Try.”

Callie pulled out her phone, and with trembling fingers, pressed send on Alex’s number. It went straight to voice mail. She didn’t leave a message, her throat too tight to talk. She called again with the same result.

She sent a text, the letters smooching together with almost too many typos to understand. She deleted it all, and then kept it simple.

CALLIE: *I’m sorry.*

ALEX: *We have to say that a lot.*

ALEX: *The truck is yours. But I’ll respect your wishes and stay out of your life for good.*

This was good, right? What she’d wanted all along—for Alex to stay out of her life. Her heart raced in her chest as she racked her brain for how to respond.

Viola gripped her arm, bringing her back to the present. “I’ve never seen you like this, Callie.”

“I’m a mess,” Callie managed to say. “I don’t know which way is up or down, what my future looks like, what I’m going to do back here. I lost my business. My brother is mad we’re moving back. Now Alex just promised to stay out of my life for good.”

“Alex Nichols. You hate him, don’t you? So this is a good thing?” Viola studied her. “Unless you don’t hate him?”

Callie shook her head, staring down at her hands.

“Unless you ... like him?”

Callie burst into tears.

Chapter Eighteen

Xander turned his phone off, not wanting to see any more messages or calls from Callie. It seemed that no matter what he did, she was going to believe the worst in him.

Although if he'd thought of renovating her house to make it more livable, he would have done so in a heartbeat.

"Everything okay?" his mom asked as she came into the kitchen. She went to the fridge and pulled out a carton of chocolate milk and a couple of glasses. "You seem glum. You know your dad is going to pull through this, right? He's too ornery to die."

Xander laughed at that, though his heart wasn't in it. How had he messed this up so badly? If he could go back in time, he'd tell Callie who he was right away. Or even better, he'd go all the way back to the very first time they met and introduce himself as Alexander Nichols, a CEO of Pets and More, and tell her he wanted to get to know her better.

No subterfuge. No falling in love with her, only to have her hate him when they met. But even with all the money in the world, there was no going back in time, which left him feeling powerless. It was easy to fix things with money; it was harder to admit you needed help beyond that. This was what his grandpa had been trying to teach him as a teenager. Money was only half of the restitution. The rest was putting beauty back into the world.

The fact was that even though he hadn't fixed up the house, and even though Callie was sorry for the accusation, he

had been lying to her from almost the first moment he'd gone to Bentonville.

"A woman, if you must know," he said. He took the glass of milk she poured him and drank it down in one gulp. This was his mom's go-to comfort move. And, for as simple as it was, it usually helped.

"What's going on?" his mom said, sitting down at the table across from him. "Maybe I can help."

He debated if he should tell her or not, but what did he have to lose? He filled her in on meeting Callie the first time, emailing her, and then realizing when he went to meet her in person that she had no idea that Alex Nichols and Xander were the same person. He told her about From Wags to Wishes and Pets and More, and the collision of her dream and his.

"At that point, you began to actively hide the fact that you were Xander?" His mom poured him another glass of milk, but it didn't look appealing any longer.

Xander nodded, shame rising in him. "I thought I might win her over as Alex. It was clear she liked Xander. But Alex had a way of getting under her skin time and time again."

His mom frowned. "You do realize you're Xander *and* Alex."

"That's the problem."

"Or it's the solution." She lifted a brow. He knew that look. It was the same one she'd given him before she'd sent him off to live with Grandpa. The one that let him know he'd messed up, but that didn't mean things were completely unfixable.

And despite himself, despite his pride's need for self-preservation, he found hope rising. With effort, he pushed it down. "I think she'll be happier without me in her life, and in the end, that's what I want. For her to be happy, and for me to *not* be the person to mess that up anymore."

"Hmm."

Xander tried not to rise to the bait, but he couldn't help it. "What does that mean?"

She leaned back in her chair, her arms folded. "I thought Grandpa taught you better than that."

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"I love you, Xander. You're my baby, and always will be, which means I have a soft spot for you."

"And why you didn't kill me after the china incident."

"Exactly. It's also why I'm going to speak straight to you right now."

"Okay," he said hesitantly, waiting for whatever truth she was going to throw down for him to digest. He knew he was impulsive and flawed, and he hated how shy and awkward he could be in new situations. He knew he'd always given up on things too easily, especially when faced with situations he felt were insurmountable. She could list any number of things he needed to work on, or that Grandpa had tried to teach him, but Xander had missed the mark.

"You've got to believe in yourself," she said.

He blinked. "What?"

She took his hand from across the table and squeezed it. "This has always been the missing piece for you. The rest of us have always believed in you, even when you were making poor choices. *You* need to believe in you. You got back on a good path. You finished business school at the top of your class. You took in that mangy dog and have loved it like no one else could. You've built a fantastic store in Eureka Springs, without the help of your father. And you did it all while using your own strengths." She looked at him until he met her gaze. "Honey, Xander and Alex are the same person," she said again, letting the words sink in this time. "She's fallen for *you*."

He swallowed. In all the time Xander had spent with his grandpa, the man had only built him up. He'd corrected him when needed, he'd but helped him face false ideas of what was smart and what wasn't, what was strong and what was weak.

And they were never the things Xander assumed. Grandpa had shown him that being shy wasn't weak, but letting others influence you into bad decisions was. Having to study twice as hard as some of his peers didn't make him dumb, but not learning from his mistakes was.

Believing that he had the ability to be a good person who did great things was the biggest lesson his grandpa taught him over the years. Soon enough, Xander had believed it. Mostly.

“So what do you think?” his mom asked. “Is this woman worth another try?”

He nodded. “She’s worth every try she’ll give me.”

“Okay, then.” His mom leaned forward, an encouraging smile on her face. “What are you waiting for?”

* * *

Xander walked up to his front door a couple days later, ready to collapse with exhaustion. He usually preferred to drive himself, but he had hired a driver to bring him back to his mountain retreat home so he could doze off for the commute.

His dad had seemed to improve just a bit during their visit—enough at least to demand Xander work every waking hour, and hours he wished he was sleeping.

Through it all, the conversation he'd had with his mom ran through his mind.

He entered the code into the keypad on his door, and pushed it open, shocked when Jax came barreling into the entryway, his nails clattering against the shiny tile, his tongue hanging out in happiness.

Xander threw his bag down and knelt to pet Jax's neck and ears, letting go of a sense of homesickness he didn't even realize he had until it was gone. “When did you get here?”

Frank stumbled into the room, his tie askew, his shirt misbuttoned, looking more exhausted than Xander felt. “Last night. Liam let us in.” He sounded hoarse.

“I didn’t know Liam was in town.”

“Just got in yesterday.”

“You look like you need to sit.”

He shook his head. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just take off, since you’re home.”

“Okay,” Xander said, watching him closely. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” He went to walk past the dog, and Jax barked and lunged playfully at him. The man retreated fearfully before hightailing it out the door.

Jax looked at Xander.

Xander looked at Jax. “I think you traumatized him.”

Jax wagged his tail innocently.

Xander went upstairs to change his clothes, then put Jax on a leash to go for a jog on the road around his new development. He’d heard that Grantham Robbins, the bestselling novelist, lived here, too. Xander didn’t get much time to read, but if he was going to listen to an audiobook, it was going to be one in the *Cruise Donnelly* series.

His neighbors had been quiet, and he’d only seen people on the lake a handful of times. But what he loved most about the area was how gorgeous it was. The trees and flowers were blooming, making his run fragrant and atmospheric.

They looped back around to the house four miles later, and both went inside, exhausted. Xander found bowls for food and water for Jax and then went to get cleaned up.

Afterward, he sat at his computer, debating what to write. If he should really do this. From downstairs, he heard snarling, then the very distinct sound of ripping fabric.

Xander groaned, not too unhappy to abandon his email debate, and went to find Jax chewing up one of his brand-new

leather couches. “This is why we can’t have nice things,” he grumbled, shooing Jax off the couch and noticing then that the wood floor had been scratched up as well.

Jax looked up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

Xander finally knew exactly what he needed to say. “I’ll be right back.” He started to run up the stairs, then stopped to turn toward his dog, his finger pointed out. “Don’t chew anything else up.” Then he raced to his room and opened the computer.

Chapter Nineteen

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 1

subject: Meet?

Callie,

I'm so sorry it's been a while since I've messaged you.

I just went through a big move and got Jax back here with me. I'm here in Eureka Springs. I would like to meet with you. Say when and I'll make it happen.

Xander

* * *

Callie pulled the trailer up to her new store location in Eureka Springs and winced. It was directly above a ghost tour location, and right beside a building that boasted that it was haunted.

At least the Sweet Shoppe was across the street and a few doors down, so she could get homemade fudge whenever she wanted.

She'd been up most nights in the yellow house since moving back home, baking instead of unpacking. Viola and the guys had helped unload the beds and furniture, but Callie hadn't gotten much further than that. Every time she got into another box, the move felt more permanent. And every time she tried to go to sleep, she was awash with embarrassment and regret over her phone call to Alex.

What in the world had she been thinking?

When had she become the kind of person to accuse others without thinking it through?

When had she decided she was above help?

"How's it look?" Callie hadn't even heard Viola come up beside her, key in hand. "I even got them to put your sign up yesterday."

Callie looked up and saw her wooden From Wags to Wishes sign hanging over the door. She blinked back tears.

"Don't tell me you're still crying." Viola pulled her into a hug.

"I'm not." Callie took a deep breath and banished any moisture. "I'm just touched. Thank you, Viola. You've gone above and beyond as a best friend to make this transition as good as it could possibly be."

"Hey." Viola stepped back. "I firmly believe you're going to be happier here than you ever were in Bentonville, okay? You're home."

Callie nodded and let the words sink in. Instead of rejecting them, like she had every time before, she embraced the thought. Home. Eureka Springs was home. Her family had been here for over a hundred years. They'd made some good choices and some very, very poor choices, but they had roots. She'd once felt that those roots trapped her, yanking her back again and again against her will. But now, she saw that those roots were grounding. They gave her a sense of place and

belonging. That wherever she went in the world, she could come back here.

“Come on. Check out inside.”

They went inside and Callie turned around, taking in the space. It was bigger than her Bentonville store, and would need less renovation. It had been a bakery before, so it already had a treat counter and some shelving along the walls. It wouldn't be too difficult to install more shelves for her inventory, and maybe it could even be open by the following week.

Viola helped her unload the trailer until she needed to leave for a job. Callie had transferred Cole to Eureka Springs High, and when he came to the store after school got out, he found her lying on the ground, staring at the ceiling.

She'd been rereading the email Xander had sent. She hadn't heard from him in well over a month, and now he wanted to get together. She didn't know why the idea made her feel so nervous. So excited. Yet she kind of wanted to tell him no. She had enough complications on her plate as it was.

“Can I borrow your car?”

“Why?”

“I'm going to head over to Alex's house.”

Callie pushed herself up onto one elbow and looked at her brother. She had only told him a little bit about her fight with Alex, but it'd been enough that Cole had stormed out and hadn't come home until two in the morning. When he did come home, he was alone, and not with the sheriff like she'd feared, but she'd still lain awake all night, thinking about what would happen if he went back to his old ways of getting in trouble. “He may not want you there.”

“Then he'll have to tell me that.” He folded his arms defiantly.

She sighed. “I just don't want you to get hurt.”

He rolled his eyes. “I won't. It's not like *I'm* in love with him.”

Ouch. Low blow. She tossed him the keys a little harder than necessary, and they hit him square in the stomach.

He smirked. “Have you checked out the website yet?” he asked her.

“No. I’ve been so busy.” He’d finished it the night before, but with all the drama, she couldn’t pretend to love something when she didn’t.

“It’s up and running, Callie. Take a look.”

“I will.”

He waited another minute before leaving. She heard her car drive away and continued to stare up at the ceiling, trying to figure out what she should do about Xander.

Chapter Twenty

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: May 6

subject: Re: Meet?

Xander,

My website has our new address. We're open 9 a.m.–9 p.m.

Callie

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 6

subject: Re: Meet?

Callie,

I know I don't deserve this, after all the vague "personal" stuff, but I'd love to be able to explain it to you. In person. Would you allow me to treat you to dinner? I passed a Mexican restaurant last time I was in Eureka Springs. Could we meet there?

Xander

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: May 6

subject: Re: Meet?

Xander,

A few questions: Will Jax be coming? Have you continued to eat dog treats? Are you married, or in a relationship? Have you killed anyone in the last year or so?

Depending on the answers to those questions, I'm free Friday at 6 p.m.

Callie

PS. I know it sounds like I'm joking, but your "complications" really do have my imagination spinning—and not with good things.

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 6

subject: Re: Meet?

Callie,

Jax will take down the Mexican restaurant, so I'm going to leave him at home. I promise that I have sworn off all dog treats since that one nibble. Not married or dating, though I wouldn't be opposed to either option someday. Killed anyone in the last year? It's been a couple of years. At least.

(Just kidding. Now I'm worried you're going to think I'm psycho. I promise the only thing I've ever killed has been the occasional spider. Oh, I once ran over a raccoon in my truck, but it was night, and I didn't realize it was in the road, or I would have swerved. Jax, though ... You've got to watch out for him. He likes to pounce birds for fun.)

I'm genuinely sorry. For so much. I miss you. I miss this.

Xander

PS. I love the new website.

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: April 7

subject: Re: Meet?

Xander,

Do we need to coordinate this? We'll both wear yellow? I'll swear a sparkler hat so you can find me.

I miss this too.

Callie

PS. Thanks. My brother built it. I had no idea he had these skills, but I'm in awe.

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 7

subject: Re: Meet?

Callie,

If you'd like to wear the sparkler hat, go for it. But I met you when I came into the store for the first time, so I know what you look like.

I didn't mean that to sound as creepy and stalkerish as it came out. I'll wear a blue shirt. Is it cheesy if I bring roses? Oh well. I'm bringing them.

Xander

PS. Your brother is very talented. Has he considered studying web design after high school? I love the

online order feature. I've already ordered my first dozen treats.

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: May 7

subject: Re: Meet?

Xander,

A single rose ventures a little into cheesy territory, but more might be unique enough to slide by. Would you mind sending me a picture? (Now who's the creepy stalker?)

Callie

PS. We got 50 orders on the first day the website was live. I don't think I saw your name come through, though. I'll have to look again. I'm going to be baking nonstop, but I love it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Callie checked her phone again, hoping for a message from Xander with a picture attached, but there was nothing. They'd been emailing for the last couple of days, and he usually responded to her messages within minutes.

Oh well. It was for the better. She had a bunch of things she needed to get done before the store opened in a few minutes. Her first official day. She'd even let Cole skip school, which she knew she shouldn't do so close to the end of the year, especially since he was at a new school, but she'd caved when he pushed.

To be honest, she didn't want to be in the store alone all day comparing everything to Bentonville if they didn't have any customers. Even if he was angry at her, having Cole around was better than facing twelve hours of silence.

"We got another order," Cole called out from the back room.

"Is there an order from a Xander?" she called back.

Cole still wasn't talking to her more than necessary, but he'd dropped enough of his anger toward her to manage all of the online orders. Callie was paying him to process the orders, box them up, and take them to the post office to be shipped. If orders kept up like this, though, she'd have to arrange to have orders picked up by a mailing service from the store.

"Xander?" Cole said, sounding surprised. He came into the room and sat at the treat counter with his laptop. He scrolled

down the list, and without looking up, said, “Yeah, he ordered a dozen.”

She must have missed it somehow when she scanned over the orders the night before.

She hadn't missed seeing Alex's name, though. He had also ordered a dozen, and she still didn't know quite what to think about that. They hadn't spoken to each other, or emailed, since she'd yelled at him about the house, which she was still embarrassed about.

Worst of all, in his absence, she realized that she missed having him around, missed having interactions with him to look forward to. The way his lips curled upward when he smiled, or his eyes lit up when she said something clever. How he'd shown mercy toward Cole, even when he didn't deserve it, and how that mercy had changed her brother's life. Both of their lives.

And, of course, how her body buzzed when he was near. If she could just forget that, life would be so much easier.

She tried to recall all the horrible things Alex had said or done, but then his email would come back to her. The one that explained how wrongly she'd judged him, and how she continued to misjudge him.

It was her responsibility to reach out to him first.

She didn't know what she would say, even if she could find the courage to email or text him. Instead, she'd just thrown herself into opening the store, managing her new online sales, and preparing herself to meet Xander. Perhaps Alex was happier to have her out of her life. And perhaps she should be happier too. By all rights, she should be better off without Alex Nichols.

Yet ...

She unlocked the door and turned the open sign in the window. From that vantage point, she turned and looked at her store, happy with how things had turned out. It was a better space for her than the Bentonville store had been. Less cramped. And thanks to Viola, it had been restored to look

historically authentic, but everything was new, with high-quality materials inside.

Her grand opening was nothing compared to the pomp and glitz of the Pets and More grand opening. No banners. No free items. No bells and whistles. Just Callie unlocking her Eureka Springs boutique door for the very first time.

It felt good.

The bell she'd tied to the door jingled behind her, and she jumped out of the way as a customer walked in. He was a man about her age, wearing an expensive-looking suit. Could this be Xander?

"Welcome. Let me know if you need any help," Callie said.

"I've heard about some homemade organic dog treats?"

"Right this way," she said, surprised he had already heard about them. "What kind of dog do you have?"

"An English Bulldog," he said. "Three years old."

Definitely not Xander. Not that she thought it would be, but she was still waiting for him to send a picture before their dinner date. If she could actually call it a date. But what else would it be?

She needed to stop overthinking everything. She asked the customer, "What's your dog's name?"

"Zeus."

She imagined the tiny dog walking around with a name like Zeus and smiled. Cole helped the man pick out a couple dozen, and Callie rang him up.

"I'm curious how you heard about us," she said to the man as he handed her some cash.

"Alex Nichols. He's my neighbor, and he mentioned your store."

Her stomach twirled at the mention of Alex. "Well, thank you for coming in."

“If these are as good as Alex said, then I’m sure I’ll be in again.” He winked and left.

The rest of the morning saw an steady influx of customers, and while several people were tourists who headed inside to check out the store and buy a treat or two as a gift for their pets at home they missed, several of them mentioned Alex as how they’d found out about her store.

“I’ve got to text him.”

“Ya think?” was Cole’s sarcastic response. He missed working with Alex. Cole had gone to the Mountain Cove several times, but Alex was never there. At least Cole didn’t know about Alex’s offer to give him the truck. Otherwise, this minor anger surge would turn into a cataclysmic storm.

They got busy again, and it wasn’t until later that night that she was able to message Alex. She was surprised when he messaged her back right away.

CALLIE: Thank you for the business referrals. Several customers mentioned you today.

ALEX: No problem. You have a good product. It’s easy to recommend.

CALLIE: Well, I still appreciate it.

CALLIE: I know I don’t deserve it. You being nice to me still.

ALEX: You deserve this and so much more.

Again, her stomach twirled. She’d never felt this way before over something as simple as a text.

CALLIE: I hate to bug you, but Cole still needs his phone back.

ALEX: I’m so sorry. I forgot with everything going on. I’ll have my assistant drop it in the mail tomorrow.

Callie was disappointed. She hadn’t realized how much she wanted him to offer to come drop it off himself, until he didn’t. She closed her eyes. She’d really messed this up. It was

funny how you didn't always know what you wanted until it was completely out of reach.

ALEX: At the risk of upsetting you, I have to ask. Can you reconsider letting me give the truck to Cole?

Callie waffled back and forth. She wasn't angry anymore, and it didn't make sense to not let Cole have the truck. She went to respond yes, but the bell above the door jangled, and she was immersed again in helping customers. Pretty soon, she'd forgotten she hadn't actually responded yes at all.

By the time she closed the store at nine, she hadn't eaten since breakfast and her head pounded. But it had been a good day. A great day.

Perhaps she'd been premature in suggesting to Xander that she'd be free the next night at six. She'd hired a teenager from Eureka Springs High to help on evenings and weekends, but if Callie was going to be this busy, a brand-new employee might need help.

Still, the thought of sneaking away for an hour or so was too tempting. Even if Xander still hadn't sent her a picture.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Callie took extra care getting ready that morning. She picked out one of her favorite blue blouses, which she knew brought out the blue in her bluish-gray eyes, and she had curled her hair loosely and left it down, rather than pulling it into her usual ponytail. She wore her makeup as usual, but at the last minute, she grabbed a darker shade of red lipstick and threw it in her bag. It was too much for the store, but for dinner?

Tonight, she'd meet Xander. She felt both excitement and nerves in turn. He never had sent a picture, which had sent up a huge red flag. If Cole was in her position, she'd tell him not to meet with this stranger, especially if they weren't willing to send a picture.

But her curiosity was getting the best of her. Even more than curiosity, it was an absolute driving need to meet this person she'd opened herself up to through email.

Cole walked into the store after school and headed straight to the back room, not returning her greeting. Callie sighed. She had to get her brother to talk to her again, but for now, she was going to give him a little space.

She heard him in the back room logging on to the computer. Their online orders had been steadily increasing, enough to almost cover the rent on the Eureka Springs store space alone. Why hadn't she done this years earlier?

Because she didn't have the skills to do it herself, or the money to pay someone else to do it. Cole really had done an amazing job.

“Callie!” he called from the back room. She rolled her eyes, grateful that they had a lull in customers for the moment.

She walked to the back room and popped her head in. “Yes?”

“Can I borrow your phone?”

“Sure.” She pulled it from her back pocket and handed it to him before heading back out into the store.

They needed to make getting his cell phone back a priority, now that Alex was back in town. It wasn’t just that he needed to borrow her phone all the time; it was that she hated that she couldn’t get a hold of him if she needed to.

A customer came in and bought a dozen treats, then left. Callie checked out the emptying case. She’d have to make more treats tonight for the online orders. Which wouldn’t be a problem, since she’d mostly given up sleep since her fight with Alex. Try as she might to convince herself that Alex didn’t care and she needed to just let him go, it was a lot harder to convince herself of that at two in the morning.

Cole came out of the back room, his face contorted in anger. “You told him NO?” he yelled.

“What?” Callie glanced around the store at the one customer in the corner, who looked up quickly at her brother’s yelling. Callie stepped forward to grab her brother’s arm and lead him into the back room, but he yanked his arm from her grip.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Cole,” she said in a low voice. “We have a customer here.”

“I don’t care,” he said derisively. “All you care about is your store and your customers!”

“That’s not true. Not even a little true.” She shook her head, confused. “Where is this all coming from?”

“I sent Alex a text.”

“Okay.” Had Alex said or done something to upset him? She knew she and Alex weren’t on the best of terms right now, but Cole and Alex had never not gotten along. Even in the beginning.

“I saw the texts he sent you before. About the truck. About me coming over.”

Callie winced. She had never meant for Cole to see any of that.

“All you care about is yourself. Not about me or what I might need,” Cole accused. “You wanted to live in Bentonville, so we had to move to Bentonville even though I wanted to stay here. Then I was happy in Bentonville, but you couldn’t make that work, so we had to move back to Eureka Springs. Now you’re being so proud, you can’t accept any offers of help from Alex, and I get screwed over in the process!”

The bell on the door jangled, indicating that their one customer had left.

“I’m trying to do what’s best for us!” she yelled back, free to do so now that they were alone in the store. “You wanted to stay here where everyone expected you to turn out just like Dad? You want to rely on people to take care of you your whole life? If I’ve learned anything in life, it’s that you can’t count on anyone but yourself!”

Cole shook his head, disgusted. “That’s not true, Callie. You have a lot of people you can count on. Me, Viola, Alex. Plus more if you’d let them. But you’re so closed off.”

“Why is this about me right now?”

“Isn’t it always about you?” Cole snapped back.

Callie blinked her eyes, stinging as though she’d been slapped.

He turned and walked away from her then, pushing the door open so hard, Callie feared that the hinges might snap.

She leaned against the counter and took a deep breath in an attempt to clear her head. He was just upset because he saw

that she'd told Alex that he couldn't have the truck—a truck she knew he would have loved to have more than anything.

Her initial refusal had nothing to do with Cole. He had to see that.

Or maybe the problem was that he *did* see that. It wasn't about him, like he'd accused. It had been about her.

She went through the motions of helping a few more customers as they came into the store, her heart leaping every time the door opened, hoping it would be Cole. She'd called her phone but heard it ringing in the back room, so he hadn't taken it with him. She cursed herself again for not driving out to Alex's and getting Cole's phone.

The door opened, and she glanced up hopefully, but it was only Allison, the evening employee she'd hired. With Allison there to help customers, Callie excused herself into the back room and collapsed in the chair.

Cole had been gone now for almost four hours. Callie didn't know how to get a hold of any of his friends, except their numbers might be in his phone. She imagined Cole vandalizing a truck again, or doing something illegal, and her heart dropped. He couldn't get in trouble again. Couldn't go to jail. But he would if he did something stupid in his anger and the sheriff caught him.

But maybe ... maybe he'd gone to Alex's house. He was angry at her because of the truck. He might go there to convince Alex to give him the truck.

Either way, she needed Cole's phone right away.

She pulled up Alex's number and pressed call.

"Hello?" he said. It sounded like he was driving.

"Is Cole with you?" she asked without preamble.

"No," Alex said. "Is something wrong?"

"We got into a big fight, and he took off. I was hoping he'd gone to your place. Or that you have his phone on you."

“My assistant put the phone in the mail this morning. We overnighted it, so you’ll get it tomorrow,” Alex said, sounding frustrated with himself. “I should have just brought it, but I’ve been in Bentonville all day. I’m heading into Eureka Springs right now. I can be at your store in about fifteen minutes.”

“No, I’ve got this,” Callie started to say. But then she stopped, Cole’s accusing words running through her mind, about how she was too proud to ask for help. Maybe he’d been right. No, he was exactly right. “You know what? Actually, yeah. Thank you. That would be nice.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding surprised. “Great. I’ll see you soon.” He hung up quickly, as if afraid that if he didn’t, she might change her mind. Which was smart, because she was already having second thoughts about Alex coming to help her.

“I’ve got to head out,” she told Allison. “Can you call me if Cole comes in?”

“Sure,” Allison said, curiosity flicking through her eyes, but she didn’t ask where he was. He was supposed to work the evening shift with her, and if Callie wasn’t mistaken, Allison had a definite crush on Cole.

“Thanks.”

She stepped outside, and a moment later, Alex pulled up in his red truck, reminding Callie once again of why Cole had run off.

Callie got into it, immediately taking in Alex’s familiar, addictive scent. His brown eyes searched hers, and her heart skipped at seeing him again. How had she thought she could convince herself that she didn’t have feelings for him, that she’d be better off without him? Two seconds in his presence, and she not only couldn’t breathe correctly, but she felt a sense of homecoming that walking into her store could never replicate.

“What happened?” Alex asked, his gaze serious.

“He borrowed my phone to text you, and saw our texts about the truck.”

“So he blew up.”

“Yeah. I’m worried he’s going to do something stupid.”

“Any ideas of where he might have gone?” he asked.

She shrugged, dismayed at how little she knew her brother. “He’s not at your place?”

Alex shook his head. “I haven’t been home, but he’d have to go through security, and they would have called me if someone was there to see me.”

Callie frowned. Where else could he be? “He mentioned the Crescent Hotel last week. Maybe there?”

He’d mentioned it because one of his classes was having everyone write a paper about a Eureka Springs story, and he wanted to do the Crescent Hotel, home to many ghost stories. It seemed unlikely that he’d be embarking on a school paper research in his current mood, but she didn’t have any other ideas.

“He was on foot,” she said. “I checked, and my car is still parked behind the store.”

“So he couldn’t have gone too far.”

“It’s been four hours,” she said miserably. Why had she waited so long to go after him? She could have called Allison hours ago to come into the store, or she could have just closed it down. Cole was so much more important than a few lost sales. At this point, he could be almost anywhere. The sun was just starting to set, but with the gray storm clouds moving in, it was going to get dark quickly.

Alex followed her directions to the Crescent Hotel and found a parking spot. They walked up the cement stairs and through the large, open entrance of the ornate hotel. To the right of the entrance, a fire blazed and a pianist played “Moonlight Sonata.”

Callie went straight to the concierge, Mrs. Peters, the mother of one of her classmates growing up. She wore a striped vest over a long-sleeved button-up shirt, and she had done her eye makeup dark and smudged, something Callie

suspected was part of the gothic dress code. “Have you seen my brother Cole come through here?”

Mrs. Peters shook her head. “It’s been a slow afternoon, so I would have seen him.”

Callie groaned in frustration. “If you see him, will you call me?”

“Is everything all right?” Mrs. Peters asked, taking the paper Callie had written her number on. Mrs. Peters eyed Alex, openly curious about him as well.

“I don’t know. I hope so,” Callie said.

A sense of urgency pressed her forward. As she and Alex headed back to his truck, the first raindrop fell, followed by another and another, until it was coming in a swift downpour. Alex grabbed her hand, and they ran toward the truck.

Alex opened her door first, then went around to the other side and climbed inside, his eyelashes dewy with raindrops, his hair a darker shade of brown when wet. “Okay, where to next?”

A surge of something she’d never felt before rushed through her. Something stronger than affection. Stronger even than attraction. On impulse, she leaned across the seat and kissed him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Xander didn't move for a moment, stunned to find Callie's lips against his own. But almost as if on instinct, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer, falling into the kiss. He'd dreamed of this happening, but never imagined that it actually would.

Every sense was awakened with Callie so close, opening herself up to him this way. He breathed in her light floral scent, dizzy with how it made him feel. Her lips moved against his as if she couldn't get enough of him. He brought his hand up to her hair and slid his fingers through the curls, cupping the back of her head as he got lost in explorations of her mouth.

Their kisses slowed after a time, and Callie pulled back first, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes dazed. "So, that happened," she said, breathlessly.

Xander had to clear his throat before he could speak. "It did."

They stared at each other, the heat in the truck completely opposite to the cooling night. Rain splattered onto his windshield, and all of it combined, made it feel like they were in their own cocoon.

He waited for her to move first, unwilling to break this spell they were under.

"Thank you," she said.

"No, thank you," he said vehemently.

She laughed, easing up some of the tension that had built up, and gently smacked him on the arm.

“What?” he asked.

“I was thanking you for helping me find Cole.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “I was thanking you for that kiss.”

She laughed again with a shake of her head at his flirting, but her cheeks turned an even darker shade of pink. “So ...”

“That happened,” he finished for her with a nod, earning him a laugh and another light smack with the back of her hand. He grabbed her hand before she could move it away, and he entwined his fingers with hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve been so proud. Too proud.”

“Don’t apologize,” Xander said. “I’ve handled this poorly at every turn.”

“We’re bad at this whole relationship thing, aren’t we?”

“Relationship?” Xander said with a lifted brow, feeling the corner of his mouth curve into a smile. He liked the sound of that. “I’m willing to keep practicing, if you are.”

“With me, though, right?” Her eyes twinkled.

This earned a laugh from him. “Definitely with you.” He shook his head, hardly believing this conversation was happening. Hardly believing she’d kissed him at all. He wasn’t quite sure what he’d done to warrant this, but he needed to figure it out so he could do it again and again.

She squeezed his fingers. “Should we keep looking for Cole?”

“Yeah,” he said.

They drove around town for another hour, stopping in at shops, and even going back to the yellow house to see if he was there.

“Do you think he got a ride into Bentonville?” Callie finally asked. “I know he made some friends there.” It was

past eight, and Callie had grown more and more worried with every passing moment they didn't find Cole.

His stomach growled. "Should we grab some food? Then we can drive over to Bentonville and check."

"Food!" Callie's eyes widened, and she pulled out her phone. "Shoot!"

"What?" Xander asked.

"I was supposed to meet someone for dinner at six, and I totally forgot."

Xander had totally forgotten as well. He'd actually been on his way into Eureka Springs for their dinner at the Mexican restaurant when she called. Tonight was the night he was going to tell her that Alex and Xander were the same person.

"Callie, I have something I need to tell you," he started, stalling for time. He didn't know how she'd react. He hadn't expected her to kiss him, for them to confess that they wanted to explore a relationship. The thought of losing all that was enough for him to want to stay quiet, delete his XanderandJax account, and instruct his family to call him Alex from now on.

But he couldn't start a relationship on a lie.

"Is something wrong?" Callie asked him.

Xander swallowed. "I hope not." *Here goes ...* "Callie, I'm ___"

Xander's phone rang, loud and shrill in the anticipatory silence.

"Do you need to get that?"

He didn't want to. But it was his personal cell, and only a handful of people had that number—most of whom didn't call unless it was something important.

He grabbed the phone from his jacket pocket and pulled over in front of a café. Maybe he'd wait until they both ate, and then he'd say something.

"This is Elton Phillips," the head of the Mountain Cove security team said after Xander answered his phone. "We just

wanted to give you a heads-up that there was an attempted break-in at the Cove tonight—their end target was your house. We've apprehended the trespasser, and the police are on their way.”

A dark feeling settled into the pit of Xander's stomach. “Who is it?” he asked.

“Some kid.” It sounded as if the phone was placed against Elton's chest. “What's your name, kid?” He came back onto the line. “Says he's a friend of yours. Cole.” Again with the voice muffled, Xander heard, “Friends don't need to climb fences to get onto their property.”

Callie must have seen something on his face, because she mouthed, “What is it?”

Xander shook his head and put his truck into drive. “He *is* my friend. Call off the police.”

There was a pause before Elton spoke. “I can't do that, Mr. Nichols. We found him climbing the main fence into the Mountain Cove property. It's trespassing, pure and simple.”

Xander groaned in frustration.

“Is it Cole?” Callie asked, grabbing his forearm.

Xander nodded grimly. “Don't let the police do anything until I get there.”

He hung up the phone and pressed the gas down, going as fast as he dared go through town. Once they got on the highway, he pushed it even faster.

“They called the police?” Callie asked quietly. He knew what she was thinking. Three strikes. This was out.

“Elton has an inflated sense of self-importance,” Xander bit off, upset that he hadn't seen this coming.

“He saw someone trespassing.” From the corner of his eye, he could see Callie staring at her hands. “He did the right thing.”

Xander reached across and took her hand, bringing her knuckles to his lips. “We're going to fix this.”

Callie nodded, but then stared at the window as the rain and trees whipped past them on the way to the Mountain Cove security offices.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When they arrived at the security offices, two police cars were already parked outside. The truck had barely come to a stop when Callie opened the door and rushed outside into the chilly, rainy night. Alex's door closed a moment later, and he was beside her, taking her by the hand as they entered the security office. Callie scanned the homey room—leather chairs sat in front of a burning fireplace, and a cherrywood-and-granite-topped desk made it look more like the study in an English manor than a security office.

Cole sat in one of the leather chairs, his elbows resting on his knees and his head bent low so his dripping wet hair hung over the sides of his face. Two officers stood behind the chair, chatting, while Sheriff Price sat in the leather chair beside Cole, talking quietly to him.

"I'll be right back," Alex said, and he veered toward the man behind the desk, leaving her feeling colder than before.

Callie stepped toward her brother. "Cole."

He looked up, and she was shocked to see that his eyes were red from crying. His clothes were soaked completely through, and he shivered slightly, even sitting in front of a fire.

"Do you have a blanket?" Callie called to the man behind the desk.

"I'm fine," Cole said through chattering teeth, but a moment later, Alex appeared with a blanket that Callie tucked around Cole's shoulders. Alex went back to the desk as Sheriff

Price stood and nodded his head toward the corner, where they could talk privately.

“This is three strikes,” the sheriff said grimly.

Callie shook her head, her eyes closed. “He’s changed,” she said.

Sheriff Price nodded. “I agree. He has. But regardless, he was caught trespassing at the Mountain Cove tonight. It’s private property, Callie.”

Callie could feel tears start to sting her own eyes. “So what does this mean, then?”

“I’ll have to take him in. We only waited to do so as a courtesy to you.”

“And then?” Callie asked, her stomach clenched.

“I’ll book him for the night. Judge Gage will see him in the morning, and what happens after that will depend on how lenient she’s feeling.”

“But three strikes ...”

“Yeah.” Sheriff Price reached out and took her elbow gently in his hand. “He’s been dealt a rough hand. Doesn’t give him any excuses to break the law, but don’t give up on him.”

Callie’s lips and fingertips were starting to feel numb. “We got into a fight tonight.”

“Go talk to your brother before we take him in.”

“Will he be safe? At the jail?”

Sheriff Price nodded grimly. “He will.”

Callie bit her lip hard to keep from crying, then sat beside Cole, who still refused to look at her. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You were right about everything you said. I am too proud. I don’t like to ask for help, and I’ve let that affect you.”

Cole shrugged.

“I’m here for you. I’m not going anywhere.”

Cole nodded, then swiped at one of his eyes.

“Cole?” the sheriff said.

Cole stood and went with Sheriff Price outside to his car, making Callie feel like she was losing a piece of herself. Cole looked back, and Callie tried to hold her head up for his sake.

“I’ll be down there in the morning,” she promised.

Then he was gone, and Callie curled in on herself. She grabbed the blanket that Cole had left behind and buried her face into it.

“Come on,” Alex said, his lips close to her ear.

She let him take her by the hand to help her stand, and then they walked slowly to his car. It was pitch dark outside, other than the light coming from the windows of the security office. “He must have walked all the way here.”

“When he wants something, he’s determined, isn’t he?” Alex said. “That quality will take him far in life.”

“If he can stay out of jail.”

“Hey,” Alex said. He reached over to tuck a dripping hair behind Callie’s ear. “He wasn’t doing it to steal or destroy. He just wanted to talk to me.” Guilt filled his expression. “I should have sent his phone over to you guys days ago.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not yours either.”

Callie shook her head. Her brother had made the choice to trespass, yes, but she was the one who’d driven him to it.

“When’s the last time you ate?” Alex asked.

Callie couldn’t even remember. That morning, maybe. After her fight with Cole, she’d lost her appetite, and since then, she’d been running around too much to eat.

“Nothing’s going to be open in Eureka Springs by the time we get back. Let’s grab something to eat from my place, and then I’ll take you home.”

“Okay,” Callie said, staring out the window as the dark forms of trees whipped past them.

Fifteen minutes later, Alex pulled up in front of his house. The garage door opened, and he pulled inside. The sight of the red truck sitting there brought back all the guilt Callie had been trying to keep at bay.

She followed Alex inside, and he led her through the kitchen to a bathroom on the first floor. “Let me grab you something to change into. There’s a towel under the sink, if you want to dry off.”

Her entire body was racked with shaking at this point, maybe from the cold that had pierced her all the way to the bone, but also from the realization that Cole was spending the night in jail. The very thing she’d been trying to avoid all along.

She turned on the sink and splashed her face, and a minute later, Alex knocked on the door and handed her some gray, soft cotton joggers, a T-shirt, and a black hoodie. “They’re going to be a little big on you, but at least they’re warm.”

“Thank you.” Part of her brain felt numb and disconnected, too. Not just her fingertips and lips anymore.

“Hey,” Alex said. Somehow his hands were warm, and he slid one along the side of her face, his thumb brushing softly against her cheekbone. “You’re not in this alone. We’re going to figure it out.”

She looked into his eyes, and some of the fog cleared. When was the last time she’d been part of a “we”? Had she ever? She leaned forward, and he met her halfway, capturing her lips in his. Everywhere he was warm, she was ice cold, and after a moment, he pulled back.

“I’d love to keep doing this,” he said. “But you’re shivering. Get warm, okay? Take a shower if you need to. I’m going to get changed and find us something to eat.”

He backed away, and it took all of Callie’s willpower not to pull him back to her. She knew he’d happily keep kissing her. But he was right. She needed to get warm, and not let her feelings about what happened to Cole get all tangled up in her feelings for Alex.

Because she could admit now, without reservation, that she had feelings for Alex. That she'd had them for a while now, no matter how much she'd tried to push them down.

She placed her wet clothes in the sink and turned on the shower, waiting until the water was steaming before getting in. His guest bathroom shower was nicer than any master bathroom she'd ever been in before. The shower itself had multiple heads, along with a waterfall feature that made her close her eyes and imagine she was elsewhere. A tropical island, perhaps. One where she didn't have any worries.

She took a longer shower than she might normally take, and then dried off and changed into Alex's clothes. The joggers pooled at her ankles, but she pulled the drawstring tight enough to keep them over her hips. The T-shirt was the perfect amount of softness, and the sweatshirt smelled just like Alex. He'd tucked some socks in the pile as well, and she slipped those on.

She looked in the drawers for a comb, but when she couldn't find one, she just finger-combed her hair. She definitely wouldn't have spent so much time curling her hair that morning if she'd known what her day would turn out to be.

Xander. She closed her eyes. What must he think of her? She'd completely blown him off. Had he waited long? She checked her phone, surprised that there weren't any messages waiting for her from him. Perhaps he was that mad.

Yet she didn't know if she wanted to meet with him now. Not at a restaurant, in a date-like setting, that is. Not now that she'd admitted she had feelings for Alex.

She opened up a new email:

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: May 7

subject: Tonight

Xander,

I had a family emergency and wasn't able to make it tonight. I hope you didn't wait for me too long. I'm not sure when I'll be able to meet again. I've got some things I need to work out. (Now I'm the one with "complications.")

Callie

She sent the email, and then walked out of the bathroom and toward the kitchen where she could hear Alex moving around. Out of nowhere, an excited dog bounded into the room toward her.

"Hey, you," she said. The dog's tail wagged, and she held her hand out for it to sniff her before she started rubbing his ears. "You must be ..."

She realized then that she didn't actually know Alex's dog's name. She must have forgotten it. He wore a collar, and while she was petting him, she twisted the collar around so she could see if it had his name on it.

JAX

Her brows furrowed. Then, like the last piece of the puzzle snapping into place, it all came together for her.

Alex coming into the store the first time. Alex saying he'd met her before.

Alex knowing things about her that she only ever told Xander.

Alex on his way to Eureka Springs tonight.

She closed her eyes. When he'd picked her up to help her with Cole, he'd been wearing a blue shirt.

Alex was Xander.

How could she have been so dumb? Had he just been playing her all along? Was this a funny joke to him?

Or was it real? It had been real to her. But he must have known from the beginning who she was. From the first moment he'd stepped into her store, he'd known he'd been emailing her, and he hadn't said a word.

She didn't know what was going on, but she did know she needed to get out of there. Right that minute. She went back into the bathroom, Jax following her every step, and she stepped into her shoes, grabbed her wet clothes, and headed for the garage.

Except she hadn't driven herself. Alex had. Xander.

What was his real name, anyway?

She walked into the kitchen to find the very person she was thinking of, standing in the kitchen, stirring something on the stovetop. He'd also changed into something comfortable, and he was barefoot.

"I pulled some soup out of the freezer my chef made a few weeks ago. I hope that sounds okay."

"I need to go," Callie said.

"What? Is everything okay?"

Callie shook her head. "I just need to go home. Right now."

"Okay." Alex wiped his hands on a towel and turned the stove off. "I'll take you."

"No. I'll just—I'll call someone to come get me."

"Callie, what's wrong?"

He went to touch her, but she yanked away as if he were diseased. "I can't. I just can't."

His expression was hurt, but she was too numb to care. "You can take my truck." He grabbed the keys from a hook in the kitchen and handed them to her. "Did I do something?"

Callie shook her head and backed away, then turned and fled for the garage before he could say anything else.

Chapter Twenty-Five

After Callie left, Xander dumped the soup down the sink, his appetite gone. What in the world had happened?

He walked into the entryway and found Jax sitting there, his tail wagging. “How did you get out of your crate?” he asked.

Jax’s tail wagged.

Xander went to pet him and realized that his collar was turned, so that the tag was above his neck instead of below.

JAX.

With a start, he knew why Callie had gone in such a hurry.

He rushed up to his bedroom and grabbed his phone, where he’d left it on his dresser after changing clothes. There was a message there from Callie, apologizing for missing their dinner. She must have sent it before she’d seen Jax.

He tried calling her, but it went straight to voice mail. Maybe he needed to get in his truck and follow her out of town, but something stopped him. It had been a long night. Between searching for Cole, seeing him get arrested, and then finding out that Alex was Xander, he needed to give her a little space.

He replied back to her email instead.

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 7

subject: Re: Tonight

Callie,

I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you. So many times I wanted to tell you.

Xander

He waited a few hours for a response, but when he heard nothing, he went to bed. He tossed and turned, but sleep never came, so at three in the morning, when his notifications buzzed with a new message, he heard it.

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: May 8

subject: Re: Tonight

Xander/Alex,

So why didn't you?

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 8

subject: Re: Tonight

Callie,

Because I was afraid. You hated Alex so much, but with Xander, I still had a chance.

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

date: May 8

subject: Re: Tonight

Xander,

Was it all a joke to you?

His heart dropped. Was that what she thought about him? That he would do something like this just to mess with her? Perhaps he'd never had a chance. Not as Xander. Not as Alex. But he wasn't ready to give up yet.

to: Callie <FromWagsToWishes@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 8

subject: Re: Tonight

Callie,

I've been a little bit in love with you from the first moment I met you. I fell even harder after we emailed for a year. I intended to tell you who I was the first time I came to your store, but in person I made misstep after misstep, and I convinced myself I needed the time to convince you that I wasn't the person you thought I was. Even if my actions kept saying otherwise.

I should have told you. Right from the beginning.

But this has never been a joke. Far from it.

Xander

He waited, but didn't hear anything from her again. So he lay awake the rest of the night, until it was time to get up and enact one final idea to win Callie over.

He only hoped that he could pull it together. In person, he messed up left and right, but they couldn't have a relationship only over email. He had to step it up, prove to her that he

meant what he said, and then, if she wanted him to, he'd walk away once and for all.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Callie showed up at the courthouse at 9 a.m. Viola was watching the store for her, and Callie wondered again what she would've for the last few years without her best friend close. The sky was sunny and bright, as if the rain from the night before had never happened.

She wore dark slacks and a white button-up blouse. She'd put an extra layer of foundation over the dark smudges under her eyes from being up most of the night before. Her mind had gone in circles all night, preventing sleep. Cole, then Xander and Alex, then back to Cole and all the way around until she'd finally emailed Xander. But at his confession of love, she hadn't known what to say. What to think. Her lips still tingled with the feel of his against them.

She'd worn his clothes to bed, which probably hadn't helped her mental state. She'd smelled him all night long.

One part of her longed to pull him into her arms, to kiss him until her senses were completely dizzy, and to never, ever let go.

Another part couldn't get over the fact that Alex was Xander. Xander was Alex. And he'd known all along.

At some point, she was going to have to see him, to give him his truck and clothes back. She'd need to know what she was going to do by then. But that was a problem for later.

For now, she needed to focus on Cole.

She walked into the courtroom and glanced around. They'd bring in everyone who would see the judge all at once. In the meantime, people all talked quietly around her.

The door to the courtroom opened, and Sheriff Price walked inside. He scanned the room, and when he spotted Callie, he made his way over to her. Her heart flipped. Had something happened to Cole?

"Callie, step outside with me for a moment."

"Okay." Her heart racing, she followed him outside the courtroom, feeling the curious stares of everyone watching them.

She was double surprised to see Cole standing outside of the building, wearing his clothes from the night before, a hopeful smile on his face.

"The charges were dropped. So he can go."

"Are you serious? How were the charges dropped?"

Sheriff Price raised an eyebrow. "Because it was private property, rather than public, the owner of the property has the power to drop the charges. Someone high up over there must be watching out for you."

Alex. It had to be.

"Keep out of trouble, Cole," Sheriff Price ordered. "You got lucky this time."

"I will, sir," Cole said. His face was pale, and he looked smaller than she'd seen him before. She didn't know what a night in jail felt like, but it had definitely changed him.

"Let's go," she said, hooking her arm around his waist. At some point in the last three years, he'd grown at least six inches taller than her. They walked out to her car, and she took him straight home.

"Is Alex here?" Cole asked, spotting the truck, his tone hopeful.

"No. I borrowed it last night."

"Oh," Cole said, disappointed.

“Hey,” Callie asked. “Did you know Alex sometimes goes by Xander?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Didn’t you? All of his online treats were ordered using his Xander account.”

“No, I didn’t know.” She paused. “His dog’s name is Jax, right?”

Cole nodded slowly. “Yeah. He talks about Jax all the time.” He paused, then shrugged. “He once asked me not to mention Jax’s name to anyone, which I thought was weird, but I also thought it was weird that he was a billionaire who knows how to change the oil on an old truck.”

They went inside the house, where Darcy greeted Cole enthusiastically. He knelt on the floor to rub her ears, and then her belly when she flopped onto her back.

Callie made breakfast while Cole took a shower. They both ate the omelets and fruit salad in silence, and once they were done, Callie stopped her brother from leaving the table. “Are you happy here?” she asked.

He shrugged in response. “I used to be. Something’s different this time. I’m trying to be good. But all my friends are getting into trouble, and it’s hard not to.”

Callie nodded slowly. “Would Bentonville be better?”

“No. I’ll figure it out. Hang out with Allison more, or something.”

She smiled at that, trying to picture her brother hanging out with the serious, bookish Allison. He might need someone a little more adventurous than that. Not that she was ready for him to start dating any time soon.

“I’m done getting into trouble,” he promised.

She reached across the table and placed her hand over his. “I love you.”

To that, he rolled his eyes. “Love you too, I guess,” he mumbled.

She smiled. That was good enough.

* * *

Callie went into the store that afternoon, leaving Cole to rest and play with Darcy, who had been feeling neglected in all the hours they'd been spending at the store.

She opened the unlocked door, surprised to find Viola still there. "You didn't have to stay so long!"

"It's fine," Viola said, looking up from her computer. "I have a bunch of stuff I've got to do for my accountant, and it's just as easy to do it here as it is from my office."

Callie doubted that greatly.

"How's Cole?" Viola asked.

"He's going to be okay," Callie said. She'd texted Viola earlier, and also Alex, to let them know that the charges had been dropped. Although Callie suspected that Alex had something to do with that and already knew.

Suddenly, she was hit with an urgency to find him before it was too late. "Can you watch the store a little longer?" she asked Viola.

"Sure," Viola said. "Everything okay?"

"I don't know. I hope so." With that, she hugged her friend and then ran from the store, stopping at home only long enough to get Alex's truck.

She raced to the Mountain Cove retreat and buzzed in at security. "I'm here to see Alex Nichols," she said.

A security officer she hadn't seen before stepped into his booth, then back out again. "I'm sorry. He's not picking up, so I can't let you in."

"But I know him. This is his truck," she said.

The man looked at the truck skeptically. She knew it didn't look like anything someone who lived in the Mountain Cove would own, but it was. She laughed at the thought. It was so Alex Nichols, and something she'd grown to love about him.

Love.

“Can you check again?” she begged.

He gave her a deadpan look, but he picked up the phone and called again. “No answer.”

She let out a huff of frustration. She now understood exactly what had led her brother to climb the fence. But she didn't want to get arrested as well, especially not now.

She went around the circle that led her away from the development, and racked her brain for where he might be. Probably the Pets and More in Bentonville. She raced there next, eager to see him.

When she arrived, the store was packed as usual. She didn't feel the same jealousy and resentment as she had before. Instead, she felt happy for Alex, almost proud that he'd been able to accomplish all of this. She was also filled with contentment and satisfaction in her own store. She loved being back in Eureka Springs, loved how busy it was and how everyone embraced their eccentricities. She didn't have to work so hard to pretend to be posh in Eureka Springs. She was who she was—handcrafted organic treats and all—and she had even started experimenting with some new designs and flavors she knew would be a hit around Halloween and the town-sponsored zombie crawl.

She went straight to the side of the store, to the main business offices. All the doors were closed, and when she tried to open one, it was locked.

“Can I help you?” a man asked from behind her. She turned to see the manager standing there, a bemused expression on his face.

“Yes, I need to speak to Alex Nichols.”

The man only blinked.

“He knows who I am,” she assured the man.

“I’m sure he does,” the manager said drolly.
“Unfortunately, he’s not here.”

“Where is he?”

“If you know him, as you say, then I’m sure you can ask him yourself.”

Callie frowned as the man walked away. That was epically unhelpful.

She walked back to Alex’s truck and got inside, feeling defeated. She was out of options, other than sending him a message. Which was what she should have done all along.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: from: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

date: May 8

subject: We Need to Talk

Xander,

Where are you?

* * *

It took every bit of Callie's willpower not to constantly check her phone while driving back into Eureka Springs.

Alex could be anywhere, really. Perhaps he'd realized that she wasn't worth the effort.

Who could blame him? She'd pushed him away and judged him wrongly at every turn. From their first meeting, she'd thought he'd only been there to gloat, something that hardly computed now. Alex wasn't a mean-spirited person, and he would never gloat about her misfortune. But she'd been too locked in her own way of thinking to consider that.

It was starting to get dark when she pulled onto Main Street in Eureka Springs. The town was just coming alive for the evening. Tourists flowed from the hotels and restaurants into the bars. Good weather like this meant that her shop was going to be less busy than usual. Which was fine with her. With all of her online orders, she didn't have to stress about a night with fewer sales like she'd done in Bentonville.

She parked Alex's truck around the back of her complex, then walked to the front, noting all the people signing up for a last-minute ghost tour. Another thing good weather did. She found it didn't bother her like she'd initially worried to have ghosts and ghost-chasers milling around her store all the time. In fact, she'd started drawing out some ghost-themed treats that might be just the thing for a ghost-loving dog owner killing time before their tour.

When she got to her store, she wasn't surprised to see the sign turned to "closed" and the lights mostly off. Viola had stayed longer than Callie had expected in the first place. At this point, Callie just wanted to make sure everything was closed out and locked up, and she'd leave early. Tomorrow, she'd begin again, fresh and ready to tackle life's challenges.

Today, though? She was ready to crawl into bed for the night. Or, more likely, crawl into bed for a couple of hours, then spend the rest of the night decorating ghost treats.

She went to unlock the door, surprised when it pushed right open. She frowned, nerves spiking. It wasn't like Viola to be careless about something like locking a door. She stepped inside, her eyes adjusting to the dark shadows quickly, her gaze drawn straight to the treat counter where a single candle was lit.

She glanced up at Alex. He was wearing a blue shirt and holding a bundle of blue flowers, the same kind Cole had brought home after the beautification day.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him. "I've been looking for you," she said.

"Calle, I—"

But before he could continue, she crossed the room, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

He dropped the flowers onto the counter and pulled her in close, kissing her back. She couldn't believe he was here, couldn't believe that she was in his arms and that he hadn't just flown away.

"Wait, Callie." With visible reluctance, he took her arms and held her back from him gently. "I have a whole speech prepared. About how I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was from the beginning. I've been working on it all afternoon."

Callie laughed. "Why don't you email it to me, then?" She snagged the front of his shirt and pulled him so close their lips were almost touching. "Right now, I'd rather do this." Her lips softly brushed his, and he groaned.

"Well ..." He kissed her again. "The important part was that I love you, Callie."

Her body felt as if she were floating somewhere above herself, lost in the feeling of being so close to Alex. She ran her fingers up through his silky hair, down his neck, and over his shoulder, marveling that he was here, at her store, so close. And so hers. "I love you, too, Alex. Xander." She laughed and shook her head. "I don't actually know what to call you."

"Either one. But everyone who loves me calls me Xander."

"Well, then, Xander, glad to finally meet you in person."

"It's about time."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

*to: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>
from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>
date: May 17
subject: I Love You*

Callie,

I'll never get tired of writing that.

Love, Xander

PS. Are you really ready for tonight? It's okay to back out. Maybe we should give it a little more time. You know, I'm thinking that it's best to just wait. Maybe another ... month or two.

*to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>
from: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>
date: May 17
subject: Re: I Love You*

Xander,

I'll never get tired of hearing it.

Love, Callie

PS. It's not going to get any easier. It'll be fine. Trust me.

PPS. I'm still waiting for you to email me your prepared speech.

to: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

from: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

date: May 17

subject: I Love You

Callie,

*Good. It's still hard to believe I can write "I love you."
It's been a long year.*

Love, Xander

PS. I still have reservations, but okay.

PPS. When I said "prepared" speech, it was more a series of ramblings I'd convinced myself sounded good in my head. You saved us both when you said you'd rather kiss. Speaking of which ... Busy tonight?

to: Xander <XanderAndJax@quick-email.com>

from: Callie <Callie.Irving@quick-email.com>

date: May 17

subject: Re: I Love You

Xander,

Yes, I'm busy. With you. No more stalling. It's time.

Love, Callie

* * *

“I just need you to assure me that no matter what happens tonight, it’s not going to negatively affect our relationship,” Xander said, nerves rising in him. It had been a whirlwind of a week, with Callie finally knowing who he was. Still fresh and new enough to feel too fragile for such a big step.

“Xander. It’s going to be fine.”

He loved hearing her say his name. Having her look at him with that softness in her eyes. Knowing he could call her up any time, or email her and not have to separate Alex from Xander, something that was getting more and more impossible.

“She knows what she’s doing,” Cole said from the back seat of the truck.

Callie had told him that Cole was struggling with making new, better friends in school and had decided to let him finish out the school year with an online homeschool program. Cole was too social for that to last until he graduated, but it should help him get some of the separation he needed for a time, at least. Plus, the online school offered a more advanced coding class, which Cole was excited to take, even if it meant finishing it over the summer.

Darcy’s head popped between the seats, her wet nose pressing briefly against Xander’s ear. Xander prayed that Jax would be on his best dog-visiting behavior—and also that the specialized training he’d paid for after the dog park incident worked.

Xander parked in his driveway, and everyone got out of the truck. Callie put Darcy on a leash and instructed Xander to go inside and do the same with Jax. “I’ll come with you,” she said, leaving Cole outside with Darcy.

Xander found Jax lazily chewing on the leg of one of his chairs, but he eagerly popped up when he saw Callie.

She bent over to rub his ears, then pulled a treat out of her purse. “Sit,” she said, and Jax instantly sat, his ears pressed forward and his tail wagging wildly in anticipation. She set the

treat down in front of Jax, and he ate it in one gulp, then looked up at her with his large eyes begging for another. She laughed and petted him again. “No more for now, or you’ll get sick.”

“I think Jax loves you just as much as I do,” Xander said, watching his dog follow Callie around the room.

She snagged his leash and slipped his walking collar over his head. “Darcy is the most non-aggressive dog I’ve ever met,” Callie said. “So we’re going to introduce them very slowly, over time, and eventually, they’ll learn to be friends, okay?”

Xander nodded, feeling as nervous as he had when he’d parked outside Callie’s store last March, imagining all the things that could go wrong. “Have you thought about the truck?” he asked as they headed out through the garage. His grandpa’s truck was still parked there, looking pristine, waiting for someone to drive it.

“I never told you,” Callie said. She shook her head, clearly frustrated with herself. “Yes, I’d love for Cole to have it, if you’re really okay with it. It’s a generous offer, and I know it’ll mean a lot to him.”

“I really mean it,” Xander said. He jogged back inside to snag the keys from inside. When he came back out, Jax had spotted Darcy and had gone still. Darcy was sniffing all around the yard, unaware that she was being watched.

Callie took a few steps forward with Jax, who barked, and then Darcy looked up, her tongue sticking out, her tail wagging at the sight of Jax. Callie stood in front of Jax and made him look at her, giving him a small treat when he did. Every time he looked away toward Darcy, Callie commanded that Jax look back at her. It felt like forever, but it was probably only a couple of minutes before Jax’s stance relaxed and his tail started to wag a little.

Callie walked past Darcy and Cole with Jax, leaving at least six feet between them, repeating the steps of making Jax look at her, before turning back around and bringing Jax back into the house.

Xander's heart sank. Jax was just too aggressive to meet Darcy.

But when he followed Callie into the house, she was beaming. "That went great!"

"Really?"

"Yes. A few more sessions like this, and they'll be able to meet for real. I didn't even think we'd get this far today."

"Oh." Xander's heart lightened. "Okay."

She scrubbed Jax's ears and stomach when he flopped onto his back. "Good boy," she crooned to him before standing.

They went back outside, where Cole had taken Darcy off her leash and was throwing a ball across the lawn for her to fetch.

"Cole, come here for a second," Xander said.

Cole threw the ball for Darcy and then jogged over to them. "What's up?"

Callie looked at him expectantly, but Xander's mind went blank. So he held out the keys, and without preamble, he said, "It's yours."

"What?" Cole looked at him, confused. When Xander didn't say anything, he looked to Callie, who shook her head in amusement.

She snagged the keys from Xander and pressed them into Cole's palm. "It's the truck you fixed up together. I told Xander he could give it to you."

Cole's eyes widened in surprise, and then he jumped up with a whoop that sent Darcy running in their direction to jump around him as well. "Thank you!" he said to his sister.

"Don't thank me. It was this guy's idea." She hooked her thumb in Xander's direction.

"Thank you," he said, surprising everyone by giving Xander a huge hug.

Xander patted him on the back hard a few times, feeling emotion sting his eyes. “You did a good job,” he said gruffly.

Cole pulled back, his smile so wide, it stretched across his whole face. “Can I drive it now?”

“You can,” Callie said.

Cole gave her a quick hug and then raced for the truck.

Callie put Darcy back on the leash, and she watched her brother back out of the garage carefully, and then head away from the Mountain Cove house. “It’s hard to believe that’s the same boy as three months ago,” she said. “I think he’s got a rough road ahead of him still, but he’s going to be okay.”

“He will,” Xander agreed.

“Thank you for believing in him.”

“I only did because you did first,” he said. He wrapped his arms around her from the back, loving the feeling of her relaxing against him.

“So about that prepared speech,” she said, and he leaned forward to kiss her before she could finish.

Epilogue

The wedding planner had gone all out for the dinner following the ceremony. Callie caught her breath at the gorgeous table settings; each table appeared as though it were floating in the air.

It had been a whirlwind few months, planning their destination wedding to Hawaii. Xander had flown out most of Eureka Springs, it seemed like—including Meredith O'Brien and her daughter, Sadie, from the Lily and Rose flower shop in Eureka Springs. They'd come to do their flowers in Hawaii, and they'd done a gorgeous job. The only thing Xander had asked for were the blue flowers, and after some research, they'd learned that they were blue waterleafs. Bouquets of them adorned every opalescent tablecloth.

Xander held Callie's hand tightly in his as they walked around the room, greeting friends of his father's, or people she'd grown up with. After a few minutes, the wedding planner ushered them to their seats as dinner was about to be served.

"How are Darcy and Jax?" Callie asked Xander quietly. Liam's assistant, Frank, was watching the dogs again, much to his own reluctance. Even though Jax had calmed down under Darcy's influence and they were the best of doggy friends now—and Callie had made sure to leave an abundance of treats—Jax could still be a handful.

She missed them.

“They’re good,” Xander whispered back, his thumb brushing along the back of Callie’s hand, sending tingles down her spine. She’d never get over how amazing it felt to be this close to him. “The house is still standing, I guess.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“I feel a little on display,” Xander said as a waiter placed a salad wedge in front of each of them. They sat at the head table, just the two of them. Callie’s dad had been unable to come for obvious reasons, although he had met Xander and was happy for them. Xander’s mom and dad had made it for the ceremony, but his dad’s health demanded that they go back and rest in the hotel for the rest of the day.

Callie looked out at their gathered friends, many of them blowing kisses, waving, and taking pictures of Callie and Xander as they carried out their own conversations. “We are on display,” Callie said.

She couldn’t remember if she’d ever been this happy in her entire life. Cole had walked her down the aisle and given her a tight hug that left hardly a dry eye in the room. Especially people who knew their pasts. Which, come to think of it, was nearly everyone, since her past had been dissected by several magazines once news of their engagement had been released. That was a little more difficult to get used to, but at least the magazines had grown bored of her quickly and moved on to more exciting stories.

The glass wall behind Callie and Xander in the reception hall had been lifted, giving them the open-air scents and sound of the beach in the background. The whole night couldn’t have been more perfect.

Callie watched all of her loved ones from where she sat. Cole sat talking to one of Xander’s cousins. Cole had approached Callie last night about a boarding school on the west coast that Xander’s cousin went to, saying he was interested in attending. She had her reservations about sending him halfway across the country for his senior year, but she knew how isolated he’d felt with online courses. She also

recognized that the awkwardness of being around Allison after their breakup hadn't helped anything either.

Xander's cousin, Lissa, talked animatedly to Cole, who listened, completely enraptured. Probably hearing more about the school. And Callie was probably going to need to let him go.

She let her gaze slide over to Viola, who was sneaking glances at Liam across the room. Liam himself was looking away from an intense conversation to occasionally glance at Viola with a soft smile. Maybe something was a-brewing there.

She nudged Xander and pointed it out, but he shook his head. "Liam's too involved with business to be involved with anything else. He told me yesterday, and I quote, 'Where else better to strike a new business deal than in the casual setting of a wedding?'"

"Love gets the best of all of us," Callie argued, but he only gave her a skeptical shrug.

They ate the rest of their dinner, laughter arising when, with the fresh-fruit-topped crême brûlée, there was a small, paw-shaped cookie on the plate.

"It's people food," Callie announced loudly. "I promise."

She and Xander couldn't resist including it in the menu, despite their caterer's protests that it didn't fit with the elegant theme of the meal. It was dog treats that had gotten them together in the first place, and she wouldn't forget that.

She'd also finally swallowed her pride enough to read through the contract that Xander had sent her after they'd first met, about carrying her treats in Pets and More. Their trial run had been so successful that she'd had to sign a contract on a store space in Bentonville with a full kitchen, and she'd hired a staff to help her bake the treats.

Plus, it was closer to Xander, which she couldn't complain about.

But to her everlasting surprise, her heart was in Eureka Springs and her store. She tried to spend most of her time

there, interacting with customers when she could, and devising new treats to sell.

Xander fidgeted beside her once his meal was done, straightening out his plate, then his dessert fork, and then drinking what was left in his glass.

“Are you okay?” she asked him.

“Just remember,” he said, with a grim smile and a wink, “you asked for this.”

He cleared his throat and stood. She took him in: his dark tuxedo, his freshly cut hair styled perfectly over his forehead, and the smile he flashed in her direction that still made her knees completely weak.

Everyone quieted and looked to him.

“As some of you may know, Callie and I fell in love over email. Then fell in love again in person.” He waved his hand as everyone laughed. “It’s complicated.”

Callie folded her arms lightly over her white dress and leaned back in her chair so she could see his face better.

He glanced down at her, his eyes filled with love. “A while ago, I promised Callie a prepared speech, and I figure this is the best time to give it. I even memorized it, rather than emailing it to everyone, which I very seriously debated doing.”

That got a few chuckles. Callie’s own heart sped up.

He turned to Callie and held out his hand. She took it and stood up beside him, staring into that face she knew she’d love forever.

“From the first moment I met you, I fell in love with you. I’ve been falling ever since. I love the way you take care of your brother. The way you wake up in the middle of the night with a new treat idea. The way you believe in the people you love. The way you never, ever give up. The way you forgive and can see straight into someone’s heart.”

Callie’s heart melted. She brought Xander’s hand, clasped tightly in hers, up to her heart and held them there together.

“I’m so grateful I walked into From Wags to Wishes that day. I’ve rethought every other choice from that moment on: pretending to be someone else. Accidentally running you out of business. Trying to fix everything in the worst possible way.” He turned to the crowd. “Did I mention that she’s forgiving?”

Everyone laughed.

“But in the end, and despite everything I did or didn’t do, it all brought me to you. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. I love you.”

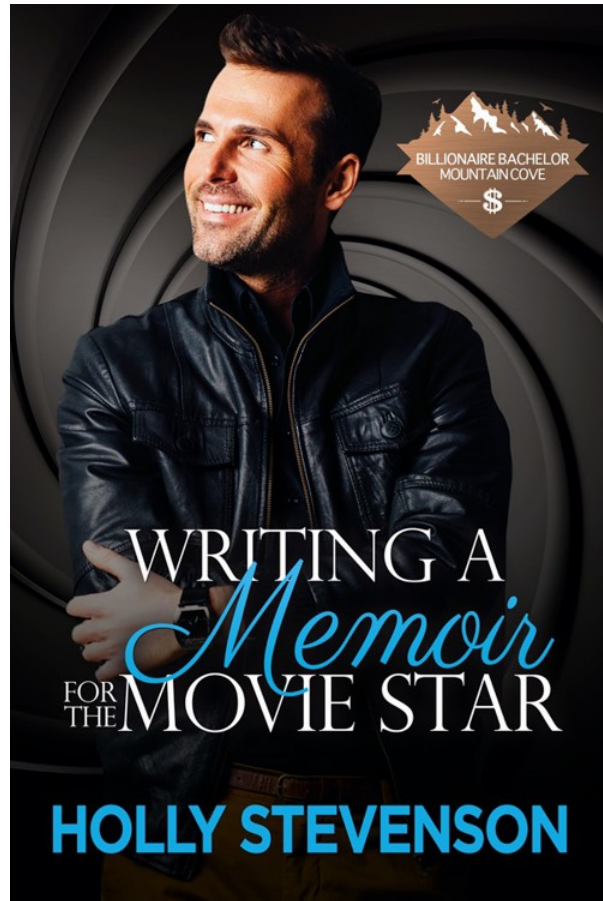
“I love you, too,” she said through her tears. While everyone cheered, she brought her lips to his and said, “That was worth the wait.”

“So were you.”

* * *

Don’t leave the Mountain Cove just yet!

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* * *

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About the Author

A glamorous day in the life of Kaylee Baldwin includes: chasing after her four children, obsessively checking her email, writing her latest book, trying to get motivated to train for that race she shouldn't have signed up for, hanging out with her husband, and reading in every spare second she can find.

She graduated from Arizona State University with a degree in English lit and currently lives in southern Arizona with her family. Her books include Whitney Award finalist Meg's Melody, Six Days of Christmas, Silver Linings, and she has a story included in A Timeless Romance Anthology: California Dreamin'.

You can reach her on Instagram or Twitter @kayleebaldwin1

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