

A shirtless man with a beard is holding a brown and white bulldog puppy. The puppy is wearing a red Santa hat with a white pom-pom. The background is a light blue gradient with white snowflake graphics. The title 'Chasing Holiday Tail' is written in a red, cursive font with a small snowflake icon above the 'y' in 'Holiday'.

Chasing Holiday Tail

Amy Award • Serena Bell • Kilby Blades • Kameron Claire
Dylann Crush • Hope Ellis • Christina Hovland
Melonie Johnson • Tawdra Kandle • Stina Lindenblatt
MK Meredith • Tracey Pedersen • Arell Rivers
Brenda St John Brown • Sylvie Stewart

CHASING HOLIDAY TAIL

A HOLIDAY ROM-COM CHARITY ANTHOLOGY

AMY AWARD SERENA BELL KILBY BLADES KAMERON CLAIRE
DYLANN CRUSH HOPE ELLIS CHRISTINA HOVLAND
MELONIE JOHNSON TAWDRA KANDLE STINA LINDENBLATT
MK MEREDITH TRACEY PEDERSEN ARELL RIVERS
BRENDA ST JOHN BROWN SYLVIE STEWART

Bear Naked With the Bearded Baller

copyright ©2023 by Amy Award

Hot Under the Collar

copyright ©2023 by Serena Bell

Lady and the Scamp

copyright ©2023 by Kilby Blades

Tess' Tasty Treats

copyright ©2023 by Kameron Claire

Santa Claws is Coming

copyright ©2023 by Dylann Crush

Snaps With Santa

copyright ©2023 by Hope Ellis

Ruff Day for the Rockstar

copyright ©2023 by Christina Hovland

Too Nice to be Naughty

copyright ©2023 by Melonie Johnson

Make Me Beg

copyright ©2023 by Tawdra Kandle

Decidedly With Paws

copyright ©2023 by Stina Lindenblatt

The Howliday Contract

copyright ©2023 by MK Meredith

Doggy Style

copyright ©2023 by Tracey Pedersen

Rescued Beats

copyright ©2023 by Arell Rivers

Mutts About You

copyright ©2023 by Brenda St John Brown

In Rover My Head

copyright ©2023 by Sylvie Stewart

Cover design by Sylvie Stewart

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. All brand names and product names used in this book are trademarks, registered trademarks or trade names of their respective holders. The author is not associated with any product or vendor in this book.

✿ Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Bear Naked With The Bearded Baller](#)

Amy Award

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Amy Award](#)

[Hot Under The Collar](#)

Serena Bell

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[About Serena Bell](#)

[Lady And The Scamp: A Canine Love Story](#)

Kilby Blades

[Chapter 1](#)

[About Kilby Blades](#)

[Tess' Tasty Treats](#)

Kameron Claire

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[About Kameron Claire](#)

[Santa Claws Is Coming](#)

Dylann Crush

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[About Dylann Crush](#)

[Snaps With Santa](#)

Hope Ellis

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[About Hope Ellis](#)

[Ruff Day For The Rockstar](#)

Christina Hovland

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[About Christina Hovland](#)

[Too Nice To Be Naughty](#)

Melonie Johnson

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[About Melonie Johnson](#)

[Make Me Beg: A Royal Re-Do Second Chance Romance](#)

Tawdra Kandle

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[About Tawdra Kandle](#)

[Decidedly With Paws](#)

Stina Lindenblatt

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[About Stina Lindenblatt](#)

[The Howliday Contract](#)

MK Meredith

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[About MK Meredith](#)

[Doggy Style](#)

Tracey Pedersen

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Tracey Pedersen](#)

[Rescued Beats](#)

Arell Rivers

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[About Arell Rivers](#)

[Mutts About You](#)

Brenda St John Brown

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[About Brenda St John Brown](#)

[In Rover My Head](#)

Sylvie Stewart

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[About Sylvie Stewart](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

FOREWORD

Valley Humane Society, a no-kill animal shelter in Casa Grande, Arizona, is excited and grateful to partner with the 2023 Holiday Charity Anthology. All of our dogs and cats love romance, love to be read to, and are hopeful of getting to spend the holidays with their fur-ever families!

VHS has been in operation since 1966, and in that time, we have sheltered, cared for, and found loving homes for tens of thousands of dogs and cats. All of our animals are cared for by a dedicated group of staff members and volunteers who treat the animals as their own. All of the cats and dogs in our care (currently 254) are microchipped, vaccinated, spayed or neutered, and given all necessary veterinary care. They spend time every day with humans who know them and love them. In 2022, we found adopters for 2,147 animals, which allowed us to bring in that many more.

VHS is 100% supported by private donations – we don't receive even one penny in government funds. Partnerships like the Holiday Charity Anthology are important to us and very much appreciated! The funds raised will be put to very good use! We are currently working to install more outside play pens, so the dogs can run and frolic and live the good life!

Your choosing VHS as a 2023 partner is truly a holiday gift!

Deb Woodard
Board President

Valley Humane Society
Casa Grande, Arizona

BEAR NAKED WITH THE BEARDED BALLER

AMY AWARD

ABOUT... BEAR NAKED WITH THE BEARDED BALLER

April De la Reine, a plus-size model, seeks solitude in a remote Colorado cabin, only to be stranded with a bear-sized dog, and a grumpy footballer—the infamous Bridger Kingman.

‘Bear Naked with The Bearded Baller’ is the sizzling prequel to the Cocky Kingmans series that promises to melt your heart and your panties in this love-at-first-sight romance.

CHAPTER 1

BRIDGER

If I never signed another talent contract in my entire fucking life, it would be too damn soon. At this point, I didn't even want to see a football, much less hold one. I'd lived the sport for so long, loved it even, and all this media bullshit made me want to throw my TV and my *Sports Illustrated* subscription in the trash so I couldn't even watch a professional football game again, much less play in one.

Instead, I found myself driving through the winter wonderland of Bear Claw Valley, Colorado, the quaint small town where I grew up, wishing I could stay for longer than just the time off I had for our bye-week. I slammed the door of my faded red '67 Ford pickup truck, stomped up the sidewalk through the gravel and slush leftover from the last storm, and shoved my way into the Mayne hardware store. The familiar smell of pine and sawdust, layered with the sharp tang of winter, welcomed me home.

The bell above the door jingled in the way only a small business in a quaint country town could. A poster for my local Cause for Paws charity event that was happening next weekend hung by the entrance. I'd take the sound of that bell over the ringing of my phone any day, all day, twice on Sundays. I made my way through the familiar aisles, not needing a damn thing except the peace and quiet.

I nodded to Tex behind the counter, who was busy flipping through the pages of a catalogue. He gave a chin jerk response. "Kingman."

That's what I liked about him. He didn't blather on and on and on and on like some people I knew. Like my fucking agent.

I glanced at the new display from Husqvarna, because I needed a new chainsaw as much as a hole in my ass, then headed over to the lumber

section. The scent of sawdust and fresh cut pine seeped in, better than any icy-hot muscle rub down from a trainer. I took my first full, deep breath in an hour. My work boots scuffed against the linoleum floor, and I shoved my hands in my pockets, scowling at the options in front of me.

Both the wood and my career.

I was about to grab a few castoffs I could carve up when I caught sight of something hot pink and furry, out of the corner of my eye. The scent of orange, vanilla, and sweet cinnamon wafted over and went straight to my cock.

My days of adrenaline fucking were over. But man, a good railing, up against a wall, making a woman scream my name as I pounded into her... I told my libido to cool it. I was not good company right now. Even the media knew that. Since I'd just been named the league's meanest player.

I stared through the shelves anyway and found my feet shifting toward the tempting sex-on-a-stick. She was an aisle over, her basket filled with an odd collection of items—paint brushes, a bag of nails, a roll of duct tape, and a trowel. I couldn't begin to imagine what she was planning to do with all those items.

I stepped into the aisle full of small tools she was perusing and fu-uck. She was no stick. Sexy cinnamon roll more like it. Tits I could get lost in, an ass that didn't quit, hips I wouldn't break if I grabbed on tight while fucking her, and thick thighs I wanted to use as earmuffs.

She wasn't a Colorado mountain girl, that much was clear from her outfit. Maybe she'd fit in with the kind of people who lived in Aspen. Nobody in Bear Claw Valley would be caught dead in fake leopard fur trim on a coat that didn't look like it would hold up to forty-degree weather, much less forty below. And those boots. While I'd like to see her in nothing but those black shiny knee-highs, heels weren't exactly good for the snow.

She moved from section to section, her gaze flitting over the items, grabbing all kinds of random shit. And I turned into a god-forsaken stalker, watching her, lusting after her.

Just say something to her, creeper.

It wasn't like I didn't know how to talk to women. I'd charmed my fair share of ball bunnies. But I didn't have a clue what to say to Cinnamon Roll.

Can I taste your ooey gooey sweet center? was not a good pick-up line.

She paused and turned toward me, so I reached for a roll of wallpaper. Pale pink with little unicorns on it, as it happened. I examined those unicorns

like they were the San Francisco offensive line. I kept my eyes glued to the paper so hard, I didn't even move until something jolted against my foot. I glanced down to see the woman's overflowing basket tipping over, dumping half the contents onto my feet as she squatted and reached for something on the very back of the bottom shelf.

Her jacket rose up her back, and the waistband of her ridiculous black suede pants gaped so that I got a clear view of the intricate tattoo scrawled across her lower back. A unicorn. A god-damned fucking unicorn prancing in some kind of magical sunlight.

Holy hell. There was no talking my cock down this time. The second she looked up, she was going to get a load of the pop-up tent in my jeans.

"Watch where you're going," I ground out and tried to step around, over, away from her, practically falling all over myself.

The deepest sky blue eyes, framed with long, dark lashes, stared up at me. She didn't seem fazed by my attitude or my hard-on that was practically in her face. Instead she smiled sweetly. "Oh, so sorry. I thought you might need this gold trim paint to go with your pink unicorn wallpaper. Excellent choice, by the way. Is it for you? Or maybe your girlfriend, wife, daughter? Please tell me it's for dear old Granny's kitchen remodel."

Her eyes sparkled up at me. They fucking sparkled.

I was a dead man.

She was fishing to see if I was single, and I had absolutely no response. Even my own name escaped me at the moment. Sweet baby Jesus, what was my name?

Cinnamon Roll stood, straightened her jacket, and held out her hand. "I'm new in town, and I'm trying to fix up my cabin up in the mountains, but I don't know what I'm doing. You don't happen to be a contractor who could help or know of one I could hire?"

My brain turned back on and piqued at the mention of the cabin. "What cabin?"

"Up on Bear Claw Mountain."

That's where I lived. Who in the hell sold a chunk of the Bear Claw to a city slicker? She had the tiniest hint of a Texas twang, and I had an idea who'd given her that land. "Up at the top?"

She smiled like I'd just guessed her favorite flavor of ice cream. "The very tippy top."

That was no place for a city girl like her. How would she even get herself

up there? She looked like she drove a Mercedes, not a four-wheeler. I knew that cabin, or rather that dilapidated pile of wood. It was just above my plot and accessible by four-wheel drive only. Windy as hell, and had the absolute best view of the valley.

I looked her up and down, studying her, trying to decide whether she was a liability or not. Attractive, I'd give her that, but she was an outsider. Playing at living a simple life. In reality, she probably loved the tabloids and some ripe gossip. Someone for me to stay far away from.

Walk away, dumbass. I leaned in. "That cabin isn't far from me. What are your plans for it?"

"I want to fix it up and make it a sustainable, beautiful space to get away from it all." She sighed and I could practically see her mountain cabin fantasy floating around her head. "I'm hoping to use local and reclaimed wood as much as possible and make it energy efficient. Maybe get some solar panels in and—"

Had she even seen the place? And why wasn't I walking fast and far from this whole conversation? My head yelled run, but everything else below the neck, and especially below the waist, said stay awhile. See where this goes. "What kind of features you planning?"

"Well, I want to have a big fireplace, for the cold nights." She got this adorable, dreamy look on her face that had me imagining things too. Although, my fantasies were more about what I could do with her in front of that fireplace on a chilly night.

"I also want to have a big kitchen, for entertaining, and a big porch to enjoy the views and the fresh air. Ooh, and also a green roof, a place where I can grow plants and maybe attract some animal friends."

I'd be her animal friend.

Gah. No. I wouldn't. Getting involved with a woman like this was the absolute last thing I needed. She was high maintenance and I barely maintained myself these days. Being with her would draw a lot of attention. I just wanted the world to leave me the fuck alone.

The cabin she'd bought was no bigger than a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty square feet. It was one room with a loft. She wasn't getting her big kitchen or entertaining space. So, not sure why I didn't bring that up. "That sounds like a big project, have you thought about the insulation, or the roofing?"

Shut up, Kingman. Shut the fuck up and walk away.

Tex poked his head into the aisle where we were standing, and I was absolutely using him to escape. “Hey, April. Lumber’s ready. Come on up to check out. Kingman, you leave my customers alone, you grump.”

Hmm. Yeah. The way Tex was all casual with her, he knew her. I gave him the bird.

“Thanks, Tanner. Yay.” She gave him a sparkling smile and I glared at him.

April. That suited her. She was like springtime come to life. All sunshiney and gonna make a big muddy mess of my life. I’d be smart to freeze her out right now.

Instead, I was fucking thawing from the stone cold winter of the soul I’d sunk into. Hell.

She picked up her basket and I bent and grabbed the duct tape that was trying to roll away. “I think you’re gonna need more than duct tape to fix up that old cabin.”

April took the tape from me and lingered a long time with her fingers on mine. “If you can’t fix it with duct tape, it can’t be fixed.”

Now if that wasn’t the hottest thing I’d ever fucking heard, I don’t know what was. I watched her walk away, partly to see that ass sway and mostly because I needed a minute to talk my hard-on down so I didn’t embarrass myself in front of the entire town.

That was press I didn’t need.

I waited until I heard the jingle of the door, all the while thinking of baseball, the Queen of England, and how Henry David Thoreau had made *Walden* so dang boring when it could have been great. All of that cooled my raging lust for a woman I’d barely talked to enough that I could go grill Tex about her.

He was already back to flipping through his dog-eared power tool catalog.

“You sold April the top of the Bear Claw, didn’t you?” They were probably from the same small hometown back in Texas or something. How else would a Texan like her find out about a piece of property that wasn’t for sale unless you knew who to talk to, sixteen hundred miles away.

Colorado was going to be a culture shock.

“Yep.” He flipped another page and wasn’t going to say another damn word. I could wait him out.

I stood there for a good three minutes while he flipped the pages.

Dammit. His silence broke me like a rookie looking for praise from his coach. Tex didn't even look up.

"She can't fix that place up herself. You saw her shoes." She'd break her ankle the minute she walked out the front door. Probably while walking to the door. Then I'd have to go on up there and...

Page flip. "You gonna help her?"

Me? No. What? No. "Not a fucking chance. She'll sell it and never come back soon enough when she realizes she doesn't know what she's doing."

"Maybe." Tex shut the catalog and looked right at me. "Or maybe she's tougher than she seems."

I'd believe that when I saw it. I'd better hike on up to her place and make sure she wasn't about to freeze to death stuck in a snowbank or something. I'd pull her plump ass out of the snow, then I'd take her back to my place and warm her right up.

Dammit. No. I needed to pretend I'd never even met her. I had plenty of other things to worry about, like my own fucked up career, and the Cause for Paws event this weekend. I had one fucking weekend off before we played our last game, and I wasn't wasting my bye-week on some fling. Unless April was some kind of PR-nightmare-fix-it girl, I didn't need her complicating my life.

Complicating my bed, maybe.

Hell, that was tempting.

CHAPTER 2

APRIL

“**Y**ou have no new messages.” Sigh. Of course I haven’t missed any calls, because not one magazine, website, or even catalogue was booking plus-size models. Every brand was into heroin chic, and I hated that with all my heart.

Not that I had any models left to book. All my girls had given up.

I should have been a sports agent like my daddy. The money to be made there didn’t care what your body looked like, just if you could play. In fact, the football teams slathered like drooling St. Bernards over big, thick lineman. Like Bridger Kingman.

I’d admit to a little of my own drooling. He was one hell of a big boy, and I hadn’t missed the big boy tenting the front of his pants either. You’d have to be on the fricking moon not to see that, and I had been eye to umm, eye with his... oh geez, I needed to quit thinking about him in that way. Totally inappropriate.

Yeah, I’d known who he was the moment I saw him pick up that unicorn wallpaper. You’d have to be living under a rock, in a cave, with no cell phone reception to miss professional football’s meanest linebacker.

Word on the street was that he was about to fire his agent and was a giant pain in the ass to work with. Regardless, everyone in the biz would be climbing over each other to get him signed. Who wouldn’t with a multi-million-dollar contract on the line? Good luck to them.

He didn’t seem that mean to me. Maybe a bit distracted and grumpy, but his eyes had sparkled when he’d asked me about my cabin.

My. Cabin.

All I’d wanted was someplace to get away from the hustle and bustle of

New York, but someplace far, far away from Texas and the disappointment I knew was waiting from my parents. I needed some peace and quiet to regroup and figure out what in the world I was going to do next.

When I emailed Tanner, my sister May's brother-in-law, asking if he had a lead on someplace in the mountains where he lived that I could escape to, he'd somehow talked me into buying this cabin.

As my rented SUV slipped and skidded through the snow on the one-lane barely-a-road for the eleventy-hundredth time, I was beginning to understand why I'd gotten such a great deal. I should be able to see the place by now, but all I saw were more trees and over there, some more trees, and up there, even more trees. Oh, and then there were the rocks.

My tires spun and I moved a half an inch or so forward. I really should pay more attention to where I was driving and quit daydreaming about how I'd like to see the monster in Bridger Kingman's pants for myself.

"Come on, four-wheel-drive, you can do it. I promise a nice long rest for you if you just get me to the cabin, okay?" I didn't dare go any faster than I already was, but at this rate, I'd be lucky to get to the top of the mountain by sunset.

What if there were wild animals in the dark waiting to eat me? Tanner had said there were bears in this area. I gave the SUV a bit more gas and prayed I didn't end up a story in the newspaper. "Failed plus-size model turned talent agent dies in mysterious car accident. Did she see that tree coming? More news at eleven."

I skidded around in the snow some more and happily avoided plowing into any trees. But then the road just ended, and there, within the dusky rays of sun shining down through the clouds, was my cabin.

Or, err, my wooden shed? Damn. This place had sure looked bigger in the pictures. The pile of wood Tanner had promised would be stacked next to it was as tall as, and almost as wide as, the whole building itself. That's what I got for buying it sight unseen.

Two minutes after I opened the door, I knew I was screwed. It was colder inside than out, and I had no idea where to even start. The right answer was probably to go home. To Texas.

A fire. I'd start with a fire. There was enough junk and leaves and stuff tossed around in here to burn down the forest. I should burn the whole cabin down and start from scratch. What a pile of poop Tanner had sold me. He was getting an earful from me tomorrow, and then I was tattling on him to

my sister.

I blew out a long breath and rubbed my hands together. I was not a quitter. I could still do this if it meant the peace and quiet I needed to rethink my life. Step one, start a fire to warm the place up, step two was going to be cleaning up and a bit of inventory to see if I even had a place to sleep tonight. Besides my car. Did Bear Claw Valley even have a hotel? I'd even take a motel at this point.

Nope. No. That was prissy quitter thinking, and I was not giving up.

I grabbed some logs from the pile of wood outside, some newspapers from the stack next to the little wood-burning stove, and the long matches out of the bag of stuff I'd bought at the hardware store. I'd gotten them hoping to light some scented candles, not even thinking I'd need them to survive the night.

I could always drive back down the mountain, but I could not take another defeat just yet. First, I was calling on my finely honed Girl Scout skills and doing the best with what I had in front of me. Twelve matches and two slightly singed fingers later, and I had a fire going. And only half the cabin had filled with smoke before I figured out how to open the damper to the flue.

Step one down, a million more to go if I was going to make this into my ideal retreat. I hadn't bought a broom, but I did get a little dustpan and brush. Good thing there was only about a hundred square feet of floor.

I started piling up the junk near the door, found a half-full bottle of whiskey for my trouble, and discovered the chain that was supposed to be attached to the pull-down ladder to the little sleeping loft. I was looking around for something I could stand on to reattach it when I heard the scratching and growling at the door.

Crap. I knew I was going to get eaten by a wild animal.

No, no. Calm down. Maybe it's just a squirrel, or a raccoon. I wanted to make animal friends. I'd just go peek out the window and see what had come to visit. Granted, I could barely see out of the dirt crusting the panes, but that meant whatever was out there wouldn't be able to see me either.

Still, I bent over and sneaky-style crept to the window and peeked over the ledge.

Oh my gawd. There was something big and brown and furry sniffing around the door.

A bear. There was a freaking bear trying to get into my cabin. A freaking

bear.

I dropped down to my knees so it couldn't see me. Maybe if I stayed very quiet, it would go away. But wait, didn't bears have an excellent sense of smell? Oh no. What if I smelled delicious?

Very carefully, I crawled across the floor to the opposite wall. Geez, the floor was absolutely freezing. Frigid air poured up through the boards. If the air could get in, it meant it could get out, and that meant the bear would smell me anywhere.

Think, April. Think of a solution.

If it can't be fixed with duct tape, it can't be fixed.

I crawled over near the stove and pulled the big, silvery roll of tape out, snapped the plastic wrapping open with my teeth and very, very gently pulled an arm's length off the roll. Any faster, and I risked the bear hearing a sound that could very well be interpreted as a growl, or the cry of an injured... umm, bunny?

The bear scratched at the door again, and I swear I heard snuffling sounds. It took everything I had to hold in my squeaks of fear.

What if I duct taped the door shut? Surely a mass of sticky tape would flummox a wild animal. I put the piece of tape with my teeth and crawled back toward the door. If I paid attention to the cardio workout level of my heartbeat or the tangy taste of fear in the back of my throat, I wouldn't get this done.

Carefully I laid the tape across the bottom of the door—where I could literally see his feet moving around in the gap—and pressed the edges to get it to stick. This piece was only long enough to go halfway.

Before I got another piece started, the bear jumped up on the door and the whole cabin rattled, the door quaking on its hinges. I couldn't help it this time, the scream just popped out of me. In response I heard a horrible woofing sound. I didn't know bears sounded like dogs.

"Go away. I'm sure I'm not delicious to eat." Which was a lie. I had plenty of fat stores that I'm sure a bear would relish. Wasn't he supposed to be hibernating?

"Bear, you get back down here, you naughty thing. Just because you're cute, doesn't mean you can—" A grouchy, deep, manly voice yelled at the animal from somewhere near the cabin. I was saved.

Wait a minute. Bears don't talk. And who talks to bears? Especially like that? I knew just the grumpity grump who had the balls to yell at a bear.

“Help. I’m being attacked by a wild animal!” Oh geez, I hoped that didn’t anger the beast and have it knocking down my door to eat my face.

“Down, Bear. Sit.”

I listened close to try and see what in the world would happen next. Surely a bear doesn’t follow commands. Then I heard the slurping and chomping sounds. Crunch, crunch, crack.

Oh no. Oh, no no no no no. The bear was eating Bridger and it was all my fault.

“Good boy. That’s a good boy, you’re the best boy, aren’t you, Bear? Yes, you are.” The sweetest ooey gooey voice praised the bear.

Like... what?

First of all, Bridger Kingman didn’t know how to be sweet, and second, did he have a trained bear? This wasn’t the eighteenth-century Russian court for goodness’ sake, it was a small mountain town in Colorado.

Someone, or something, knocked on the door, practically rattling it right off the hinges. “April? It’s Bridger Kingman. We met at the hardware store. You’re okay now. Come on out. No one’s going to eat you.”

Swear to God, I heard him mumble something more that sounded like, “Unless you ask me too.”

I crawled back across the floor and peeked over the windowsill. Yep. That was Bridger Kingman, petting the fluffy, brown, furry head of his... dog.

His. Big ass, brown, fluffy, furry dog.

I slipped down the wall and hung my head for a full three breaths while I made faces at myself. It took me a couple more to tell my heart to stop freaking out. No bears were going to eat me. But maybe a hot defensive lineman was?

It’s not like every woman I knew didn’t have a crush on him. Well, no. That wasn’t entirely true. New York’s elite chic, who were literally scared of large bodies, didn’t go gah-gah for him. Bridger was a big boy. Had to be for his job.

And that turned me the hell on. What I wouldn’t do to be wrapped up and kept safe and warm by someone who wasn’t going to break when I sat on their face.

Did it just get hot in here? I fanned my face and then remembered Bridger was literally standing at my door asking for me. Right. I was hot from embarrassment, not because I was fantasizing about what that beard could do to my girly parts.

Get your poop in a group, April. The man is standing at your door. Open it.

I pulled myself off the floor and gave the handle a tug. It moved but was stuck. Oh, right. I taped it shut. A good yank, and the door opened. The duct tape went flying and stuck to my leg, all twisted up. “Sup?”

Sup? Really? That’s what I decided to say? Okay then, let’s go with white girl gangsta style. “Yo.”

Bridger looked down at his dog who made that cute head twist dogs make when they don’t know what’s happening either. I couldn’t blame him. I didn’t know what I was going on right now.

“Uh, yo... uh, you doing okay up here?”

“Yep, fine. Super, great. Can’t you tell?” I waved my hand around the wreck of a cabin.

“I can. Bear decided he wanted to check out the new neighbor, and I figured we’d better make sure this old cabin wasn’t falling down around you.”

The steps to the little loft came crashing down just as he said that. I cringed and sank down into myself and squeaked, “Everything’s fine.”

“Right. Well, there’s a storm coming, and—”

Just as he said that, not one, not two, not three, but three billion snowflakes crashed down from the sky. I thought snow was supposed to come down all floaty and pretty. This was not pretty. It was snowpocalypse.

I grabbed Bridger by the front of his shirt and yanked him into the cabin. He tripped over the other twisted piece of duct tape and grabbed onto me to stay upright.

Which meant I ended up curled into his great big bear-hug arms. What was that he said about eating me if I asked?

CHAPTER 3

BRIDGER

Should I tell her now that she had duct tape covered in bits of leaves stuck in her hair? Or that she had a smear of dust across the bridge of her nose like the cutest smattering of fake freckles? Probably not.

“You’ve, uh, got something right here.” I reached out and rubbed my thumb across her cheek, and then found myself cupping her chin and tilting her face up so I could stare into those sparkling eyes.

Her lips parted just the tiniest bit, and her tongue peeked out, wetting her lips. “Oh, do I? I’m sure I’m a mess.”

The hottest fucking mess I’d ever met.

I was not a mess kind of guy. Until my agent flipped my whole damn career upside down by committing me to four more years with the worst team in the league, my life was ordered and predictable. Work hard, play hard, rest hard. Make a plan and stick to it to get what you want.

My gaze flicked down to her lips and back up. “Yeah, you are. Do you want me to help you?”

What the fuck was I saying? I just came up here chasing after Bear. Figured I should check on the city slicker to make sure she wasn’t being stupid.

There was a storm coming, and since I knew good and well this cabin wasn’t severe weather ready, it wasn’t like I was going to let her ride out the night with the wind blowing through this place and freezing her to death.

“I think mother nature is going to insist.” April glanced outside and I turned my head to see what she was seeing.

Holy shit. That storm rolled in quick. I’d thought I tell her to head into town and get a room at our little B&B. But it was looking like Bear and I

were going to be stuck up here in this disaster. We were going to die if I didn't do something right quick to make sure we didn't.

So I did the best thing I knew to warm up. I kissed April.

The moment my lips touched hers, there were no chills to be found. I licked along the seam of her lips and the snowy mountains turned into volcanoes. Our tongues slid against each other, and the polar fucking ice caps melted. She moaned into my mouth and the Earth turned into the surface of the sun.

But it was her soft whimper as I deepened the kiss further, exploring every part of her mouth with my own, that melted my god damned socks off.

April gripped my shirt and slipped her hands into my hair. She was no shy, wilting flower waiting for my mouth and tongue to take hers. She gave as good as she was getting.

By the time we broke apart, both gasping for air, I think she'd counted every one of my teeth and my tonsils with her tongue as her guide.

She blinked slowly as if waking from a long, languid nap, and damn if I didn't want to see what she actually looked like waking up in my arms. "If your plan was to distract me from the fact that your dog is actually a bear and we're about to be stuck in a snowstorm with only a chocolate candy bar, a half bottle of whiskey I found, and that tiny stove for heat, umm, it worked."

"That was exactly my plan. How did you guess?" I hadn't come up here with the intention to do anything but check that she was safe and prepared for the storm. "But also, we should probably at least shut the door so we don't actually freeze to death."

Neither of us moved. I didn't want to let her go. It was like she had a spell on me, and I didn't mind one bit.

Wait, what had she said about not having supplies? Damn. I knew she wasn't prepared. I was going to murder Tex later for selling her this place and not making sure she didn't die up here on the mountain. "No food or water?"

She smiled lazily, not concerned even a little bit. "Can one survive on kisses alone?"

Yes.

Dammit. No. But I was going to die trying.

No, no I wasn't. We could kiss and hopefully do lots more from the warmth and safety of my cabin. "Get your coat on. We'll hike back down to my place."

She glanced out the door, then back at me, and out the door again. "Umm.

I am wearing my coat.”

Shit. I glanced around the room to see if there was an old blanket lying around or something we could wrap her in. The wind chill was going to be brutal. No way I was letting her get frostbite. “I suppose those are the best shoes you have?”

“I guess I’m not very well prepared. I’ve never spent a lot of time anyplace that it snows. I didn’t know it would be quite so cold or happen so fast.” She gave me a chagrined smirk. “Well, there are some fuzzy slippers in my suitcase.”

This was about to be a fucking survival situation so I absolutely should not be imagining her in nothing but those slippers. Get your head in the game, Kingman. “If you’ve got flannel pjs in there too, we’ll take it. But we’ve got to move before the snow starts drifting. It’s not that far. Come on.”

“No chance we can drive? My rental has seat heaters, which are heaven on a tight back.”

“Can’t get there from here. No road between my place and yours. Just a trail. The visibility is going down quick, and we’d have to drive all the way down the mountain to get you anywhere else safe. I think a quick hike is our best bet.”

The kind of hike that would get icy and slippery and someone wearing heels could break an ankle. We’d just have to hold hands the whole way so I could make sure she stayed upright.

April made a face like what we were about to do was the worst idea ever, and she wasn’t entirely wrong. I zipped up her coat and expertly wrapped my scarf around her neck, ensuring every bit of exposed skin was covered.

I wanted to be able to savor that skin later, and I couldn’t do that if she got frostbite. It would be a damn shame if that soft spot in the small of her throat turned blue.

I slipped my own gloves onto her little hands, and had to keep myself from growling, irritated that she wasn’t already wrapped up in blankets, in front of the rolling fireplace, wearing nothing but a smile.

“Mrph mrr mss.” Her words were muffled through the scarf.

I pulled one inch of it down. “What?”

“Let’s do this.”

I gave her a quick nod and took her hand in mine, leading her and Bear out into the fucking blizzard.

The sharp gusts of snow stung our faces, swirling around us. April’s

boots no sooner left the interior of her cabin than she was sinking into the soft folds of powder. A few steps past her car, and I couldn't see her feet. It was a good fucking thing I'd walked this trail a billion times over the years.

Each and every step we took, she nearly toppled over. But she gripped my hand tight, and there was no way I was letting her veer off the path.

But then the wind picked up and every flake of snow that had accumulated on the mountain for the last ten years swirled around us. I could barely see two feet in front of my face. But I could see Bear's big old wagging tail. He loved a good snowstorm, this was like his playground.

I squeezed April's hand. It was hard to talk in this wind and she hadn't said a word since we started walking. "We're almost there. Just a few more minutes."

She nodded, but her eyes were about as big around as my biceps. I hated that she was scared. I didn't even know this woman, so I shouldn't have a pounding behind my heart wanting to make everything right with the world for her.

Another hundred yards, and my cabin was finally in sight, its inviting light glowing through the snowflakes. I pointed and her tight shoulders went from up around her ears back to normal as she let some of her worry go. She pulled down the scarf and blew out a long steamy breath. "It's so cute. Not what I'd expect for a big growly dude like you."

She shook her head back and forth, let go of my hand and pressed a glove to her face, her eyes doing a dance of confusion. "My nose hairs are frozen. Is that even a thing? How—"

She was the one that was cute. My cabin was average. Before I could even tell her so, April slipped, her body vanishing beneath a thick white blanket of fluffy wet and cold snowflakes. My whole body went heavy and still like rocks as I watched April slip beneath the snow. Bear dove in, snuffling all around, clearing the area all surrounding her. He barked at me like he was saying, "hurry up and save her, dummy."

I stumbled towards her, my hands trembling as I scooped through the snow. She reached up for me, and I pulled her up and straight into my arms, picking her up like a rescued princess. The fear intertwined with a strange sense of familiarity as I held her against my chest—as if I had done it a thousand times before.

She squealed and wrapped her arms around my neck. As if I'd ever drop her.

I took long strides, carrying her like some kind of Victorian romance heroine who needed rescuing. I was no Mr. Willoughby, but I was a linebacker and I rushed up the stairs and through the door of the cabin like I was scoring a touchdown.

Bear followed us in, and I kicked the door shut, taking a deep breath and soaking up the heat. He went straight into the kitchen and curled up in his plush bed next to the water heater. He'd never be the curl up in front of the fireplace dog. Not since the forest fire he'd been rescued from as a pup.

April's teeth clattered and I set her back on her feet in front of the fire, but still holding her in my arms, not wanting to let go just yet. Some stray strands of hair begged my fingers to brush them away from her forehead, and I couldn't resist one more soft touch before I set to getting her warm. The protective instincts I didn't even realize I had for her had not just kicked in, they were kicking my ass.

April was mine. She belonged with me, and I wanted nothing more than to be hers.

But this was too fast. No one fell in love after one meeting and a hike down a mountain in a snowstorm. Not in real life anyway.

She looked up at me like I was her hero. I wanted to be.

"Good thing you're the biggest man I've ever met in my life." Her voice came out soft and breathy. "I'm not sure I'd trust anyone else to pick me up and carry me like that."

Her arms were still wrapped around my shoulders, and I wasn't moving an inch. "You should be carried everywhere."

That sounded like I was chastising her, and I cursed my tongue for being such a grump. I'd been cranky with everyone around me for so long, I wasn't sure I knew how to talk any other way.

I'd do it again right now and carry her to my bed if she'd let me. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. "We should get you warmed up."

"Yes, we should." She pulled off the gloves I'd put on her and reached for the zipper of my jacket. "With body heat. Lots and lots of shared body heat."

April's naughty little grin melted my icy fucking heart in more ways than one. For the first time in what felt like a thousand years, the corners of my mouth turned up in a genuine smile. Not because I was about to get laid—not that I was sad about that. But because I'd found someone who made me want to be happy.

That smile on my face grew as I reached for her jacket too. “Yep. Everyone knows that’s the best way to get warm. I’m practically hot already.”

April giggled, and it went first to my soul, and then straight to my cock. “Ooh, I wanna be hot.”

“You are so fucking hot.” That just slipped out and I wasn’t sorry.

April blushed and I couldn’t wait to do that to every inch of her skin from head to toe and everywhere in between.

CHAPTER 4

APRIL

I gazed up into Bridger's eyes, and anticipation bubbled up inside me. Our bodies were so close that his hot breath washed over my skin. That smile of his did something fun and naughty to my lower belly. And so did his dark eyes, glimmering with desire, hidden cleverly beneath thick lashes. Delicious.

I didn't always trust men with my body. Especially in New York and L.A. where it felt like the only way to exist was heroin chic. I wanted to prove that curves and thick thighs and soft bodies were beautiful and worthy of being worshipped too.

My failed talent agency had made me doubt that.

Bridger's absolute lust for me both in this moment and when we'd kissed up at my cabin, helped me remember. I could read the truth in him. He wasn't faking any bit of this heat radiating between us just to get his dick wet. He was hot for me, and that right there made me trust him so much more than I had anyone else in my love life.

Jumping into bed with someone I'd met just a few hours ago wasn't something I'd ever done before, and I likely wouldn't ever do again.

Aside from the whole *we didn't die in a snowpocalypse so let's prove to the universe just how alive we are* thing, there was something about him that was just... right. Right for me. I felt that at a gut level, and I couldn't wait to get to know him better to see what truth there was to that instinct. After we fucked each other's brains out.

This was going to be lots of fun. I grabbed hold of his shirt and tugged it open so the buttons went flying. With a quick yank of his collar, I pulled him tight against me, our lips mere centimeters apart.

A claim I'd longed to say to the right man, came easily with Bridger. I mouthed the words against his lips. "You belong to me, big boy."

He chuckled, his amber eyes twinkling in the firelight. I ran my hands along the hard planes of his chest and felt his muscles ripple beneath my touch.

"Say it again," he commanded. His voice was low and seductive, like dark honey drizzling over me.

"You. Belong. To me," I breathed against his mouth, feeling out of control in all the best kinds of ways.

His lips brushed against mine and he growled out his reply, "And you're mine now too."

He yanked my coat off my arms and tossed it aside, then slipped his hands under the hem of my sweater to pull it over my head. I expected his fingers to be cold, but his touch seared me as he slid the material up and over my head. When my head popped out, he waggled his eyebrows at me and trapped my arms in the sweater, holding them over my head, forcing me to arch my back. With an entirely too-delicious sparkle in his eye, he backed me up against the wall next to the fireplace and trapped me there with his big, strong body.

"I've been dying to taste this particular spot of skin since the moment I saw you." His hand roamed across my waist, then up and up, learning every single nook and cranny of my curves. Shivers went down to my toes, and I leaned into his touch.

"That's not one spot." The words came out in a gasp as he skimmed his knuckles over my bra and across the tops of my breasts, not giving me half of what I wanted. Tease.

"I want to taste all of you."

Bridger bent his head and pressed his lips to the spot his fingers had just been. Instead of a soft kiss, he scraped his teeth across my skin, nipped at me, and then kissed away the sting.

My breath hitched, and I groaned out at every new sensation that crashed through me. "Then taste me. All of me."

"You are so damn beautiful. Every inch of you." He whispered these sweet nothings, punctuated with soft kisses and little nips all up and down my throat.

I was a model. I knew I was beautiful, even when what felt like the rest of the world didn't. But when he said it, his words empowered me in a way that

had me feeling so alive in this moment. With him, and only him, the binds of any inhibitions or doubts that were holding me back broke, and I was free.

He finally yanked the sweater from my hands and tossed it aside. His fingers went to the back of my neck, and he threaded them through my hair. We stared into each other's eyes so long, I was sure I'd fallen into a sexy dream.

His eyes flicked from mine down to my lips and stayed there. I didn't want to break this spell, but I also couldn't wait for him to kiss me again. I parted my lips on my next breath and tilted my chin up, leaning into him, needing him to meet me the other fifty percent of the way.

Just before he leaned in, he looked so deeply into my eyes as if he wanted to dive into the depths of who I was, and at that moment, all I could think about was how perfect it felt when we were together like this.

We were two souls meeting for the first time, discovering something more powerful than either one of us had ever imagined possible. The look on his face clearly said that he knew this was so much more than a snowy hookup.

Our kiss wasn't even close to sweet. He nipped at my lips like he had my skin, and it wasn't long before our tongues were intertwined, wrapping together as if we were made to be together. He groaned into my mouth and then grabbed my thighs, picked me up, wrapping my legs around his waist, and turning to the open living room.

He was so incredibly strong and after this, I was demanding that he carry me everywhere. With hardly any effort at all, he bent to his knees, and then pressed me down into the soft, furry rug. Together, we pulled my jeans down my legs, and Bridger tugged my panties off right after them. He tossed them over his shoulders, and I giggled at his disdain for my undergarments, until I saw the awe on his face.

He literally licked his lips like a kid about to walk into a candy store with a hundred bucks. With the same careful measure he took with everything else, instead of diving in like I would have, he started slow, running his hands up and down my body to explore every inch of my skin.

His touches weren't shy. He knew exactly what he wanted and what he was doing. I couldn't help but moan when he cupped my breasts and ran his thumbs over the nipples. But he was only there long enough to tease me before his fingers were tracing the swell of my tummy and then curve of my hip. His total possession of each inch of my body left me with a rise and fall

of goosebumps, and the anticipation for what he would do next.

I wanted so much to tease him right back with my own touches and words, but I could hardly do more than sigh and moan. I couldn't even come up with good dirty talk, and he hadn't even gotten between my legs yet. I was the one who was ready to beg now. I'd get him back for that when it was my turn. "Please, Bridger. Don't tease me."

"I'm barely getting started. Got to get you nice and warmed up. Just wait until I use your thighs as my own personal earmuffs."

He moved all the way down, past my thighs, and pressed little kisses and licks across each of my toes and then the tops of my feet. I'd certainly never thought ankles were an erogenous zone, but every teasing touch had me glowing hotter and hotter. "Too much more and I won't just be warm, I'm going to combust and burn the cabin down."

"I want you completely melted for me, sweetheart." He trailed his fingers back up the outside of each leg, inching closer and closer to my core.

"If I melt anymore for you, I'm going to be a pile of goo right here on your carpet." The wicked witch of the west, or east as it was, cackled "I'm melting, I'm melting" in my head. And I might have said it out loud if he hadn't smiled, dipped his head, brushing his beard along the inside of my thigh, and pulled the fleshiest bit of my leg between his teeth, gently letting it slide between his lips. I groaned and pushed my hips up, needing him to do that exact same thing to my pussy.

"Bridger, you're going to be the death of me."

"Not until you've melted for me at least a couple dozen times." Finally, finally, finally he pressed hot kisses against my pussy lips. His tongue darted out, flicking across my clit, tasting me as if I were the most delicious treat he'd ever tasted.

He groaned or growled or both at the same time. It was a guttural moan, unable to hold himself back any longer. That kind of sound that came from a man lost in the moment. Lost in me.

His hands moved from my hips up over my stomach, caressing parts of me I didn't normally like to be touched. But with him, every part of me wanted to be caressed, worshipped. He slid his hands back down and gripped my butt in both hands, holding my pussy tight to his lips, licking and sucking and feasting on me.

The man had a tongue like a god. A really dirty, horny god.

I was going to have the best beard burn after this.

“You’re fucking delicious,” he whispered, as if the words weren’t even for me.

I couldn’t take it anymore and shoved my hands into his hair to hold him right where I needed him most. “Make me come, Bridger. Now.”

Before I even finished my demand, he was on top of me, pushing my arms up over my head and into the carpet.

“I’ll be inside of you when you come for me. I want to feel your cunt squeezing my cock.” He said the words with a deep, almost primal force that demanded my submission, and I was powerless to deny him. I loved this little battle of wills we had going on between us. Most guys either went all squishy for a dominant woman or wouldn’t play along at all. “Do you want my cock, April? Or do you want to melt for me some more?”

“Can’t we do both?” I brought my knees up and wrapped my legs around his waist, locking him to me. His answer was to kiss me hard, the taste of my arousal taking me from hot to entirely ooey gooey melted in a second.

Bridger reached into his pocket. How was he still wearing his jeans? He pulled out his wallet and, in a second, had a wrapped condom ready to go. I grabbed the packet, opening it, while he finally undid his jeans and dropped them down around his knees.

Oh. Ooh. He really was the biggest linebacker in the league. Not that I had anything to compare to, but there was no way anyone else in the wide world of sports was... bigger than Bridger Kingman.

Like... if I didn’t know condoms were incredibly flexible, I’d wonder if this thing was even going to fit. But I did know exactly where he was going to fit perfectly. God, I loved a big cock.

Apparently, I’d stared at his equipment for too long, because he grabbed the condom from me and rolled it down. “Don’t worry, love. We’ll go slow.”

He must have thought my open-mouthed, slack-jawed gape was trepidation. He didn’t know how wrong he was. “Don’t you dare.”

I loved the way he commanded what he wanted from me, but I had just as much fun telling him what to do. I wrapped my legs around his waist and twisted until he was underneath me, my weight holding him to the floor, just as his had done to me.

“I want all of you, big boy.” I positioned myself and reached between us, grabbing his cock and notching the head right at my entrance. Then I moved my hips just a few inches and sank down onto his thick shaft, slowly, until he was buried as deep inside of me as I could take him.

His eyes were closed, and his head pushed down into the carpet. He was taking long, deep breaths, and I recognized his attempt at controlling himself. But I wanted him out of control. I squeezed my inner muscles rhythmically, punctuating my need for him with my body and my words at the same time. “You’re mine, you are mine.”

I don’t know why it was so important for me to say it out loud like this again, but I needed to verbalize this claim on him. It felt like if I didn’t, he’d slip away from me.

He gasped at the intensity of it all and his eyes shot open, staring up at me before they rolled back in his head. He grabbed onto my hips and held me tight. “You want me to beg you to go faster, don’t you, sweetness?”

“I definitely want to hear you beg.”

I’d never been so bold and had definitely never said anything like that out loud before. Somehow, Bridger’s tough exterior mixed with his sweet but boldly protective inside brought out the truest parts of me I’d hidden from even myself. “Say it, Bridger. Beg me to ride your cock until I come.”

“Holy fuck that’s hot.” His fingers dug into the flesh at my hips. “Yes, fuck me, April. Let me watch you come apart, make yourself come on my cock.”

Okay, so he was probably new to begging, because that was straight up telling me what to do. But it still hit those buttons for me. I pressed my knees into the soft rug, closed my eyes, threw my head back and resisted every impulse I had to ride him like a naughty, horny cowgirl. Instead, I slowed both his movements and mine, so that each thrust brought greater pleasure and more intensity than anything I had ever felt before.

Bridger groaned and shifted his angle slightly so that every movement massaged my inner walls in just the right way. He pulled out ever so slightly before plunging back in, each thrust slower and deeper than the last.

Our hearts pounded together in rhythm, and it felt like we were meant to be together. Like our bodies already knew we were a perfect match. His hard muscles to my soft curves, his grump to my sunshine, his careful protectiveness to my willingness to jump in with both feet. We were laying claim to every inch of each other, and nothing could be better.

Oops. I was wrong.

Just as I was about to reach down to stroke myself as I rode him, Bridger shoved my hand out of the way and slid his fingers between us, cupping my pussy, stroking my clit with his thumb.

“This pussy is mine, and so is the orgasm. Ride me, April, take my cock, but I’m the one who’s making you come.”

CHAPTER 5

BRIDGER

Thick thighs might save lives, but April's were about to kill me. If she didn't come in the next seven seconds, I was a dead man. Because I'd rather die than come before she did.

Sex had never in my life been this good. And I'd had a lot of sex. Being a star football player from early on, I'd never even had to chase women. But, if whatever the hell I'd been doing with every other woman before this was sex, I'd been doing it dead ass wrong.

I always made sure my partners were well taken care of, because there was nothing sexier than a woman coming on my dick when I told her to. But nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to the pure bliss of April on top of me, her cunt squeezing my cock, teetering on the edge of exploding.

"April." Her name was nothing more than a growl coming out of my soul. "Come for me. Come all over my cock, right the fuck now."

"Beg me, Bridger. Beg me to come on your cock. I need it." She moaned out the words, whimpered her own plea. Her pussy tightened around my cock, pulsing around me.

Never in my life had I begged a woman for anything. But fuck, if that's what she needed to come, that's what I was going to give her. This goddess of a woman literally taking her pleasure from me, demanding it, had me half a breath away from falling in love with her.

I sat up, wrapped one arm around her ass so she didn't move off my lap, and shoved the other one into her hair. I gripped her pretty waves in my fist and tilted her head back, making her arch into me. With the last of my will power, I pressed my lips to her ear and growled my plea and my demand. "Please, April. Come for me now."

She ground against me one last time, and a full-body shudder rolled across her. Every muscle in her body clenched before she cried out. She grasped onto my shoulders, digging her nails into my skin as she finally exploded, her pussy clenching around me, taking me with her into the utter bliss of coming together.

I couldn't take my eyes off her, watching every pulse of her pleasure dragging the longest fucking orgasm out of me. The only thing that would have made this any better was if I'd been bare inside of her, spilling myself deep, marking her as my own.

A rush of tingles swept from my chest, spreading out in all directions. The idea of filling her with my seed, making babies with her, watching her belly grow with my children, stole my breath away.

I wanted that. And even the thought should have scared the shit out of me. But it didn't.

April's head dropped to my shoulder, and her harsh, fast breaths matched mine. I cradled her head, not willing to unthread my fingers from her hair just yet. I was cementing this scene, this feeling, her scent, everything, in my mind, because I knew it was going to be a pivotal moment in my life.

I was never letting April go.

I'd learned to trust my gut. It was how I'd chosen which school to play ball for and gone on to win every award a defensive player could while I was there. My gut told me to buy this piece of the Bear Claw, build a cabin, and start my own charity for pets rescued from natural disasters. My gut helped me become Defensive Rookie of the Year after being second draft pick and playing for the Texas Stars. It was also how I knew the Stars was no longer the place for me.

People thought I was careful with my decisions, but I just listened to my gut and followed it religiously. It had never steered me wrong.

And my gut... my heart said April was the one.

She gave a little hum of satisfaction and stretched, arching her back, pressing her tits into my chest. I lifted her head and gave her a deep kiss, claiming her mouth once again. When we broke apart, she was glassy-eyed and smiling.

"That was... I... you were..." She tipped her head to the side and blinked at me through her dark lashes. "I think you fucked my brains out. Words are hard now."

That wasn't the only thing hard. I was still inside of her, barely down

from our first round, and I was getting hard for her all over again. “You were the one fucking me. But I’ll be happy to return the favor.”

She gave a sweet laugh that turned into a groan as I laid her back and finally pulled out of her still-tight pussy. I disposed of the condom and realized I’d have to get up to find another one. For the time being, I wasn’t going anywhere.

Besides, I still wanted to have her coming on my tongue, and my fingers, and—

Bear let out a deep bark, followed by a soft, whiny cry for attention. April squealed and then giggled. “Oh, gah, that almost scared the pee out of me. I maybe forgot you had a dog... bear...enormous fuzzy ball of fur.”

“You’re frightened by my dog, but not me.” It wasn’t a question. Not once had she backed away, backed down, or anything else. It was one of the things that had me falling for her. She was a tough cookie. Even if she was a city slicker.

She reached up and booped my nose. Booped. “You’re not scary. He’s not either. He just startled me, because I was so into you, I forgot he existed. Bear is cute, but also, could probably eat me. I like living on the edge that way.”

It took me a minute to recover from the nose booping before I could respond. “I’m not scary?”

Honestly, when was the last time I’d met anyone who wasn’t a little bit scared of me? Came with the territory of being six-five and almost three hundred pounds of mostly muscle. Not to mention being named the football league’s meanest player.

“Maybe if I was a quarterback you were sacking. You’d probably scare the bejeesus out of me.”

I wanted to make a joke about sacking her. But I was a bit too stunned.

“You know who I am?” She was from Texas, and I had been playing ball there for the last four years. It made sense that she knew I was. My brain screamed ‘ball bunny’ but my gut said she was something so much more.

“Yeah. I grew up in a bit of a sports family.” She smiled just a little shyly, but I didn’t think it was over my fame, but because she was talking about her family. That had me curious. “My dad’s been following your career since you played at Nebraska. No one else has ever won the Bronko Nagurski Trophy, the Chuck Bednarik Award, the Lombardi Award, the Outland Trophy, and AP’s Football Player of the Year, like you did.”

Okay, normal city slicker women didn't even know the difference between offensive and defensive players, much less the names of the college football awards. "Uh, who's your dad, April?"

"Oh, yeah, umm, he's Hunter De la Reine."

Oh shit. Only sports' most powerful, well-known agent. Which made April his protege daughter. "Huh. I guess, well, I know who you are now too."

She shrugged and tried to pull away, but I didn't let her. I held her tight and cupped her chin. "Doesn't change anything, sweetheart. So I'm famous, and you're rich and famous. I still want to fuck your brains out. And not because of your father or anything else."

She finally met my eyes, and there was relief and something else I was hoping for shining in them. "Umm, I know what kind of contract you have. You're rich too."

"And what if I told you, I was ready to throw it all away? Would you care?" I already knew the answer. April had told her old man to fuck off when he'd tried to corner her into taking over his agency when he retired. She understood the merit of following your own dreams instead of someone else's.

"No." She waggled one eyebrow at my lower half. "It'd be a shame never to see your ass in those tight football pants ever again, but I'd never tell anyone not to be who and what they want for themselves. Plenty of people have thought they could do that to me, and it stinks."

"Okay then. If that part is out of the way, we can spend the rest of this storm getting to know each other. And I very much want to know everything about you."

"You just want to get in my pants again." She laughed, but I recognized a test when I saw one.

That was fine. Just because I'd fallen head over heels in three seconds flat, didn't mean she had.

"I do. But I want a lot more from you. There's something special between us, and it's not just the sex. I like you. A lot." I knew better than to scare her away by saying anything more than that. If it took me the rest of my life, I was going to convince this girl to marry me and have my babies. Lots and lots of babies.

She didn't immediately respond to that, and I was going to give her a minute to process what I was saying.

Fuck, I hoped she wanted kids. I didn't even realize I wanted any until I imagined little blue-eyed mini versions of April running around with a whole herd of big, fluffy dogs.

Better start with the dogs. I turned back toward the kitchen, looking for Bear. He'd probably curled back up by the water heater. "Bear, come here boy. Come have a proper intro to our guest, buddy."

No fluffy head or wagging tail popped out. Weird. Where did he go? "Bear?"

A big snuffle and groan like he was put upon that I was calling him sounded from behind April. He was laying on her other side, not three feet from the fireplace, calm and as comfy as could be. I gently stroked him in that soft spot between his eyes. "When did you sneak over there, you big fluffball?"

Spoke to how completely focused on April I was and my imagining of our future life together. "I think I'm not the only one who likes you. He's never been this close to the fireplace in his life. He's scared of it."

"I like him too." She ran her fingers over his head and gave him a scrunch behind his ear. "Why is he scared of the fireplace? He seems pretty fine with it now."

"He was caught up in a forest fire here in Colorado when he was a puppy. We have them pretty much every summer. Poor guy was a wreck. Patches of fur burned away, smoke inhalation."

"You rescued him?" She looked up at me like I was some kind of knight in shining armor. I was just a guy with a soft spot for animals. Especially ones in need.

"Yeah. He stays with my folks up here during the season." Wouldn't be fair to have him down in Texas when I'm on the road all the time. But if I moved back to Colorado, he'd be by my side a lot more than just my by-weeks. "I just picked him up from them this morning. Gotta have my guy by my side for the big shindig this weekend."

"Shindig?" Both April and Bear gave me that what-are-you-talking-about head tilt. These two were made for each other.

"Yeah. Our holiday Cause for Paws." We did fundraising like this a couple of times a year, but the holiday one always brought in the most money. Probably because I made a bunch of professional athletes donate time or money or prizes. Being scary had its advantages. "There's a 5K where everyone brings their dogs, then we do a big cookout and a party over at the

ski resort. There's a silent auction, and we raise a bunch of money for local shelters and make funds available specially to take care of pets that have been affected by natural disasters."

"That's... very cool. But won't you have to cancel?" She waved an arm at the window.

"This is Bear Claw Valley, doll. We love a little snow." The ski resort on the other side of the hill was likely doing a happy dance for all the fresh powder they were getting.

"Little?" She shook her head at me, and Bear gave a little woof in solidarity.

"What? Everything is little compared to me." Except April. She and I fit together exactly right.

"You got me there." She winked and let out a chuckle that made my heart do flips in my chest. "I guess everything is small when you're as big as a bear."

"You'll go with me to the Cause for Paws stuff tomorrow, won't you?"

"I'll have to cheer you and Bear on from the finish line of the 5K, because, you know, fancy high-heeled boots. But yeah, it all sounds like fun, and I'm always down for a good cause."

Here goes nothing... or everything. "And after that?"

She turned in my arms, and this time she was the one who pushed her hands into my hair. "I don't know, but"—she brushed her lips across mine, pulling away too fast to let me kiss her as I wanted—"I like you, too, Bridger. Even if you're the absolute worst at begging."

I was ready to beg her to stay with me forever. "I think it's probably going to take a long time for you to teach me that particular skill, sweetheart."

"Then you'd better hope it keeps snowing. Too bad we didn't bring my suitcase. I'm fairly sure I packed my fuzzy handcuffs. Oh, wait. Do you have any duct tape?"

EPILOGUE

APRIL



ne year later

“Does it ever not snow for Cause for Paws?” I clapped my hands together, waiting for Bridger to open the cabin door.

Bear was still running circles in the fluffy stuff and trying to eat the snowflakes. At least this year it wasn’t a whole ass blizzard. But this was the coldest I’d been since we’d both made the move to Denver. Who knew Colorado had three-hundred days of sunshine a year?

Bear Claw Valley on the other hand, once again had fresh snow. Good for skiing. Sucky for cute boots. And no, I was never giving up my cute ass boots.

“Not that I can ever remember.” He gave the door a good shake, and it still didn’t budge.

The 5k and the party at the ski resort had been the most successful fundraiser for the charity in its entire history. Partly because I was an excellent event planner, and partly because half of Colorado had shown up. I’d always thought Texans made sports a priority, but Denver? Man, that was a sports-crazy town if I ever lived in one.

They loved that a hometown boy was back. The Mustangs had made him an offer even his shitty agent couldn’t refuse. But Bridger had. And now he was the defense coach for the Denver State Dragons college football team. Next year, he’d be their head coach.

He loved it. I loved seeing him so happy. He was amazing with the kids. Someday soon he was going to be an amazing dad. But he didn’t know that yet.

We didn’t spend as much time here as I would like, but I treasured every

moment when we did. Most of my days were spent in Denver, pursuing my dreams and forging my own path, doing something I really felt made a difference this time.

I'd started a non-profit to promote body positivity and inclusivity in the fashion world, helping young models navigate the industry and empowering them to challenge the status quo. Denver wasn't the most body positive town, and I found myself fighting fatphobia in small ways and big nearly every day. Especially in the media.

It was challenging work, but incredibly fulfilling. But there were days I wanted to crawl into a hole when one too many concerned trolls told me to eat a salad. Bridger was always there to support me, to listen when I needed to vent, to celebrate my victories, and tell the assholes to eat a bag of dicks.

We were a team, in every sense of the word.

Bridger smirked at me, winking. "Sweetheart, could you come here and help me give this stubborn door a good shove?"

Knowing full well he could have easily manhandled that door open himself, I arched an eyebrow but went along with it anyway. Mustering my strength, we both pushed on the count of three. The door swung open easily, as if it had never been stuck in the first place. I sent Bridger a suspicious glance, but he just shrugged, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

As I stepped inside the warm cabin, I was taken with what I saw. It was aglow with the soft, romantic flicker of dozens of candles, their light dancing on the wooden walls and ceiling, making the whole place feel like a dream. The rough-around-the-edges cabin we knew so well had been transformed into an intimate sanctuary for just the two of us.

Bridger whistled for Bear, shut the door behind him, and pulled me into our perfectly warm and cozy sanctuary. He wrapped me into a bear hug, our bodies perfectly in sync. I could feel his heart racing in his chest. It matched the rhythm of my own.

"April De la Reine," he started, his voice shaking slightly with a mix of nervousness and excitement, which was totally out of character for the Bridger I knew and loved. He was all confidence and bravado all the time. Why was he saying my full name? What in the world could be wrong?

He brushed his lips across mine and gah, wasn't I being silly. There was nothing wrong, and everything was right. He was just flirting and trying to get into my pants. He didn't have to try this hard. I wasn't even wearing any panties tonight. They'd ruin the line of the tight leggings I was wearing.

Bridger went down on one knee and patted his leg for Bear to come over. Our big ball of fluff spun in a circle and sat down, still wagging his tail. I think he knew what was going on too. Bridger pulled out a small pouch, which I hadn't noticed in all the fur, that was attached to Bear's collar. He turned it upside down, and a small box dropped into his hand. My breath hitched as I looked at him, my eyes wide with surprise.

"You know I'm not one to beg. I mean, who could resist all this?" He gestured at his broad chest and muscled arms. His eyes twinkled in the candlelight, his grin boyishly charming.

I was going all swoony and gooey inside. I wanted to scream yes, yes, yes. But I bit my lip to give him the chance to play out his scene and actually pop the question.

"But for you," he opened the box to reveal a ridiculously huge, sparkling diamond ring, "I'd beg every single day. So, April, will you please be my wife?"

Caught in the golden candlelight, his hope-filled eyes and the immense love I felt for this man, I had only one answer. "Yes," I whispered, my voice quivering with emotion. "Yes, Bridger. I will."

I bent and grabbed his face, loving the rough feeling of his beard, and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him. Then, nudging him with a cheeky smile, I added, "And for the record, you look really good on your knees for me, big boy."

ABOUT AMY AWARD

Amy Award is a curvy girl who has a thing for football players, fuzzy-butt pets, and spicy romance novels. She believes that all bodies are beautiful and deserve their own love stories with Happy Ever Afters. Find out more about Amy [here](#):

Sign up for Amy's newsletter here and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

The Cocky Kingmans
[The C*ck Down the Block](#)
[The Wiener Across the Way](#)
[The P*ssy Next Door](#)



HOT UNDER THE COLLAR

SERENA BELL

ABOUT HOT UNDER THE COLLAR

Reggie's adopted pup comes with the ultimate perk: a date with a hot firefighter. Unfortunately, he's also the guy who rescued her when she set her bedroom on fire during a failed attempt at "self care." Can she turn a recipe for humiliation into a sizzling holiday fling—or more?

CHAPTER 1

REGGIE

This is so not me.

Before today, I would have told you that “self-care” was a concept for people who had too much time on their hands. I would have said candles were for religious services, and the removable nozzle on the shower was to clean the grout in hard-to-reach locations.

But my therapist told me this morning I have to do a better job of treating myself the way I deserve to be treated, so here I am. Trying, at least.

Because I *do* deserve way better than the bullshit deal I’ve gotten this year: My ex-husband leaving me for a twenty-four-year-old dance teacher, the two of them moving together to Santorini to lie on Mediterranean beaches and bonk each other’s brains out.

I definitely deserve better than that.

I’m willing to try this “treating myself well” for one night, if only as a fuck-you to them.

On my way back to work from my therapy visit, I bought tea lights at the grocery store, and when I got home, I dug out all the candles I own. There were two scented candles I got as gifts from people who clearly don’t know me very well, and a novelty candle shaped like a well-endowed penis—a gift from someone who clearly *does* know me.

I arrange candles in my bedroom, trailing them into the bathroom, around the sink and tub. The dick candle goes in a place of honor on my nightstand. I mean, right?

I have to admit, the whole effect is pretty. And peaceful.

I climb into the tub. The water is blissfully warm.

Okay, this self care thing doesn’t totally suck.

The water slooshes over me, covering my belly and setting my breasts afloat. It feels really good. At my therapist's suggestion, I've kept the shower nozzle within arm's length, and I reach for it now and turn on the water. Mmm... that's...

Whoa.

That's really good.

Way better than anything my ex ever came up with.

I am officially a self-care convert!

In the other room, I hear the Roomba leave its dock and start pacing my bedroom, but I ignore it, because the ticklish, delicious sensation of the water between my legs is waaaay too distracting.

I'm going to give my therapist a raise.

I brace my feet on the tub floor and lift my hips to make the spray of the nozzle more direct. And ohhhhhhhh.

A piercing sound stabs my ears and floods the room. What the—

I sit bolt upright, dropping the sprayer into the tub. And then I smell it.

Smoke.

I haul myself out of the tub and race into the bedroom. Holy shit; the Roomba has knocked over one of my tea lights and set the carpet and the bottom of my bedskirt on fire. I run back into the bathroom, looking around frantically for something I can fill with water. I dump tea lights in the sink and fill two small glasses with water, but by the time I get back to the bedroom, the water merely sizzles and steams on the fire.

Stay calm! Think!

It's harder than it sounds when your bed is on fire. And not in the good way.

I need a big bucket. Or...

Fire extinguisher!

I run downstairs to the kitchen, grab the fire extinguisher, and race back up. I yank the pin, squeeze the handle and—

Whoosh.

A moment later, the world settles.

The fire's out. The room is full of smoke, yellow powder everywhere, the smell of ammonia slicing through my brain. I grab the Roomba—which has miraculously evaded the fire—and power it off, then back away from the disaster, hovering outside the door of the bedroom.

As I stand there, panting, my heart gradually slows to a trot. And then—

as my brain begins to process again—I hear it.

The fire alarm is still screeching.

Shit.

And then, below the shrill cry...

Sirens.

Noooo.

I totally forgot: The fire alarms in my house are wired into the central security system, which means when the alarm sounds for more than ninety seconds, it calls the fire department.

Red light floods the bedroom, turning the yellow-powdered floor orange.

Fists pound my front door.

I duck into the bedroom and grab the first clothes I can find—sleep shorts that haven't fit me since Obama was president and the nearest t-shirt, which happens to say *The boobs are real, the smile is fake*—yanking them onto my still slightly damp body.

I race down the stairs and come face to face with two firefighters in full gear, masks down. Shit shit shit.

“The fire's out!” I tell them.

“Where was it?” one asks.

“Uh,” I say, because all of a sudden I remember:

Tub full of water.

Shower nozzle dropped in the tub.

Water still on.

Candles still burning (didn't have time to blow them out—too busy worrying about not setting entire house on fire, and shutting down Roomba so it wouldn't set anything else on fire).

“Where was the fire?” the same one demands, which is when I notice that even in a helmet he's distressingly good looking. At least six-three, with broad shoulders the gear can't hide, full lips, warm brown eyes, and a chiseled jaw.

And he's about to climb the stairs and see my nest o' self lovin'.

“Ma'am,” he says, which kinda, I won't lie, makes me want to die, even though in fairness he's definitely younger than I am. “Please.”

I point up the stairs.

He indicates my front door. “Out,” he says. “Go stand in the street till we give you the all clear.”

I definitely shouldn't think his commanding attitude is hot. Not after

almost immolating myself in an autoerotic fire.

It probably doesn't help that I was seven-eighths of the way to orgasm and am pumped full of adrenaline.

I obey the sexy command and head outside. It's September, the evenings starting to cool off, and my nipples tighten. I look down. The water dripping off my hair has left wet patches on my well-worn, light-colored t-shirt.

I am...

Highly visible.

I should have gone ahead and died when the sexy firefighter called me "ma'am," because I'm going to die of embarrassment anyway.

I bury my face in my hands.

My neighbors gather, drawn by the sirens and lights, concerned; I cross my arms so I don't give *them* a show, too. My eighty-year-old next door neighbor drapes a hot pink fuzzy sweater around my shoulders, and I thank her, pulling it tight around my *The boobs are real* headlights. She and my other neighbors clamor for info, and I lie and say I burned a pizza (seriously, can you blame me?). Thankfully, they lose interest and drift away.

The firefighters finish their work and come outside; it's just me now, and the not-as-sexy firefighter (he's still good eye candy) gives me a tight nod and heads back to the truck.

The hot firefighter has taken his helmet off. His hair is dark and neatly trimmed, high and tight, the edges all precise and baring a thin line of skin that's whiter than his seasonal tan. I recognize the haircut and him at the same moment: He's one of Mei's clients at the day spa and salon where I work. Greeaaatt, so on top of everything, I'll actually have to see him again.

Unless I hide the next time he comes in, which seems like an excellent idea.

"The fire's definitely out," he says. "It didn't reach the mattress, which is extremely good news because if it had, we'd have had to douse the mattress to make sure it was really out. Good work with the extinguisher."

I wasn't expecting praise, and for some reason—possibly my ludicrous outfit and tight nipples, possibly because he knows I was worshipping at the altar of the dick candle *with my shower nozzle attachment*—I blush.

He crosses his arms, and the stern expression on his face gives me fantasy material for the next time I'm foolish enough to take my therapist's advice. "I turned off the water and put the rest of your candles out. I'm going to give you the standard candle safety lecture. Always keep a burning candle within

sight.” He ticks it off on his fingers, which are long, blunt-tipped, and visibly calloused. My still alert girl-parts give a needy squeeze. “Extinguish all candles when leaving a room or before going to sleep.” He gives me a look that I’m pretty sure says that this also encompasses wanking in the bathtub. “Never burn a candle on or near anything that can catch fire.”

Never burn a candle shaped like a big penis, just in case you set your house on fire and a hot firefighter comes to put it out.

“I don’t usually—candles aren’t—that’s not—” I give up. “I, uh—I’m so sorry.”

Death, I am yours.

He waves a hand. “All part of the job. A few tips on fire extinguisher cleanup. We’ll take the spent one with us, but you obviously need to get a replacement ASAP. Vacuum up the contents—wear a mask when you do that, and make sure you use a vacuum with a filter. You can use isopropyl alcohol diluted 50 percent with warm water to get the stuck-on residue.”

“Thank you,” I manage.

His eyes meet mine, and the corner of his mouth turns up. “I’d say the pleasure was all mine,” he says, “but I’m guessing maybe it wasn’t.”

Then he turns and walks back to the truck, leaving me with my mouth hanging open.

CHAPTER 2

FORD

Since the fire at her place, I've been to Hott Spot three times for a trim. Reggie never cuts my hair.

Even when Reggie's the one who greets me at the front desk, she always finds a way to turn me over to the other stylist, Mei. Who is very pretty and gives great haircuts.

But she's not Reggie—whose name I only know because I asked Mei.

Today I'm determined: This is the day Reggie will cut my hair, I'll chat her up, and I'll ask her out.

When I push through the front door of the day spa and salon, the first thing I see is a flash of Reggie's multicolored hair behind the main desk. As I get closer, she sits up, giving me a better view of her heart-shaped face—round cheeks, slightly pointed chin, pierced eyebrows, and sparkling nose ring.

I know from talking to her the night of her candle fire that there's also a stud in her tongue.

I've thought about that tongue stud a lot.

"Hey!" I say.

She looks up. "Hi, can I help you?"

She either doesn't recognize me or is pretending not to know me. Fair enough. I might too if I were in her shoes. I know she was embarrassed the night we answered the call at her house and caught her in the middle of—

Well, the middle of whatever she'd been in the middle of.

I've thought about that a lot, too. A lot. Couldn't stop thinking about how she never got to finish, and I've pictured a thousand ways I could help her with that. My dreams have been full of ideas.

“I’m here for a haircut,” I say. “I don’t know if you remember me—”

“Mei usually cuts your hair, right?” she says, keying through something on the computer, staring at it like it’s the most fascinating thing she’s ever seen.

“You cut, too, right? That would work, if you’re available.”

“Let me just see if Mei’s available,” she says, like she didn’t even hear me.

“Hey—not sure if you remember, but I answered the call at your house the night of the fire,” I say.

“I know,” she says. Grudgingly, like she was *really* hoping I wouldn’t go there. She looks back at the computer screen. “Ah. You’re in luck. Mei will be free after this slot, in about five minutes. I’m booking you in with her—”

“About that night—”

Her eyes flash. “Can we *please* not talk about it? Don’t you have some kind of confidentiality agreement? Aren’t you under some oath not to discuss the weird-ass shit you see when you show up at someone’s house in the middle of the night and catch them worshipping at the altar of dick?”

I laugh. I can’t help it.

She scowls at me. “If our situations were reversed, you wouldn’t want to talk about it either.”

“I don’t own a dick candle.”

She snorts, and her gaze flicks to mine briefly, appreciatively.

“Hope this isn’t too weird a question—”

“Anything that starts that way is definitely too weird,” she says.

I laugh, then open my mouth to continue. But just then, Mei steps into the reception area with a client at her side. Nan.

“Ford Cartright! What brings you here?” Nan demands.

Nan’s the grandmother of one of my crewmates, and I spent so much time in her house growing up that she might as well have been my grandmother. She’s a seventy-ish plump woman with a head of soft, fluffy white hair. She also owns one of Rush Creek’s two bakeries, and she created Rush Creek’s now infamous Better-Than-Sex cake, which she calls Better-Than-Robert-Redford cake (even though everyone in town knows it by its real name).

“Hey, Nan. This,” I say, gesturing to my hair, which is more loose and scruffy than high and tight.

She scrutinizes me. “Yeah, that could use some TLC.”

Nan always tells it like it is.

“You waiting for Mei?” she asks me.

“Uh—”

No-win situation here: I can’t say in front of Mei that I don’t want her to cut my hair, but if I keep my mouth shut, Reggie will definitely pawn me off on Mei.

Nan looks from Reggie to me and back again, the corners of her mouth tilting up. Uh-oh. Nan is a notorious busybody, and that smile scares me.

“You going to the Hott & Cold Holiday Festival?” she asks Reggie.

I give Nan a quelling look, which has zero effect. Subtlety doesn’t work with Nan.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Reggie says, shrugging.

“I’m going.” Mei smiles at Nan. “I think it sounds like so much fun!”

“So much,” Nan says. She addresses Reggie again. “You love dogs, don’t you?”

“You know I do,” Reggie says, and her mouth curves in the first smile I’ve ever seen on her face. And is that a dimple?

It is. I’m such a goner.

“The festival promotes pet adoption and raises money for the Rush Creek Animal Shelter. Look,” Nan says, grabbing her phone. “Look at this guy.” She taps, scrolls, taps again, then holds the phone out.

Whoa. What’s her game? I’m pretty sure I know what’s on that screen, even before I crane my neck to confirm my suspicions.

Yup.

I close my eyes and shake my head.

“I know you lost Fargo earlier this year,” Nan says sympathetically to Reggie. “So tough, right? Losing Marcus was harder than losing my husband.” She pauses. “Much harder, actually.” She points to the phone screen. “This guy’s named Wags. Not too big, not too small—I met him last week. You’ll love him.”

“I’m not ready,” Reggie says flatly.

“You never *think* you’re ready,” Nan says. “But have a look at this guy.”

I open my eyes to see Nan pushing the phone into Reggie’s hands. Reggie looks from Nan’s phone screen to me.

“Is that you?” she asks, pointing to the screen.

“Uh, yeah,” I say.

The photo is one of twelve in our Adopt-a-Pet, Win-a-Date campaign. Everyone who adopts a pup gets a date to the Hott & Cold Festival—with a

firefighter. I wait for Nan to explain the setup.

She doesn't.

Okay, then. *I'll* explain to Reggie that if she adopts Wags, she'll also win a date with me to the Festival. And how much I'd like that.

"So you know the deal with this, right?" I ask Reggie. "The Adopt-a-Pet, Win-a—"

"Is he a good boy?" Reggie interrupts. Her eyes are fixed on the screen, and I'm positive it's not because it's a great photo of me. There's a softness in her eyes as she touches a finger to the photo, right on the little dog's nose. She raises her chin and looks up at the three of us. Her gaze is distant, still soft.

Damn, she's adorable. My train of thought gets hopelessly derailed by the longing on her face.

I'd guess she's been lonely. And that's bullshit, if you ask me. I don't know her well, but that night at her house I learned a few things, and I liked everything I saw.

I want to get to know her better.

She's still waiting for my answer. What was the question? Oh, right:

"Yeah, Wags. *Such* a good boy. The thing is, it's an adoption drive with a twist. If you adopt Wags, you automatically get a daaa—"

"Wags is a *total* sweetheart, isn't he, Ford?" Nan interrupts. "I heard Elsa Craig say she was going to try to adopt him this afternoon. After lunch, I think. So if you're interested, you should go right now, before he gets snatched up—"

Reggie shoves the phone at Nan. "Mei, can you take Ford?" she demands.

Well. Good to know that in a photograph that contains both me and Wags, Wags is the one who prompts immediate action...

"Sure," Mei says, shrugging.

Reggie is already heading toward the back of the spa. "Is Sonya in her office?"

"I think so?" Mei says. "Ford, follow me."

"Reggie, you should know—" I start.

"Oh!" Nan says, bringing her phone up suddenly to her eyes, in a dramatic rendition of someone who's just gotten a text. "Elsa is leaving to go to the shelter right now!"

"Reggie," I attempt again. "It's win a date with a—"

"Gotta run!" she says, and blows past me toward the back of the spa.

I glower at Nan.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she says. “I just did you a huge favor. You think when she said she wasn’t ready, she meant for a dog?” She gives me a hard look. “She meant for *you*. If you’d asked her out, she would have run the other way so fast...”

“So you tricked her. And she’s going to feel like *I* tricked her. Not cool.”

““The ends justify the means,”” Nan quotes.

“This is small town dating, Nan, not fifteenth century politics. Pretty sure the tactics are different.”

“Machiavelli is always in style.”

I shake my head, disgusted.

Mei clears her throat, and I give her a pleading look.

She puts her hands up. “I didn’t hear anything,” she says, with a sigh. “Ford, come on, let’s do something about that hair. You have a festival to go to and my prickly coworker to woo. Can’t have you looking like something the dog dragged in.”

CHAPTER 3

REGGIE

I kneel in the shelter's meet-and-greet room, and Wags climbs onto my lap, puts his paws on my shoulders, and licks my face.

"Hi, Wags, you good boy," I say, and his tail wags furiously.

He has short, light-colored hair and an elegant pointy nose, and he's skinny, whippet-like, but a little more substantial. He turns around once in my lap and settles, and I stroke his head, while his panting slows and his eyes close.

Pretty sure I'm in love.

Sonya, the manager of Hott Spot and one of my closest friends, leans against the wall watching us.

"I don't know," I tell her, even though I do. I totally know. "What if he doesn't get along with Gus?"

Gus is Sonya's dog, and he frequently comes to work with her.

"They don't have to *live* together," she points out. "I'm sure we can figure out how to keep them apart if they don't like each other. But the shelter says Wags gets along with all the other dogs, and Gus gets along with everything and everybody. Groundhogs. Squirrels. My Uncle Ernest. They'll be fine." She watches me a moment more. "You guys look pretty happy together."

The shelter manager, Carol, comes back, takes a look at Wags and me, and grins. "Can I take that as a yes?" she asks.

"You can take it as a hell yes." I scratch Wags's ears, and he sinks a little deeper into me. I don't want to get up and disturb him, but I do want to finish my adoption transaction before Elsa Craig shows up and contests my ownership.

Carol leashes Wags and leads the three of us to the front desk, where I fill out paperwork. She gives me a bunch of handouts with instructions for what to buy and how to help him with the adjustment.

“Oh,” she says, consulting something on her computer screen. “He’s part of the Adopt-and-Win drive.”

“Oh, yeah, Ford said something about that.”

“‘Ford?’” Sonya echoes. “You mean the hot firefighter? I thought we were here because of something Nan said?”

“Well, Ford just said—”

But I can’t remember what Ford said. Just that there had been some urgency in his voice—but it had been drowned out by the urgency in Nan’s, and my own need to claim Wags.

As if he can feel it, Wags leans his weight against my leg and gives a little sigh.

“G’boy,” I tell him, and he sighs again.

“You two,” Sonya says. “You’re the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, right,” Carol says, consulting her screen again. “Ford Cartwright was matched up with Wags. Lucky you.” She beams at me. “He’s definitely the hottest one.”

“Hottest—?”

“Hottest firefighter.” She rustles in a drawer. “Here you go.”

I look down at the item in my hand. It’s a bright red ticket to the Hott & Cold Festival. *Ford Cartwright Plus One*, it says.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Your ticket to the festival. As Ford’s date.”

Sonya makes a choked sound behind me.

“As—what?”

“The Adopt-a-Pup and Win-a-Date adoption drive,” Carol says patiently. “Ford’s your date.”

I shove the ticket across the desk like it burned me. “No,” I say. “No, thanks. I’ll just take Wags here, and Ford can—Ford can sponsor another pup. No date.”

“Wait,” Sonya says. “You’re turning down a date with the hot firefighter?” She gives me a hard look. She’s seen me crushing on him, and has tried to convince me to poach him from Mei—as a client, that is—cut his hair, and ask him out.

She’s convinced it’s some kind of Samson and Delilah thing. Cut his hair,

win his heart. That's what happened with her and her boyfriend Quinn, who she's head over heels about.

But ever since the night of the fire, I've been even more sure that will never happen.

Sonya, as always, looks super hot today. She's wearing a vivid cranberry tank, a pair of fitted pants, and a drapery jacket. A few weeks ago I cut her thick, straight brown hair in a short bob, and it *always* looks good. Whereas my mane of chaos always looks like I slept on it, forgot to brush it, and dipped it in a paint palette.

That last part's on purpose. The rest is just my fate. The rainbow is supposed to distract from the mess—no idea if it works. Basically, I'm jealous of everything about Sonya's appearance today, because she's not-yet-thirty and super hot, and I'm forty and feeling especially blobby since my ex absconded to Santorini.

"There's no way I'm going to that festival with him," I tell her.

"Give us a moment?" she asks Carol.

Carol tries to hide a smile. "Of course."

Sonya grabs my arm and pulls me to the side, Wags trailing obediently at my heel. "Reggie. What the heck? I know you think he's hot."

I sigh. I've never told anyone this story, but I trust Sonya. She won't laugh at me.

Much.

"You have to promise not to tell anyone."

"Cross my heart," she says, doing it.

Wags turns around a few times and settles at my feet, head on my Doc Martens.

"It was a few months ago. I was trying to take my therapist's advice and, you know, practice *self care*."

I hope she won't make me elaborate.

Luckily, Sonya is a woman of great sensitivity, and she gets it. "Faulty toy?" she asks. "I read a great romance novel where the heroine sets a dumpster on fire with her vibrator. Christina Hovland's *It Doesn't Have to Be This Hard*."

"Um," I say. "No. Not a toy. Well. Not exactly." I close one eye, wincing. "Shower nozzle," I whisper.

"Oh, yeah," she says. "Amen."

"I was in the bathtub. But I lit candles—my therapist's suggestion. In the

bathroom and the bedroom. The Roomba... knocked over a candle. The curtains went up in flames. The fire department came. Including. Hot Firefighter.”

“Oh,” says Sonya. “Oh, *my*.”

She’s trying really hard not to laugh. I give her an A for effort.

“There was a big dick candle burning on my nightstand. And I may or may not have left the shower nozzle running in the tub when I climbed naked out of it to put out the fire. And then grabbed the closest clothes I could find and put them on while I was still wet. No bra and my *The boobs are real, the smile is fake* t-shirt. It was your basic damp white t-shirt situation.”

“Right,” Sonya says. “So, that was a little embarrassing.”

“A little embarrassing is when you accidentally set your kitchen on fire because you leave the toast in the toaster. This was...” I roll my eyes.

“Was he nice about it?”

“He was professional about it,” I say. “Mostly.”

She raises her eyebrows.

“As he was walking out, he said, ‘I’d say the pleasure was all mine, but I’m guessing maybe it wasn’t.’”

“Reggie!” she says. “He likes you!”

“He doesn’t,” I retort. “I was a hot mess who’d just set her house on fire while making it abundantly clear that her best bet for orgasm this century was herself. Anyway,” I say, crossing my arms, “he’s too young for me.”

Wags whines in agreement.

She squints at me. “You don’t know that.”

“There’s no way he’s more than thirty-two, and I’m forty.”

“That’s not that big an age difference.”

“It’s an eternity.”

She rolls her eyes.

“I’m not his type, anyway.”

“How do you *know* that?”

“Come on, Sonya. Him: solid t-shirt, Carhartt jeans, work boots, high-and-tight haircut. Guessing former enlisted? Me: tattoos, ragbag quilt hair, piercings everywhere, and—” I look down to see what I’m wearing. Denim mini, ripped tights—it’s too cold for fishnets—and this studded leather vest thing I got for, no joke, twelve bucks at Goodwill. I don’t bother to finish the sentence. If she can’t see that one of these things is not like the other, we’re not having this conversation.

Her eyebrows are all scrunched up, WTF-style. She still looks way too unconvinced. “That’s a lot of reasons *not to*,” she says.

“Exactly.”

“But you only need one reason *to*.”

“What’s that?”

“That you *want to*.”

It’s my turn to give her the WTF face.

“Just saying, Reggie. Maybe self care in this situation is letting yourself have what you know you want.”

I grumble, under my breath, “Or maybe it’s *not* doing something you know will end in pain and humiliation.”

She presses her lips together like she’s trying not to say what she’s thinking, then ruins it by saying it anyway.

“I know your ex did a number on you,” she says. “But you’re beautiful and funny and smart and any man would be lucky to have you.”

“I’m forty and desperately in need of a glow-up, and my self-confidence took a sabbatical of unknown duration to Santorini.”

She giggles and says, “I rest my case.”

“‘Funny,’ I’ll grant you.”

“Just give this a chance, hon. Just a chance.”

“He saw me basically naked with wet hair wearing a see-through *The boobs are real, the smile is fake* t-shirt, having just made a fool of myself while jerking off in a bathtub with a dick candle on my nightstand,” I review for her.

“So he’s seen you at your worst and he still liked you enough to flirt with you.”

“He wasn’t flirting. He was issuing a parting shot. And oh, my God, Sonya, if I accept this date, he’s going to think I raced out of the salon to get a date with him!”

“So tell him the truth. That you fell in love with the dog and had no idea it was a package deal.”

I groan. Wags lifts his head, making sure everything’s okay. “I’m good, bud,” I tell him, and he lowers it again.

“Ugh,” I say. “This is lose-lose, isn’t it? If I keep Wags—”

Wags lifts his head again, giving me worried eyes.

“—which obviously I am,” I quickly amend. “Sorry, dude. That was thoughtless of me. *Since* I’m keeping Wags, if I refuse the date, I’m basically

turning down Ford publicly. Even if everyone in Rush Creek couldn't put two and two together, Nan would help them."

Sonya shakes her head. "I wouldn't think of it as lose-lose. Spending a night at a fun festival with a very hot firefighter doesn't seem like a losing situation to me."

I sigh. Wags sighs, too.

"Ladies?" Carol calls to us. "I don't want to rush you, but I have a couple of phone calls I need to make—"

"We're good," I call back. I return to the desk and hold out my hand. Carol smiles and deposits the *Ford Plus One* ticket in my open palm.

Sonya very wisely doesn't say anything.

We leave, me with Wags's leash in my hand and the ticket in my pocket.

Because maybe I want Sonya to be right. Maybe *wanting to* is a good enough reason. Maybe letting myself want—and have—is self-care.

And despite everything I said to Sonya, despite my protests and fears and... well, all the baggage and shit...

It's not too often a guy like that storms through your front door, all sexy command, and then slips back out again with a twinkle. And I'd like a second chance to make a first impression.

CHAPTER 4

FORD

The day of the Hott & Cold Festival, I pick Reggie up in my truck.

The shelter had texted me to tell me Reggie had adopted Wags and claimed my plus-one ticket. When I saw the text, I fist pumped. As pissed as I was at Nan for her interference, I couldn't complain about the outcome.

The shelter gave me Reggie's phone number, which she had left with them and said they could pass along, so I texted her to say, *hey*.

She texted right back, *hey*.

Wasn't trying to trick you into going out with me, I tapped out. *I think Nan had an agenda*.

Long silence. Then, *Well, it worked*. She added a tongue-out wink emoji.

I blew out a breath of relief. *Pick you up at 1:15 Sat?*

Sounds good, she texted in reply.

It isn't wild enthusiasm, but I can work with it. I have a whole afternoon to show her how good things can be between us.

When I pull up at her place, she's standing in the snowy building parking lot with Wags at her side. The event welcomes all leashed, well-behaved dogs, and having experienced a long photo shoot with Wags as my partner, I can definitely verify that he's easygoing.

Reggie looks beautiful. Her hair is down, and the colors are vivid, like she touched them up since I saw her last. Her cheeks are pink, her lips cherry red, her eye makeup thick and dark. The night of the fire, she must have taken her makeup off, so I know her eyelashes are pale... but even without lipstick, her lips were lush and pink and lickable.

I had to work hard not to think about kissing her the whole time I was lecturing about candle safety. That would have been unprofessional.

She wears a black coat that looks like something Morticia Addams would favor—calf length, fitted to her curvy figure, with poofs of fabric at the shoulders and a curved diagonal row of snaps up the front. Under it, I can just see black tights and black combat boots. No hat, no gloves.

“Aren’t you going to be cold?” I ask her.

“Don’t do that thing,” she says. “The thing where you’re all protective. I can decide my own temperature.”

I bite back a smile as she climbs up into the truck.

If you’d told me the woman who would mess up my head more than anyone has in years would be angry and dressed in all black, I would have laughed my ass off, but here she is.

We drive up to the Hott property, making awkward small talk about how our weeks have gone (hers: long but good; mine: there was a fire at the Goodall ranch; no one was hurt but the hay barn burned). The festival is being held in the big area between the wedding barn, the lodge, and the ranch house.

I circle the truck and hold out my hand. She eyes it suspiciously but grasps it and hops down. I don’t let her go when she lands. “This okay?” I say, instead, and she bites her lip and says, “I guess.”

“You guess,” I tease. “I can let go if you don’t like it.”

“No, it’s fine. Your hand’s warm.” She gives me a shy sidelong look, and it feels like a big win.

We walk side by side toward the crowds. There are kids and dogs everywhere, the kids in a frenzy of excitement over a candy cane hunt in progress. Couples hand-in-hand sip from to-go cups of cocoa. There’s a pop-up skating rink, a snow maze, sleigh rides, a big stage. A gigantic banner over the stage proclaims that dogs eager for adoption will be introduced on the hour and half hour. But right now, it’s ten past and—

“Are those dogs dancing?” I ask incredulously.

“Oh, yeah,” Reggie says. “That’s Sonya’s stepmom’s thing. Haven’t you seen them yet?”

“No. But they’re—very talented.”

They are—they boogey in time to the music, getting up on their hind legs and moving their forelegs in surprisingly human ways. I stare for a while.

“Wow,” I say, turning to her to see if she’s as impressed by the spectacle

as I am. But she's not looking at the stage. Her attention's on a couple on the other side of the audience.

My eyes follow hers. It's a tall sandy-haired man holding the hand of a black-haired woman with her locks twisted in a bun.

"Reggie?"

Her gaze snaps to mine, but something's gone from it, some light, and she pulls her hand out of mine. I hate the chill that slips into my palm where her heat was a moment ago, but I hate the blankness in her expression more.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine," she says, but I can tell she's full of it.

"Who are they?"

At first I think she's not going to answer. Then she sighs and says, "It's my ex-husband, Hardy, and his new girlfriend. Twenty-four year old dance teacher."

Ouch.

I don't say it out loud, but I must wince visibly, because she says, "Yeah. I'm mostly over it. I just wasn't expecting to see them. I thought they were in Santorini."

"Santorini, huh? The Greek island? So, your ex-cliché ran off with his new cliché to a cliché?"

She snorts a laugh, the color coming back into her face, and it's like that feeling when you fill in the last square of a puzzle. The world clicking into place.

Just then the blond guy looks up, his attention sliding our way. His eyes flicker with recognition when he catches sight of Reggie, and I can't help myself: I reach out and tug her close, settling an arm around her. She gives me a quick, startled look. I shrug and smile.

We both look over at her ex and his cliché. The blond guy's mouth falls open.

Reggie's smile peeks out of hiding, faint, like early spring flowers, promising summer and stirring my blood.

Hardy and his girlfriend move off.

Reggie looks up at me, her eyes a vivid July-sky blue with lighter flecks and a darker ring around the outside. They're beautiful.

"Well," she says. "That coulda gone way worse, I guess."

I raise an eyebrow. "What, like he could have tried to introduce you to her?"

“I’ve met her,” she says, biting her lip. “I took her yoga class with him once.”

We both wince this time.

She shakes her head, her mouth wry. “I just mean, if I had to see him at all, I’m at least glad I look good and I’m on a date with a hot firefighter. Even if it’s a fundraiser. He doesn’t have to know that.”

I need to set her straight that even though this is a fundraiser, I’m with her because I want to be. The only thing I’d change if I did it over is I’d ask her straight out if she wanted to go to the festival with me, instead of letting it happen by chance.

Although then she wouldn’t have Wags, who leans his head against her thigh like he’s found his happy place. (Dude, I feel you.) And I’m pretty sure she and Wags were fated to be together, regardless of what happens between Reggie and me.

I know what I hope happens.

I’m about to tell her all that when she says, “Holy crap, what is *that*?”

CHAPTER 5

REGGIE

It's doga. Doggie yoga. No joke.

"I had no idea that even existed," I say.

Ford smiles at me, eye crinkles and perfect angle-bracket smile lines.

"You want to try it?"

"Hell yes."

Ford's hand enfolds mine as he leads me toward the mats. His hand is large and warm, and it's been a long time since I was touched like this. It makes my fingertips tingle, lights up a network of nerves into a fireworks display.

I think of Sonya saying that maybe self-care is letting myself have what I want. Right now what I want is to have lots more of Ford touching me. That big warm hand other places, his mouth bossy on mine, the whole length of his body hard against me.

It feels good to want it, and even better to think about letting it happen.

Our eyes meet, and I feel like he can see my thoughts, because his eyes darken before my gaze drops.

I know he's here because I adopted Wags... but I want to believe he wants the same thing I want. That maybe Sonya's right and the tease he dropped on my doorstep the night of the fire was an invitation.

"Grab a mat!" an instructor calls.

The last time I was in a yoga class was when I went with Hardy to his girlfriend's class... but I'm not going to let her poison something I love, and I've always loved yoga.

Ford and I take side-by-side mats, trading off turns with Wags, who is definitely a natural. I wonder if someone did doga with him before he landed

in the shelter. I warm quickly in the big heated yoga tent, despite the frigid outdoor temps, and I have to strip off my coat. It's not easy doing yoga—or doga—in a mini skirt, but I don't worry too much about it, because I'm wearing thick fleece tights—basically leggings—underneath. Though downward dog feels a bit—risky. Wags is an expert, but I feel self-conscious as I raise my mini-skirted butt sky high and spread my legs.

Until I catch Ford ogling my ass from upside down, eyes dark and focused.

I wonder if we're picturing the same thing. Me sinking to my hands and knees, him crowding his big solid body behind me, his hands on my hips—

Ohhh.

I'm a little light-headed when I right myself. He looks dazed, too.

"How about a ride?" he asks.

My eyes must get huge, because his eyebrows go up.

"Sleigh ride," he says, amused, gesturing toward the line.

My face gets hot.

"Or," he says, mouth turning up even farther at the corners, "I'm happy to help out with anything else you're looking for."

I blush deeper. "I might," I whisper, "take you up on that."

When I do meet his eyes, they're blazing back at me. His hand comes to the side of my face, and my mouth opens a little in anticipation—but he only brushes my hair back behind my ear.

"Your hair is beautiful," he says.

That melts me. People tell me my hair is "cool," or "fun," or sometimes "a great statement." They don't usually say it's beautiful. And definitely not the way he said it, soft as a caress.

I'm tilting toward him a little bit. I restore myself to vertical. "Thank you," I say.

Ford's smile gets bigger, with a delicious side of male smugness that only makes me wish we weren't in a crowd.

"Cocoa?" he asks.

He buys me the largest size hot chocolate. While we stand in line for the *sleigh* ride, he wraps both my hands around the to-go cup, warming them between his and the thick paper. Standing this close, I can see the beginnings of dark shadow on his sculpted jaw, his mouth the only soft thing about his face. I can't stop looking at it.

"Reggie?" someone says behind me.

I turn to find Hanna—who owns Hott Spot salon—with her husband, Easton, and their baby, Eloise. “Oh, hey, Han,” I say. “Hey, Easton. This is —”

I pause.

Ford steps in. “Ford Cartwright,” he says.

“Hey, Ford,” Hanna says. “It’s been a while!” Meeting my curious gaze, she says, “We went to school together.” She glances from Ford to me, questions in her eyes.

I know, sister; I have all the same questions.

“I won a fake date with him by adopting Wags,” I say, by way of explanation.

“It’s a real date,” Ford says.

Hanna gives both of us a quizzical look. I can’t help her, because Ford’s statement caught me off guard, too.

“Um, well,” she says. “Have fun with that. Easton and I are off to help judge the snowperson contest.”

She gives me one last mystified look before she and Easton head off toward a jumble of icy sculptures, some of which are elaborate enough to count as art.

“You didn’t have to say that,” I tell him. “About it being a real date.”

One corner of his mouth curves. “It *is* a real date. I want to be here with you. So assuming you want to be here with me, that makes it a real date.”

My stomach goes warm. “Yeah. I, uh, do.”

The curve of his mouth blossoms into a full-blown smile. “Good.”

“You two!” the sleigh driver instructs, and it’s our turn to climb into the sleigh. The portable wooden steps are steep, and Ford takes my hand again, Wags jumping up. We sit side by side in the sleigh, Wags settling on the seat beside me, Ford’s arm draped around me. I lean into him, pulled like a magnet. He’s sturdy and warm, and I can feel all the muscle through our clothes. The thickness of his biceps, the cords in his forearm, the bunching and stretching through his side. Something settles, warm and liquid, in my low belly.

The horses pull us around the perimeter of Hanna’s family’s ranchland, now the site of the Hott Springs Eternal wedding venue. Everything is snow covered, muted and lovely.

We chat about nothing for a bit. His crewmates, my coworkers at the salon. How we spent winters as kids—him, in Rush Creek, building snow

forts and having snowball fights and ice skating on the lakes and ponds. Skiing at Mt. Bachelor. Me, in Ohio, doing essentially the same thing, minus the skiing. Minus the mountains.

We both stare out at the Cascades, standing in the distance, mostly white-capped at this time of year. Beautiful, remote, and ragged.

“Sometimes I look at them and just feel like everything’s going to be OK. Like they’ve been standing so long, and nothing can faze them,” Ford says.

“Well, except volcanoes,” I point out.

He snorts. “Thanks, sunshine.”

“Just telling it like it is.”

“The boobs are real. The smile is fake.”

“Exactly,” I say, pleased that he remembers. And then not so pleased, because I suddenly recall that I don’t want him to relive that night. But it’s too late. I bite my lip and say, “Can you just forget what you saw that night? Pretend it didn’t happen?”

Ford blinks. Frowns. “What if—” He stops. “What if I don’t *want* to forget what I saw that night?”

Our eyes meet. His are dark and intent.

I bite my lip. “You don’t?”

He shakes his head. “No. I *liked* what I saw. Or what I imagined I was seeing,” he amends, the corners of his mouth curving.

I blush fiercely.

His eyes rake over the blush, deepening it. “Yeah. That’s what I thought,” he murmurs.

I can’t look away from the challenge in his gaze, my body riding anticipation so sharp it’s almost pain.

With an abrupt jolt, the sleigh ride ends and our fellow passengers start disembarking.

I stand, but before I can extricate myself from the sleigh, he stands and scoops me up like I weigh nothing. I gasp, laughing, struggling.

“Put me down!” I cry. “I’ve been eating like crap lately. I weigh a ton!”

He shrugs. “Well, it looks really fucking good on you.” He hops down the temp steps and jogs with me in his arms, Wags panting along behind us.

I don’t let him see how much I like that. I turn my face into his chest. He smells like snow and cold, a whiff of smoke. I could lick him.

“Put me down,” I say, with way less conviction.

“Nope,” he says, still trotting with me in his arms, into a small grove of

trees, out of view. Wags follows us into a clearing. It's a winter wonderland, the branches coated with a thin sparkle of snow and ice, the sky bright blue above our heads. A wooden bench squats at one side of the clearing, iced over from a recent storm.

"How did you know this was here?" I ask, drinking in the beauty of the scene as he sets me on my feet.

"I played in these woods with the Hott brothers, growing up." He watches me quietly as Wags settles at our feet, lying down and closing his eyes. Ford takes both my hands again, his big and warm and swallowing mine up... and the intensity of his gaze scares me.

No, that's not what scares me.

What scares me is how good it feels. How much I like it. How much I want this—Ford and me—to be happening.

"So," he says, voice low and thick with suggestion. My core softens in anticipation. "That night. In the tub. I've been wondering."

He lets go of one of my hands. Reaches out. Rubs his thumb over my lip.

"Did you finish?"

His eyes are dark, serious, intent. I can't look away. I don't want to look away. My mouth is so dry, I don't trust myself to speak. Instead, I shake my head.

"I didn't think so," he says roughly. "I was pretty sure you got interrupted. And you know what I really wanted to do that night?" His thumb slides over my lip, tugging it down, slicking across the sensitive inner curve, and my whole body goes liquid. "I wanted to pick you up and carry you back to that bedroom and lay you down. Tell you I knew exactly what you were doing in the bathtub and ask if you'd let me get you there."

A helpless whimper breaks from my lips, and heat flashes into his eyes. I have no more than a second to love it, the fire, the need, and then his mouth is on mine, replacing his thumb. Hard, hungry, completely in control. His hand fits behind my head; his body presses along the length of mine, and I moan softly again. He makes a soft broken sound deep in his chest, almost a growl, and the kiss deepens, his tongue finding mine, sending pleasure to every nerve ending in my skin. His mouth slides away, trailing kisses along my jaw, down my throat. Ford unsnaps my coat and tugs it open, his lips moving into the scoop of my black lace top, finding the curve of my breast.

"I've been thinking about doing this," he breathes. "Getting you off."

My body goes molten at his words.

He pulls my top down, finds the lace edge of my bra, peels that away, too, his mouth following the path he's cleared for himself to my nipple, which he takes in his mouth. The contrast between the icy air on my skin and the heat of his mouth and hands winds me up, and up. His mouth is tight on my nipple, insistent. My breasts, always sensitive, are on fire for him, the deep tug between nipples and clit bright and alive, bringing me close enough that I wonder if he could send me over the edge this way.

His big hand slides down my front, cupping between my legs; I press into it, tipping my hips, reaching for more. And then I have a moment of sanity, clarity:

“Someone might see us.”

“That's true,” he murmurs, his breath a warm brush against my ear. “So I'll just have to make you come fast.”

One more hungry kiss that doesn't end, one more pinch of my nipple, his fingers flicking over it afterwards to caress away the almost-pain, one more tight, hard rock of his big palm over the aching place between my legs, and I'm there, coming for him, coming so hard for him. His mouth muffling my cries and his hands slowing so he can soothe me back down.

And no one sees, and the snow muffles sound enough that I can tell myself no one heard, either. And while it's possible I'm wrong about that, I honestly can't even bring myself to feel bad about it.

CHAPTER 6

FORD

She stumbles to the bench and sits down. She laughs when her butt touches the ice, and murmurs, “It feels good. I’m so hot and swollen; the cold feels good. God. Everything feels good.”

I smile at her. I’ve been wanting to do that for a while now, and the satisfaction on her face is as rewarding for me as the thrill of a well-executed rescue.

“C’mere,” she says.

I do, stepping between her legs.

“It’s cold,” she warns.

“I can handle it,” I tell her.

She unzips me, and before I can take the full force of the ice-cold air, she lowers her mouth to me.

“*Fuck*,” I whisper. “You don’t have to—”

“Shh,” she says around me, and her tongue is a thing of beauty, strong and limber and everywhere at once, the stud cold in contrast to the heat of her. I have to hold myself back so I don’t thrust too deep for her, but she keeps one hand on my ass and one on the front of my thigh, showing me, setting the depth, and I move against the caress of her mouth.

“You’re so fucking hot. God. That’s so good.”

She groans her approval against my swollen, needy cock.

Holding back, not thrusting into her mouth, is its own pleasure. I don’t let myself push, so the tension builds and winds at the base of my spine.

“Reggie—”

“Shh, it’s okay,” she says again, and then I’m coming against the soft rub and hard stud of her tongue, my hand tangling deep in her hair.

“Fuck,” I say, when she lets me go, smiling, and zips me back up.

Wags opens one eye, then the other, lifts his head from the icy floor. Staggers to his feet and leans his nose against Reggie’s knee.

“Hey, bud,” she says. “Thanks for sleeping through that.”

She stands up and I open my arms. She steps into them, leaning her head against my shoulder. We’re cuddling, I realize. I’m surprised and also not surprised to find out she’s a cuddler. I cup her head, stroking her hair. “Thank you,” I say quietly, and she tips her face up and smiles at me.

I smile back.

When both of our legs are a little less wobbly, we head out of our little snow cul-de-sac with Wags trailing.

I’m grinning, about a whisper away from whistling. But the festival’s just about over, and I don’t want the day to end.

“How would you feel about coming back here with me tonight to the Hott & Cold Holiday Prom?” I ask her.

I’m watching her face, so I clock the moment it freezes. The moment when she steps back out of my embrace, the side of my body going cold.

“Ford,” she says. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s not a have to,” I say, my stomach going cold. I knew we should have addressed the issue of the fake versus real date sooner. “I want to. Reggie, I know this started out as a fundraiser, but I like you. I really, really like you. And I want to spend more time with you.”

She won’t meet my eyes.

“Reggie.”

“I can’t,” she says. “I’m not... ready.”

It’s an echo of her words at the salon, of Nan’s assertion that if I asked Reggie straight out, she’d turn me down. The only reason this day has happened at all is because it was always pretend in her mind.

She sighs. “Ford... I’ve had a really good time today, but I think we should call it quits now. Before—before anyone gets hurt.” She closes her eyes. “I mean, that night was pretty emblematic. What you saw that night was who I am right now. My therapist told me I should try to practice some... *self care*.”

The last two words are forced out against the backdrop of a deep blush.

“And you saw how well *that* went. I’m a hot mess. And I don’t want to put that on you, or anyone else. I need some time to be, I don’t know, more... more *solid*.”

I'm trying to find the right words around the ball of emotions in my chest, and they're not coming. She grasps Wags's leash and says, "In other words, this is a classic example of 'it's not you, it's me.' But in this case, it's really true."

"Reggie," I say.

"Please don't," she says. "Let's just agree it was an amazing day."

She gives me a quick fierce hug, and the feel of her body against mine steals all my words.

"I can get a ride home with Sonya," she says.

And then she's walking away from me, and I'm left feeling like she's kicked me in the ribs.

It's weirdly familiar, and then I get it: It's the sensation of being kicked as someone struggles when you're trying to save them.

I'm not saying I'm rescuing Reggie. Fuck no. If there's anyone capable of taking care of herself, it's this woman.

I'm just saying sometimes you take a kick in the ribs and keep trying because you know something good and right will come out of it.

"Reggie," I say. "Stop. Just stop for a fucking second, and let me tell you something."

CHAPTER 7

REGGIE

stop, because Ford's command has so much authority. It's not the kind of tone you ignore... and plus, I can feel it between my legs, a rumble of pleasure.

I turn around, and he's standing there, arms crossed, not so different from how he looked when he showed up at my house. Less gear. Same expression on his face.

"You say you were a hot mess that night." He shakes his head. "That's not what I saw."

"No?"

"No. I saw a woman who knows what she needs and how to get it."

My reaction must show on my face, because he laughs and shakes his head. "That, yeah—I mean, of course. It was a total thirst trap, seeing what you'd been up to, and it gave me all kinds of ideas. We've already been over that. And—" He gives me a long, assessing look. "I'm not done with those ideas, by the way."

My body goes hot again.

"But that's not what I mean. I mean that you weren't counting on anyone else to help you figure out who you were and what worked for you—that's the part that I liked."

Now it's the ache in my chest that has my attention right now, the feeling that the ice there wants to crack, wants to melt, but I won't, can't let it, because...

Because I'm too scared.

"And I saw a woman who's got a head on her shoulders in an emergency. Who put out a fire, who did what needed to be done. Smart, calm, with it. Not

a hot mess at all. Grace under pressure.”

His eyes are steady on mine, and all I can think about is Sonya saying, *Maybe self care is letting yourself have what you know you want.*

“I saw a woman with a t-shirt that cracked me up. A dick candle altar on the bedside table. A sense of humor. *My* sense of humor. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to know you better. And I was totally right, because every little bit I’ve gotten to know you today has only made me want to know you more. Better. All the way.”

Tears press at the backs of my eyes, threatening in a way they haven’t, not once, since Hardy left.

“You weren’t supposed to see any of that,” I tell him, finally finding my words. “You weren’t supposed to know any of that.”

“I get that,” he says. “But I did. I saw you sweaty and flustered and off your game. Alone and trying to make the most of it. And I wanted more of you.”

It feels like he’s taking a blowtorch to the ice in my chest—too much at once, but also the only way back to myself.

“I don’t want you to be disappointed,” I confess.

He just stares at me, like the words I’m saying don’t make any sense.

“Like Hardy was, in the end,” I explain, and my voice cracks on it. My eyes fill with tears.

And then they’re spilling down my face, and he takes a step closer, cupping my face in his hand and swiping the tears away with calloused thumbs. Lowering his mouth to mine and kissing me in a way that feels like the connection I was craving, like an asked and answered question.

“Reggie,” he murmurs. “I will never be disappointed.”

“You can’t know that. Hardy must have thought that, too, at first.”

“Hardy is a complete and total fool. He obviously had no idea what to do with a real woman or how to hang onto a good thing. His loss is my gain, and I’m not the kind of guy who will ever forget that.”

And that’s it. The ice melts, and I’m breathless, drowning in the sensation.

Then I find air, and my voice.

“I like you, too,” I say. “I’ve liked you since you showed up at my house and oozed confidence and competence and rescued me—”

“You rescued yourself,” he reminds me, but a smile has broken out on his face, laugh crinkles forming.

“You did tell me how to clean up the yucky fire extinguisher mess.”

He raises his eyebrows, laughter in his eyes. “You could have looked that up on Google.”

“You made me feel like things were going to be okay,” I say. “And I loved being with you today. And what we did. In the woods. I want to—I want to do that again. But first... I want to go to holiday prom.”

A grin blooms on his face, full flower. “Yeah?” he says.

“Yeah.”

“Yes!” He pumps his fist and makes me laugh.

I look at my phone. “Give me an hour.”

CHAPTER 8

FORD

Reggie gets a ride home with Sonya, and true to our agreement, I arrive at her place an hour later. I leave the car in her apartment building's parking area, and climb the steps to her place, knocking at the door.

The door opens, and Reggie stands there, and holy shit.

She's wearing a short black dress sewn from several layers of lace. It's feminine AF but also incredibly badass, like Reggie. The heart-shaped neckline makes her already amazing tits look like a feast set out for me, deliciously pale against the black fabric. She's wearing black cat-eye liner and mascara and a whole bunch of other eye makeup. Red lipstick. I want to kiss it off right fucking now. And that's before I see the combat boots.

"You look incredible," I tell her.

She smiles at me. "So do you."

"Those boots," I say. "You can keep them on later when I take the rest of it off."

"I was planning on it," she says, and her smile gets bigger.

"Reggie," I say roughly, and then we're kissing, soft mouth and hard stud, and it's all I can do to take my hands off her and get us out the door so we don't miss holiday prom completely.

The Hott & Cold Holiday Prom is in full swing when we arrive, vibrant with red and green dresses and matching cummerbunds. A huge Christmas tree squats in the corner, decked out in colored lights and an eclectic collection of ornaments. The room, darkened for dancing, sparkles with the reflections off a disco ball.

We take a minute to absorb the atmosphere. At the front of the room, a DJ spins a mix of '80s hits and holiday songs from every decade. People dance

in groups and pairs, a happy fray. I spot Sonya and her boyfriend, Hanna and her husband, an assortment of my crewmates with the dates who won them by adopting dogs. The expressions on their faces are pretty hilarious, ranging from “how the hell did I get myself into this” to “how the hell do I get myself out of this?”

And then, of course, there’s me. Holy shit, I lucked out. I slide a look sideways at Reggie, at the rare smile on her face and the curves of her body under that black dress. I’m a huge fan. Though that doesn’t stop me from thinking about later, when I’ll be removing that black dress from her killer curves and running my hands over every inch of her. When I’ll be following my fingertips with my lips and tongue until she cries out my name.

When the thick heels of those boots will be digging into my ass.

As if she can hear my thoughts, she looks up and gives me a knowing smile, then slips her hand into mine. It’s trusting, confiding, and I squeeze her hand back, so grateful to be here with the most beautiful woman in the room, to have earned her willingness to give this thing between us a shot.

“Into the Groove” comes on, and Reggie beams and tugs me onto the dance floor. She’s a good dancer, sexy and uninhibited, and I watch her with frank interest. She holds my gaze, sending a little challenge back at me. *You like?* her expression seems to say, and as I swing into motion across from her, I let everything in my eyes and face tell her *hell yes*. Heat surges between us, as we dance, holding eye contact. Her eyes are dark with need, her lower lip soft enough to make me think of the sensation of her mouth on my dick.

The music shifts, Coldplay’s version of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” I hold out my arms, and she doesn’t hesitate before stepping into them. She’s soft and curvy to the touch, and she settles her cheek against my shoulder. It feels like she’s meant to be there, and my heart pounds with the pure pleasure of it. The rightness of it.

We slow dance to the song, our bodies drifting closer and closer together. The space between us feels super-charged with chemistry, and I can’t help the way blood swells my cock. She apparently doesn’t mind, because she nudges her hip against my erection, then tilts her chin to smirk up at me.

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s what you do to me.”

“You’re good for my ego.”

“The big guy doesn’t lie.”

She cracks up. “Seriously, Ford? *The big guy doesn’t lie?*”

But I just pull her closer and lower my face to rest my cheek against her

hair. It's soft and silky and smells like spring rain and roses. I like the contradictions—Reggie, dressed all in black, wearing combat boots, and smelling like flowers and the gentlest season.

It's possible we would have found our way to each other even if she hadn't set her bedskirt on fire, but I can't help feeling like this was meant to be.

"Do you believe in fate?" I ask her.

She shrugs. "Not really."

"I feel like either I have to believe in fate, or think that the Roomba was programmed by Nan."

She hoots a laugh. "I wouldn't put it past her."

The song ends and Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This) starts up. But I don't let Reggie go, and she doesn't try to get away. We just stand there, holding each other, enjoying the moment.

A flash of bright pink snares both our eyes; it's Nan in a dress so vivid it's practically fluorescent. She's dancing with my crewmate, her grandson. She lifts her head and catches my eye, raising an eyebrow when she spots me still holding Reggie. *See?* she mouths.

Thank you, I tell her, and she beams.

"I think we made Nan's holiday season," I tell Reggie.

"Good," she says, reaching up to stroke the soft edge Mei cut into my hair. Her touch feels electric, delicious. "Because she made mine."

Everyone around us is dancing and we're standing still in each other's arms.

"I've changed my mind," Reggie says. She steps back and crosses her arms, smirking a little. "About being at holiday prom with you."

I raise my eyebrows.

Her eyes twinkle as she looks up at me, bright as Christmas lights. "I'd way rather be home in bed with you."

I scoop her up, throw her over my shoulder, and carry her out.

As much as I loved holding her in my arms and dancing with her, this is the moment I've been waiting for. I open the door to my apartment, and watch her face as she sees what I've done.

There's a trail of white twinkly lights leading up my stairs, and she turns to look at me, amusement and wonder on her face.

"What did you do?" she asks.

"I had an hour," I say. "It doesn't take me an hour to put on a tux."

That makes her laugh.

I nod my head to indicate that she should follow the lights, and she does, climbing the stairs with me right behind her, admiring her bare creamy thighs, unable to stop myself from reaching out and running a finger from the inside of her knee upward. I hear her soft exhalation, and it makes me instantly hard. She looks back at me with a knowing grin, and I raise my eyebrow as if to say *yup*.

The lights lead her up to my bedroom, where they ring the bed.

"No candles," I say. "Safer."

She snorts.

"C'mon," I say, and lead her along the last little bit of lit path into the bathroom.

"Self care," I say, gesturing. "I have a very adjustable removable shower nozzle. I myself use it mainly for getting soap off my back, but I hear rumors it's good for other things. You could show me. Or I could show you. Whichever you'd rather."

Her eyes are big, her lower lip soft and full and a little wet. I want to lick it. I want to lick all of her.

I turn on the water in the tub and spin her around to give me access to the zipper on her dress. I unzip it and let it fall to the bathroom floor, leaving her in just a black lace bra and matching panties. This time it's my exhalation that's audible in the quiet space, and she turns in my arms and slides close.

Then she pulls back just a bit and gives me a wicked smile. "Where's my dick candle?" she asks.

I burst out laughing. Then I sober.

"I have something *way* better for you," I tell her.

Then I proceed to give her exactly what she wants for Christmas.

ABOUT SERENA BELL

USA Today bestselling author Serena Bell writes romantic comedies with small towns, big hearts, hot nights, and all the feels. Serena's books have earned many honors, including a RITA finalist spot, an RT Reviewers' Choice Award, Apple Books Best Book of the Month, and Amazon Best Book of the Year for Romance. When not writing, Serena loves to spend time with her college-sweetheart husband, two book-loving kiddos, new sewing machine, and stash of dark chocolate. Find out more about Serena [here](#).

Sign up for Serena's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

Wilder Adventures

[Make Me Wilder](#)

[Walk on the Wilder Side](#)

[Wilder With You](#)

[A Little Wilder](#)

[Wilder At Last](#)

Hott Springs Eternal

[Hott Shot](#)

Under One Roof

[Do Over](#)

[Head Over Heels](#)

[Sleepover](#)



LADY AND THE SCAMP: A CANINE LOVE STORY

KILBY BLADES

ABOUT LADY AND THE SCAMP

Bo is the handsome mixed-breed Callie never expected to meet. An award-winning Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Callie usually runs in the show dog crowd. Then, a pet-friendly gala gone wrong shows her Bo's true stripes. He went the distance to protect her, but will the world—and their human caretakers—accept their forbidden love?

CHAPTER 1

“A pet-friendly gala was a bad idea.”

I said this to my spaniel, Callie, who looked twice as put-out as I felt. Tucked under my arm, she balked at the chaotic scene. Her dark eyes blinked in astonishment. Her nose twitched in irritation. Her usually firm jaw slacked a little.

“No offense.” I smoothed an apologetic hand over her silky hair.

Callie’s behavior at black tie affairs bettered that of most humans. Show dogs received their share of invitations. Callie was the three-year title defender of Best in Show at Bergdorfshire. That made her the most famous bitch in the world.

She glanced up at me with a look that said, *Do we have to do this?*

I returned one that said, *Yes. But there will be CBD treats for both of us when we get home.*

Make it two CBD treats and a tummy rub. She narrowed her eyes in negotiation.

“The princess gets what the princess wants,” I conceded aloud.

She and I talked like that: a little human speech, a few canine sounds, and a whole lot of body language. People who said dogs couldn’t communicate weren’t paying attention to their dogs. Callie hadn’t gotten to where she was by reducing herself to some mindless human companion. Callie was a total boss.

“Come on, girl.” I set her down, resigning myself to join the mayhem on the ballroom floor. What I wore tonight was nothing like the practical handler’s clothes I wore when we were showing. In place of sensible flats and a frumpy skirt suit with enough to give for me to achieve a brisk walk, I

wore a slinky evening gown, and very un-sensible shoes. Despite restrictive attire, I pulled her lead with the same tension I would use in a show. Under these bizarre circumstances, she would find it comforting—a life raft and a tow line in a sea of utter havoc.

The room was organized as most charity dinners were: lavish tables positioned around a stage. At some point, someone would appeal to the crowd to open their wallets. It would have been ho-hum if the tables hadn't sported a unique feature: they'd been half-set for dogs.

Human chairs alternated in singles and pairs with fuzzy, rectangular rugs. Fine china and crystal stemware on tabletops alternated with food and water bowls on floors. The human settings had name tents in front of the plates. The dog bowls sported paw prints that corresponded to the size of the breed; calligraphy spelled out the name of each dog.

Even I had to admit—it was terribly well-designed. It stood at the intersection of party planning and canine chic. A visual of the empty room would have made a stunning photo spread for a magazine. But the room *wasn't* empty, which meant things weren't going so well. The dogs weren't keeping their places. There was cavorting and sniffing and too many dogs were unleashed. There was aggressive petting and cuddling by owners trying to calm their canines, and looks of exasperation, because, really, who had thought this was a good idea?

"Someone needs to have a talk with Steven," I muttered under my breath.

Steven was the event planner. He'd been in-house with Happy Hounds for years. Ours was a rescue organization that placed abandoned dogs. Every year, Steven's holiday gala concepts got bigger. Every year, a little more went wrong.

"Someone needs to have a talk with Steven," I repeated once Callie and I reached our seats. I said this to Philip, the Executive Director. The two of us had been fundraising together for three years. I hadn't been invited purely because of Callie's and my stature. I was here in my new capacity as President of the Happy Hounds Board.

"Callie—in top form, as always," Philip complimented on my approach. I was used to people addressing my dog first. I fished a small chew bone from my clutch and put her down on her fuzzy rug. "And Shayla," he greeted me next, his warm eyes rising to mine. He was tall and wavy-haired—completely gray but possessing a youthful air that proved how well some men aged.

"Welcome to your first holiday gala as Board President." He looked

around. “It’s quite the event.”

I gave the room another quick scan. “I can honestly say I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Philip leaned in and lowered his voice. “Our VIP has yet to arrive.”

“Then maybe you can tell me more about him. The file you sent didn’t have much.”

“Oh.” Philip seemed surprised. “I thought you two had met.”

I shook my head in confusion. “Where would I have met a random donor?”

His brow lowered into a frown. “Didn’t you know? Max von Rainer is your neighbor.”

“I live too far away from civilization to have neighbors.”

I didn’t so much have neighbors as I had people I ran into when I drove into town. My breeding operation-slash-handler academy sat on twenty acres.

“You can’t mean that mansion on the hill...” I scoffed. I called it “the feudal estate” in my mind. In one of the oldest, proudest, down-homiest ranching communities in the foothills of the High Sierra, it stuck out like a bejeweled thumb.

It resembled a small castle, with its carriage houses and guest houses and other kinds of houses that only rich people understood. It wasn’t just large, it was ostentatious, out of place, and entirely too grand.

“*That mansion,*” Philip reported, “is the former home of his father, the late Klaus von Rainer. The family’s been dark for six years. Klaus was a major donor; when he died, the donations from the family foundation dried up. Recently, Max has shown an interest.”

“Why the change of heart?”

I was skeptical that Max even had one. He hadn’t exactly been neighborly in the three years since I’d bought my place. The first week I moved in, I’d received a nasty-gram complaining about construction. The second week, it had been grouching about too much traffic. The third week, it had been a threat to report me for clearing trees that were the rare habitat of a protected weevil. If Klaus had died six years earlier, the offender had to be Max—the worst neighbor I’d ever had.

A waiter chose that moment to float by with champagne. Impressive, considering the random Chihuahua nipping at his heels. Philip and I each plucked up a glass. The long sip I took afforded me a moment of reflection.

Max wasn’t the kind of person I wanted to meet. But I was Board

President. I needed to be willing to court donors who were willing to give to the cause. Whether I liked them was immaterial.

“Full disclosure,” I began to hedge. “There might be a reason I’ve never met him. I don’t think he strictly—”

But Philip’s sharp break in attention cut me right off. His gaze shifted from my face to something over my right shoulder. Before I could turn fully, he was extending his hand in greeting. Max von Rainer had arrived.

“Max,” Philip greeted with a large smile and a booming voice that was necessary given the din. In the short time since I’d found Philip, the room had grown more chaotic. Callie—ever the professional and rather used to being around dozens of dogs—remained under the table enjoying her treat. But I couldn’t think about Callie right then. Couldn’t think, full stop. Max von Rainer looked nothing like his snooty name.

In place of black tie, he wore a dark gray suit with a lighter cowboy hat. Wait...not a suit. A dark jacket. And were those *jeans*? The boots he had on were stylish but well-worn.

His thumbs were hitched in his pockets, his shoulders were relaxed, and he seemed at ease. That was the biggest clue that he was rich. He’d come to a black-tie affair dressed like a cowboy on his wedding day and walked in like he owned the place.

“Looks like you finally got me.” His voice was deep and his tone was mildly sarcastic.

“Max. You’re looking well. So glad you could join us tonight.”

Philip simpered a little. But Max took his flattery in stride. “Dinner tastes better when it’s for a good cause.”

Max not yet noticing me gave me more time to take him in. Astute brown eyes peered from beneath the brim of his hat. A fair-skinned, heart-shaped face and proud cheekbones held something ancient, and even more regal than his name. He was tall, but not imposing. Broad, but not too thick. I could see him as a swimmer with that build.

And don’t forget that big dick energy, a voice inside me whispered as my girly bits decided that courting him for a donation wouldn’t be so bad. Love thy neighbor and bury the hatchet and all. My rogue brain would have kept on with old adages if I hadn’t scolded her to quit mixing metaphors.

“And who is this handsome boy?” Philip asked. It took me following Philip’s gaze to realize that Max had brought a dog. Standing thigh-high to him was some sort of mixed breed. The frenetic energy the male dog carried

was either a clue that he was an adolescent, or proof that the sheer number of dogs in the room had him on edge.

“This here’s Bo,” Max responded.

“Beautiful animal,” Philip praised—some sort of platitude, I was sure. It was the kind of compliment one paid to a purebred who was a fine representation of his breed. But Max’s dog was just a dog—one who ignored us in favor of sniffing out Callie. I watched closely now, conscious of the tension in the room and protective of my girl.

That dog—no *every* dog—in an environment this precarious ought to be on a leash. I wouldn’t hesitate to pick Callie up the second she seemed wary. For the moment, she had halted her gnawing and set her sights on Bo. Her chew bone sat still where she’d grasped it between her front paws. I half-expected her to lose interest and return to her chewing. Instead, she smiled and wagged her tail.

“Max.” Philip finally turned to me. “This is Shayla Hicks, President of our Board of Trustees and a renowned breeder/owner/handler. Also your neighbor, I believe. And this right here is Calliope, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel extraordinaire. Last year, Callie took home Best in Show at Bergdorfshire for the third year in a row.”

Most people who were introduced to Callie either complimented me for guiding her to championship or marveled at what a beautiful dog she was. The look Max gave her was underwhelmed. Instead, he fixed his gaze on me. He was sizing me up, though I couldn’t tell if he liked what he saw. I’d been told the chartreuse of my evening gown complemented my smooth, brown skin, and that sweeping my braids up into a chignon flattered my shoulders.

“Bergdorfshire. That’s a fancy show.”

Not a moment after, he shifted his gaze to scan the room. It felt like a dismissal, as if he cared nothing for my response. The rudeness of his gesture reminded me of all those mean notes he’d sent. Yet again, I dreaded having to be the one on deck to sweet talk him into making a gift. But kissing up to insufferable people was part of the job.

“Should we sit?” I suggested. It took a concerted effort to smile.

His gaze floated back to me. “Yeah. Maybe we’d better.” Then, he spoke a sharp command to Bo. “*Platz!*”

Breeds with strong regional origins responded to commands lodged in their collective unconscious. The oddity of using German with Bo reinforced my “obnoxious jackass” theory. Leave it to a vainglorious billionaire to speak

in a different language to his garden variety mutt.

To Bo's credit, he calmly lowered himself to the floor, then looked to his left, under Max's chair toward Callie, who had risen to her feet to check him out. When Bo lay down, she did, too. Them getting along put me at ease in light of growing pandemonium. The noise level in the room was rising—the ratio of dog sounds now drowning out those of humans. Needing something to take the edge off, I had another long sip of my champagne.

Before I could make small talk, Steven swooped in, whisper-hissing to Philip moments after we all sat down. "We need to get started." The neutral expression on Steven's face belied his voice's panic. "We're going to switch the order of the courses. Dogs first, humans second. The canines are getting restless."

"Yes, by all means, let's begin." Philip came just short of shooing Steven away. Admitting that the event was spinning out of control was embarrassing, especially in front of a donor.

"It's nice to be able to treat the dogs, isn't it?" I mustered a warm smile for Max and picked up the menu card that had been left on my plate. The canine courses were chilled beef consommé, followed by chicken liver and vegetable pâté, with peanut butter pumpkin cookies for dessert.

Max didn't comment, but reading the menu card in front of him, he showed the hint of a smile, complete with a sexy dimple I resented. What kind of person didn't make conversation at a charity gala? Half the people here came for the networking, but he was like a stone. I hated that he was so hard to read.

"How long have you and Bo been together?" I decided to break the ice. People loved to talk about their dogs. I started liking him a little more when he smiled and reached down to scratch Bo's scruff with affection.

"I've had him since he was a puppy. Technically, he still is."

"It's a kind-hearted thing, to adopt a dog." I would kill him with kindness, if nothing else.

He quirked an eyebrow. "I suppose that's why you breed pedigree."

"Actually, I grew up with rescue dogs." I smiled sweetly and kept my voice light. "I have two rescues at home now—they're my pets."

"And Calliope's your business." I didn't like his derision, though he wasn't the first person to ever knock dog breeding.

"No, it's more than that." I laid out all my reasons. "I respect breeding as a tradition. It's worth keeping certain lineages alive—understanding their

temperaments, and how they can live in harmony with humans. If we didn't breed dogs, we wouldn't be able to tell families which breeds were great for kids, or train service dogs as helpers and companions."

"So you breed Cavaliers because they're great for kids..."

"I don't breed Cavaliers to win trophies and crank out puppies if that's what you're asking. I love Callie. And I love the breed."

Regardless of Max's behavior, talking about Callie made me smile. I looked down at my girl to find her playing tug-of-war on a short rope with Bo. It was one of the toys that had been set under the tables to entertain the dogs and they'd made good use. Bo was a fair bit bigger than Callie, which might have been cause for concern. But he was gentle with her, and didn't play too rough.

At least his dog's not an asshole. I looked back up at Max, annoyed by his obvious judgment. The man had a chip on his shoulder, and Lord knew why. I was saved from having to make more small talk by the arrival of a team of waiters. They encircled our table for coordinated service. Only, instead of setting plates in front of us, they stooped down to the dogs' level. In perfect synchronization, they tipped glass carafes full of dark liquid downward to fill their bowls with the canine appetizer: chilled beef consommé.

Callie and Bo stopped what they were doing long enough to follow their noses, then dug into their meals. I looked around to find a small army of servers at the other tables doing the same. Suddenly, the flurry of activity—all the barking, and tousling and tension that came from having so many dogs in close proximity—quieted and a chorus of happy slurping ensued.

I gave a little laugh. Max muttered, "That'll do it."

Philip's face was abject relief. I polished off my champagne, thinking to start a fresh subject. We'd said all that ought to be said about purebreds versus mutts.

"Philip mentioned we were neighbors. I'm sorry we've never met. It's not too easy to pop next door with all the acreage. If I ever wanted to borrow a cup of sugar, I'd need a map and my hiking boots."

"Maybe I'll send a golf cart one day. Have you over for tea?"

He said it so flippantly. I'd never met anyone so disingenuous. Did this man ever say anything he actually meant?

"I'd love to host you as well." I smiled benignly. "To show you my farm. I do more than breed prize-winning Cavaliers, Mr. Rainer. I use my excess

kennel space to take in rescued dogs—some of them in pretty bad shape. Happy Hounds sends me their worst cases.”

Something—could it have been a flicker of humanity?—flashed across his eyes. He was looking at me again in that way that made my stomach flip. But I’d never know what he might have said next. An ear-splitting, desperation-filled shout of “Scarlett, *no*,” rang out in the crowd. Philip stood in abrupt alarm. I set down my glass and swung my gaze toward the panicked voice, then in the direction where the stricken man was looking.

I did so just in time to see an enormous Great Dane with her paws on the shoulders of a waiter who looked scared enough to wet his pants. Her muzzle was down and she lapped loudly at whatever food was on his plate.

“Scarlett, *no*,” her owner repeated, in motion now. But breaking into a run in a room full of dogs was a bad idea. Now dogs were running, not just in pursuit of the Great Dane owner—in pursuit of more waiters who had filtered in with plates full of the human first course: steak tartare.

Suddenly, dogs were everywhere; waiters were down; humans were shouting and crying; Philip turned green and Max began to laugh. I couldn’t do much more than watch in abject horror as it spiraled into bedlam. I was finally jolted out of my thoughts when Callie tugged at her leash.

Then, all hell broke loose.

“Can you handle Callie’s grooming today?” I asked my second-in-command. “I have to take a call.”

“You know she loves being groomed by Uncle Jake.” He smiled down at her and used his cooing voice.

Jake had lived in California for a decade, but sounded like he’d arrived from Kentucky last week. He’d relocated for love—upended his whole life for a guy who had only lasted a year. Jake was so good, I’d convinced him to stay.

“I know you slip her bacon treats you think I don’t know about.”

I handed Callie over, who he gave an admonishing look. “That was *supposed* to be our secret. Look at you, telling momma what we done.”

That afternoon, we had a photo shoot. *Canine Quarterly* wanted to do a piece about me and Callie and the school for dog handlers that I operated

here on the farm. The piece wouldn't run for another six months, but Callie was about to come into season. Two months from now, she would be heavy with pups.

"After she's done, will you take her to the Grassy Knoll?" I requested.

I tried to minimize the amount of time I kept my dogs confined. The Grassy Knoll was the name for one of many free range spaces on my property—an acre of groomed grasses on low, rolling hills sprinkled with ancient, shady oaks. It was one of Callie's favorite places. Trips to the knoll usually involved a half hour of play and naps for all involved. California sunshine meant we could use it all year without worrying about bad weather. It was true—Jake and I did have the very best jobs.

Jake gave a little salute before disappearing with Callie. It forced me to focus on an unwelcome task—that of notifying Philip of the Board's decision. It had been ten days since the fateful holiday gala—ten days since the debacle that would be talked about for decades. Nine days since the media had gotten it in their teeth and published unkind stories with headlines like *Disaster in Dogtown* and *The Happy Hounds Charity Gala: What a Fundraiser Shouldn't Be*. It had been eight days since the first of the lawsuits had started to file in. Thankfully, no one had been seriously hurt.

I dialed onto my video call from my cozy office, a second-floor perch in the main house with a view of my farm. I could see across to the kennels, to my outdoor training ring, to the indoor ring I used in hotter weather. To the left were my support buildings—everything from staff quarters to the grooming hut.

"Hey Philip," I said kindly when his face appeared on the screen. He looked like he'd been through hell. We'd spent countless hours on the phone with attorneys, fielding calls from donors, and fighting with the insurance company.

"Hey, Shayla." He seemed worse than he had these past few days, throughout our deluge of difficult meetings. It told me he was cracking under his façade.

I didn't ask how he was doing. We both knew the answer to that. So I cut to the chase.

"Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Bad news," he answered immediately.

"We're letting Steven go. It's clear the concept was his idea and there were details he didn't disclose."

“And the good news?” He seemed afraid to ask.

“You get to keep your job.”

Philip did not look victorious. A firing would have been a career-ender, but staying would be a long road marked with intense scrutiny and a litany of additional, awkward conversations. The only thing that had saved his bacon was his donor relationships. Firing him would have done more harm than good.

The next twenty minutes were spent informing him of other decisions. We would hold off on announcing plans for a gala in the coming year. I would give an exclusive interview to *The Canine Confessional*. It was a calculated maneuver that would dredge up the embarrassment of the event, but it would also give me a chance to promote a new narrative to restore Happy Hounds.

“Whenever it’s appropriate, I’d like to take a few days off,” Philip was saying.

But before I could form an answer, the person I had least expected rode into view. I recognized him from his big hat, and from the golf cart he rode in on, and from the discernible form of the dog at his side.

“Philip,” I said in astonishment. “I gotta go. “Max von Rainer is here.”

After the way things had ended, no one had dared to imagine that Max would want anything to do with Happy Hounds. Philip and I had joked that we might see him back in another five years. And it wasn’t as if he and I had hit it off at the gala. Between that, and the whole debacle, and his previous unneighborly behavior, I hadn’t thought I would ever see him again.

I was suddenly pleased that I’d chosen to look nice today on account of the photo shoot. I was farm-girl chic with a button-down shirt and cowboy boots in gray suede. My soft blue jeans were snug-fitting and dark washed with a light ombre on the side that echoed the gray in my boots. In place of the tinted moisturizer-slash-sunblock I relied on day-to-day, I’d put on a little makeup. It was nothing like the doe eye and evening dew look I’d put on for the gala. But my braids were fresh and I looked about as good as a woman could look without seeming like she was trying.

I went at a measured pace as I made my way downstairs. It’s not like I was in a rush to see the man, or like I’d thought about him since that night—not his dark eyes, or how good he’d smelled or the fact that he was such a tall drink of water who reminded me that I was parched.

Now that I knew his name, it wasn’t like I had Googled him for unofficial

purposes. It wasn't like I was afraid I couldn't act natural around him now that the extent of his hotness had registered. It wasn't like I had forced my brain to disassociate his *unsparkling* personality from the package he came in, to let me have a sexual fantasy or four.

"Max." I was out my front door before he had a chance to knock. He and Bo were on their way up my front steps, to the large porch that wrapped around my timber-framed house. He looked delicious in boots and jeans and a fine navy sweater polo that fit him just right. His suit jacket from the other night had concealed impressive arms—corded forearms with sun-lightened hair and biceps that proved he could bench me. Setting my eyes on him again, I couldn't help but smile and surrender to the obvious: physically, he was just my type.

"I'll admit—I didn't expect to see you, not after Saturday night."

"What can I say? You left an impression." He said it like he meant *me* and not a ballroom full of crazed dogs. "If you're free, I'll take you up on that tour."

He smiled in a way that was utterly disarming. I wondered at his change of demeanor. At the gala, he had seemed so...strange.

Not wanting to be tricked by whatever spell he meant to put me under, I actively resisted.

"I see you brought Bo."

I bent to my knee to greet the dog who had grown on me. I respected the way he'd handled himself through the chaos of Saturday night.

When I'd torn my eyes away from the horror long enough to check on Callie, I'd found her cowering under the table; Bo had stood directly over her, covering her smaller body in a fully protective stance. Bo had bared his teeth and not backed down until Max had convinced him I was Callie's human.

"He insisted on coming. Wanted to make sure Callie was okay. I've never seen him growl like that."

"He could make good money as a bodyguard," I quipped.

This time, Bo greeted me like we were old friends. After we'd shared a warm hello, I rose to my feet and reached into my hip belt for my walkie.

"Jake, it's Shay. Is Callie all done?" The walkie squeaked off and I waited for an answer.

"Want me to bring her back down?" The walkie crackled as Jake shut it on and off.

“Yes, please.” I pressed the button once more. “Tell her she has a visitor.”

I replaced the walkie onto my belt and leaned my hip against the railing. Max rested his thumbs in his pockets. “You said you foster rescues. Is that right?”

I nodded. “I always have done. After I became a donor and learned more about Happy Hounds’ challenges, I started helping out.”

Our conversation was broken by the minor ruckus of Bo dashing down my front steps and racing off in the direction from which Callie was coming. In an uncharacteristic maneuver, Callie wriggled out of Jake’s arms. He bent enough to let her down safely, then let her break into her own run.

Watching the two of them reunite made me chuckle. The now-groomed Callie looked like a million bucks, her white and chestnut hair flowing glamorously as she ran, but the simple joy on her face was unmistakable.

“Come on, Callie,” I said after they’d had a good minute together, sniffing and cavorting as dogs did. “Don’t worry. Bo can come.”

I began to walk us toward the training ring, remembering my task—to appeal to the philanthropy of the billionaire next door.

There was no way of telling how much he actually knew about Happy Hounds. His father had been the original donor. That meant I would have to start from the beginning.

“Happy Hounds started out as a no-kill shelter—a kennel facility that harbored rescued dogs. We cared for them until we could place them in homes. After we grew out of three different locations, we realized a bigger facility couldn’t meet the demand for shelter space, let alone the social needs of the dogs.”

“So you started a foster program.” He finished my thought.

I nodded as I opened the door to the training facility to let him in.

“The organization as a whole can foster 150 dogs at any given time. Here on my property, we can foster up to twenty. When dogs come to me, they don’t move into a kennel—they move into a home. Ten of my employees live on the premises, rent-free in return for fostering. The tenants in my other units are affiliated with a different nonprofit that places people who need housing. In return for fostering, they live here for free, too.”

His eyebrows rose to a level on his forehead that told me he was impressed.

“How does this space factor into your foster operation?” His gaze washed

over the bright green of the turf that made up the majority of the vast space, not to mention the obstacles on the course—ramps and steps and tunnels and jumps and runs.

“Fostering isn’t the only place where we’ve grown capacity. This is our support center. It’s where we provide obedience training and social/emotional behavior therapy to make at-risk dogs easier to home.”

“Why is it set up like a show ring?” he asked, noting the stations and podiums on the far wall. He sounded less confrontational this time.

“Behavior therapy for the nonprofit is every morning. My for-profit handler school is in the afternoon.”

The sound of dog tags jingling followed us as we walked. Bo and Callie trotted behind, somehow in perfect lockstep despite their difference in size.

“So who pays for all of this?” he asked. “Does the nonprofit reimburse you?”

I shook my head. “I finance my charitable activity from my breeding and training profits. They serve as in-kind donations to Happy Hounds.”

“Show me more,” he implored a bit firmly. I imagined that people with the kind of money he had were used to making demands. Somehow, beneath his questionable social skills, I sensed a tender heart, if not for humans, for dogs. Noting his shift gave me the sort of rush that reminded me why I’d joined the Board. Most people found the idea of asking other people for money intimidating. But it was easy when you believed in the cause.

“This is our veterinary clinic.” I ushered us into the next building. The space between the indoor training ring and the clinic was short—ten yards between structures, door to door. Between the living houses and the working buildings, my farm resembled a small village. The clinic had the same gable roof and white clapboard siding as the other spaces on the farm.

“Some of the pets that come to our clinic have been malnourished or abused, and require serious medical care. This is also where we perform routine services, like physicals and vaccinations. And every dog who needs it is spayed or neutered.”

I waved to my vet tech on our way out. She was in a space we called the lounge, snuggling a dog who had surgery yesterday. As I held the door for Max to exit, she mouthed to me through the window, *Who is he?* then gave me a knowing nod and a thumbs-up.

“Moving on to our supply closet.” We walked outside for another short minute before entering another building—this one as large as the vet clinic,

but filled to the brim. “We excel at services that no other shelter in the state even offers. Care and feeding support for families who have love for a pet, but worry about affording one. We’ve even created a transportation and vetting network that allows for adoptions across the U.S. Our track record in finding the right forever-homes is impeccable.”

For the first time in minutes, I stopped and turned to face him. “So. What do you think? Is it more than you expected from a championship-winning show dog breeder?”

“I might have misjudged you, Ms. Hicks,” he said with a cocky playfulness that telegraphed sorry-not-sorry. Still, I could see he was impressed. In spite of his perpetually flippant tone, I was learning that his words held truth.

“What’s all that, over there?” He motioned to the set of buildings on the other side of the outdoor training ring.

“Oh, that?” I looked where he was looking. “Those are buildings I use for my for-profit side. They house our breeding spaces, birthing suite, temporary quarters for nursing moms, and spaces where prospective families can come and look at pups. But I know your disdain for pedigree, so I doubt you’ll want to see all that.”

Then, he unleashed a powerful weapon: a charming smile.

“Actually, I would be very interested in seeing that side of the operation.”

Was Max von Rainer flirting with me? I had no idea what he was playing at, but there was no reason *not* to play along.

“Right this way.”

From there, I might have turned on a bit of my own charm. Twenty minutes later, he’d seen enough to know that my breeding center wasn’t some slipshod, backwater puppy mill, or some overpriced scam that capitalized off of Callie’s pedigree, and her wins.

“I suppose I’ve taken up enough of your time,” he said when we returned to his golf cart, then gave a whistle to summon Bo. I looked behind us. He and Callie weren’t trailing. “I know I showed up unannounced. I appreciate you being gracious. What you do here...” he looked past me, toward all the buildings “...it’s truly amazing.”

His dark gaze pierced into me and his words seemed so heartfelt that they played at my own tender sensibilities.

“Well...” I felt breathless. “I do what I can.”

Why was I letting this man get to me? He gazed at me for a long moment,

so long my neck flushed. Before I could grasp for something graceful to say, he spoke again.

“I’d like to do what I can, too.”

This is it.

He meant a donation. But the way he stood close, and the way he looked at me made it seem like more. His gaze dropped to my lips and, good Lord, if I didn’t pray that he would kiss me.

“I’ll do some thinking.” His voice had quieted and lowered. “Then, I’ll send you a check.”

Two Months Later

“Shayla. It’s time.”

Jake’s voice crackled over my walkie. The urgency in his tone gave it away. The day we’d been waiting for had finally arrived. Callie was having her puppies. Any normal day this late in her gestation, I’d have been with her around the clock. But today was no normal day.

I got right back on the walkie to summon my facilities manager. “Tillie, I need you to take over with the delivery.” I heard the breathlessness in my own voice. “The first shipment’s coming into the dock.”

The first shipment, meaning the first dog food shipment. The loading dock, meaning the one attached to our new warehouse, which Max had donated to Happy Hounds and had zoned and built on my property in a month.

“I’ll be there in two minutes.” Tillie’s response came over the walkie at the same time as the sound of her golf cart engine came through, yet another incredible donation from Max.

It turned out Max owned all kinds of *companies* that made all kinds of *things*. In addition to donating items that his companies produced—everything from building materials to pet supplies—he’d written us an actual check. One with six zeroes behind it. And when you put a one in front of six zeroes, that added up to a million.

It had made for a hectic two months. He’d sent help so quickly, we’d hardly been equipped to absorb it. Two weeks after his visit, things had started to arrive. My saving grace had been Callie. Thanks to her breeding

schedule, I was staying close to home and training less. The stud who we'd brought in had literally been in and out. He'd left her pregnant with puppies on their first try.

I hopped into my own golf cart—electric because, of course. Electric carts were cleaner, and silent and less disruptive to the dogs. Max had thought of everything. He'd put us on such amazing footing that I'd felt guilty for weeks. I felt that I'd harshly misjudged him. He hadn't been kind the night of the gala. But he'd been more generous than any other donor had been in the history of Happy Hounds. And he wasn't just some billionaire haphazardly throwing around his money. He'd given anonymously. That counted for a lot.

"How's she doing?" I demanded when I made it to the birthing suite.

Callie was panting quickly and laying heavy on her side. Her hind legs and tail were becoming damp and matted, a sign that the puppies were on their way. Tears sprang to my eyes—I couldn't help it. It was half from joy and half from fear. Birthing was the most ancient, natural process. Still, I couldn't put myself at ease until I knew Callie and her pups were okay.

"She's doing great, Shay," my vet tech, Josie, soothed. I could deliver puppies in a pinch, but that wasn't my preferred position. I tended to stay up front, petting and whispering comfort to my dogs.

It went as all births did, fast and slow at the same time. My ears listened for telltale sounds. My heart swelled with every healthy whimper and squeak. Apart from that were the suction of the tiny catheters that were used to help the pups breathe; the buzz of the heating lamp that would keep them warm; the calm voices of Josie and Jake as they helped each other tie off the umbilical cords and Callie's own plaintive squeals when something on her hurt.

"Shay, I think she's done," Josie said softly just as I was beginning to calm down. "Do you want to come meet the litter?"

I, too, had been lying on my side. My shoulder was cramped—half-asleep. It took me a minute to get myself back into position.

My first thought was one of sheer awe as I stared down at the suckling puppies. They had been lined up and placed in position to nurse. They were tiny—barely half a pound each—with noses barely the size of a pencil eraser. Their eyes were tightly closed. But then I had my second thought. These puppies didn't have Blenheim coloring—Callie was chestnut and white and so was her stud. It was basic genetics: when you bred a Blenheim-colored

Cavalier with another Blenheim-colored Cavalier, you ended up with a Blenheim.

I personally knew the sire. He was the same stud who had bred with Callie to produce her first two litters. I had personally been there when the deed was done. So why had she just given birth to Black and Tan Cavaliers? Yes, there were Black and Tans—it was one of four possible color profiles. But if Callie's stud had been Black and Tan, her puppies ought to have been tri-colored.

I took a closer look at the puppies. I was an expert in Cavaliers, possessing encyclopedic knowledge of how their every feature was meant to look. Inspecting these newborns, there was something in their tiny musculature, something in the turn of their nose—tiny hints that these were not purebred Cavaliers. I wracked my addled brain to think of who else it could be. All rescue pets were spayed or neutered, often on their first day. Callie didn't assist me in my handling classes. That was Bernice—another dog I showed. It was rare to have a dog outside one of these circles anywhere on my property. Just what the hell was going on?

"Do her puppies look a little strange to you? Like, not what you expected?"

Jake possessed the high virtue of keeping it real.

"Black and Tan. I noticed that," he admitted.

"And do they look a little..." I cocked my head, choosing my words carefully.

"Not like Cavaliers?" Josie observed. "Yeah. I noticed that, too."

"Any ideas?" I asked them both. I was the leader. I had to keep calm, even as hyperventilation was a real possibility. I was a respected breeder. A renowned one. Things like this did not happen.

"They kind of remind me of a specific dog," Josie began carefully, clearly walking softly for my benefit. "A beautiful dog...I remember wracking my brain to figure out what breed he was."

"What dog?" I tried to keep my voice even.

"You know. Hottie von Hottie's."

Usually, I admonished Josie for calling Max that. The man was our benefactor—the reason we would be able to do so much more. Surely, we needed to have respect for that.

But it took me only seconds to do the mental math that seemed to corroborate her theory. It took less time than that to figure out what it all

meant. And even less time to reduce Max's status back to one of my least favorite people.

I could barely say it out loud: Max's unpedigreed mutt had impregnated my elite show dog with seven puppies.

"Max von Rainer, you are lucky," I muttered on my way up his winding driveway. In my mind, I was doing eighty—cornering like Andretti and driving like a bat out of hell. In reality, I drove ten miles an hour, the fastest I'd let myself go with a box full of puppies in my front seat. I'd had a good mind to make this same drive up to his ivory tower the day they were born.

Two things had stood in my way: his house manager informing me that he would be overseas for seven weeks, and travel being too dangerous for the dogs. Now, they were stronger and they'd had their shots. Seven weeks was better than zero weeks in terms of getting me to cool down. The puppies were heart-meltingly cute. Every last worker and tenant on the farm had fallen in love.

Not that any of that absolved Max. Why wasn't Bo fixed? The night of the gala, I'd been too distracted to get a good glance at his undercarriage. But, seriously, who *didn't* fix their dog in this day and age if they weren't planning on breeding? I suddenly regretted not taking a better look.

"Don't worry, Callie. I'll defend your honor against that scamp."

Callie side-eyed me with the same "What is *with* you?" look she'd been giving me for weeks. I didn't blame her. I'd let loose some epic rants.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I demanded the second Max opened the door. It had taken me a minute to gather the puppies, to get all seven of them, plus me and Callie, up his front steps. The puppies were *technically* in the box—its walls were too tall and smooth for them to scale, but their excitement made them difficult to carry. Once I got to the landing, I'd set the puppies down.

"Hey there, Shayla."

Max looked puzzled, but amused—possessing that same unflappability he'd shown since day one. He leaned against the door jamb casually, like livid women showed up to his doorstep on the daily, waiting for me to explain myself.

But I would not explain myself. Not only because I was suddenly too flummoxed to speak—because actually seeing him put me on the edge of my sanity. Between the anger and the attraction, I hardly knew what to do. All these weeks while I'd been dealing with this, he'd been unaffected—footloose and fancy-free. It incensed me twice that he'd gotten hotter. All of this added up to me not speaking a word, but instead pointing downward.

That's right, asshole. Look what's in the box.

"Callie had her puppies?" His eyes brightened in delight. He bent to his knees to congratulate her, lavishing ear scratches. "Who's a good girl?" he cooed, before turning his attention to the seven little pups. I scolded myself not to succumb to the barely resistible charm of a big, strong man holding a small, vulnerable puppy when he did just that and scooped one up.

He rose back to his feet but kept a puppy in his arms—the runt of the litter, who we just called "Doc." Before I could get another word out, he turned his head, set his lips, and sent a loud whistle over his shoulder.

"Bo will want to say hi. He didn't stop playing with that rope they tousled with at the gala for weeks."

"Speaking of Bo..." I found my voice for the first time since yelling at him ineffectively. "Do any of these puppies look familiar?"

I could see the moment the truth dawned on him. Gone were his fun and games. Faltered was his insistence on not taking anything seriously. Away was the act he put on to rile me—the one he so richly enjoyed. Bo did choose that moment to trot up to the door. He went straight to Callie for an enthusiastic hello, oblivious to the goings-on around him. I rolled my eyes.

Men.

"You think Bo's the father?"

I bent down and picked up Bashful, the sweetest of the group, then circled around to stand next to Bo. He and Callie were enjoying quite the reunion, so fixed on each other that it was hard for me to show Max what I could clearly see.

"Sit, Callie," I commanded with irritation. Max commanded Bo to do the same. That's when I sat Bashful in between the two of them. He cast a furtive glance at Bo, then turned to his left for a comforting nuzzle from his mom.

"Are you sure?" Max sounded more curious than defensive. "They look a lot like Black and Tans. A lot of studs can throw all four colors."

Instead of asking him when he'd become an expert in the genetics of Cavaliers, I focused on my task.

“I thought you might have your doubts.” I reached into my back pocket like Maury Povich. “So I had a paternity test done. The puppies are half Cavalier, half pinscher mix. Bo *is* the father.”

“Bo’s not a pinscher mix.” Max said it distractedly as he continued to look between the dogs. Bo had taken an interest in Bashful—was giving him gentle sniffs as Callie did the same.

“Are you serious right now?” I challenged, practically shoving the paper in his direction.

“That’s not what I meant.” Max finally rose and met my eyes, taking the paper but not bothering to look. “Bo doesn’t just *have* pinscher in him. He’s purebred—an Austrian Shorthaired.”

I blinked, fuzzy on rare breeds that didn’t show at Bergdorfshire or any of the major showing circles. Still, I was able to pull a picture up in my mind. I’d never met one—but from what I’d seen in books, they had lighter coloring. I told Max as much.

“True,” he conceded, his gaze scanning the paternity test now. “Your everyday variety are mostly red with white on the muzzle. But Bo isn’t your garden variety.”

“Bo’s *not* a mutt?”

Max let loose a rich chuckle. “His full name is Herr Beauregard Zazarac Kippax III.”

“That’s a lot of name for a dog.” I was reeling.

He gave me a look that said, *Duh. That’s why I call him Bo.*

He handed me back the paper then juttied his chin at Bo. “His lineage is highly sought after in Europe. It goes all the way back to the Habsburgs. He’s a direct descendent of Emperor Franz Joseph’s brood. Dogs depicted in Habsburg-era art are almost exclusively Austrian Pinschers with his coloring. It’s considered highly favorable, and quite rare.”

“Wait a minute.” I narrowed my eyes. “Then why did you give me such a hard time at the gala? About my breeding operation and me showing dogs?”

“It’s not the owning I’m not a fan of—it’s the selling.”

“But you own a purebred.”

He shrugged as if to say, *So?*

“Which means you bought him from a breeder.”

“Not quite.”

Callie and Bo chose that moment to go on the move, their “sit” orders far enough in the past that they thought to ignore them. I’d been mostly focused

on sparring with Max, but seeing them together reminded me why I'd come.

"You know what? Never mind. We have decisions to make. Like what the hell to do about all these dogs."

"I'll take custody," he said easily.

"And do what?"

"Love them." He looked at me like the answer was obvious. "Keep them as pets."

"And just how do you plan to take care of seven puppies?"

My outrage only made him smile wider. He looked behind himself, into the grand entryway of his opulent home. "I'm not without resources."

"You've been traveling for the past seven weeks. You're some sort of—" I cut myself off. "*Mogul*. Shunting them off to a pet nanny? That's your idea of love?"

"I take Bo with me when I travel," he said like it was a logical solution. "I'll bet the puppies would love the jet."

I frowned, not having expected any of this.

"This isn't why I came," I stated.

"Why *did* you come?" He crossed his arms.

"To tell you to get your dog fixed." I didn't know how stupid that would sound until I said it out loud—doubly stupid now that I knew Bo was pedigreed, and likely an active stud. "*And* for an apology," I stated my second, far more legitimate, reason.

"I'll apologize for not keeping a closer eye on my dog that day we came to the farm..." He trailed off in a way that made me suspicious. "If you apologize for not keeping a closer eye on *your* dog, especially if you knew she was in heat."

I sighed in self-recrimination. I was, indeed, partially to blame. I'd known Callie was *about* to go into heat. I just hadn't known she already had. I'd also failed to ever imagine that she, too, could fall smitten with a cute boy and get knocked up.

"Fine. I apologize."

He seemed mollified. "I apologize, too."

"But I'm not giving you seven puppies."

Something hard flashed in his eyes, and he frowned. "And I'm not letting you sell them off."

"Selling them off is different from finding them homes."

"Bo's the father. He's got rights." Max doubled down in a way that gave

me a glimpse of the boardroom CEO. “And he isn’t some deadbeat, either. He wants a chance to know his kids.”

Is he serious?

My utter shock at the turn this had taken rendered me silent. Each word that came out of his mouth was more bananas than the next.

“And visitation rights aren’t enough. The absolute least I’ll accept is joint custody. 50/50. And we need to acknowledge the elephant in the room.”

The big elephant, in my mind, was Max going absolutely nuclear about the puppies. He seemed seconds short of threatening to lawyer up.

“And what’s the big elephant?”

He motioned down at our dogs.

“Isn’t it obvious? Bo and Callie are in love.”

I looked down at our feet and swept my gaze over the box of puppies, then to Callie and Bo. I had to admit—the bond I’d witnessed between them before seemed stronger. The fact that there had even been a bond since day one—a bond that reinforced itself in the few times they’d ever seen each other—was telling.

“The worst thing we could do to these two is to keep them apart. We’ve got to let them be a family. And, between your fully staffed dog sanctuary and my obvious ability to give them a good life, we can make this work.”

I had to hand it to him—he was persuasive. But I still wasn’t sure, and I had to ask my girl. Crouching to Callie’s level, I patted my leg in a way that summoned her to come. When she did, I asked her, point blank.

“Callie, is this what you want? To keep your puppies and be with Bo?”

She looked at me in earnest, glanced back over her shoulder at Bo, blinked back up at me, then gave an affirmative sniff. In seconds, there were tears in my eyes and a profound truth hit me all at once. Callie was such a good girl—the most loving companion, the best show dog I could ever want—she’d taken three championships at Bergdorfshire, birthed three litters, and showed up to work every day with a great attitude. She had already given me more than I could ever hope to give her. She had more than earned her right to retire—no, not just to retire, but to be happy for many years. And if she wanted this—wanted Bo and her puppies—I owed her.

Seeing my distress, she stepped closer and, in a rare show of behavior I generally discourage, stood up to lick my tearful face. It only reinforced my decision. I brought Callie into my arms and cuddled her in a big hug, holding her for a long time before letting her go.

“It’s okay, baby. Go see Bo.”

No sooner had I risen to my feet, wiping at my lashes all the while, than a handkerchief came into my vision, courtesy of Max, who gazed at me with tender eyes.

I nodded my thanks and gave a big sniffle, wiping the wetness off of my cheeks, collecting myself and my dignity all at once. When I finally did speak, I still felt vulnerable.

“I have no idea how to do this.” My voice was small.

“Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out,” Max said.

“This is not going as expected.”

“For me either.” His eyes pierced into me as he said it and I got the sense he wasn’t just talking about the dogs. It reminded me of the spark between *us*—the one that had flickered since the beginning no matter what I’d thought of him at any given time.

I watched in a state of suspended awe as he bent to take the remaining puppies out of the box, one by one, and shooed them into his enormous house. I wouldn’t soon forget the vision of their tiny paws slipping across marble floors as they ran inside, or their proud parents trotting after them, or the feel of Max’s hand on the small of my back as he welcomed me into his space.

I still didn’t know how it would work, but I was certain of one thing: whatever this was, it was right.

ABOUT KILBY BLADES

Kilby Blades is a USA Today bestselling author of contemporary romance. She is a HOLT Medallion finalist, a Publisher's Weekly BookLife Prize Semi-Finalist, and a RWA Vivian Award finalist, and has been lauded by critics for "writing characters who complement each other like a fine wine does a good meal" (PW). When she's not writing, Kilby goes to movie matinees alone, where she eats Chocolate Pocky and buttered popcorn and usually smuggles in not-a-little-bit of red wine. She is a cinephile, an oenophile, a social justice fighter and—most of all—a glutton for a good story. Find out more about Kilby [here](#).

Sign up for Kilby's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

Green Valley Heroes (Smartypants Romance)
[Forrest for the Trees](#)

The Gilded Love Series
[Snapdragon](#)
[Chrysalis](#)
[Vertical](#)
[Loaded](#)

The Hot in the Kitchen Series
[The Secret Ingredient](#)
[Spoonng Leads To Forking](#)

Travel Romance
[Looks Good on Paper](#)
[It Takes a Villa](#)



TESS' TASTY TREATS

KAMERON CLAIRE

ABOUT TESS' TASTY TREATS

Tess creates hypo-allergenic dog treats, and attends a vendor fair as part of the first #Paws4ACause event at the Veteran K9 Center where all proceeds go to animal rescue and the training of PTSD therapy dogs for military veterans.

Logan is a veteran with ties to the K9 trainers at the facility, and he is investing in the training program and expansion of the center.

The moment Logan meets Tess, he knows she's the one.

This short story ends on a cliffhanger, with the full story releasing November 2023.

CHAPTER 1

TESS

“Hey girl!” I call to Jamie as she walks through the side door used by employees and band members. She waves back and holds up a finger, letting me know she’ll be by shortly. Usually we chat as the band sets up their equipment, while the crowd is still sparse.

Working as a bartender at Hangry Henry’s Hideout was not on my career dream list in high school, but it pays decently, the clientele is chill yet diverse enough as to not be boring, and I’m only doing this until the day I can afford to run my doggie bakery full-time.

It’s my dream of dreams, which probably means I’ll be tending bar in my sixties.

Heading to the ice machine in the back, I fill a five-pound bucket and lug it to the front to find two hotties taking a seat at the end of my bar. One of them I’ve seen a couple of times before, usually accompanied by two or more other hotties, but the blond next to him is new and infinitely better looking than all the other guys combined.

I mean, I don’t think any of them get kicked out of bed, but this guy has movie star looks.

Too beautiful for Spring City.

He brings his green eyes up to mine and something inside me combusts, freezing me in place as I miss the container and dump almost half of the ice on top of my boots.

“Fuck!” I stop pouring and take a step back, embarrassment painting my cheeks red.

He grins. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I wave him off and scurry back into the kitchen, cursing

my life.

Marcus, our line cook, raises his brow. "You okay?"

"I need a shovel so I can clean ice off the ground."

He snickers and walks out to survey the damage, yelling back at me in the kitchen. "What the fuck did you do, girlie?"

"Shut up," I yell back.

"How you doing?" I hear Marcus say before coming back into the kitchen with a shit-eating grin on his face. "I see the distraction."

I roll my eyes, a snow shovel in my hand.

He snatches it from me. "Go take care of every gay man and straight woman's dream while I clean up your mess."

I give him a thirty-second head start, straighten my shoulders, and tilt up my chin. One of my superpowers is pretending like everything is fine - great - grand despite evidence to the contrary. Skirting the slippery mess, I grab a stack of coasters and slap two down in front of them. "What can I get you?"

Green Eyes' gaze is unwavering as he catalogs every freckle on my face—not that I have many. "What do you have on tap that's local?"

Shrugging, I wave toward the taps. "I mean, they are almost all Colorado-based breweries."

"Which one is your favorite?"

I sigh and glance over my shoulder at the taps again. "When I drink beer, I prefer a winter porter or stout."

"I'll take that."

The other guy nods. "Two, please. And a couple of menus."

I smack my hand on the bar, pretending to be completely unaffected by Green Eyes, and turn on my heel. "You got it."

Staying out of Marcus's way as he cleans up my mess, I slide a couple of menus in front of them and try not to notice the intensity coming off of the one guy. He's wearing a small smile, authentic enough not to be creepy, subdued enough to not seem goofy or crazy. It's filled with knowledge, as if he already knows what he wants without looking at the menu.

Weirdly enough, I'm pretty sure he thinks it's me.

It should creep me out.

Let me be clear, I'm not.

Still, I'm not going to make it easy on the hottie.

As I'm pouring their beers, I hear Jamie chirp with excitement from behind me. "What are you doing here?"

I turn to find her talking to the second guy, the one with dark blond hair, a square jaw, and tattoos. Considering my tattoos, you'd think he'd be the one I'm attracted to instead of the clean slate starlet—the one with a boyish charm darkened only slightly by real-world knowledge. He could play the hot boy next door or tortured artist in my fantasies and rock either role.

The guy with the tattoos shrugs. "Grabbing a bite with my buddy and checking out the band."

"You know we're going to be at the center tomorrow afternoon?" Jamie smiles at me and points to the guy she is talking to as I set their beers down. "This is Karden. He's one of the guys that trains Nanook."

I arch my brow. "You work at the VKC?"

He nods. "I do."

"I'm Logan." The other guy interjects and offers me his hand, which I have no choice but to take.

"Tess." His handshake is firm, but not overpowering, as if he wants to make sure we're connecting without performing some kind of flex. I have to admit, I appreciate a strong handshake. "Are you a K9 trainer too?"

"No. Not exactly."

"Come say hi to my husband, Kirian." Jamie slaps Karden on the shoulder, pulling him off his stool and leaving me with Logan.

"Alone at last." He grins before taking a draw off his beer.

"Is that what you were hoping for?"

"Absolutely."

"And why is that?"

"How else am I going to capture your undivided attention with my big, bad friend sitting next to me?"

I put my hand on my hip and throw him a sassy smile. "Are you afraid he's better looking than you?"

He shakes his head. "I know he's not."

"That's a mighty cocky statement, considering he's a good-looking guy."

"As my good friend Saint says, not cocky, just confident."

"Oh? And what are you confident about?"

"That I'm the man you've been waiting for."

I roll my eyes. "Oh my god. Get me some tortilla chips, Marcus, because the cheese is thick over here."

Logan chuckles. "I wish I could buy you a drink."

"Well, it so happens this is the one job where I'm allowed to drink while

working.”

“Line us up two of whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?” I arch my brow. “You realize I can grab a bottle of the most expensive whiskey we have and take your credit card for a ride with that open statement?”

He shrugs. “I’m positive you’re worth it.”

I don’t grab the most expensive whiskey we have. Instead, I mix a couple of shooters to test his resolve. A minute later, I’m setting down the two shots in front of him.

“What’s this?” he asks.

“Screaming Orgasm.”

He barely controls the smile taking over his face as he sniffs it, his eyes locking onto mine. “To new friends and special beginnings.”

I clink my shot glass against his and down it, tapping the empty glass against the bar top.

“Yo, Tess. Can we get a round?” Kirian says with Jamie under his arm.

Logan’s friend, Karden, comes back to take his seat. His shrewd gaze bounces between us before he picks up his menu.

“Thanks for the shot, Logan.”

“My pleasure, Tess.”

For the next two hours, I schlep drinks as the band warms up and plays their first set—the crowd filling in with new arrivals every few minutes. Friday night with Puppy Love playing is always a good tip night. My two hotties have had their dinners and are talking animatedly about tales from their past. Neither seems drunk, although both have had a couple of beers each, and no matter where I move around the bar, I find Logan’s eyes on me.

I’ve also noticed how he and Karden have waved off every woman who has had the guts to come up and ask them to dance. That shouldn’t make me happy, but it does.

“Can I get you anything else?” I ask when the band takes their first break.

“How about your phone number?” Logan says.

I bat my eyelashes. “Awww, I bet you ask that of all the girls.”

“I really don’t. What time do you get off?”

“Why? Do you think I’m going home with you?”

He sighs, clearly exasperated by me. “No, but I’d like to know you made it home safe.”

“That’s sweet, but I’ve made it home safely every night for the last four

years, so I think I can manage one more.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know you for the last four years. If I had, I would’ve been checking in on you every night.”

“Is he always so bossy?” I direct my question to Karden, who shakes his head.

“I’ve never seen him possessive over anyone or anything—ever.”

Logan smiles. “Don’t you know you’re special, Tess?”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, I bet I am.”

He reaches across the bar but doesn’t touch me, and while I don’t give him my hand, I do give him my attention. “Don’t tell me you didn’t feel that shot of electricity skitter up your spine the moment our eyes met. I know you did, just like it did for me. Let me take you out tomorrow.”

I shake my head. “I’m working tomorrow.”

“Here?”

“No, at my other job.” I don’t know why, but I decline to mention I’ll be at VKC tomorrow. Will he be there? Probably not, considering he’s not a K9 trainer, but I’m betting Karden will.

“How about tomorrow night?” he presses. “I’m flying out on Monday, so it has to be tomorrow or Sunday at the latest.”

Scoffing, I take a step back from him. “Oh, so you’re in town for two nights and in a rush to get me into bed?”

His voice drops into a growl. “I’m not trying to get you in the bed, Tess. I’m asking you out on a date. Preferably to a place where we can talk and hear each other speak. And yes, while I am leaving on Monday for Thanksgiving, I’m coming back.”

He glances at Karden who says nothing, his eyes locked on something or someone or maybe nothing in the distance. It’s obvious that he’s trying to zone out of this conversation. “You know I’m not going to let this go. So you might as well give me your phone number.”

Arching my brow, I cross my arms over my chest—admittedly framing my full breasts for his perusal. Still... I’m not going to make it easy on the hottie. “If you are coming back to town, I’ll give you my number next time.”

Logan considers me for a moment, his gaze taking in every inch of me, and then nods his head. “That’s fair. Don’t get married while I’m gone.”

I laugh. He has no idea how appropriate that comment is. “I make no promises.”

Both he and Karden stand. He pulls his wallet out from his back pocket

and throws two hundred dollars down on the bar.

My jaw drops. “Your tab is seventy bucks—tops.”

“Anything left is for you, babe. I’ll be back after the holidays.”

Dumbfounded, I watch them walk out of the bar and am startled back into reality when Kirian once again calls my name. I sigh and nod in his direction. “Coming right up.”

It’s early morning as I load up my baked goods, samples, table displays, and taste tester—Brit the Boxer—and drive ten miles northeast of Spring City to the Veteran K9 Center. To date, my doggie treats business—Tess’s Treats—has been a hobby, as well as a passion, considering Brit has more food allergies than my pocketbook can afford.

Specifically corn, wheat, and poultry.

While some of my treats she can’t eat, what I’ve found is there are plenty of dogs who benefit from carefully curated, human-grade food and treats—and their parents will pay to keep them healthy. Right now I have five clients paying me to deliver fresh food every week, which means I spend my Sunday meal prepping for dogs and delivering containers across Spring City.

If only I could make it a business.

Jamie is the one who invited me to this animal charity event—Paws for a Cause—at the Veteran K9 Center. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have had a clue it was going on. This is my big shot to get the word out there and pick up a few new clients, or at least meet other vendors and create a network to build from.

I follow a line of cars and trucks to the south of three big metal buildings and stop as a petite blonde woman approaches my window. “Are you here to set up as a vendor?”

Nodding, I show her the receipt on my phone. I had to pay one hundred dollars to rent my space for the day, but it all goes to charity, so I figure it’s a double tax write-off.

If such a thing exists.

“Great. I’m Janey, owner of the Veteran K9 Center.”

“Oh! It’s nice to meet you,” I say with genuine enthusiasm. I think it’s great that a woman owns and operates all of this.

She flashes me a warm smile. “It’s nice to meet you, too. I’m excited to

see your products.”

“I can’t wait to show them to you.”

Brit sits up and pushes her face into the tiny space between the back of my seat and the open window.

“Oh, and who is this?” Janey chuckles, but I notice she keeps her hands to herself. As a dog trainer with her animal at her feet, she’s got to be smarter than ninety percent of the random people we meet while out on a walk who run up to Brit without an invitation.

“This is Brit.”

“So sweet. I love her brindle coloring. How old?”

“She’s a little over three.”

“Well, I’ll be happy for a more personal greeting later when Macha and I aren’t on duty.” Pointing to where all the cars have parked, she continues. “You are in vendor spot eighteen. Park with everyone else and if you need help to lug your stuff from your car to your spot, just grab one of the guys. I’ll come around to check in on you soon.”

“Okay.” I roll up my window and follow the cars, parking where a guy wearing a “volunteer” T-shirt tells me to park. I have a trolley to help me cart my totes of goodies, but I can’t carry my two folding tables without making a second trip. Luckily, there are a handful of people standing by and willing to lend a hand.

Of course, this would all be a lot easier if my mom had been home this morning like she was supposed to be. Just another mark in the unreliable column.

Not that I’m counting. I stopped keeping track when I was fourteen.

Even though it is November in Colorado, it’s a mild day and set to be nearly fifty degrees with little to no wind, so it takes no time to warm up from the exertion of setting up my booth. They configured this like a craft fair or farmer’s market, except this is one-hundred percent canine focused and friendly.

It’s also kind of a party, considering Puppy Love, Kirian’s band, will play this afternoon while at the same time, a giant BBQ rages into the early evening. After I pack up my stuff, I plan to hang out with Jamie while her husband plays.

Brit is super chill and lays patiently on her cot behind the tables as I do my thing. Before I know it, most of the vendors have set up their wares and are walking around, checking out what the rest of us have to offer.

“These look amazing,” an older woman coos, her eyes raking over the iced pumpkin cookies I made last week.

Chuckling, I nod. “Even though I use human-grade ingredients, I wouldn’t recommend them.”

She joins me in a laugh. “My Golden is with my husband at our booth. We make pet-safe soaps and salves for irritated skin and chapped paw pads, noses, etc. We also have a CBD line we’re rolling out. Can I buy some cookies?”

“Sure!” I say a little too enthusiastically and open up a brown paper sleeve, sliding in a couple of cookies, completely unaware of our audience.

“Tess’s Treats. Human-grade yummys for your furbaby’s tummy,” a male voice says smoothly. “And look at that, there’s a phone number.”

I bring my eyes up to find Logan standing there with my business card between his fingers, a wry grin spreading his perfect lips. He looks even better than he did last night in a pair of fitted jeans, a tight T-shirt over his muscular chest, and a loose flannel hanging over that. He’s wearing a baseball cap with the VKC logo on it, which paints a mountain man veneer over his movie star good looks.

“You?” I startle.

“And you,” he responds, tilting his head toward the woman who is waiting with a ten-dollar bill in her hand.

“Oh, sorry.” I hand her the bag and take the ten, thanking her for her business. “I’ll come by to see your stuff soon.”

Her eyes travel over Logan, and she gives me a knowing wink. “See you later, dear.”

Logan leans over my table to look at Brit. “Is that your Boxer?”

“It is.”

“Must be fate. Can I pet her?”

I tilt my head to the side and nod slowly. “You can pet her.”

He comes around my table and kneels, cupping her face in his large hands. She instantly eats up the attention, sitting up and stretching her neck into his touch. Before I can stop her, she’s climbing his chest, putting her paws on top of his shoulders.

She’s such a diva.

“She’s beautiful. How long have you had her?”

“Three years.” I watch him lovingly caress her coat and a tinge of jealousy runs through me. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I’d fantasized about

him lovingly running his hands over me when I went to bed last night. Yeah, I got off to thoughts of him before I fell asleep. “Why’d you say it was fate?”

He looks up at me, his eyes trailing over my body before coming up to my face. “I’ve always wanted a Boxer and plan to get one when I move to town.”

“You’re moving here?”

Nodding, he lets Brit go and stands, showing me exactly how tall and broad he is. Last night he was on a stool, on the other side of the bar top, so I wasn’t exactly sure. But now he’s only six inches away—close enough to touch—and I feel the full weight of his honed power. “In January. I have to out-process from the military and get through the holidays, but then I’m here full time.”

“I didn’t realize you were in the military,” I say.

He raises his eyebrow in challenge. “How could you? We haven’t gone on our date yet. You know... the one where we learn how much we like each other.”

I blush and roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Now that I know what you’re doing today, how about dinner tonight?”

“You really aren’t going to give up, are you?”

“I’m really not.” He shakes his head.

“Good.” I smile, my eyes hitting the treats on my table. As a bartender I’m used to all kinds of flirting and all kinds of come-ons, ranging from subdued to downright scary/stalkerish. I know how to graciously blow them off where egos aren’t bruised, tips aren’t affected, and my safety isn’t at risk, but Logan’s flirting is different—a perfect combination of direct and welcomed.

Or maybe it’s because I’m so deliciously attracted to him, I don’t mind his brand of aggressive.

He says nothing, but when I look up, I find his green eyes on me, a coy smile on his face. “So, Tess. Dinner?”

“I was going to hang out after the vendor fair, watch the band, and eat BBQ.”

“Am I invited?”

“Could I keep you away?” I tease.

“If you really didn’t want me, I’d leave you alone. But I know you want me almost as much as I want you.”

“There goes that cockiness again.”

“Not cocky, babe. Confident.”

CHAPTER 2

LOGAN

There's a rumor amongst men that when they met the one they were going to marry, they just knew. Call it a bolt of lightning, Cupid's arrow, Aphrodite's punch in the face—whatever. Once I locked eyes with Tess, I knew she was the one for me.

Even if I wasn't already moving to Spring City for the Veteran K9 Center or my battle buddies turned into lifelong friends, I'd move here for a shot at a lifetime with her.

"There you are." Janey walks up behind me with her Rottweiler Macha at her side, her eyes on Tess and her cookies.

Not those cookies.

"Have you met Janey, owner and operator of Veteran K9 Center?" I say casually, sidling up beside Tess as if I'm introducing my new girlfriend to my new business partner.

Neither of which is true... yet.

"Briefly." Tess looks at me with genuine confusion twisting her mouth.

Janey also raises her brow and then turns her attention to the treats. "You're Jamie's friend, right?"

Tess nods and turns to grab a gallon size bag of dog treats out of her tote, handing it to Janey. "I brought the center dogs a smorgasbord of samples. I figure you're particular about what you feed them and I would be honored if they tried them."

"Thanks. I'm sure the kids will love them. Can I ask, is this a hobby or something you hope to do full-time?"

"Full-time, someday."

Janey smiles, her eyes coming to me, and I'm instantly reminded about

her business idea for the new building. Tess could rent space and sell her treats full-time. I could help make that happen—one of her many dreams I’ve yet to learn but would like to help fulfill. “We get questions about fresh, natural, and organic dog food from our clients all the time, so we should talk soon. Maybe after the holidays?”

“She’ll be here,” I answer for Tess, flashing both women a smile when I realize neither find my Monty Hall’s Let’s Make A Deal routine charming.

Tess rolls her eyes. “I would like that, Janey.”

“Okay, well, I’ll leave you to your customers. See you at the BBQ tonight?” Janey’s eyes bounce to me.

“Absolutely.” Tess smiles.

“Great.” Janey and Macha walk away, greeting vendors along the way. I stand back, dropping to one knee again to pet Brit while Tess talks with potential clients.

After they walk away, she looks down at us and smiles. “She really likes you.”

“Good, because I plan on spending a lot of time with her—” I waggle my brows “—and you, of course. But for now, I should let you take care of business.”

“I guess that would be okay.”

I pull out my phone and text her. “Now you have my number. If you need a break, or if my new girlfriend needs a walk, text me and I’ll be here.”

“And if you get bored and want a place to chill, I suppose me and your new girlfriend would enjoy having you.” Tess waves to the space behind her. “Bring yourself a chair.”

I flash her my most charming smile—the one that used to get me out of trouble as a prep school hellraiser—and throw her a wink before walking away from her booth. There are probably twenty to thirty people here, and it will only get crazier as the morning passes by. Walking into the building, I make a B-Line to Karden, who is resting his ass against the edge of his desk with Kiki chilling at his feet.

“Why do you look so happy?” He raises his brow.

“Because the woman of my dreams is outside hawking her cookies.”

He narrows his eyes. “Somehow that sounds dirty and possibly illegal.”

I chuckle. “Tess, the bartender from last night, is here peddling gourmet dog treats and custom food.”

“Wow. That’s... serendipitous.”

“I know. It’s fate.”

Right then, Janey walks in with the gallon bag of treats and sets it down on the table. She removes Macha’s muzzle, a safety precaution that Karden bitched about last night. Considering there are many untrained dogs in attendance, the VKC team decided they would muzzle their highly trained, military-grade, war machines while walking through the public space—just in case. Meanwhile, none of the civilian dogs are allowed in the building or the training area without a VKC team member escorting them. All vendors signed a form waiving VKC liability if their dog gets into a fight with another dog.

Simply put: the problem and solution will be between the two vendors to hash out, just like at a dog park.

If I’d been involved in the planning of this event, I would have brought in a liability lawyer to protect the business, but as of this moment, I’m still a spectator.

“How’s it going so far?”

Janey nods, rubbing Macha’s head and pulling out a cookie for her to taste test. Karden grabs one, sniffs it, and then offers it to Kiki who chomps it down eagerly. Both dogs seem to approve of Tess’s treats. “So far, so good. All the vendors seem happy. The rescue is working on their adoptions, and the silent auction has a pledge of over ten thousand dollars already. We’ve run several prospective clients through our training program, and we have both county and city K9 representatives here to show their support.”

“That’s great.”

She shrugs. “I’m wishing now that I had the 3D model of the future site ready so I could sell that too.”

“Next time. Maybe in the spring. Instead of annually, this could be a twice a year event if it’s fiscally beneficial,” I suggest.

“I guess we’ll see when it is all said and done.” Janey leans her hips against the wall and smiles at me. “So... Tess. How long has that been going on?”

I chuckle. “Since about twenty hundred hours last night.”

Janey’s jaw drops. “What is it with you guys? Every single one of you jumps in with both feet.”

Shrugging, I glance at Karden, who points to himself and shakes his head, wordlessly stating Not Me. “When you know, you know.”

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever.”

“Who, besides me, are you talking about?” I’m trying to think, but as far as I know, everyone but Vale and Kemp are single. Barron and Vale have been married and divorced—have been for a while—and Karden, Saint, and Lincoln have never had a serious relationship. Long-term arrangements, yeah, but nothing approaching an altar or happily ever after. None of them have been struck stupid like I was last night.

Janey’s gaze drifts across the room and she shrugs. “No one, I guess.”

I exchange a glance with Karden, who subtly shakes his head and presses his lips together. There have been rumors about Janey and Saint over the years, mostly from a time before I knew them, but no one knows anything for sure. You’re likely to get your bell rung if you push Saint for more information, and we don’t ask Janey things like that.

When she was in the military, she worked hard to present and maintain a professional image. I guess in some ways she still does.

“Do we have any coffee or hot cocoa or something? I think I’ll bring Tess a mug.” I glance around at the same time Kemp and Vale walk in with their dogs. Kemp eyes the bag of cookies and grabs a pumpkin-shaped one with icing, sniffing it before taking a bite.

He grimaces. “This is horrible.”

Karden and I laugh. “It’s for Thanos, dumbass.”

Handing his Shiloh Shepherd the biscuit, he grabs a napkin and wipes his tongue. “Why do they make them so appealing to humans? It’s not like the dog cares about presentation.”

“Because humans are the ones with the cash, and we are visually stimulated creatures.” Vale chuckles, grabbing another one and feeding it to his Husky, Strijker.

“Speaking of visually stimulating things.” I waggle my brow.

Janey shakes her head. “There is a gourmet coffee truck outside. Buy her something fancy.”

“Good idea.” I smack Karden on the shoulder and leave the K9 crew behind to do their thing.

Twenty minutes later, I’m walking up to Tess’s table with four drinks. I have no idea what she likes, so I bought a smattering of everything. One super sweet and fancy s’mores mocha latte, caramel apple cider, decaf black coffee, and a regular black coffee for me. I figure if she wants something different, I’ll get it for her.

There’s an attractive, slightly older woman with a salt-and-pepper

gentleman standing at the end of her table, almost behind it with an air of familiarity.

Tess's eyes grow wide when I set down the tray of drinks. "Can I tempt you with something hot?"

She blushes slightly and squares her shoulders. I love how she doesn't back down from my flirting. "What are you offering?"

I run through the drinks, thankful she takes the s'mores with enthusiasm, and look up to find the woman smiling at me. She's the spitting image of Tess in fifteen to twenty years. So much so that they are obviously related. Dark, lush, long brown hair. Light brown, almost gray eyes. Thick, long eyelashes, and centerfold curves. I'm not going to say she has the same plump, kissable lips, considering I don't know if this is a mother or an older sister, but I bet the guy standing next to her has no complaints. "I don't suppose you like black decaf coffee or caramel apple cider?"

"I'll take the cider if you're offering." She smiles.

"Sure thing." I hand her the cup and then look at Tess, hoping she feels it is necessary to introduce me. When she takes a second too long and continues to stare at me, I tilt my head to encourage her.

She rolls her eyes. "Logan, this is my mother, Tracy, and her man friend, Steve."

Mother? Wow. "Nice to meet you, Tracy." I shake her hand and then look at her man friend—which is an interesting term to use. There's a story there. "Can I interest you in a decaf, Steve?"

The salt-and-pepper man nods and holds his hand out. "Thanks."

I shake his hand and then turn my attention back to Tess as she takes her first sip.

"Mmmm." She lets out a low moan, and I close my eyes and will myself not to get hard in front of her mother. This woman is too sexy for me to ignore.

"Are you the hot guy getting me out of trouble this morning?" Tracy smiles over her steaming cup of cider.

"Trouble?" I let the hot guy comment slide—for now.

"My mom was supposed to be my second pair of hands this morning, but she was otherwise occupied," Tess says with a bit of bite.

"Oh?" I say, a bit confused, but then catch the way Tracy and Steve look at each other. "Ohhhh. Well, as far as excuses go, it's a pretty good one."

"Don't encourage her," Tess mutters, turning on a bright smile as a

customer approaches the table.

“Well—” Tracy grabs Brit’s leash and flashes me a big smile “—we are going to take this princess for a walk, cruise the other vendors, and will be back soon. Nice to meet you, Logan.”

As they leave, I stand to the side and wait for the customers to clear Tess’s table. Once they are gone, she turns to me and shakes her head. “Don’t ask.”

“Oh, but I have to know,” I say with a teasing lilt.

She chuckles. “My mom had me young and while I love her very much, she’s not the most reliable person in my life. We kind of raised each other.”

“Are you an only child?” I can’t help myself. I reach out and brush a piece of her hair that’s fallen loose from the braid framing her face.

“I am, aside from a few half-siblings floating out in the world. Are you?”

“No, but I’m the black sheep of my family.”

“I don’t believe that. You’re too handsome to be trouble to anyone other than women and their panties.”

I take a step closer and finger the length of her braid. “You admit you find me attractive?”

Tess’s eyes sparkle, her lips parting in surprise, but she doesn’t step back; she doesn’t turn away from me. She’s bold and fearless—two traits that completely turn me on. “You don’t need me to stroke your ego, Logan.”

This woman is amazing.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t enjoy it.” My eyes shift to the side, and I take a reluctant step back so Tess can turn her attention to another customer.

A few minutes later, Karden walks through with Kiki muzzled and on her leash, a folding camping chair in his hand. “Figured you could use a seat.”

“Thanks.”

He nods his head to Tess in greeting and then fingers a bag of treats. “The dogs approve. Thanks for the sample pack.”

Her smile is wide. “You’re welcome. I’m thrilled they like them.”

“You hanging out with us after the vendor fair for the band?”

“Yes.” She nods enthusiastically.

Karden gives me a meaningful look. “I guess I’ll be seeing you both later.”

I set up the chair but I don’t take a seat. “Can I get you something to eat?”

She chuckles. “You don’t have to take care of me.”

“Maybe I want to take care of you.”

“Yeah, right.” She dismisses me with a wave of her hand and then sits on a little stool in the corner that I hadn’t noticed until now. “Sit down and talk to me.”

“What do you want to know?” I move my seat closer to hers, but still out of touching distance. Any closer, and I don’t think I could control myself.

To my delight, she scoots her stool closer. “Why are you the black sheep of your family?”

“Uh, well, that’s an involved story.”

“The crowd is thinning out, but maybe you can give me the short version.”

I lean back in the chair and blow out my breath. “My family has certain expectations, an image they put out to the world that I chose not to conform to by joining the Army as a grunt. But honestly, I was a disappointment long before that.”

“Do you hope to one day win their approval?” Tess arches her brow and takes a sip of her drink, which is probably now lukewarm.

“Not really. I’m happy with the man I’ve become.” I grab her hand, inspecting the tattoos on her forearm. Flowers and paw prints in bright colors trail up her arm and across her chest that is covered today by a high neck Henley stretched taut over her breasts. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not estranged from them. We talk once or twice a month, but I have no desire to be pulled back into the fold.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“It’s something I’d rather discuss over a drink in a dark, quiet location.”

Tess wraps her fingers over my forearm in understanding. “Okay.”

“Is it just you and your mom?”

She nods. “Plus Brit living in a two-bedroom, two and a half-bath townhouse. Neither of us can afford to move out, and considering we’re more like roommates, it works out fine.”

“What about Steve?” I raise my brow.

Tess shrugs. “Steve is new, so we will see how long he lasts, but he seems like a nice enough guy.”

The vendors next to us pack up their tables and I check my watch. “It’s thirteen hundred hours. Looks like the vendor’s fair part of the day is over. How’d you do?”

“I’m pretty sure I broke even, which is a first. I sold out of most of my

treat bags, made a couple of new clients, and paid for all my ingredients and the table fee, with maybe a little leftover—thank goddess.”

“That’s fantastic. Can I help you pack up and carry things to your car?” I glance around, wondering where Brit and her mom got off to.

“That’d be nice, thank you.”

After packing her totes and tables in her older Nissan Xterra, we walk around to the other side of the three buildings where a makeshift stage is erected and the band, Puppy Love, is setting up to play in an hour. Brit, Tracy, and Steve are standing with Jamie from last night and who I can only assume is her Husky, Nanook.

“There you are,” Tess says, giving Jamie a quick hug.

“Hey!” Jamie wraps her arms around Tess. Her eyes shoot my way and she nods in my direction. “Hello?”

I offer her my hand, my shoulder brushing Tess’s because we are standing so close. “We didn’t get introduced last night. I’m Logan.”

“Nice to meet you.”

CHAPTER 3

TESS

My mom slides up to my side opposite Logan and whispers in my ear. “I like this guy. Why haven’t you told me about him?”

“Because I literally met him last night.”

“Oh? With the chemistry between the two of you, I would’ve thought you’d known each other for a lot longer.”

I glanced at Logan, who smiles and waggles his brow, letting me know that he’s paying attention even if he’s not looking at us.

Janey is on stage at the microphone with Kemp by her side. “Hey everyone. My name is Janey LaVey, and I am the owner of the Veteran K9 Center. With me is Michael Kemp, Chief Operations Officer—or lead dude in charge, if you will. We’re not formal enough for CEO and COO titles, even if that’s what the business license says.”

Logan and Karden chuckle.

“We want to thank everybody for being here today. This is our first Paws for a Cause event, and it has been a wonderful success. We had multiple dogs adopted today from Valley Humane Society, and now we’re going to talk about why we’re raising money. The VKC has been open for almost three years, and for anybody who didn’t know, it was primarily opened to provide military members a safe place to kennel and train their dogs, specifically when they get pulled away from home on training exercises, schools, and of course, deployments. For over a year, we’ve been researching the possibility of training and placing PTSD support animals with qualified military veterans, and today is step one in realizing that dream. It costs between fifteen and twenty thousand and approximately one year to properly train a support animal, and we recently had several of our canine handlers certified

with the Service Dogs for Veterans Program. Plus, we'll be getting our first few puppies next month."

"Most importantly, there's no cost to the veterans who qualify for and receive a support animal, which is why all the donations made today are so important to our goal," Kemp adds.

"Right." Janey looks in our direction. "To the left of the stage are the K9 handlers and team members who are working to make this and bigger things happen in the near future. If you have questions about the program or how you can help, just find one of us wearing a VKC T-shirt or hat. Again, thank you for your donations and support. Now, I'll turn the microphone over to SSGT Charise Vale and SSGT Mari Kemp as they announce the silent auction winners."

"I wonder what bigger things are in the near future?" I say to no one in particular.

Logan slides his hand into mine and squeezes my fingers gently. "If you want to know, I'll tell you later. I think you'll be excited."

I look at him, my brow furrowed, realizing I have yet to ask him why he's in town this weekend. "I assumed you knew these guys from the military, but it never dawned on me to ask why you're here today."

"Babe, we have much to learn about each other. Yes, a couple of us served together, but I'm investing in the future of this business. And that is one reason I'm moving here."

"What's the other reason?"

He flashes that charming smile he gave me last night. "Do you need to ask?"

I roll my eyes. "You are a lot, you know that?"

"Yeah, but you like it."

We watch the band and talk, hanging out with Logan's VKC buddies until the sun dips below the horizon, dropping the temperature a good ten degrees in a matter of seconds.

"It's getting kind of cold. Did you bring a jacket?" I lean into Logan so I can hear him over the band.

Who am I kidding? I've had the hardest time not touching him. After

spending hours with him today, I can't believe I resisted giving him my phone number last night.

"Yeah, but it's in the car." He turns to me, his eyes instantly going to my lips, which I subconsciously lick in anticipation. Fuck me, I want this man.

"Do you want to get out of here?" I arch my eyebrow. No, I don't normally do one-night stands. As a bartender, doing so would welcome drama I'm not interested in dealing with, but Logan is so tempting, and why should I deny myself what he clearly wants to give me?

It's been a couple of months for me, and one look at Logan reminds me I have an itch that needs to be scratched.

He takes my hand and brings it to his lips. "What did you have in mind, babe?"

Here goes nothing. "I think my mom is staying the night with Steve again. Do you want to watch a movie?"

Logan sucks in his breath and lowers his voice. "Are you inviting me over?"

I shrug, trying to act nonchalant when my insides—specifically my pussy—are screaming yes, Yes, YES! "I need to get Brit home, and honestly, I've been up since six after closing down the bar last night at two. I would love nothing more than to take a hot shower, slip into my PJs, and relax for a little while."

"If you're tired, why don't we call it a night?"

"I thought you wanted to take me out?" I bat my eyelashes.

He grins. "I do, but we don't have to rush anything, Tess. I'm leaving town on Monday, and I'll be gone through the new year, but then I'm back. Permanently. We have all the time in the world to get to know each other."

I smile softly and look down at his hand on my knee. I love the way he feels the need to touch me, even if it's mostly innocent. "What are you doing tomorrow, Logan?"

"Whatever you want to do, Tess."

"I'm making and delivering dog food all day tomorrow, but if you want to hang out while I do it, I'd love to have you keep me company."

"It's a date." He stands up and pulls me to my feet. "Let me walk you to your car."

We say our goodbyes to the VKC folks and walk through the lot. I let Brit in and then turn into Logan's chest, his body heat and proximity warming me despite the chill in the air. Sliding my hands up his muscled pecs, I wrap my

fingers around his neck. “Are you sure you don’t want to come over?”

He leans down so his nose barely touches mine. “Make no mistake. I want to—so very badly.”

“But?”

“The last thing I want is to leave you with the impression that I’m a hit-it-and-quit-it kind of guy. I should have realized last night, but I’m betting you get hit on left and right as a beautiful bartender.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not exactly left and right.”

“Yeah, right.” He brushes a strand of hair from my face, caressing my cheek with his fingertips. Even though he is tall and hard with muscle, there’s something gentle about him.

Is he also a gentle lover? Or is he dominant in bed? Can I hope he’s a little of both?

I take the smallest step forward, pressing my breasts against his chest. “Maybe you should kiss me goodnight, since you refuse to tuck me in.”

Logan slides his hand into my hair and tilts my face up, his thumb sliding over my bottom lip. “I’m not refusing you anything, babe. Just postponing the good stuff until it’s a better time for both of us. A time when I can take days exploring you, tasting you, pleasing you. A time not marred by me rushing out of town for another six weeks. We’ll take our time apart to get to know each other because when we’re back together again, my mouth will be busy getting to know you in other ways.”

Teasingly, I shimmy my ass and grind my body against his. “You don’t believe in quickies?”

“Quickies are for couples that know each other intimately. There will be none for us until I know your body so well, I can get you off in minutes with your clothes still on.”

“Oh…”

Logan presses his lips to mine, but I’m not sure if it’s because he can’t hold back any longer or because he’s shutting me up. Either way, I’m into it, melting into his strong embrace. His mouth is firm, lips soft, tongue slick as he slides into my open and wanton depths. It’s been months since I’ve been kissed like this.

No, that’s a lie. I’ve never been kissed like this.

He claims my mouth like I’m the oxygen he needs to survive, and I’m ready to be his savior.

Logan knows exactly how much pressure and tongue to use without being

too much, and our kiss feels effortless, like two halves coming together seamlessly. Firm hands cup my ass and pull me tight against him, his erection pressing against my lower belly and letting me know I have so much to look forward to.

Logan breaks our kiss, his green eyes sparkling in the low lit sky. “You are dangerous, Tess.”

“Me?” I tease. “You’re the one with the wickedly talented tongue.”

“You have no idea.” He licks his lips. “What time do you want me to come over tomorrow?”

Disappointment fills me, but I shake it off. He obviously wants me—the evidence is practically pulsing in his pants—but he’s still willing to send me home alone. Could he really be that nice of a guy or is it something else? “Ten a.m.”

“I’ll bring breakfast.”

“I’ll make sure I’m dressed when you arrive.” I bat my eyelashes again. “Or maybe not.”

“Definitely dangerous.” He lets me go and takes a step back. “Text me when you get home.”

CHAPTER 4

LOGAN

The next morning, I arrive at the address Tess texted me with two breakfast burritos, a box of donuts, and two coffees. After walking to her car, I leaned down to take what was supposed to be a simple goodnight kiss and ended up making out with her for a solid ten minutes—until I was so achingly hard that I had to take a lap around the buildings before I could walk comfortably and rejoin the guys.

I've been thinking about that kiss all night and again this morning as I jerked off in the shower.

She's so beautiful—everything about this woman turns me on.

But it's more than her looks. It's her flirty confidence that I find so sexy, as well as her drive and passion, both of which are intoxicating.

"Hey." She opens the door with a smile. "I wasn't sure you'd make it."

"Why is that?" I hand her the donut box and then lean forward to kiss her cheek before following her into the townhouse.

"Well, I put some of my best moves on you in the parking lot last night and you still sent me home by myself. I thought maybe you weren't really interested." She shrugs and leads me into the kitchen.

I put our drinks and burritos down next to the donut box and then slide my hands around her waist, pulling her flush against my body. "Nothing could be further from the truth, but I figured I should tone it down."

"You're confident, not cocky. Remember?" She smiles up at me.

I nod. "That's true. Glad you recognize the difference."

"I saw it Friday night, but I couldn't make it easy on you."

"You can make me work for it." I kiss the tip of her nose. "I don't mind."

"I was thinking about you this morning." She pulls out of my embrace

and eyes the coffee, handing me the one that is plain black.

“Yeah? I was thinking about you, too.” I take my coffee and slip her a wink. Her eyes trail down my body, sending blood straight to my cock.

She flashes me a knowing grin. “My thoughts were a bit more PG.”

“Probably.” I help myself in her kitchen, opening cupboards and pulling down two plates.

Tess pulls out two stools on the breakfast bar, and we sit down, unwrapping our breakfast burritos as if we’ve done this a dozen times. “I mean, they weren’t one hundred percent PG, but that’s a discussion for later.”

I stop with the burrito midway to my mouth and glance at her, a devilish smirk on her lips. “Are you teasing me?”

“Maybe.”

“I like it.”

She chuckles. “You said you’re investing in the business, but I didn’t think soldiers made a ton of money.”

I shrug. “Base pay is a little more than minimum wage if we worked forty-hour weeks, which, of course, we don’t. But there are other incentives, like housing allowance, education, and medical benefits. And if you do twenty, there’s retirement to look forward to.”

“But you aren’t doing twenty?”

“No. Six was enough for me.” I leave it at that, skirting the topic of money. I don’t want to outright lie, but I don’t want it to be a thing between us, either.

“What does this investment look like? Are you going to work at VKC? Sponsor a dog? Build kennels?”

“Uh—” I hedge “—my mother died eighteen months ago and left me an inheritance. Now that I’ve turned twenty-five, I have to go to California to meet with the lawyers and sign the paperwork.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss.” Tess wraps her fingers around my forearm.

I nod, placing my hand on top of hers. My mother and I spent most of my life at odds with each other, but that doesn’t mean I don’t miss her or the opportunity to make amends. “Thanks. After Christmas, I’ll move here and invest in the land west of the facility, a new building, and the next phase of the center to include retail spaces... say, for a small business owner who makes and sells gourmet dog treats.”

“Oh.” She chuckles and shakes her head. “I’m nowhere near able to afford a retail space.”

“Maybe not today, but by the time we’re ready, who knows?”

Tess bites her lip and glances around her kitchen, an air of wistful thought in her expression. “It’s nice she could leave you something after she was gone.”

I shrug and move on, desperate to change the subject. “Have you ever been to Southern California?”

She nods, swallowing her bite of burrito. “One of my mom’s boyfriends took us to Disneyland when I was like eight. And then another time we went to Hollywood, Universal Studios, and all of that when I was fifteen. That trip was kind of creepy.”

“Why is that?”

“I developed young, so the men hitting on me and my mother simultaneously was super gross.”

“There are creeps everywhere, but Hollywood has a special brand of sycophants, ones that like to use the guise of discovering raw talent to perpetuate their lecherous ways. Maybe someday I’ll show you a different side of California.”

“That would be nice.” She looks down purposefully at my nearly empty plate. “Are you ready to make dog food?”

I laugh. “That is a question I never thought someone would ask me.”

She chuckles. “I’m glad I can provide you with new experiences.”

We put our dishes into the dishwasher, and then Tess takes considerable time clearing the space. I sit on the floor with Brit, staying out of her way while bonding with the easygoing Boxer.

For the next couple hours, I watch her prep ingredients, portion out servings, and vacuum seal seven days’ worth of food for her clients—old and new. “This is quite the operation you’ve got going on here.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what I’m going to do when I outgrow this space. I’ve talked to Henry about using the bar’s kitchen, but that means I have to change my days and hours. But at least there’s an option there.”

I store that tidbit of information in my brain for later. I have to admit, I never thought watching somebody make dog food would be so inspirational. She certainly cares about what she’s creating, labeling each bag with potential allergens, date, time and ingredients. The way she sources her raw materials is impressive, too. This is not some hobby, but a passion to take care of her and other people’s fur babies—as she calls them.

I worry about her liabilities, though, especially if she grows her business.

She has nothing legally protecting her in case a dog has a bad reaction to her treats. That is something I will help her rectify once I move into town.

“Now what?”

“Now we deliver the food. Are you up for a joyride around town?”

“Definitely. Maybe you can give me a tour of the neighborhoods while we’re at it.”

“I can do that. I’ll even show you my favorite house of all time.”

“That would be good because I’m going to need to look for a place to live, and I need to know which neighborhoods are the right ones to move into.” And of course, buying a house Tess likes in a neighborhood she eventually wants to live in just makes good financial sense.

I know I’m getting ahead of myself, but I feel our connection in my bones.

Does she?

We climb into her Xterra with Brit taking a seat in the back and spend the next two hours driving. “If you could live anywhere in or around Spring City, which neighborhood would you pick?” I ask casually.

“Is money a factor?”

I shake my head. “Not really.”

She hums, deep in thought for a minute. “It depends on what I had going on in my life. If I need to be in town near a job, I’d probably move to Peregrine or maybe down south near Castilla Mountain. There are big beautiful houses in good school districts in those neighborhoods, but most of them don’t have land to offer. There’s Vanguard Estates, which is a newer, gated community where at least half of the Rocky Mountain Rangers football team lives in their mini-mansions on their one-acre lots, but I don’t think I’d like living there. Starlite Park is an established community with one to five-acre lots—they even zoned some as horse properties. Northeast, near the VKC, people have five to ten-acre hobby farms that might be fun for kids.”

“Do you want kids?” I look at her through a different lens and picture her five years from now with a toddler on her lap resting their dark hair against her swollen belly. Holy shit, I never have thoughts like this. Yet with Tess, they feel natural.

“I do. At least two, but maybe three or four. You?” She glances over at me after negotiating a left turn into a nice neighborhood.

“Yeah. Someday.” I nod, more certain now than I ever have been. Children have always been a mystery to me, mostly because I’m the baby of

the family and spent most of my life raised by nannies or living away from home amidst other prep school kids—out of sight, out of mind.

And my mother couldn't understand how joining the Army and living in a barracks felt so natural to me.

She parks in front of a large house with a faux brick facade accenting the doorway. "Let me run these up and then I'll drive you through the Gold Rush Hills Estates. They are beautiful but impractical houses overlooking the city."

While she runs up to the house, I jot a note of the neighborhoods she's listed, letting the real estate agent Karden hook me up with know I want something with a couple of acres that are zoned for animals and four or more bedrooms. She'll send me listings to look at after the holiday, and if things continue to go well, I'll ask Tess to do me a favor by touring the houses with the realtor and Facetiming me during their walk-throughs.

I'll let her pick our future home, even if she doesn't know that's what she's doing.

At least that's the plan.

Karden laughed at me last night when I told him my plan. He said it was ridiculous to jump headfirst into a relationship with a woman who doesn't know I'm working toward forever with her.

My response: if you aren't working toward forever, what are you doing?

Passing time was his answer, and I guess he's right. Until now, I've been passing time, but with Tess, I know this is more.

Maybe I'm crazy, but I've never felt this way before and I'm trusting my gut.

Tess jogs back to her SUV with a big smile on her face. "They have a very sweet English Bulldog who had a medley of digestive problems before she started eating my food."

"It makes you happy to help people and their fur-babies."

She nods, the smile on her face growing wider. "It really does."

"How about we grab some dinner on our way back to your place?"

"Do you like Thai food?"

"I love it."

She does a happy dance in her seat. "There's a great place a couple of blocks from my house. It's my favorite."

We grab food, head back to her place, and spend another couple of hours together eating, walking Brit, and then relaxing on the couch. I have her pulled into my lap while a rerun of "Brooklyn 99" plays on the TV.

Nuzzling her neck, I whisper in her ear. "This is nice."

"It is. I don't think I've ever truly snuggled before."

"Guys are always in a hurry to get into your pants?"

"Yeah. Or maybe I'm always in a hurry to get the deed done. I'm not great with intimacy, and most guys don't care about it, anyway."

"Does it make you uncomfortable?" I kiss her cheek and turn her chin so our eyes meet.

"Intimacy translates to vulnerability in my mind."

I brush a strand of hair back from her cheek and kiss her lips softly. "I'm not asking for anything I'm not willing to give. You do your best to match my energy, and I'll be a happy man. If at any point you decide you aren't feeling what I'm feeling, talk to me about it. Okay?"

Tess smiles and slides her fingers along the shaved sides of my head. "Do you think you'll grow your hair when you separate from the military?"

"Maybe a little. Why?"

"I wonder what you'll look like."

"Someday I'll show you pictures of me as a teen. I went through a surfer dude phase at one point. Long hair, puka shell necklace, golden tan—the stereotypical So-Cal beach bum image." I lean down and claim her lips in a kiss that I hope will keep her on edge and pining for me for six weeks. Our tongues tangle as she adjusts her position on my lap, meeting me with just as much passion and just as much need.

"What time is your flight tomorrow?" she pants when we break for air.

"Eight a.m. out of Denver. Karden says I'll have to leave his place no later than five if I want to make my flight."

"I guess that means you won't be tucking me into bed tonight." Tess juts her bottom lip in feigned disappointment, although it might not be completely fake. She wants me as much as I want her. The chemistry between us is explosive. Everyone sees it—even her mother.

"Not tonight, babe." I glance at my watch, knowing if I don't leave now, I might never leave. "I should head out before we get carried away."

She begrudgingly lets me up and walks me to the door, where I once again pull her into my arms. "I'll be back soon, and we'll talk every day until then. Okay?"

"Okay." She nods and smiles, but her tone is full of doubt. How can she question my sincerity? Has she been fed bullshit throughout her life and cannot accept anything else? Considering I'm holding back some of my truth

right now, maybe I shouldn't push it.

"Goodnight, babe." I kiss her softly and pull back, forcing myself to let her go. The coldness from the night air combined with the distance between us chills me to the bone. I walk back to my rental and slide into the driver's seat, cranking the engine and illuminating the house with my headlights as she waves and closes the front door.

My heart pounds in my chest and I know I can't leave just yet.

It's not enough to have the memory of her body pressed against mine, or the velvety softness of her tongue sliding into my mouth. To survive the next six weeks without her, I need the smell of her arousal infusing my lungs and the taste of her orgasm sliding down my throat.

I turn off the engine and jump out of my car with one more task to complete before I leave—pleasure my woman.

CHAPTER 5

TESS

I close the door and shuffle into the kitchen, an uneasiness settling in my tummy.

“He’s a gentleman, Tess,” I say out loud to reassure myself. How sad is it that if a guy isn’t pawing at me nonstop, I assume he’s not interested or he has some big secret to hide?

It’s pathetic.

There’s a knock on my front door and then Logan is standing in my entryway, shaking his head and flipping the deadbolt into the engaged position. “You should lock your doors, babe.”

I smile. “Maybe I was hoping you’d come back?”

Logan approaches me like a man on a mission, pulling me against his body and then swinging me up into his arms. “I need one thing from you before I leave.”

“What’s that, Logan?” I grin.

“You coming on my lips.” He sets my ass down on the counter. “Any chance your mother is going to walk in on us in the next fifteen minutes?”

“Fifteen minutes?”

“If I can’t get you off in less time than that, I don’t deserve you.”

“I’ll be the judge of what you deserve.” I bite my lip as Logan hooks his fingers into the top of my yoga pants and pulls them down, urging me to lift my hips. “And I don’t think my mother is coming home tonight.”

There’s no reason to play coy or deny him. I want this too fucking bad to play hard to get tonight.

“Good,” Logan claims my lips as my bare ass hits the cool laminate. His kiss is intoxicating, and my body hums with anticipation. I know he’ll get me

off with his talented tongue, and after yesterday, my body is primed for a release.

“Lean back, babe.” He undoes the buttons on my oversized flannel and pulls down the cups of my tank top, sucking each nipple into his mouth as he moves swiftly down my body. I lean back on my elbows and watch him make quick work of laying me out like an all-you-can-eat buffet. He lifts my left thigh and hooks my knee with his bicep, propping my leg up on his shoulder while kissing the inside of my thigh.

Then he stops his ministrations to stare at my pussy spread wide for him. He smiles slowly and drags his eyes up my body to lock gazes with me. “You are like a fancy dessert plated up for me. One look and I know I’m going to be addicted to the rich, decadent taste of you.”

This man and his swoon-worthy words. I’ve never had a guy wax so poetic for me before.

He keeps his gaze locked with mine and lowers his head, his tongue running a long, lavish swipe up my center. I shudder, a small moan escaping my lips, and let my head drop back—my eyes closing.

That is all the signal he needs, plunging his tongue between my pussy lips, sucking my labia between his teeth. He swirls circles around my clit, flicking the engorged bud until I’m rolling my hips and riding his perfect mouth. Logan uses the wide expanse of his chest to push my legs further apart—one hand holding up my thigh, my other leg braced on his shoulder—and works me with only his tongue, teeth, and lips. It takes mere minutes for my orgasm to build and crash over. I have nothing soft to clutch, my fingernails scraping against the laminate as my pussy pulses and floods his mouth with cum.

“Oh fuck.” I throw my head back, smacking it on the edge of the countertop.

Logan growls between my thighs, his mouth and tongue working me through my release until I’m so sensitive, I have no choice but to grab a fist full of his hair and push him off of me. “Please stop.”

He grabs my hand out of his hair and presses a kiss to my palm, chuckling softly. “Can you orgasm multiple times?”

“If I can, I never have before.”

“Hmmm. Something we’ll have to work toward when I move into town.” He winks at me when I bring my eyes to his.

“You made me come in less than five minutes, so I guess you deserve

me.” Logan shakes his head and helps me sit up, my leg muscles shaking in post-orgasmic bliss.

“I don’t deserve you yet, Tess, but hopefully you’ll give me a chance to prove how good we can be together.”

“You definitely earned that chance.” I wrap my ankles around the back of his thighs as he steps forward to kiss my lips, my scent all over his mouth. Sliding my fingers into his waistband, I move to unbuckle his belt, but he stops me by wrapping his fingers around mine.

“Not tonight, babe.”

“But... don’t you want to come too?”

“I got exactly what I wanted tonight.” He kisses me chastely and leans down, guiding my feet back into my yoga pant legs. “Now I can leave town with the scent and taste of you burned into my memory.”

It’s at that moment a key slides into my front door. Logan quickly pulls up my yoga pants before my mom enters the house. The two of us lean casually against the countertop as she comes around the corner, a coy smile on her lips. “I have work tomorrow, so I had to come home, but I’m going straight to bed.”

Logan shakes his head. “I was just leaving. I have an early morning flight, but I’ll be back soon.”

“Maybe we can have dinner when you get back?” My mom looks at me hopefully.

I roll my eyes and nod.

“I’d like that.” Logan turns and kisses me chastely again. “I’ll call you tomorrow, babe.”

And just like that, the man of my dreams walks out of my life.

How am I going to survive six weeks without him?

Waking up the next day, I grab my phone to check the time. It is ten am—my normal wake-up time—but there are no text messages from Logan.

Was he running late this morning or did he forget me already?

My body thrums with need after the small taste of pleasure he gave me last night, and I can’t wait for him to come back so I can show him some of my talents.

Why hasn't he texted yet?

Sighing, I roll out of bed, slide on a pair of sweatpants, a tank top, and an oversized hoodie, and relieve myself before slipping my bare feet into a pair of thick faux sheepskin boots. If he doesn't text me by this afternoon, I'll text him to make sure he made it to California okay.

If he doesn't text after that... well, I don't know what to think.

Brit stretches and performs a full-body shake before she heads to the door and sits underneath her leash, her squishy muzzle and sad puppy dog eyes willing me to brave the cold morning air.

Just as I'm pulling my knit cap down over my ears, I hear my phone chirp with an incoming message.

"Good morning, babe."

Want more of Logan and Tess? Read their full length book in Mine to Covet, book 6 of the new Veteran K9 Team series, releasing mid-November.

Catch the other team members [here](#).

ABOUT KAMERON CLAIRE

Kameron Claire writes stories with Witty tongues, Wicked needs, and Wild deeds.

Her full length and short, steamy contemporary and paranormal romances emphasize strong female leads and the protective alpha men who know how to love and support kick-ass, take-charge women. Many of her stories contain military veterans, boss babes, gentle yet dominant men, and goofy K9 hijinks. Find out more about Kameron [here](#).

Sign up for Kameron's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

Check out the rest of the Veteran K9 series [here](#)

Other popular series set in Spring City, Colorado

[Rangers Football](#)

[Hot Nights with the Boss](#)

[Grayson Enterprises](#)



SANTA CLAWS IS COMING

DYLANN CRUSH

ABOUT SANTA CLAWS IS COMING

Santa always shows up in Beaver Bluff for the holidays, but this year he's coming for a cause. When the local cat cafe and animal rescue is being forced out of business right before Christmas, Deputy Hurley can't sit back and do nothing, especially when a curvy out-of-towner steps in to help. Among canine chaos and a flurry of felines, the magic of the holidays ignites a spark between them that can't be ignored.

CHAPTER 1

NOELLE

As I drove into Beaver Bluff, Tennessee, I didn't even try to shake off my bad mood. Spending another holiday away from home was bad enough, but having to hole up in a small town no one had ever heard of was guaranteed to be a bust. I was a city girl through and through, and the thought of being away from the hustle and bustle of New York City at my favorite time of year made me more than a little grumpy.

It didn't help that my phone had lost service when I exited the highway, and I hadn't seen a street sign for miles. Making sense of these winding country roads would be difficult enough during broad daylight, but with nothing but a sliver of moon to guide me, I was ready to pull into the first gas station I could find and beg for directions. But there weren't any gas stations. The only sign of life I'd seen was the huge animal I'd almost nailed with my front bumper as it scurried across the road a few miles back.

For the umpteenth time since my plane left LaGuardia this morning, I cursed my mom for guilting me into coming to Tennessee for Christmas. She should be the one helping my grandma shut down her business and move into assisted living. Instead, she was on a holiday cruise with her new husband, and I was here in her place.

As I continued to squint into the inky blackness ahead, hoping for some sign that I was going in the right direction, flashing red and blue lights lit up my rearview mirror. My heart stopped and dropped right into my gut.

"Seriously? Now?" I groaned, pulling over to the shoulder.

A beam of light cut through the darkness as steps approached. I cracked the window while I waited. It wasn't like me to look for silver linings, but maybe the cop would give me directions after they cited me for whatever

they thought I'd done wrong.

The officer stopped next to the window, so close that all I could see was his khaki uniform shirt and a wide leather belt packed with all kinds of equipment.

"Evening, ma'am. License and registration, please." The words rolled off the officer's tongue in a thick Tennessee twang.

I sighed as I pulled my purse onto my lap. "Great, this is all I needed tonight."

"Excuse me?" He bent down and peered through the window.

The light blinded me for a moment, and I spilled the contents of my purse between the console and the driver's seat. "Aw, shit."

"Is everything okay, ma'am?"

He was probably trying to be nice, but I wasn't a woman who appreciated being referred to as "ma'am," at least not while I was still under the age of fifty. Under the circumstances, and given he had a gun, I was prepared to let it slide. But since he asked, I couldn't keep from telling the truth.

"No, everything's not okay. My license is caught in the crack. I'm going to have to get out of the car and slide the seat back to see if I can reach it. Unless..."

"Unless what, ma'am?"

Hearing that word again had the same effect as listening to someone scrape a metal rake down a chalkboard. I clenched my jaws together to hold back any snide remarks and tried to channel the most pleasant-sounding version of my voice. "Unless you want to tell me how to get to Beaver Bluff and send me on my way."

Even without looking at his face, I could hear the smile in his voice. "I'd be happy to do that. Right after I take a quick peek at your license and registration."

"Fine." A week before Christmas and I got stopped by the only cop who seemed to be completely immune to the holiday spirit. "Can I open the door so I can get out and try to find my license?"

Before I could wrap my fingers around the handle, the door opened. The overhead light came on and I got my first halfway decent look at Officer Do-Right. I climbed out of the car and stood in front of him. He towered over me, even with my high-heeled boots on. A wide-brimmed hat covered his head, but I could see his eyes. More green than brown, they reflected the light right back at me as his lips curved up into a shy grin.

“Do you need help retrieving your license, ma’am?”

“I’ve got it.” Any hint of initial attraction I might have felt for the broad-shouldered deputy dissipated as soon as he uttered another “ma’am.” I leaned down and pressed the button to slide the seat back. It moved a millimeter at a time. At this rate, I’d be here until next Christmas.

Eager to get the inquisition over, I leaned into the car and felt along the area between the console and the seat. I came up with a nail file, two lipsticks, eighty dollars in cash, and the business card of the guy from the total train wreck blind date I’d been on last week.

“It’s down here somewhere.” I practically crawled into the car, tilting my head to search for something resembling my license. Just when I’d almost given up hope, I caught sight of my credit card with the holographic front and my license right behind it. I nabbed it and staggered out of the car, then thrust it at the cop. “There you go.”

“Miss Kitty’s Pleasure Palace?” His brows arched so high they disappeared under the band of his hat.

“No.” I grabbed my license and peeled the loyalty card that had stuck to it from the back. I was only two stamps away from a twenty-dollar gift certificate and I’d be damned if Deputy Do-Right was going to keep me from earning a discount on my next battery-operated boyfriend.

“Noelle Evergreen. New York City? You’re quite a ways from home. You aren’t related to Marjoree Evergreen, are you?”

Finally, a ray of hope. “Yes. She’s my grandmother on my mom’s side. That’s why I’m here. I mean, that’s why I’m trying to get to Beaver Bluff. You know her?”

He let out a soft laugh. “Everyone around here knows Marjoree.”

When he didn’t say anything else, I wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “Are you going to give me a ticket, officer?”

“Deputy Hurley.” He handed my license back to me. “Do you know why I pulled you over?”

Sensing a weak spot in his seemingly impenetrable defenses, I pressed on. “Because you could tell I was lost, and you felt sorry for me?”

He shook his head. “You’ve got a taillight out. It’s dark on these roads, and I’d hate for anything to happen to you because someone didn’t see your car.”

“It’s a rental. I didn’t notice when I picked it up at the airport. I’ll have someone look at it when I get into town.” I crossed my fingers behind my

back, hoping he'd let me off with a warning. Despite his immunity to my "woe is me" routine, the good-looking deputy had me rattled. It wasn't every day I came face to face with a guy whose All-American good looks rivaled those of Captain America himself.

"They should have checked that out before they let you drive off the lot. I'm going to let you go under one condition." He held up a finger like I needed the visual aid to count to one. Under the circumstances, I probably did.

"What's that?" Living in New York, I'd been propositioned for all kinds of things. If this country boy thought he could pull one over on me...

"Tell your Grandma Evergreen I said hello."

I let out a *whoosh* of breath. "That's it?"

He nodded. "And make sure you get that taillight replaced as soon as possible."

"Will do." Relief flooded through my system. "If it's not too much trouble, would you mind giving me directions to Beaver Bluff?"

"I'll do you one better than that, Miss Evergreen. I'm headed back that way myself. If you'd like to follow me, I'd be happy to show you the way."

Finally, it looked like my luck might have changed. "Thank you. I'd appreciate that very much."

Twenty minutes later, I waved to the deputy as I stood by the back door to my Grandma Evergreen's cat cafe.

"I hope you enjoy your time in Beaver Bluff, Miss Evergreen. Don't forget to have that taillight replaced, and Merry Christmas." He tapped the brim of his hat and gave me a wide smile before he pulled away.

Merry Christmas? Spending the holiday helping my grandma close her business and move into an assisted living facility wasn't merry at all. She and my mom had a falling out when I was still a kid. Even though she was one of my only living relatives, we barely knew each other. I faced the door, unsure of what I'd find on the other side.

Ten days.

I'd not only survived, but thrived, working in one of the most cutthroat Fortune 100 firms in New York City for the past eight years. There was no reason I wouldn't be able to hack being in Beaver Bluff, Tennessee for Christmas. I raised my hand, curled my fingers into a fist, and knocked.

CHAPTER 2

HURLEY

The first snowflakes of the season drifted down as I got out of my truck. Maybe my nieces and nephews would get their wish of having a white Christmas after all. The sign for the Purr-fect Pussy Cat Cafe hung over a big picture window on one of the oldest buildings in town. Even though I'd passed by almost every day for as long as I could remember, I still got a kick out of the name Mrs. Evergreen had chosen.

Of course, not everyone in Beaver Bluff felt the same way, especially the building's owner. He'd been eager to kick Mrs. Evergreen and her cats out almost as soon as she'd set up the cat rescue. Rumor had it he was selling the building to someone who was bringing in a business with national exposure—probably one of those tacky fast-food burger places that had been opening up in neighboring towns.

I grabbed the replacement bulb I'd picked up on my way over. Helping Noelle with her taillight would be the hospitable thing to do. It's not like I had anything else to do on my day off. Besides, Marjoree made the best muffins in town. It had been way too long since I'd stopped by to check in on her. I was just being neighborly, that's all. It had nothing to do with her beautiful, blond granddaughter. Nothing at all.

Pushing open the door to the cafe, I inhaled the scent of freshly brewed coffee. A handful of customers sat at the tables in the front. The coffee and baked goods were delicious, but spending time with the cats was the real draw.

Marjoree waved at me from behind the counter. "Good morning, Hurley."

I let the front door close behind me before passing through the screen door Marjoree had set up to keep the cats from getting out. "This place looks

great.”

Giant paper snowflakes hung from the ceiling and sparkling twinkle lights were strung around the edges of the room. Someone had even made a Christmas tree out of cardboard cat scratchers in the corner.

“Thank you. I figured if I have to shut down, I’d do it in style.” Marjoree set a steaming mug of coffee on the counter, then slid a cranberry white chocolate muffin onto a plate next to it. “What brings you in this morning?”

My stomach rumbled at the sight of the muffin. I’d never turned down a fresh baked good. Holding up the bag, I glanced around for her granddaughter. “I met Noelle on her way into town last night. Assuming she hasn’t had a chance to get that taillight fixed yet, I figured I’d stop by and replace the bulb for her.”

Marjoree gave me one of her bright, broad smiles. “Oh, that’s right. Noelle told me about her little run-in with you. She’s a bit of a firecracker, that one.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “She certainly has a way with words.”

“Well, you go right ahead and take care of that taillight after you eat your breakfast. I’m sure Noelle will appreciate it.” Marjoree patted my arm before turning her attention to a couple who’d stepped up to the counter.

I took my time enjoying the muffin, hoping I might catch a glimpse of Noelle before I went outside. When I’d finished the last crumb and reached the bottom of my coffee mug, I gave up on waiting. Heading outside, I located the rental car parked in the back.

Replacing the bulb didn’t take long. As I tightened the last screw, I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d get to see Noelle again. Sounded like she’d be in town through the holidays. We were bound to run into each other at some point.

When I stopped back into the cafe, Noelle was busy helping her grandmother with the customers. She looked natural and at ease as she chatted with the customers and played with the cats. It was a side of her I hadn’t seen during our encounter on the road.

Marjoree noticed me first. She leaned on a cane as she rounded the counter. “All done?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Noelle turned her attention to me, her eyes locking with mine. “Thanks for fixing the taillight, Deputy Hurley. You didn’t have to do that, but I appreciate it.”

Last night she'd had her hair pulled back tight in a severe-looking bun and had been dressed in all black right down to her high-heeled black boots. This morning her long, blonde hair hung in loose waves. A pair of jeans hugged her hips and an oversized hoodie covered up her curves. She looked more at ease, more approachable, and, in my opinion, even more beautiful.

"My pleasure. That's how we do things in a small town like Beaver Bluff," I said. "We look out for one other and help each other out. Y'all have a good day and let me know if I can help you with anything else."

Noelle smiled, a gorgeous wide grin that seemed to wrap around my heart and give it a nice, strong squeeze. That had to be why I wasn't paying attention when I went to leave the cafe. Temporarily blinded by the grin on Noelle's full, pink lips, I pushed through the screen and opened the outer door before making sure none of the cats had followed me into the small entryway.

"Hurley! Shut the door." Marjorie lunged forward, trying to slam the door closed with the tip of her cane.

I startled out of my stupor in time to see an animal streak between my legs and out the door. Another followed, then two more and three after that, until I completely lost count. Marjorie tumbled forward, crashing into a chair before toppling to the floor. Noelle stood frozen in place, her eyes wide.

The moment stretched. Fractions of a second seemed to last for hours. Then suddenly, time leapt forward. My training took over. I pulled out my phone and called for an ambulance as I checked Marjorie for broken bones.

Noelle crouched down next to me. "What can I do?"

Marjorie gripped my hand with superhuman strength. "The ambulance is on its way. I'll be fine, but those animals are probably scared to death. The best thing you can do right now is to go find them."

"I can't leave you." Noelle gripped her grandmother's hand while she shook her head. "What are we going to do about the adoption event you have scheduled for this afternoon?"

"We'll have to postpone. If anything happens to them, I'll never forgive myself." Marjorie cupped Noelle's cheeks with her palms. "Please find Dodger, and you'll find the rest."

Noelle nodded. Then she lifted her head and locked her gaze on mine. Her expression shifted. The softness in her eyes gave way to a hardened resolve. "Let's go, Deputy. You let them out. You're going to help me find them."

Nodding, I shifted my gaze from Noelle to her grandmother. “I’m sorry, Marjoree. I’ll fix this. I promise.”

CHAPTER 3

NOELLE

Thankful I'd thought to grab my coat before rushing out the door after the parade of cats, I zigzagged through the streets of downtown Beaver Bluff, my breath forming small clouds in the frosty air. Deputy Hurley raced ahead, pausing every once in a while for me to catch up. We'd managed to get all the cats back to the cat cafe so far except for one—Dodger.

When my grandma introduced me to all the cats at the cafe this morning, I noticed one of them didn't look quite like the others. In fact, Dodger wasn't a cat at all, but Grandma Evergreen told me I'd better not mention that to him.

"Are you sure there's only one left?" Hurley asked.

"Yes. Just Dodger."

"Any idea what Dodger looks like? Big? Little, Black? White? Brown?"

"Actually, Dodger's not a cat." I slowed down. Talking and jogging at the same time took too much out of me.

"Wait a sec." Hurley stopped and turned back to face me. "Your grandma runs a cat cafe. Are you telling me there's an impostor trying to pull one over on her?"

"No. Grandma knows Dodger is a dog." I clamped my hands over my mouth as soon as the d-word escaped. Hopefully, Dodger hadn't heard me.

"How did a dog get mixed in with a cat cafe?" Hurley squinted, clearly confused.

"Don't say it out loud. You'll hurt his feelings."

"Don't say what out loud?" Hurley's face scrunched up.

"D-O-G. Dodger doesn't like it. He was turned in with a litter of kittens. I

guess he thought he was one of them, and he's been acting like a cat ever since." The funny thing was, Dodger didn't even look like a cat. He was part long-haired miniature Dachshund and part long-legged terrier. But in the few hours I'd been at the cat cafe, I'd seen him climb up the cat trees, shred cardboard cat scratchers, and even cough up a hairball.

Hurley shook his head. "Just when you think you've heard or seen it all..."

"Hey, there he is!" I pointed to a dark shape a few yards ahead. The dog dashed from one side of the street to the other, so light on his feet he seemed to fly.

"Come on, Dodger! Give it up already!" I tried to yell between breaths.

The oddly shaped dog paused and turned. His bright brown eyes stood out against his white and brown fur. Deputy Hurley reached out, his fingers grazing Dodger's back. Then the dog took off, bolting in front of a truck loaded with Christmas trees. Tires skidded on the wet pavement and the sound of metal scraping against metal made me cover my ears.

As we rounded a corner, Dodger made a sharp turn and darted into a narrow alleyway. I skidded to a stop, barely avoiding crashing into a stack of empty cardboard boxes.

Hurley motioned me forward. "He's got to be hiding in one of those boxes. I'll start on this side. If you start over there, we can work toward the middle and hopefully flush him out."

Nodding, I picked my way over to where the stacks of boxes began. "Here, kitty, kitty."

Hurley shook his head. "Come on, little buddy. You can't hide forever."

"Is this the first time you've ever been in pursuit of a fleeing canine?" I asked. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I couldn't help but acknowledge the humor of our predicament.

"Affirmative." He shot me a wide grin. "How about you?"

"I haven't had many opportunities to chase pets around New York. This trip seems to be filled with quite a few firsts for me," I admitted.

He let out a warm laugh. "And you're only on your second day in Beaver Bluff."

Movement to my left drew my attention. Dodger darted up the pile of boxes and over the top of the fence.

"There he goes." I couldn't go back and tell my grandma we'd lost one of the animals. In the short time I'd been in town, she'd opened her heart and

told me how she viewed the animals in the rescue like family.

“Maybe it’s time to call for backup.” Hurley pulled out his phone and held it to his ear.

Eager to find Dodger again, I took off down the alley and around the corner. I caught sight of him in the middle of an intersection and the chase continued. We followed him through backyards, over fences, and past storefronts. The elusive canine seemed to be one step ahead of us at every turn. Just when we thought we had him cornered, he would slip away with a flick of his stubby tail.

Despite my promise to my grandma, I was about to give up on getting my hands on Dodger. We’d been chasing him all afternoon with no luck. My feet hurt, my lungs burned, and I was eager to get back to check on her and the cafe.

Finally, Hurley received a call from one of his co-workers on patrol. A dog matching Dodger’s description had been spotted sniffing around the nativity set in front of the church on the edge of the town square.

“He’s got to be getting tired. How about we check it out before we head back?” Hurley suggested.

“Fine. But if he’s not there, we need to get back and check in on the cafe.”

“Deal.” Hurley held out his hand to shake.

Instinctively, I took it. His warm fingers wrapped around mine. A sense of calm eased the tightness in my chest. Knowing the deputy was on my side offered me a sense of reassurance. Even though it was all his fault we were out here in the first place, I didn’t have to handle it alone.

“Your fingers are freezing.” He rubbed my hands between his as we made our way to the manger scene.

I ignored the tingles racing up and down my arms. The last thing I needed was to swoon over a small-town country cop. Not even one with kindness in his eyes who thought nothing of fixing a stranger’s taillight or spending hours chasing after a stray d-o-g.

“There he is,” I whispered, my gaze settling on the furry form snuggled into the crib right next to the plastic baby Jesus.

Hurley let go of my hands and crept toward the manger. He gave me a silent signal to approach from the other side. Nodding, I mimicked his movements until we stood about five feet away from the crib. Dodger cracked an eye open. He nabbed the edge of the cloth swaddled around the

doll and jumped down from the crib.

“Oh no, Dodger, you can't steal baby Jesus!” I gasped, the absurdity of the situation finally sinking in.

Hurley dove for the dog, just missing him and landing in the hay covering the floor of the manger. “Dammit!”

Hay stuck up from his hair and clung to his jacket. He looked like a scarecrow who'd been through the wringer. I rolled back onto my butt and tried to cover my laugh with my hand.

“This isn't over.” Hurley got to his feet and continued to give chase.

Carrying the doll in his mouth must have slowed Dodger down. We caught up to him at the base of a large tree. He was trying to shimmy up the trunk, but without claws, he was out of time and out of luck.

Hurley grabbed hold of him and wrapped Dodger up in his coat. “Gotcha.”

“Finally!” I reached out and tried to pry the doll from Dodger's teeth. Tiny rows of teeth marks dotted the front of the statue. “Oh no. Baby Jesus is ruined.”

Hurley glanced down at the doll. “We'll replace him. No one will ever know.”

“You've got a line on plastic baby Jesus dolls? You really do know how to get everything around here.” I brushed some shiny slobber off the baby and tucked it inside the front of my jacket.

Hurley gave me a warm grin. “Let's get this guy back to the cafe, then I'll hook you up.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” I turned my back on the baby-less nativity scene and let Hurley lead me back toward the center of town. I'd been quick to make assumptions about Beaver Bluff and the people who made the small corner of Tennessee their home. If I'd learned anything in the past twenty-four hours, it was that Beaver Bluff, Tennessee, might just be more unpredictable than Midtown Manhattan.

CHAPTER 4

HURLEY

I dipped my fry into some hot sauce, then popped it into my mouth as I lifted my head to meet my buddy's gaze.

"How long is she in town?" Evan asked. When I said I needed advice, he suggested we meet for a beer and a burger at Pappy's Last Call, the local dive bar. I'd spent the last fifteen minutes filling him in on how I'd spent my day chasing a runaway dog I'd let loose from the cat cafe and drooling over Mrs. Evergreen's granddaughter.

"Through Christmas for sure. Maybe a few days after?" I washed the fry down with a sip of beer. "She's here to help her grandma shut down the cafe before the end of the year. But now Marjoree's out of commission from her fall, so I'm not sure what's going to happen." I should have been over there right now helping Noelle, but she'd tossed me out the door as soon as we got back to the cafe with the dog who thought he was a cat.

Evan smirked as he reached for his beer. "You really stepped in it this time, man."

"Tell me about it. What am I supposed to do?"

"How far do you want to go to impress this woman?" he asked.

"Whatever it takes. You should see her." A funny warmth tingled in my chest. I rubbed at it while I tried to describe how it felt to be around Noelle Evergreen. "Looking at her is like staring right into the sun."

"Okay, Romeo." Evan shook his head as he reached over and stole a few of my fries. "Your first priority is rescheduling the holiday adoption event to find some of those cats a new home before the end of the year."

"We're just going to let them sell the building out from under Marjoree?" It didn't seem fair. There had to be something we could do to prevent it.

“I called in a favor and talked to someone over in city planning when you told me what’s going on. They’re not just selling the building; the new owner wants to tear it down. There’s got to be some angle we can work. We might be able to stop it if we can prove the building has historical significance to the town.”

“Surely somebody famous slept there at least once,” I mumbled. If anyone could find a loophole, it would be Evan Bishop or one of his brothers. Their sole purpose in life was making sure the history of Beaver Bluff—specifically the Devil’s Dance Distillery, their family co-owned with two other local families—wasn’t forgotten.

“Let me handle looking into that. In the meantime, you ought to help your dream girl create some buzz for the cats. Set up an event or two. You’re creative. Just let me know what you need from me.” His phone buzzed where he’d set it down on the table. He picked it up and glanced at the screen. “Gotta go. Cole took Danica to Jamaica for an early Christmas present and I have to pick them up at the airport.”

It hadn’t been that long ago that Cole, his brothers, and I spent most of our weeknights on stools in front of the bar, cheering on the Predators over an order of hot wings. We still got together every once in a while, but since Cole had fallen for Danica, and Miller had started spending more time with Amelie, it wasn’t the same. I was happy for them, but a little envious of the bond they shared.

“Hey, thanks for the advice.” I got up and grabbed hold of his outstretched hand. “I appreciate it.”

“Let me know how it goes, man.”

I nodded and sat down to finish my burger alone, my mind spinning with ideas about how I could help Noelle find homes for all the cats. There were twenty-nine of them listed on the Purr-fect Pussy Cat Cafe website. With less than a week to go before Christmas, I’d need to find homes for two to three cats a day, if I wanted to have them all settled before the end of the year, plus the damn dog who thought he was a cat.

I pulled out the notebook I’d brought with me and opened the cover to a blank sheet of paper. No idea was a bad idea. I’d just jot down everything that came to mind, then go back and circle the most viable options later. With nothing going for me but my hope to come through for Noelle, I put the pen to the paper and got to work.

An hour later, I stood in the alley behind the cat cafe and knocked on the door that led to the second-floor apartment. We were short on time, and I didn't want to wait until the next day to go over my ideas with Noelle. I also wasn't sure whether she'd had dinner, so I'd brought her a burger from Pappy's, just in case.

She didn't look happy to see me when she opened the door. "You'd better have a replacement baby Jesus with you."

"They had a run on nativity sets at the farm supply store. He's coming in a shipment from Scranton, but won't be here until the day after tomorrow. I brought you a burger and I've got ideas on how we can find homes for the cats before New Year's." I held out the brown paper bag like a peace offering.

Noelle licked her lips. "Fries, too?"

"What's a burger without fries?" I handed it over and held my breath, hoping for an invitation to follow her upstairs.

"I haven't eaten since this morning. You really brainstormed a list of ideas?" She cocked her head, studying me like she wasn't sure whether to trust me.

"I feel awful about what happened earlier and want to make it up to you. I think you're going to like some of these." She'd probably hate them all, but at least she'd be talking to me again.

"Fine. Come in. My grandma said I'm not allowed to be mean to you." Noelle headed up the steps in front of me. It was impossible to tear my gaze away from her ass as she climbed the stairs.

"Marjoree said that?" Mrs. Evergreen and I had known each other for years, but I never felt like she was a big fan of mine.

"Yeah. She said it was an accident. You're lucky it wasn't worse, or I'd be holding a grudge." Noelle set the brown bag down on the table in the small eat-in kitchen. Her shoulders rose and fell as she let out a long exhale. "Can I get you anything to drink before you share your brilliant ideas?"

My throat constricted. Maybe I'd oversold the chicken scratch I'd scrawled down on the notepad. "I never said they were brilliant. They're more like conversation starters."

She grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge and gestured to one of the vintage floral chairs. "Then let's get the conversation started. I need to be back in New York on New Year's Day, and we've got twenty-nine cats and a Dodger to re-home. Go."

“Alright. First idea, an open house with hot cocoa and kittens.” I glanced up, trying to get a read on Noelle’s expression.

“Kids and cocoa?” She wrinkled her nose. “Too messy. Hard pass.”

“What about a meow masquerade ball?” I winced as I said it out loud. The idea of a formal party didn’t appeal to me at all.

Noelle shook her head.

“Pictures with Santa Claws? Claws as in paws, get it?” This one was one of my favorites, though it didn’t take much for one bad idea to rise slightly higher than the rest of my bad ideas.

She cocked her head, her burger halfway to her mouth. “That one has potential. We could use it as a fundraiser and an adoption event. If we can’t get all the cats adopted out, at least we could send them to another shelter with a sizable donation to help pay for their care.”

I sat back and clasped my hands over my stomach, proud of myself for coming up with a suggestion that met with her approval. “Great. I was thinking we could even dress some kittens up as elves, or maybe even reindeer. Wouldn’t that be cute?”

“I love it. It’s awesome you’re so invested in this idea.” A wide smile spread across Noelle’s lips, transforming her face from beautiful to absolutely stunning. My breath caught in my chest as I smiled back.

“I’ll call in a few favors and get some help to spread the word.” I flipped my notebook to a fresh page, ready to start a to-do list of everything that needed to be done. “First up, we need to pick a date.”

“The sooner the better, don’t you think? Are you free Saturday or Sunday afternoon?”

I was thrilled she wanted to include me. “Yeah. I’m working overnight on Friday, but have Saturday off. Whatever you need me to do, I’m there.”

“Good.” She locked eyes with me and the corners of her mouth tilted up. “You’re going to make the perfect Santa Claws, Deputy Hurley.”

CHAPTER 5

NOELLE

Saturday morning finally arrived. There wasn't a window in downtown Beaver Bluff that didn't have a flyer displayed about the Santa Claws event. Hurley had done exactly what he'd promised and called in favors with the local paper. They printed an entire article about the cat cafe, and Hurley even found a DJ from a station up in Nashville who planned to broadcast live during the event.

With tomorrow being Christmas Eve, I was hoping we'd be able to find homes for most of the cats today. I got up and spent the next couple of hours running through the morning routine. Thankfully, my grandmother had a few volunteers who came in to help with the cats and a part-time employee who did the baking for the cafe every day.

Grandma Evergreen had been moved to a rehab facility where she'd spend the next several weeks until she could get around on her own again. Hurley felt awful and had been stopping by to visit her every day. He'd also been checking on me in between shifts, and I'd looked forward to his visits.

I told myself it meant nothing. The tall deputy with the kind heart wasn't my type. He was too honest, too nice, too thoughtful. Ugh. I sounded like a true, hardened New Yorker. I'd just put the finishing touches on the big velvet chair where Santa Claws would pose for photos when my phone rang.

"Hi, Grandma. I was just about to send you a picture of the decorations. How are you feeling today?" Even though I hadn't been thrilled about spending the holidays in Beaver Bluff, it had been nice getting to know my grandma.

"Same old, same old. I don't know why they won't let me come home. I'd be more use helping at the adoption event today than I am sitting here

doing nothing.”

“You need to rest.” That’s what the doctor said. I wasn’t telling her anything she didn’t already know, she just didn’t enjoy hearing it.

“I feel fine, Noelle. Nothing more than a few bumps and bruises.”

“I’ll take some videos and promise to send you lots of pictures.” The walls of my chest squeezed tight around my heart. “I also promise to make sure any cats that get adopted go to a good home.”

Grandma let out a heavy sigh. “That’s what’s most important. Has anyone shown interest in Dodger yet? Make sure he and Cricket stay together. They won’t be able to survive without each other.”

Hurley had been talking up Dodger to the guys at the station. Unfortunately, all of them knew about the dog’s escapades. It was going to take someone with a big heart and an unlimited reserve of patience to take on that crafty canine. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure they stay together.”

“Thank you, Noelle. When your mother told me she wouldn’t come and was sending you instead, I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about spending the holidays with an old woman you haven’t seen in twenty years, but you seem to fit right in around here, honey.” Her voice grew soft. “You used to have so much fun when you’d come and visit. I never should have let your mama keep us apart.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, all the summers you spent here in Beaver Bluff when you were barely knee high to a grasshopper. You don’t remember that at all?”

“No.” I racked my brain, trying to summon a memory of a summer in Beaver Bluff. Nothing came to mind. The only thing I remembered about my grandma was my mom telling me she cared more about the cats she rescued and fostered than she did about her own family. I’d been having a difficult time reconciling my mom’s version of my Grandma Evergreen with the sweet woman I’d met when I arrived in town.

“There’s a photo album on my bookshelf. Flip through that when you have a minute to spare. I bet those pictures will jog your memory.”

“I will,” I promised, just as the front door of the cafe opened and Hurley stuck his head through. “Hurley’s here. I’ve got to get ready for this afternoon. I’ll call you when it’s over.”

“Good luck, honey. And thank you.”

I ended the call, still confused by my grandma’s comment about spending time in Beaver Bluff when I was younger. I’d have to wait until later to try to

unpack those memories. The only thing I had time for right now was trying to convince a bunch of strangers their lives weren't quite complete without the company of one of our cuddly cats or kittens.

"You sure you haven't found someone else who'd make a better Santa Claws yet?" Hurley set a huge bag down on the floor. "I just picked up the costume from the distillery. Hopefully, it had a chance to air out since Evan wore it during Winterfest last weekend."

"Who's Evan again?" I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to keep all the names he kept spouting off straight.

"One of the Bishops."

"Right..." He'd filled me in on the Bishop-Stewart feud when he'd brought me a burger the other night. Seemed like the drama and history in Beaver Bluff could almost rival the colorful history of New York City.

Hurley glanced around the interior of the cafe. I'd closed down to get ready for the big event, so we were alone with only the cats and Dodger to keep us company.

"I set up a chair over there where you can sit for photos. Grandma's crochet circle came through with headbands for the cats." I held up a set of small, crocheted antlers, complete with a chin strap that could fit onto a cat's head. "Now we just have to decide which cat is going to pose as which reindeer."

Hurley let out a deep belly laugh. "If you pull this off, it might just go down as one of the greatest feats in Beaver Bluff history."

"I'd settle for finding homes for some cats." I picked up a long-haired Himalayan female cat named Cleo. She had gorgeous, thick fur and the sweetest personality. If my walk-up on the lower east side allowed animals, I'd be tempted to take her home with me.

"All we can do is try." Hurley reached down and pulled something out of the bag. "Hey, I almost forgot. I brought you a new baby Jesus. Maybe we can take your d-o-g for a walk later and slip him back into the manger before anyone notices he's gone."

"Aw, that's the sweetest gift anyone's ever gotten for me." I checked over the plastic doll. "Why are his swaddling clothes purple and green? And his hair is metallic gold. Hurley, where did you get this?"

"The shipment coming into the farm supply store got cancelled, so I had to find an alternate source."

"Please tell me he's not a black-market baby Jesus." I gritted my teeth.

“No.” Hurley rolled his eyes and shook his head. “He’s part of a Mardis Gras nativity set, and I bought him off an internet auction site. We can rub some hay over him to dull the metallic sheen before we put him back in the crib.”

“I don’t believe this.” With no other option, I set the doll inside a cabinet and shut the door. I wasn’t taking any chances on Dodger making his mark on this one.

Hurley picked up the bag and slung it over his shoulder like he was hefting Santa’s bag of toys. “I guess if you haven’t found someone else to play Santa, it’s going to be up to me.”

I put my hand on his arm. His forearm muscles twitched under my fingers. “Thank you for your help. It means a lot to my grandma.”

“I’m not doing this for your grandma, Noelle.” The intensity in his eyes drilled into me, past all the armor I’d bolted into place to protect myself.

I drew my bottom lip into my mouth, not sure if I wanted to ask the question that burned in my chest. Unable to prevent myself, I held his gaze, nervous to ask, but even more anxious at the thought of never knowing.

“Then why are you doing this?”

He tilted his head slightly to the right, studying me like he wasn’t sure whether to trust me with the truth. Then he lifted his hand and cupped my cheek with his palm. His touch sent a wave of heat hurtling toward my belly. Then even lower.

“I think it’s pretty obvious that I’m doing this for you.”

My breath caught and my knees turned to noodles. I got lost in the moment, pulling his head down toward mine and rising to my tiptoes to press my lips against his.

I was completely unprepared for the fireworks that exploded along my nerve endings and the deep ache that pulsed between my legs. The more I got to know Deputy Do-Right, the more I realized my initial impression had been way off base. There was so much more to him than I’d realized, and as it turned out, it looked like he might be exactly my type.

CHAPTER 6

HURLEY

The afternoon passed in a blur of cats, kids, and Christmas carols. The flashes exploding in front of my eyes from parents snapping pictures were nothing compared to the way just looking at Noelle blinded me. I didn't know what had possessed me to kiss her, but I didn't regret it. Based on the way she'd responded, she didn't either. Once we got through the event, I planned on doing it again. And again, and again, assuming she was on board.

Finally, the door closed behind the last group of visitors. The family of five had taken at least three dozen pictures, but it had been worth it. Two of the cats we'd dressed up as reindeer had gone home with them. Noelle flipped the deadbolt and pulled the shade down over the window before she turned to press her back against the door.

"How many cats did you adopt out today?" I peeled the cat mask off my head, grateful for a breath of air that didn't smell like the inside of a rubber mask.

"Eighteen." Her smile stretched wide. "We've only got eleven left. I'm hoping we pick up a few more cat lovers after Christmas who might have heard the broadcast today."

My fingers fumbled as I tried to find the buttons buried underneath the thick faux fur of Santa's jacket. "Sounds like you're feeling pretty good about how things went."

"I am." She crossed the room and brushed my hands away. "Let me help you with that."

"Hey, any time you want to take my clothes off, I'm willing." Damn, I wanted to bite my tongue for being so forward. I tried to play off the

comment with a shrug. "In case you were wondering."

"What if I was wondering?" Her hands slid under the Santa jacket, skimming over the thin t-shirt I had on underneath. My skin prickled. This woman had no idea what kind of effect she had on me. What lengths I'd go to for her. Dressing up like a cat in a Santa costume was just the beginning.

Not wanting to break whatever spell she'd fallen under that might have caused her to forget she was way out of my league, I tread carefully. "Then I guess you've got your answer."

She slid the jacket off my shoulders and let it fall to the ground behind us. Soft holiday music still filtered through the speakers while multi-colored lights flickered in time to the beat.

"We should celebrate our success today." Noelle put her palms on my chest. She looked up at me, her eyes glittering with the reflection of hundreds of twinkling lights.

I'd been holding back, afraid to put myself out there since I knew she wouldn't be sticking around. There was no possibility of a future with Noelle, and I'd gotten tired of heartless hook ups that weren't leading anywhere.

Then I remembered my talk with Evan the other night. He'd be the first one to encourage me to take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Women like Noelle Evergreen didn't show up in Beaver Bluff, Tennessee, every day. Hell, I'd lived in the small mountain town my entire life and had never met anyone who'd made my heart sing like she did.

"I like you, Noelle. A lot."

"I like you, too, Hurley." She leaned in and kissed my neck. Blood surged toward my groin. My cock rallied.

I took half a step back, just far enough to slip my hand between us and nudge her chin up so she'd meet my gaze. "Is there any chance you might stick around Beaver Bluff after the holidays?"

Her brows drew down and a quick flash of something I didn't recognize passed through her eyes. "I'm up for a promotion, and if I get it, it'll be effective the first of the year. My life is in New York, and yours is here."

Even though I'd expected her to say something like that, it still felt like a sucker punch to my gut to hear it out loud.

Her palm grazed the scruff on my cheek and a hesitant smile slowly spread across her lips. "But that doesn't mean we can't enjoy our time together before I go home."

The rules of engagement couldn't be clearer. I could either play it safe

and go home to my freezer full of frozen meals or take what Noelle was offering and keep myself from falling for her before she headed back to New York.

She broke eye contact, shifting her gaze to the center of my chest. “What do you say, Santa Claws? Do you have any free time over the holidays?”

I was done trying to resist her. Sliding my hands into the back pockets of the red jeans that molded to her ass, I pulled her hips against mine. My cock pressed into her belly, hard as a piece of Christmas coal, and ready to engage.

“Merry Christmas to me.” She threw her arms around my neck and rose to her tiptoes.

Tired of holding back, I took control, slanting my mouth over hers and walking her backward toward the steps leading up to the apartment. I swept her into my arms without breaking the kiss. She tightened her grip and held on while I carried her up the stairs and into the guest bedroom.

My furry red pants ended up on the floor, right next to her jeans and ugly Christmas sweater. We tumbled onto the bed in our underwear. Now that I’d given in, I was so desperate to touch her, to taste her, to explore every inch of her soft skin... I couldn’t get her naked fast enough.

My palms skimmed up her sides while she reached into my briefs for my cock. I hissed in a breath as she wrapped a hand around my shaft. A red light flashed, coming from my groin area. Damn. The holiday boxer briefs I’d thrown on this morning had Rudolph on the front with a light-up nose.

“What’s this?” Noelle sat up and straddled my hips. She pressed on Rudolph’s nose and let out a laugh when my crotch lit up.

“I was trying to be festive.” Forcing myself into a seated position, I reached behind her and unclasped her bra. It fell forward, giving me my first glimpse of her gorgeous tits. My mouth watered, and I leaned in to suck one of her pert nipples into my mouth.

“Oh, Hurley.” Her nails raked through my hair. Goosebumps exploded down my neck.

At that moment, I didn’t care that she’d be gone in a few days. We’d been tossed together now for some reason. My only goal was to make sure she’d never forget me.

I laid her back on the bed and kicked off the damn Rudolph briefs, taking her lacy snowflake panties off with my teeth. Nudging her thighs apart with my shoulders, I leaned forward and circled her clit with my tongue. She tasted sweeter than the frosted sugar cookies we’d served downstairs.

Her hips bucked, and I set my palm on her belly, holding her in place. She'd be leaving soon, but tonight she belonged to me. Tonight, she was mine.

CHAPTER 7

NOELLE

I never would have pegged Deputy Do-Right as a take-charge guy in the bedroom. He was so nice, so dependable, so... “Oh, right there. I’m so...”

His mouth on mine prevented me from saying anything else. My orgasm crashed over me as Hurley swiveled his hips and sent me to another dimension... again. My fingers dug into his shoulders, holding tight, urging him on, begging for more.

When he’d made sure he’d wrung the last bit of my release from me, his hips stilled, his entire body tensed, and he let himself go. I kissed him hard and clenched the walls of my pussy around his cock as he came.

We’d been holed up in the bedroom for hours. I’d never had such good sex. Being with Hurley was on a whole new level. If I wasn’t careful, he might ruin me for anyone else.

He rolled to the side and pulled me onto his chest. “I think I could be happy spending the rest of my life right here in this room with you.”

With my ear on his pec, his voice vibrated through me. I loved being this close to him, loved the power I felt in knowing I could make him feel good. “You don’t think you’d get bored?”

“Never.” He smoothed my hair away from my forehead.

I ran my fingers over his ridged abs. “What about food? You’d need to keep up your strength.”

“We’ll have food delivered.”

“What about the cats?”

“Aren’t there volunteers who can come in and feed them?” He flipped to his side and propped his head up on his hand. “Speaking of feeding the cats,

it's probably time."

The sound of soft kitty paws trying to burrow through the door had been coming from the hallway for the past several minutes. "Do we have to get up?"

Hurley pressed a kiss to my temple before he pulled himself up out of the bed. "I need to clean up. Then I'll meet you downstairs to help. The sooner we get the chores done, the sooner we can get back to bed, right?"

"Right." I watched him head to the bathroom to dispose of the condom, enjoying the view of his naked ass as he went. And I'd thought spending the holidays in Beaver Bluff would be boring. I needed to learn to not go into situations with preconceived expectations.

I dragged myself out of bed and tossed on some pajama pants and Hurley's t-shirt. It smelled like him—a mixture of holiday spice and the fresh scent of his deodorant. I lifted the neckband and took in a deep whiff. A calm sense of peacefulness washed over me. I might just accidentally misplace his shirt so he couldn't find it and I could keep it.

By the time Hurley came down the stairs in his light-up Rudolph briefs, I'd already fed all the cats and was filling their bowls with fresh water. It felt like it should be the middle of the night, but a quick glance at the vintage kitty clock on the wall showed it was only a little after seven.

"I should probably call my grandma and let her know how things went. She's probably going out of her mind wondering." I should have called her as soon as we shut the door behind the last group, but I'd been distracted by Hurley. Guilt spread through my chest and made my stomach tighten. It wasn't like me to get distracted by a man, even one as skilled and good looking as the tall, small-town, country deputy.

"Go ahead. I'll run out and grab us something for dinner while you do. How does that sound?" He took over, filling water bowls. Rudolph's nose lit up every time he bent down. I let out a half-laugh, half-snort as I watched him.

"What the hell was that?" He turned toward me, Rudolph's nose flickering in the soft light of the cafe. "Are you sure it was human?"

Embarrassed, I covered my mouth with my hand. "Sorry, I couldn't help it. Good thing I don't laugh much, huh?"

Hurley's arms wrapped around me and he lifted me up so his hands cupped my ass. "I think I'm becoming addicted to all the little noises you make."

I laughed again as his lips met my neck. Goosebumps pebbled my skin, racing down my chest and making my nipples poke through the fabric of his t-shirt. Sighing, I put my hands on his cheeks and turned his face so I could kiss him. I'd been looking for someone like him my entire adult life. With all the men in New York, why did I have to find the one for me in a place like Beaver Bluff, Tennessee? And what was I willing to do about it?

CHAPTER 8

HURLEY

With Noelle's grandma still in the hospital, somehow I'd convinced her to spend Christmas day with me and my family. I'd introduced her as Marjoree's granddaughter and told everyone I was just being nice by extending an invitation to someone new in town who'd otherwise be spending the holiday alone.

We always had extras at the holidays, but based on the knowing glances my mom kept shooting my way and the grins my brothers kept flashing at me, no one believed there wasn't something going on between Noelle and me. When we'd finally eaten dessert, cleared the table, and sat through several rounds of holiday charades, an opportunity to escape presented itself.

It still took half an hour for us to make it from the foyer to the porch. By the time my dad went and got her coat, and my mom retrieved the leftovers she'd packed up for us from the fridge, I was ready to toss Noelle over my shoulder and make a run for my truck.

"Thanks for inviting me to dinner with your family tonight." Noelle leaned over the center console and kissed me. We hadn't pulled away from the curb yet, and I could feel my brothers staring at us through the front window.

I didn't care. With Christmas over, my time with Noelle was coming to an end. We had one more adoption event planned before she'd head back to New York. After that, I'd probably never see her again.

"Thanks for coming." I rested my forehead against hers. "My family can be a little much."

"I had so much fun. Growing up with just my mom and me, our holidays were always so quiet. I always wished we had family around. You're lucky to

have them so close.” Noelle moved back to her side of the truck to clip her seatbelt in place.

We drove back to her grandma’s apartment with just the soft holiday tunes from the radio playing. Over the next few days, I’d promised to help her move her grandmother’s few things into the assisted living facility they’d picked out, then be there for the final adoption event on New Year’s Eve. Evan still hadn’t come through with anything that could stop them from tearing down the building, so it looked like the Purr-fect Pussy Cat Cafe would cease to exist in just a few days.

As I pulled into a parking spot in back of the building, Noelle’s phone rang. Figuring it was just her grandma or mom calling to wish her a Merry Christmas, I unloaded the leftovers my mom had sent with us and carried them upstairs.

Dodger jumped onto the kitchen table to investigate the new smells while his sidekick Cricket wound between my legs. Despite my best efforts, no one would take in a dog who thought he was a cat. His reputation preceded him, at least around Beaver Bluff. Hopefully, someone from out of town would come to the New Year’s Event and take a chance on the mismatched pair.

Noelle came upstairs, her hand pressed to her forehead. “That was my work bestie. I’ve got to go back to New York.”

“What happened?” I followed her into the bedroom, where she pulled her suitcase out from the closet. “They’re announcing the promotions tomorrow. I have to be there. You don’t know how things work around there. Out of sight, out of mind is a real thing.”

“The day after Christmas? What about the New Year’s Eve bash? We’ve still got eleven cats and Dodger to re-home.” Beyond closing the cat cafe, I wasn’t ready to let her go. Not yet. We were supposed to have more time together.

She whirled around and grabbed both of my hands. “You can do it without me.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to do it without her. I didn’t want to do anything without her.

“Please, Hurley? For my grandma? For the cats? For Dodger?”

My heart cracked into a million pieces. She was really leaving. I’d gone into our fling knowing she wouldn’t be staying. Even so, a tiny sliver of my heart hoped I’d be able to convince her. That maybe she’d fall in love with Beaver Bluff and want to stay. That maybe she’d fall in love with me.

As much as it hurt to stare into her beautiful brown eyes and know she would never choose me, I nodded. “I’ll do it, Noelle. But not for Dodger, not for the cats, and not for your grandma. I’ll do it for you, because in the space of a few short days, I’ve fallen head over heels, completely in love with you.”

Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a gasp. “Oh, Hurley. I’m sorry. I always told you I was heading back to New York. There’s nothing for me here in Beaver Bluff.”

“I know. I’ll go fill up your rental with gas while you finish packing.” I didn’t know what else to do. I’d told her how I felt, and it didn’t matter. She was right. There was nothing for her in Beaver Bluff. Nothing but me.

CHAPTER 9

NOELLE

I stared at my boss sitting on the other side of her wide desk and sucked in a deep breath. We were on the forty-eighth floor of a building in midtown Manhattan. If I stood at the floor-to-ceiling window, I could look out over hundreds of buildings housing thousands of people. The energy of the city surrounded me. This was where I belonged and the moment I'd been working toward my entire career. Then why did I feel so empty?

"Of course, your new role with the company will require more travel." She slid a packet across the desk. "We've got big plans to expand into Europe and Asia in the next five years. You have no real ties holding you back, so you're the perfect candidate to fill the position."

My hand shook as I reached for the folder. "Exactly how much time do you anticipate me being in the States?"

"Less than five percent. You can give up your apartment and put your things into storage. No sense in paying for a home base if you'll never be home, right?" She smiled, so sure she was giving me everything I wanted. I thought she was considering me for a position that would split my time between opening new stores and working at HQ. That would have enabled me to get down to Beaver Bluff a few times a year to visit my grandma, and maybe even spend some time with Hurley if he'd let me.

"I don't understand. We talked about me taking over as Director of Training."

"And the team felt you were better suited for a larger role. I thought you'd be excited about this, Noelle." She frowned, clearly expecting a different reaction from me.

"So the director position is off the table?" I should be thrilled, but all I

could think about was how far away I'd be. What if Grandma Evergreen needed me?

"We offered that to someone else. I don't understand. Are you seriously considering turning down the position?"

"No, um, I need some time to think things through. I just wasn't expecting this." Nodding, I got to my feet. "Can I circle back with you tomorrow?"

"We'd like to make the announcement as soon as possible. I can give you until the end of the day." She shuffled the papers on her desk into a neat pile. "Don't make a mistake, Noelle. Everything you've ever wanted is sitting right in front of you. Don't be afraid to reach out and take it."

She was right. I'd be a fool to turn down the job she was offering. But in the past several days, I'd come to realize that there were some things in life that money couldn't buy. Things like friendship, and family, and belonging to a cause bigger than myself. Things like love. Flipping through the photo album my grandma saved had brought on a flood of memories... memories of how it felt to be surrounded by people who loved me and cared about me. I'd told myself I didn't need that. I'd been lying to myself for years.

At that moment, I knew what I had to do. I just didn't know how to do it. It was a good thing I'd been pinching pennies and saving as much as I could over the years. With a plan taking shape in my head, I pulled out my phone and took a deep breath, then I pushed the button to make a call that might just change everything.

CHAPTER 10

HURLEY

Thanks to my friends and family in Beaver Bluff, the New Year's Eve Bash was a huge success. By eleven-thirty, all the animals had found new homes except for two. Cricket pounced on the sparkly pom pom Evan had been teasing her with while Dodger leapt from the top of one cat tower to the other.

Noelle had been right about the radio broadcast bringing in listeners. Folks from as far away as Nashville had come in to save the cats. I'd been texting her updates as I sent each one off with his or her new owners, but she hadn't responded for over an hour. She was probably off ringing in the new year in Times Square. Spending the last day of the year surrounded by strangers seemed like a very New Yorkish thing to do.

My heart was still reeling from having to say goodbye to Noelle, but the sooner I forgot about the short time we spent together, the better off I'd be. So what if I didn't have someone special to share my life with yet? My life was filled with the people who mattered the most to me—the ones who'd come through to help pull off the New Year's bash at the last minute.

My parents climbed into their vehicle parked at the curb. Even after thirty years of marriage, my dad still opened my mom's door. My brothers had already left, but they'd been here earlier and pitched in without much complaining. Cole and Danica had just said their goodbyes. They had to make an appearance at the party at the distillery before midnight and were taking Evan with them.

That left me, Dodger, and Cricket. Looked like we'd be ringing in the new year alone. Tomorrow, I'd have to make a difficult decision and figure out which shelter to take them to. I would have loved to bring them home

with me, but I couldn't. My younger brother who'd been staying with me was allergic to cats.

"Sorry to let you down, guys." I sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to me. Cricket jumped up into my lap and Dodger settled on the back of the couch, right behind my head. I'd make sure they went to a good place. With the funds we'd raised during the adoption events, someone at another no-kill shelter would be happy to take them.

The front door of the cafe opened. Damn, I must not have turned the deadbolt. I got up, forcing Cricket to abandon my lap. "Sorry, the event's over."

"That's too bad. I was hoping you might have one or two left. Turns out I'm moving to a place that will allow pets after all."

I recognized her voice before she stepped into the light. Noelle stopped in the foyer like she wasn't sure whether she should come all the way in.

"What are you doing here?" I blinked hard, not sure if I could trust what I was seeing. "You went back to New York."

"I did. They offered me everything I've ever wanted: a huge salary, the ability to travel, even a very attractive stock option package." Her lips curved up slightly. "I turned them down."

My pulse spiked. "You did what?"

"Turns out everything I thought I wanted wasn't what I really wanted after all." Noelle stepped through the second door and let it close behind her.

The hope I'd squashed down in my chest struggled to surface. "What are you saying?"

She looked up at me, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "I want this, Hurley... time to get to know my grandma, the chance to build something beautiful and make a difference in the world, the sense of community I've found here in Beaver Bluff."

"You deserve it. All that and so much more." I put my hand on her shoulder, happy that she'd figured things out for herself and so sorry that what had been growing between us didn't make her list.

"I bought the building. Turns out your friend Evan was right. At one point in time, this building housed some law offices. I found an old newspaper announcement that said this is where the three families who own the Devil's Dance Distillery signed the official contract that put them into business together. When I told the buyer who wanted to raze it to the ground and threatened to tie the sale up in a lawsuit, he backed out." Noelle lifted her

shoulders. “I emptied my savings, cashed in my retirement, and it’s going to be mine. Grandma Evergreen won’t have to leave, and we can keep the cat cafe running.”

“That’s amazing.” I knew she was smart and capable, but I was still in awe of what she’d been able to accomplish, especially in such a short time. “So you’re going to stay here in Beaver Bluff and run the cat cafe with your grandma?”

“I might get a little restless with just one location to focus on, so I was thinking of making some changes and franchising the concept. Only instead of the Purr-fect Pussy Cat Cafe, we could open up a series of Perfect Paws Pets locations. That way we can include d-o-g-s and day care and turn it into more of a business than a rescue.”

She’d said “we,” but I assumed that meant her and her grandma. I’d resigned myself to the disappointing fact that there would never be a “we” that involved me and Noelle.

“That sounds great. I’m happy for you. I hope you get everything you want.” Looking at her hurt too damn much. Though I ached to pull her into my arms, touching her and feeling her soft curves against me would only make it that much harder to walk away.

“Most of all, I want you.” Her voice came out in a breathy whisper, so soft I questioned whether she’d actually spoken or if I’d just imagined it because it was what I most wanted to hear.

“What?”

She looked down at her feet. “If it’s too late, I understand.”

“Too late for what?”

She lifted her chin and stared at me as tears coursed down her cheeks. “For us, Hurley. None of this means a thing without you.”

“Too late?” I wrapped my arms around her and lifted her off her feet, my heart suddenly so light it felt like it was about to float right out of my chest. “There’s no such thing. I’d wait for you forever, Noelle Evergreen.”

“I can think of much better things we can do for forever besides waiting.” Her hands slid up my chest, and she clasped her fingers together behind my neck, pulling my mouth toward hers. “Like kissing under the mistletoe.”

I glanced up to see the sprig of fake mistletoe one of my brothers had hung from the ceiling as a joke and made a mental note to buy him a case of beer to thank him. Then I dipped my head and kissed the woman I loved, the woman I’d been waiting for all my life.

ABOUT DYLANN CRUSH

USA Today bestselling author Dylann Crush writes contemporary romance with sizzle, sass, heart and humor. A true romantic, she loves her heroines spunky and her heroes super sexy. When she's not dreaming up steamy storylines, she can be found sipping a margarita and searching for the best Tex-Mex food in the Upper Midwest. Find out more about Dylann [here](#).

Sign up for Dylann's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

[Whiskey Wars Series](#)

[Lovebird Cafe Series](#)

[Holiday Texas Series](#)

[Tying the Knot in Texas Series](#)

[Cowboys in Paradise Series](#)

[Mountain Men of Mustang Mountain Series](#)



SNAPS WITH SANTA

HOPE ELLIS

ABOUT SNAPS WITH SANTA

Grace is feeling like a Grinch after moving back home to her small town. But when a rescued kitten leads to a chance meeting with her first love, Grace soon finds herself hot for Santa.

CHAPTER 1

I'd forgotten how much I hated snow.

The overcast sky spat a flurry of tiny pellets in wild, wind-whipped sheets. It was the worst kind of snow. It weighted trees. Claimed roofs. Buried the treads of my tires and transformed the the road into a skating rink.

No doubt the out-of-towners and tourists were loving it. With each passing moment, our sleepy little town grew even sleepier under its blanket of snow. Main Street and all its festive holiday decorations grew opaque as the torrent slowly leached all the bright, joyful frivolity from downtown.

This was perfect-day-to-stay-inside weather. Cuddle-under-a-blanket-with-hot-chocolate weather. Finally-binge-watch-that-new-series weather.

Instead, I was outside. Braving the perils of driving on an unplowed snowy road, where there was no fun or safety to be had.

"This better be good," I muttered, pulling into the drive fronting my mother's stately Tudor. The low-slung exterior of the Fiat gave an audible, pained scrape as it fought to gain purchase on the vaunted mountain of snow. Whether or not I'd make it up the drive seemed in question for a full minute as the wheels spun fruitlessly, the engine tinnily gunning in vain. But it finally pulled free, sluggishly trudging forward. By the time I'd made it up the drive, squeezed the car in an available sliver of space and braved the slippery front steps, I was beyond exasperated.

"Grace. You made it." Aline, my mother's housekeeper, gave me a sunny smile as she ushered me in. "Wow. It's really coming down out there."

"Tell me about it." Biting back impatience, I shot a wary glance around the foyer and empty sitting room. "So, where is she? And what's this emergency errand?"

“Here, let me take your coat. You can leave your boots here, the ladies are out back in the sunroom.”

That would explain the half-dozen cars hogging the winding drive outside.

“‘The ladies’? She has guests? What was so urgent that I had to rush over right now?”

“Come back and say hello to everyone.” Aline gave me another sunny smile, but this one seemed strained. “Won’t take long. And everybody’s so excited to see you again after all this time.”

“Is that so?” Giving in, I bent to unlace my boots. They were completely impractical, red-bottomed, slick-soled and more suited for L.A.’s winter than the growing Snowpocalypse outside. I’d grown up here. How the hell had I forgotten that I’d need snow boots in the middle of December?

As transitions went, this one was beyond rocky.

“It won’t take but a minute,” Aline assured me once I was upright again. She planted a guiding hand in the middle of my back, steering me through the familiar inner workings of the house. “Don’t you want you want say hello to your aunties anyway?”

“I’d like to unpack the millions of boxes at my house. Eat off my own plates. Find my night guard. How long is this errand going to take?”

“And here we are,” Aline announced brightly, leaving my question unanswered as she all but shoved me into the sunroom. “Look who’s here, everybody! Grace’s home!”

Surveying the room, I could only blink in bemusement.

Christmas had thrown up all over this room. My mother’s brunches were a festive affair under normal circumstances. She and her closest friends gathered once a month for tea (catered meal) and fellowship (gossip). As long as I could remember, they’d gathered here to celebrate birthday, holidays, graduations, life transitions. This was the the epic Christmas bunch and, as usual, my mother had gone all out. Tinsel and garland swooped and swirled dizzily from every surface. No fewer than four towering Christmas trees were stationed around the spacious, glass-walled room. It was impossible to guess how many of the gift-wrapped boxes strewn across the room were real presents or props.

The assembled women let out a collective cheer as I stumbled further into the room.

“Grace.” My mother gave me a shrewd once-over before offering a

pleased smile. "You came."

"You said it was an emergency. Hi, aunties!"

Hugs and squeals filled the next few minutes, and I almost forgot my irritation. She was in the company of her friends and happy.

Hopefully she'd spit out what she wanted relatively soon.

"Where you coming from, Grace?" I didn't miss the way my mother's friend eyed my worn leggings, faded sweatshirt and fuzzy curls.

"At home," I said through a forced smile. "Unpacking."

"Big move," another auntie observed. She pulled a sympathetic face before asking, "How are you? Now that the divorce's final?"

"I've been divorced for two years, Auntie Marcia. And it's okay, you don't have to keep pretending. I know you hated Eric."

"Whew! Couldn't stand his entitled ass." She screwed up her face in obvious disgust and the other women nodded in agreement.

An uneasy silence settled as, one by one, each of the women's eyes settled on the framed picture resting on a nearby side table. I followed their gazes, then let out a long sigh.

Even after fifteen years and a whole husband, my mother insisted on displaying my awkward prom picture. Still pining for What Could Have Been.

My ex hadn't found the picture all that charming whenever he'd visited.

At the moment, I didn't find it all that charming either. Probably because Luke Jackson was never that far from my mind nowadays.

Not that I planned on letting anyone else in on that secret.

"Glad you're done with that asshole ex-husband," an auntie said, finally breaking the tense silence. "You happy to be home?"

"It's kinda weird," I said, sidestepping the question. "But good to be closer to Mom."

"I thought this day would never come," she said.

"Me neither," I said meaningfully. "What was the emergency you called me about?"

"Oh." My mother darted a significant look at Aline, who now stood behind me holding a small cardboard box. "Yes. You should probably get going, we don't have a lot of time."

"For?"

Aline stepped closer and tilted the box a bit so I'd have a better view of its contents. Leaning in, I squinted at the jumbled blanket within.

A miniature orange paw shot out from the blanket's folds. Its tiny claws snagged the blanket, drawing it down until an orange, whiskered face appeared.

"A kitten?" I couldn't hide my astonishment.

"Yep. Isn't it cute?" Aline grinned at me, and I found myself grinning back.

"Yeah. It is."

I glanced back in the box and found the kitten studying me with bright green eyes, its head assuming a confused tilt. It was tiny ball of fluff, no bigger than my hand, with a wild underbelly of tangled white fur. Charmed, I extended a cautious finger, gently nuzzling the underside of the adorably pointed chin.

"Where'd you get it?" My grin widened when the kitten captured the tip of my finger between its murder mitts. Eyes on mine, it gave my fingertip a rough lick before burying its teeth deep enough to make me yelp.

"I found it outside by the Dumpster today," my mother said, and I didn't have to glance back at her to sniff out that fabrication. The odds of her, and not her staff, taking out the trash were nil.

"It needs to go to the vet," Aline said. "It's been out in the cold for I don't know how long. Its mother wasn't nearby so I don't know how it's been eating. Poor thing. It's underfed and so scrawny. . ."

This kitten wasn't scrawny or underfed. It wasn't feral either, judging from the way it nudged my fingers in a greedy bid for more petting.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"We don't know," Aline shrugged.

"And you found it this morning." I flicked a disbelieving glance at Aline and she blushed.

"Yes," my mother said.

"You're allergic to cats," I reminded her.

She huffed. "What does that have to do with it needing to be checked out? We need to get it to the vet's office now, before Dr. Haynes leaves for holiday break."

Curiouser and curiouser.

Not surprising that Dr. Haynes was going out on holiday break. He had to be in his 80s by now, and he'd only worked part-time back when our family's French dog was still alive and kicking. But his partner and supporting veterinarian staff were more than capable of looking over a tiny kitten.

Still . . . something about my mother's story didn't make sense.

But what was the point of questioning them further? The quickest course of action would be to drive the kitten by Dr. Haynes's office so I could return to the misery of unpacking boxes.

I ventured into the box for another pet, only to be inexplicably met with a vicious hiss and series of emphatic murder-claw swipes.

"What the hell?" Snatching my finger back, I frowned down at the little orange demon. "What's with the Jekyll and Hyde act?"

"Must be a boy cat after all, a tomcat." One of my aunts threw me a baleful glance over her holiday cocktail. "The betrayals start early."

That got them all chorusing in agreement.

I caught myself nodding along before pivoting toward the doorway. Time to get away from this disturbing foreshadowing of my future.

"I bring back the cat and I'm free to go?" I ignored the mildly disapproving looks my mother's friends gave me. "No more emergencies or crises?"

"That's all I ask," my mother said, trying to look meek and failing. "Get the kitten checked out and I'll take care of the rest."

Of course I didn't believe a word she said.

CHAPTER 2

Dr. Haynes's office didn't seem all that open.

A trio of cars with out-of-state plates were stationed around the back door and it didn't appear the front walk had ever been shoveled. Lights were on in the familiar brick building, and I thought I detected a bit of Burl Ives floating from inside. But the front door was locked.

Anchoring the blanket-draped box over one hip, I went up on tiptoe to peer through the frosted glass.

"Hey!" The door swung open unexpectedly, revealing a grinning woman in worn jeans, an ugly Christmas sweater, and a melting topknot. "How can I help you?" Her flat-voweled Midwestern delivery immediately confirmed she was Not From Here.

"I was hoping to catch you guys for walk-in hours, but I guess you're not open?"

"I told them we needed to put a sign out, he insisted, said it's a small town and everyone would already know we aren't open."

I shook my head, struggling to process that flurry of information. "Uh, wait. What? Y'all aren't open? Is Dr. Haynes okay?"

"He's doing better than both you and me, somewhere in the Bahamas with Mrs. Haynes right now. Can't say I'd be doing anything different if I'd just retired."

That landed like a blow. Kind, jovial Dr. Haynes had finally fully retired?

"I didn't know," I said slowly.

"What's that you've got there?" She aimed an interested glance at the carton perched on my hip. "Bringing somebody in?"

I was already turning away. "Well, yeah. My mother found this kitten, but

it honestly seems okay —”

“Ooh, let’s see. Come on in. Doc’s not here in an official capacity, but I happen to know he wouldn’t turn away an innocent kitten.”

With that, she ushered me into the blissful warmth of the lobby, gesturing for me to have a seat. I settled, tugging the blanket more firmly over the top of the box as I surveyed this familiar landmark from my childhood.

Dr. Haynes might have been gone, but so far his office hadn’t changed much since the fifteen years I’d visited with our family’s beloved Frenchie in tow.

Same bright posters of kittens and puppies, achingly cute in their staged play. Clumsy seasonal artwork gifted from a cohort of elementary children from long ago. Snowflakes, misshapen Christmas trees and ornaments cut from festive-colored construction paper decorated the front desk.

All familiar.

But change was afoot. Sealed boxes were stacked all around the periphery of the room. New furniture and equipment, the woman explained. The whole practice was slated for an overhaul, including the front office and the clinic. The new vet didn’t plan on opening until after the new year, but the team from his old practice wanted to help him get a head start.

I thanked her profusely, gave her a rundown on the kitten’s mostly unknown origins, and halfway filled out the intake form she’d found in the reception area. I was lost in my own thoughts when the kitten’s head emerged from under the fur-lined blanket. It appeared to be in the same contemplative mood as it stared at me in open consideration.

“Gettin’ more brave, huh?”

I’d barely gotten the words out before it pounced on my lap, gave my arm a cursory nuzzle, then bounded across the room in a series of high, happy hops.

Poor thing, my ass.

“Come back here . . . Cat.” But the kitten was faster than I’d expected, high on devilry and clearly enthused about this impromptu game of Chase. It disappeared, worming its way through the maze of boxes. The woman joined the chase, and soon we were joined by two more of her colleagues as the kitten’s skillful evasion continued.

We were on our hands and knees, peering around the back of a box mountain when a deep male voice sounded from behind us.

“Frisky little thing, huh?”

I stiffened, mildly horrified.

The other women straightened, laughing with the newcomer.

I remained where I was, eyes closed, heart hammering. I knew that voice. I knew what devastation was waiting for me.

Letting out a long, pained breath, I pushed to my feet and faced the man I'd been doing my damndest to avoid for the past fifteen years.

And, more recently, the last six months.

"Grace." There was no mistaking the surprise in his voice. His breath caught. "It's you."

"Yeah." There was no mistaking the defeat in my voice.

Because the Universe seemed determined to push us together, to synchronize our orbits. Despite all my best efforts, it seemed I'd always be helpless against his gravitational pull.

In some ways, Luke Jackson hadn't changed at all.

This was the same handsome boy who'd been my playmate in adolescence and my first love as a young adult. I'd gazed into that face on our prom night, stared into those unfathomably dark eyes as I'd pledged myself to him. Body, mind, soul. Forever and forever, his and his alone, I'd whispered into his ear.

I'd believed it then, with all the naivety of a young girl who didn't understand how much Fate looked to toy with the fickle promises of childhood sweethearts. I couldn't have anticipated the obstacles life would throw our way, let alone my own mistakes.

And his.

Once upon a time, I'd known his face as well as my own. Now, I couldn't help the startled thrill of shock that raced down my spine at the sight of him.

Time had only only matured the natural confidence and innate sexiness of Luke Jackson.

Smooth brown stretched over the high, sculpted jut of his cheekbones. Those deep-set dark eyes sparked with a familiar intelligence and perceptiveness. The skein of grey in his well-maintained beard made me want to climb him, never mind the mouthwatering fit of his ratty t-shirt and old jeans.

"Grace." He gave a slow, hard shake of his head as if trying to clear it. "It's you," he said again.

"Guilty," I said, noting the startled glances the staff exchanged before backing away as if in tacit agreement.

Luke and I remained still. Frozen. Transfixed by all the time, the ghosts of memories between us. Who knows how long we would have stood there staring at each other, if a tiny feline meow hadn't sounded at our feet.

"You came out." I leveled the kitten with an accusing stare, inwardly grateful to be free of Luke's gaze. The kitten mewled again as if in acknowledgment. Then some inner demon seemed to spur it into action again. It lunged at my leg, its sharp claws piercing the skin at my ankle, then shin, then thigh as it began its ragged climb up my leg.

"We get it, you're the boss. That's enough bullying for now." Laughter colored Luke's voice as he bent, one big hand cupping the kitten, the other grasping the back of my knee as he tried to disentangle the kitten's claws from my leggings.

The deep gasp that escaped me had little to do with the pain of the puncture wounds. It had everything to do with the carnal memory Luke's touch evoked.

The last time he'd touched me, the warmth of his hand wrapping around the back of my elbow, we'd ended up in the linen closet of a hotel, kissing. That'd been a year ago, at our mutual friend's birthday party. It had taken every fiber of my being not to leave with him, to let him take me to his room and do all the filthy things we hadn't gotten around to in the closet.

Somehow, I'd fought the impulse.

But there was no mistaking the heat, the deferred promise in Luke's eyes now.

"I might as well take you two back now." He straightened with the wriggling kitten in tow and inclined his head toward the back.

"Room three is open. Hell all of 'em are open," someone called as we made our way back to the clinic. "Let us know if you need anything, Dr. Jackson." That was followed by a chorus of muted giggles and snickers.

After briefly summarizing how the cat came to be in my possession, I stayed quiet as Luke went about his vet business. I knew he'd switched his careers not long after his stint in the Navy, choosing to parlay his nursing background into veterinary science. But it was another thing altogether to see him at work, competently examining the kitten, palpating its belly, examining its ears, eyes and mouth.

"It's a girl," he informed me as the kitten clawed its way up his t-shirt until she fit between the nook of his neck and shoulder.

"That's a surprise," I muttered, then gave a dismissive shake of my head

when Luke looked askance.

“She’s pretty affectionate.” He didn’t even wince when the kitten dug for purchase on the slope of his shoulder, its claws sinking into him. When he rubbed the underside of the kitten’s chin, there was no biting. No hissing. I tried not to take it personally.

This was also a smart cat. She’d claimed one of my favorite spots on Luke. I’d scented his cologne in that same valley, sank my teeth into warm, salty skin when he’d slid inside me, his fingers digging into my ass —

“You got a name for her yet?” Luke’s full attention was on me, even as he reached up to obligingly scratch at the purring feline.

“She’s not mine.” I cleared my throat, uncrossed and recrossed my legs when Luke’s hungry gaze roamed over my seated body. “I just brought her here to be checked out.”

One of his dark brows lifted. “Your mom’s allergic to cats.”

“Yep.”

“So she’s gonna find her a home.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Huh.” His head tilted as he studied me. “What are you doing here, Grace?”

“I could ask you the same. You bought out Dr. Haynes? What would make you want to come back? Permanently?”

Luke turned and produced a small ball from a drawer, then settled the kitten and bouncing ball on the floor.

Silence settled as the kitten hurled itself after the ball with reckless abandon, careening from one corner of the room to the other.

“Got tired of the city.” He straightened to face me again. “Finally listened to Ma. She’s getting older, I wanted to be closer.”

“Oh.” I cleared my throat. “How long have you been back?”

“Just a few days. Furniture came for the new house yesterday. Clinic delivery came today.” He let out a long breath. “It’s, uh, a *lot*. I can’t wait to get on the other side of all this upheaval, to finally be settled.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You too?” I heard the genuine surprise in his voice. “You’re back? For good?”

For good. That sounded so tragically ominous.

“Looks that way,” I managed.

“I ran into your Mom today. She didn’t mention one thing about you

moving back home.”

I gave a rueful laugh. “Are you really surprised? I think it’s pretty safe to say that she engineered this whole thing. I’m betting she borrowed this kitten from one of her friends.”

He nodded. “I’d have to agree. That kitten seems pretty well cared for, not like it’s been living in the streets.”

“My mother doesn’t miss a trick.”

He took a step forward, his eyes intent on mine. “Your husband move back with you, Grace?”

I cleared my throat, ran a nervous hand over the back of my neck. “Uh, no.”

“No?” A dozen emotions flitted across his face before he lowered his head, studying his clogs.

“No.”

“Still separated?”

A little more than separated, for a while now. “Yes.”

“You know what I want to know.”

I snuck a glance and found his eyes back on me, his jaw tight. “Yeah. I do.”

“So?”

Answering this unspoken question would change *everything*. Was I really ready for that?

“Yes,” I said after a long pause, hitching up my Big Girl Pants as I met his eyes.

“We had a deal.” He took another step forward. “We agreed you’d tell me the second the divorce was final.”

Come to me, he’d whispered in my ear in the dark of the linen closet. *The second it’s over. Let me show you how a real man treats the woman he loves.*

God knows I’d wanted to give in. My fingers had itched to call Luke the minute that divorce proclamation was signed two years ago.

But I’d hesitated. One man had already taught me that happily ever after didn’t exist, not really. Did I really want to ruin the memory of what I’d once had with Luke? No.

“You said your life in L.A. is perfect. Is that why you didn’t tell me the divorce was final?”

I held back a snort and a knowing light gleamed in his eyes.

Back then, I’d almost choked on the words when I’d said them. Perfect?

Hardly. All that climbing and attaining and succeeding had left me empty. I'd built a successful law firm, made partner, made millions. And it wasn't enough.

But I couldn't tell him that at the time. I'd needed to keep some distance, figure out what *I* wanted.

Now I knew. I wanted some measure, some shadow of the peace I'd known when I was younger. To be back where it all started, when life had been as simple as a boy and girl and the love between them.

The words, the truth, bottled behind my lips.

But I didn't have to tell him. Even now, he knew.

Because he knew me.

He advanced stealthily, closing the space between us. Then I was in his arms, relieved to be enveloped by the warmth, the familiar scent of him.

"You gonna run off and leave me again?"

"Huh?"

"You left the hotel without saying goodbye."

"There was nothing more to say."

"No more running, Grace." His mouth descended to mine, warm and soft. I closed my eyes, lost to the feel and taste of him, the gentle articulation of his lips, his strong grip at my waist. The kitten was completely forgotten when he lifted me up, settling me on the examining table. I gripped a handful of t-shirt, yanking him between the vee of my thighs as I draped my arms around his neck.

"You feel so good," he rasped. He moved to my neck and bit the skin just above my collarbone as his grip tightened at my waist.

"Ummm. . ."

Luke and I both jumped apart at the sound of someone clearing their throat. His three colleagues were crowded in the doorway. They looked scandalized, all of them gaping at us as if they were watching the good part in a Cinemax movie.

"Uh, Dr. Jackson?" His colleague looked between us with wide eyes. "*Really* sorry to interrupt. Just wanted to pass along a message."

Luke's heated gaze was still locked on mine. "Uh, yeah?"

"Someone from the parade committee just called. There's a problem with your event tonight."

"Of course there is," Luke said under his breath, closing his eyes. He bent, interrupting the kitten's trajectory as it scampered toward the doorway

and freedom. Dropping the wild feline in my lap, he turned to face them fully.

“Your volunteer backed out,” another colleague said. “And Dr. Haynes’s notes say should NOT attempt this without the minimum number of volunteers.”

I listened, intrigued. Having recently moved back home, I’d forgotten all about the annual holiday parade. The whole town turned out, snow and freezing temperatures be damned. Dr. Haynes had always hosted a “Pet Pictures with Santa” exhibit to benefit Paws for a Cause. Now that Luke had effectively taken over his practice, it only made sense that he would continue the tradition.

Luke’s efforts to enlist his colleagues for help with the role were immediately dismissed. They’d come to help him set up the clinic, they explained, but wanted to enjoy the parade for themselves before they packed up and returned home the next day. Maybe there was someone else in town he was close to? With whom he had a . . . *close rapport*? Then they disappeared, glancing pointedly at me before closing the door and returning to their unpacking efforts.

Luke’s eyes narrowed on me.

“No,” I said. I knew him pretty well too. I could guess exactly what he was thinking. “I can’t do it.”

“Why?” His dark brows rose.

“I just got in a few days ago. I need to unpack.”

“You and me both.”

“Anyone else would jump to help you, the whole town loves the Pictures with Santa exhibit.”

“You owe me.” His jaw set in the stubborn way I’d always dreaded. “You owe me many times over.”

God, this was terrifying. Having everything I wanted so close, so within reach. It was easier to deny this, a mind-blowing potential for happiness, when the stars were out of alignment. When we were on other sides of the world, or with different partners. But what if my imaginings couldn’t compare to reality? Worse, what if we actually tried and forever damaged what we had, what we were?

Was I ready to try again? To reach for my biggest dream?

Agreeing to this, it would mean something.

“Say it. Say you’ll do this with me.” Luke watched me. I knew he sensed

my indecision, my conflicted thoughts.
I took a deep breath. “Yes. I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER 3

Main Street was alive and buzzing with the annual Christmas parade. Folks from all over town converged on the downtown area (such as it was) to watch the same familiar, beloved floats chug down the snow-lined street. Our high school's marching band led the way, bundled against the frigid temperatures, grimly determined to spread the holiday cheer no matter what, damn it. They marched through the gathering snow, blaring holiday tunes and boogying down in response to the catcalls from the crowd. In parades past, I'd loved visiting the merchant stalls lining the sidewalks. Every manner of tasty treats were always available along with dozens of crafters' stalls. Word on the street, if it could be believed, was that a new stall offered moonshine-spiked hot chocolate.

That would have been right up my alley.

But any hopes I'd had of sneaking away for a warm, spiked drink dissipated as soon as I got a good look at the Pet Pictures with Santa setup.

It was pure chaos.

We'd taken over the interior of a little sundry shop known for its souvenirs and greetings cards. Luke, dressed as Santa, sat on the same tacky tinsel-wrapped throne Dr. Haynes had presided over for so many years. He was smiling at the growing line of pet owners, but I recognized the frayed, exhausted edge of his smile.

I was one of several people who'd volunteered to help him wrangle the pets and their owners. My mother was working the line, dispensing treats, tips and holiday props to the pet parents waiting in line both inside the store and outside in the cold. One of my aunties helped pass out the little forms collecting contact information. My job was to check each person's completed

contact sheet before handing it off to the photographer, then help with getting the each pet positioned near Luke for the best possible Snap with Santa.

Luke deserved a lot of credit. He hadn't batted an eye, not even when someone wound a massive six foot snake around his neck and lap. Other noteworthy arrivals included a pet pig (dressed in the world's ugliest Christmas sweater), guinea pigs, ferrets and a lynx. Then there was the cat who nearly took out Luke's eye when we tried settling it on Luke's lap.

Our operation might have been a bit more efficient had it not been for the gawkers. Every townspeople, every neighbor, every loved one who brought their pet insisted on getting a picture of Luke and I.

Together.

"I can't believe this," the pharmacy tech from next door enthused. "Grace and Luke! The prom queen and king! Y'all gonna make it permanent this time?"

"Now I believe in fairy tales," our long retired fifth-grade teacher announced. "'Cause you two were always meant to be together."

"Reunited, and it feels so good," someone else sang off-key over the din of the crowd, channeling Peaches & Herb.

My mother, ever the instigator, made sure to co-sign every meddling, presumptuous statement: "Don't they look good together?"

More than once, Luke and I exchanged weary, bemused glances. I'd kept my focus on the line, but the ongoing commentary was unsettling. Hearing the nosy feedback from the people who'd known us since childhood only increased my anxiety.

So for the next few hours, I kept my focus on work, and the job at hand. Everything else would sort itself out.

"One last one," Luke told the photographer, rising creakily from his chair and starting toward me.

I darted a startled glance behind me and realized the line was gone. The store owner was locking the door and flipping over the "Closed" sign. My mother and her friends wilted into the nearest chair, wearily rubbing at their legs and feet.

"We're really done." I let out a relieved sigh.

"We're really done." Luke shot me a quick grin. "Well, almost done. I need a picture of my own, if you don't mind."

I hesitated, one eye on the approaching photographer. "Haven't you taken enough pictures tonight?"

“There’s one I still need.” He reached out, slid his fingers through mine.

“You picked a good place to stand.” The photographer nodded toward something overhead. Following his gaze, I craned my neck until I spotted the sprig of mistletoe tied on one of the bare wooden planks overhead.

Oh God.

A quick glance showed my mother and her friends watching us with avid interest, hanging onto every word.

“You did this. You put the mistletoe up there.” My mouth went dry as Luke’s arms slid around my waist, drawing me closer.

“Uh, nope. That would be me,” the shop owner called from a distance. “It’s been up there a week.”

“See?” Luke stared down at me, his eyes soft. “This is Fate at work. Not me.”

Now that his arms were around me, I didn’t want to move. And I wanted this kiss like I wanted my next breath.

But. . .

“I can’t do this, kiss you, in front of my mother,” I whispered, horrified.

“You are grown, Grace,” my mother called from the front of the shop. “Handle your business.”

“Matter of fact, we’re gonna get outta here. Let you young people enjoy each other,” my auntie added.

“From now on, I’m staying out of it,” my mother said, and Luke and I both made disbelieving noises.

They hustled out, yanking on coats and hats and scarves before they threw themselves outside. The shop owner disappeared into the storage room.

Then it was just Luke and me, and the glaring eye of the photographer’s camera.

“Let’s mark this occasion.” Pulling me even closer, Luke bent to whisper in my ear. “It’s a new beginning. Our beginning.”

Entranced as I was by the moment and magic of his arms around me, I couldn’t help but give voice to my fears. “We tend to fumble beginnings.”

“Betcha we stick this landing.”

“It’s a risk, Luke.”

“It’s always been you for me, Grace.”

I looked away, frustrated. “That’s why you got engaged?”

His arms tightened around me. “You got *married*.”

“You joined the Navy without telling me.”

He pulled back to meet my eyes. "Fine. We both did stupid shit when we were stupid kids. We're older and wiser."

"Maybe."

"You want me. And I want you."

I looked away. "That doesn't mean we'd be good together, that we'd work."

"Stop running so we can find out. Come home with me tonight."

Our eyes met, clung.

"Yes," I said, finally. "To all of it."

"Oh, *thank God*," the photographer choked out, and Luke and I dissolved into laughter at her pained expression.

"I forgot you were here," I admitted with a laugh.

"Me too," Luke said.

"That's okay, I got some great candids," she said. "Now let's put this mistletoe to work."

CHAPTER 4

Standing on Luke's front porch, I had more than a few nerves. I'd insisted on going home briefly before meeting Luke. After hosting and holding every manner of animal, I'd wanted a shower. And to maybe slip on my prettier underthings and spray on my favorite fragrance. You know, just in case.

Luke greeted me with the wide, cheesy smile I remembered from childhood, the one saved exclusively for his happiest, most transcendent moments.

"Gracie. Get in here." He tugged me into the house and into his arms. He'd taken a shower too, judging by the clean scent of his skin and the fresh, pleasant bite of his aftershave.

"Thanks. It's cold out there," I said, and even I heard the nerves in my voice. "Show me around."

There wasn't much to see. Luke's house looked a lot like mine. Same upheaval. Boxes stacked everywhere, blocking all the doorways. Maneuvering from the front door and through the labyrinth of boxes was a feat.

But a miracle awaited us in the living room.

A roaring fire lit the room, illuminating a small clearing where the boxes had been shoved out of the way for a makeshift picnic. A charcuterie board, wrapped chocolates and a champagne bottle anchored the soft-looking blanket on the floor. Several dozen votive candles were creatively arranged into what I eventually recognized as a heart.

"How in the world did you manage this?"

Luke captured my hand, leading me farther into the room. "The

colleagues you met earlier today. Couldn't talk them out of it, nor did I want to."

I couldn't help but smile. "I thought you might have had some help."

"What, you don't think I can be romantic?"

"I know you can. But candles and a charcuterie board? Beyond what I expected, and in such a short amount of time."

"Ah. I know what this is." Luke nodded to himself. "You're remembering High School and College Luke, and all his inexperienced fumbling."

I couldn't help smiling at all those memories as we drew even with the makeshift picnic. "I loved Young Luke and all his fumbling. I was equally inexperienced, so I didn't know what I was doing. I was just so happy it was you."

"Well, I'm a grown-up now. A creaky old man," he said, and I laughed. "But, Grace. I can't wait to show you all the things I've learned."

My mouth went dry at the heat in his eyes.

"Luke —"

"Remember this?" Luke asked, just as the strains of a very familiar song came alive from an unseen speaker somewhere.

Al Green's smooth signature tone filled the room. I went still, struck by recognition and heart-melting nostalgia. "That night. After prom."

"Yep."

"Our song." Our first time.

"Will you give me this dance?" When his brows lifted in inquiry, I could only nod in agreement. We automatically fell into a familiar, mindless two-step as Al softly entreated us to stay together.

Luke swept a cluster of curls out of my face, his expression intent. "That was the best night of my life, Grace."

"Mine too."

"I think we can top it."

"Do you?" I couldn't help a roguish smile.

"I do." So saying, he turned us until my back brushed a column of boxes. Lifting me, he settled me on the stack. "You ready?"

I lifted my chin. "I am." Capturing the back of his head, I pulled him in for a slow, mind-numbing kiss. "I hope you're ready too."

I'd imagined this moment many times in my life. Luke, in my arms again, all mine. It was the sweetest moment.

But this kiss was anything but sweet. It was biting. Urgent. Luke's grip

on my waist almost painfully tight, his breath almost ragged with need. My breath caught when his met mine. The fierce desire in his eyes was rivaled by an aching vulnerability, an echo of the old Luke who'd loved me unreservedly.

"I love you, Luke Jackson," I whispered, sealing the promise with the gentle, reverent press of my lips against his. "This is it. It's us from here on out."

There was no mistaking the relief, the joy, that flitted across his features. "Damn right."

"Touch me," I urged, capturing one of his big hands and drawing it under my sweater.

He wasted no time dispensing with my bra and sweater until my breasts, tight and aching, were cupped in his hands.

"That was a front-clasp bra," I said, half-laughing. "You've gotten faster."

"Wait 'til I show you my other tricks," he rasped. Then we were both speechless when he drew my nipple into his mouth, his clever tongue painting pleasure in tiny, heated licks. "You gonna show me yours?"

"Hell yes," I managed.

"You promise?" Eyes on mine, he turned his attention to the other breast and I promptly lost my mind.

Luke kept his word. So did I.

On the boxes, where he created a makeshift table to suck and nibble and lap at me with his talented tongue. "I'm gonna eat this pussy every day," he vowed, pinning my bucking hips down as his sly tongue traveled to forbidden territory. I could only scream in agreement.

On the blanket, his fingers tangled in my wild curls as I kneeled before him, obediently swallowing around him. "I think you'll like it when I use my teeth this time," I informed him, privately enjoying the way his body bucked and trembled from the gentle scrape.

On the floor, my hips tilted invitingly, Luke's dick teasing and taunting the outer petals of my pussy until I screamed that it was his, I was his, forever.

On the blanket, kneeling over Luke's face as he ate my softness, his tongue and fingers driving me into a delirium.

But it was those precious final moments, when Luke was inside me with no space between us, that were my undoing. When he finally lost control, his

hips slamming into me on an unsteady rhythm, his fingers working my clit with a desperate fervor. We came together on a shout, and many moments passed before I returned to earth and the blissful reality of the man beside me.

“Forever,” I said, reassuring the both of us as I threaded my fingers through his.

Hours later, we fed each other dinner on the blanket. I listened, hungry for all the details he was willing to share about all the time I’d missed. He listened to me, gently coaxing me to share the secrets I’d never spoken.

Still reeling from the physical and emotional intimacies we’d shared, I followed Luke into bed. Blinking blearily, I watched as he attempted to hang a makeshift curtain over the window for privacy.

“Leave it,” I murmured, surrendering to sleep and the sweet knowledge that there’d be no more sleepless nights away from Luke’s side. “I love watching the snow.”

ABOUT HOPE ELLIS

Hope Ellis is a behavioral outcomes researcher by day and a USA Today best-selling author of nerdy, naughty romances by night. She hopes to one day conquer her habit of compulsively binge-watching The Office. Find out more about Hope [here](#).

Sign up for Hope's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

The Leffersbee Series
[Been There Done That](#)
[Before and After You](#)



RUFF DAY FOR THE ROCKSTAR

CHRISTINA HOVLAND

ABOUT RUFF DAY FOR THE ROCKSTAR

Movie star Irina and rocker Knox are settling into married life, but something seems to be missing. When Irina volunteers at a pet adoption event, she meets just the guy (he's four-legged and furry) to round out their life together. But are they ready for that level of commitment?

CHAPTER 1

IRINA

For movie star and Denver's sweetheart, Irina Carmichael, the holiday season meant a pro bono appearance scheduled by her publicist at the Cause for the Paws adopt-a-pet festival.

The event benefitted Ruffles-n-Fur Shelter for Dogs—a Denver-centered not-for-profit hosting a great big holiday adoption event so all the little fluff balls would have a home for the holidays. While the festival itself stretched over the Denver Downtown Park, complete with carriage rides and hot cocoa, Irina's job was to show up at the shelter building next to the park. She would pet the puppies, take pictures, sign autographs, and help the little furballs find those elusive loving homes they sought.

She did this kind of show-up-and-smile gig often—it was good for her image, sure, but more than that she actually really enjoyed doing the appearances for good causes. Helping out and making donations made her fame seem less obnoxious.

Because most of the time, the fame part of her job *did* feel obnoxious. She loved the work, and adored that she got to do it while meeting loads of new people... but the fame and the money parts always seemed a little, well, over the top.

Sort of like the house she shared with her husband, Knox (a.k.a. Jeremy Dillion, a.k.a. Dimefront musician).

The whole Dimefront band had purchased monstrosities of mansions at the end of a cul-de-sac in a gated Denver community so they could all be near each other all the time. Some might think this was a horrible idea.

But they'd become more than friends and colleagues. They were found family.

Knox stood nearby the marble tile of the entryway to their house as she slipped on her knee-high, kick-ass boots over the skinny jeans she'd paired with what was probably supposed to be an ugly Christmas sweater. However, with embroidered puppies, the right styling, hoop earrings, and a whole heap of confidence, the sweater was actually really cute and not ugly at all.

"You're hovering," she said, catching his gaze.

"I am," he replied, a sly grin on his lips.

Knox had been following her around all day. Who needed a puppy with a super sexy rocker like him on her heels?

She caught him staring and lifted her eyebrows. "Like what you see?"

He pretended not to be staring even as he said, "Always."

Her lips twitched, but she tapped down the smile stirring inside.

Gah, Irina loved this man. Loved everything about him. Starting with his a-little-too-long blonde hair falling over his face and continuing down to the ripped jeans hugging his thighs. She even loved the well-worn T-shirt he liked to toss on when he planned to stay home all day and mess around his guitar or piano.

She adored her husband.

The magnetic pull between them tugged. But if she followed it, then she'd start touching him, then kissing him. Then he'd start kissing her back. She'd be late. And she couldn't be late because... the puppies.

Think of the puppies, Irina.

Knox eyed the door, then her, then the door, like he was also calculating the amount of time they could spend in a lip lock before she absolutely had to go.

Unfortunately, she'd already done that math and there was not enough time.

He obviously came to the same conclusion because his eyebrows fell together. Then he frowned and got a wistful look in his eyes. She'd been seeing a lot these days. A little tickle of something she couldn't quite put her finger on, but that happened every time a mention of today's event came up.

One thing was clear: he wanted to attend with Irina, but he wouldn't let himself. The man practically took a step toward the door before stopping himself.

Yes, he definitely wanted to tag along with her to the event.

"You know you want to come," she said, with a dose of flirt and a wink.

Ack, that sounded dirtier than she'd meant. They had zero time for dirty,

kinky, or sexy.

“With me.” She pointed to her chest.

Gah, still didn’t fix it.

“To the event.” *There, much better.*

The edges of Knox’s mouth ticked up into a grin, and she both loved and hated that she knew the flavor of that grin. The way it felt running up the inside of her thighs, the—

“No. You go. I don’t want to come.” He said the last part super-fast, punctuating his announcement with a totally fake grin.

She preferred the sexy grin from before.

“You know I can see through your bologna lines,” she countered. They were practically written in invisible ink.

“You think you know so much,” Knox said, glancing to his toes and holding his gaze there while two of his fingers tapped out a quick beat on his thigh.

“Uh-huh. Because you, my love, are being a Liar McLiarton,” she said, again with a heavy dose of sass.

He made a *pf-shaw* sound.

But years of training as an actress had taught Irina how to control every part of her body—from the dilation of her pupils to the way she swayed her hips. She had all that down...unless Knox used his tongue and his fingers to get her to... *you know, well... ahem... some stories are not for today, Irina.*

Anyhoo, her rocker of a husband had not had the same intense professional training as her.

That’s why he had a little “tell” for when he wasn’t being entirely truthful. It had taken her a solid year into their marriage before she caught it. But once she figured it out? Well, she couldn’t exactly unsee what was right in front of her.

That “tell” of his—the one she told no one about, not even her best friend and publicist, Courtney?

The ever-so-slight, quick two-finger tap against his thigh she had just witnessed.

That’s it. That’s all it was. Nothing outrageous, and she’d never let Knox in on her secret knowledge. Because then he’d try to stop doing it and, well... she couldn’t have that, could she? Not when she’d finally figured it out.

“You’re *sure*?” Irina asked, checking her purse one last time on her way to the door.

The guy absolutely wanted to tag along with her. But for reasons he kept locked tight, he kept turning her down.

She tried all her tricks to weasel out an answer, but he wasn't talking. Nope, he was sealed up tighter than a Ziploc.

"I mean... I... I...I don't..." He tapped his finger against his thigh.

She waited, studying him while he came up with another silly reason he had to stay home.

"Fine, you're right. I want to come." Knox pulled his lips to the side. "I *do* want to come."

"Yeah?" Irina asked, eyebrows crinkling with his admission.

The pull was too much, and she took a step toward him.

"I mean, I know I said I couldn't be there. That I didn't *want* to be there." He strode to the living room and dropped his ass to the sofa, fidgeting with one of the throw pillows.

She nodded, following him into the living room. "Uh-huh. You said that this morning. Last night. When I first booked the gig. When I mentioned it last Tuesday. Every single time it's come up, actually."

If there was an excuse not to attend this canine adoption event, Knox rolled through them like one-ply novelty toilet paper. Come to think of it, counting up all of those times, his dedication to declining something he so clearly wanted to attend was impressive.

"It's not that I can't come, it's that I shouldn't come," he said with a sigh. Then he whispered, enunciating every word, "There are going to be puppies."

Irina nodded since that was kind of the point of the event.

"I'm a sucker for puppies," Knox continued whispering, even though it was only the two of them in the house. "There's no way I'll be able to go and not come home with one."

This was... that was... huh.

"That's sweet," she whispered back, since that seemed to be the thing they were doing. "Why didn't you ever say anything before?"

And how did she not know her husband wanted his own dog so much?

"I don't talk about it because I cannot bring home a puppy." He dropped his head to his hands in some kind of defeat.

"How has this never come up?" she asked.

Because if this was important to him, then it was important to her.

"Because I don't talk about it," he said, again. "Like I said."

"You are a grown adult, a homeowner with a steady job, and a supportive

spouse...” She pointed to herself. “There is no reason you can’t have a dog if you want one,” she assured. “Do you want a dog?”

Knox didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled the pillow to his chest and stared at her like he couldn’t find the words he needed.

Then he nodded. The affirmative wasn’t entirely necessary because she could see it in his expression... this was important to him.

“I’ve never had a dog before,” she said. “But I like them.”

As an adult she’d never had time to give a pet and never had a burning desire to make the time, either.

As a kid, her parents hadn’t really been dog people. They were more into reptiles and amphibians... salamanders, toads, and the occasional pet snake they’d bring home to rehabilitate.

Irina sat next to Knox on the sofa, giving into the magnetic pull and relaxing into his space, her shoulder brushing against his arm. There was just something right that clicked into place when they shared the same air, like this.

She reached for his hand and linked their fingers together. They did this when they had important conversations. They touched—held hands, bumped knees, kissed—it kept the flow of energy open between the two of them. One of those things that stuck from watching her parents over the years.

They might get a tad—fine, a lot—eccentric, but sometimes it made loads of sense. Like the energy thing.

Knox looked up from their hands, and pierced her with his gaze. “We can’t get a dog. Where would we keep it?”

Seriously? That was his question. Because—

“We have a house here with loads of room, and an apartment with a balcony when we’re in L.A. There’s plenty of space.” She might be unsure how this was all going to play out, but was keeping herself open to all possibilities.

“Your career takes you all over, and I’m always touring with the band, and Linx has a cat, and—”

She squeezed his hand. “Babe, if there’s one thing I’ve learned, being with you, it’s that when something is important we make it work. Even with all the noise of the rest of the world, we figure it out.”

He nodded. Thought on that.

“I love you, you know,” he said, squeezing her hand right back.

“I love you right back. And *you* do understand that we can also go today,

help out, have a good time, and you aren't required to bring anything home this time." Adopting a puppy wasn't a requirement of attendance at the festival. "Well, anything except me."

"Ha," he murmured, leaning in for a kiss.

She kissed him back, then shrugged. "Come on, come with me. Start getting the feel for what kind of dog you'd like to bring home eventually."

He shook his head. "Nope. That's a bad idea."

"What if I promise we will go and only make a large donation today? I'll see to it. And today will only be the start of us opening up to the idea of adoption. Someday. When you're ready."

He heaved a deep breath.

She waited him out.

"Irina, I'm going to fall in love, and I'm very convincing when I want something." He sighed into the acknowledgement of his own truth.

He wasn't wrong. Since the moment they had met, he'd been extremely convincing. Case in point? They were still married, and she hadn't seen long term in their future at all when they originally said, "I do."

"We'll get there, and I'll fall in love with our future fur ball," he said, resigned. "And then I'll convince you to cancel our New Year's Jamaica trip and then you'll resent me because you won't get your beach time, and I don't want you to hate me."

Irina's eyebrows raised right on up all on their own because there was no way they were cancelling Jamaica. How had that option even shown up on the table?

"The dog could come with us to Jamaica," she suggested. Boom. Done.

He shook his head. "Not enough time for island quarantine and any vaccines he'll need."

"You've been thinking about this a lot, haven't you?" she asked.

"Yup."

"You know there *are* dog sitters and puppy hotels," she said. "Lots of people still go on vacation after they expand their family with pets."

"But not right after," he said earnestly, gripping her hands harder. "We couldn't adopt little Waffles, give him time to get comfortable with us, and then force him to go through abandonment again so soon."

"Waffles?" she asked, scratching at her earlobe with her free hand. He'd already named his maybe-someday dog?

Knox lifted a shoulder. "I always said if I got a dog, I'd name him

Waffles.”

“Is that up for negotiation?” Because she didn’t really love the idea of naming her non-existent dog after food or beverages.

“No.” Knox shook his head. “I sort of promised myself. I don’t want to break that promise.”

Irina smirked because, yes, her husband could be convincing and if he brought home a dog, and he was set on naming that dog after a breakfast food, then he’d figure out a way to get her to agree.

“But don’t worry. I’ll just stay home so none of that happens.” He nodded, agreeing with himself, and stood. “You go. Have a great time. Make a big ass donation from me to help Waffles find his forever home, yeah?”

Irina nodded, but it didn’t really matter because Knox had already headed to the kitchen.

Her heart settled funny in her chest, though.

When it seemed like she knew everything about her husband he went and surprised her with one more reason to adore him.

“Okay then,” she said in a whisper.

Then she smiled because, damn, she loved her Knox.

CHAPTER 2

IRINA

Since snow was scarce this year, Denver wasn't the slushy December mess like normal. Instead it was actually kind of nice out... a little nip in the air with the cold coming down from the mountains, but without the mud that winter usually hauled along with it.

Which was good, since this festival was way more than the carriage rides and cocoa Irina had expected.

There were booths selling all kinds of art and tchotchkes, food trucks everywhere, and staging had started for what seemed to be a dog-themed holiday light parade to come later. Uh-huh, this event was quite the shebang.

Irina's Lincoln Town Car rolled up to the shelter at the edge of the park. Her bodyguard, Max, held the door open as Irina climbed out from the back, pausing to wave at those holding up their cell-phone cameras to capture the moment.

Courtney slid out behind her. She was married to Dimefront's lead singer, and they had a baby together. That was definitely a story for another day because, oh boy, was that a story.

Irina didn't know Max's story. Not yet, anyway. Though she did have a hunch that he had a good one coming. But, for now, he was a bit of an enigma to Irina. He didn't talk much—or at all—but he was always watching. Always on guard. Always ready, just in case.

Max was really there for Knox's peace of mind. As soon as Irina broke out in her first Hollywood blockbuster, Knox started to worry. Thus... bodyguards like Max followed her all over. She didn't mind since she liked the company.

Max was a hulk of a guy who moonlighted as a bouncer at Brek's Bar and

spent the rest of his time working private security.

“This is cute,” Irina muttered in Max’s direction, even though she already understood he wouldn’t be answering. “The way they did the red carpet like this.”

Max grunted in reply. Which was something, at least.

She took in more of the winter wonderland extravaganza set-up outside the shelter. There were giant blow-up snow globes with different dog scenes in each of them. A guy dressed up as Santa was ready to take photos—with an entire crew of canines dressed as elves hanging out with him. The charity had set up a red-carpet walkway leading right to him.

“Seriously, how fuh-reaking adorable can this be?” Courtney said out of the corner of her mouth, pausing beside Irina while one of the floppy-eared pups posed for the camera at the other end of the carpet.

Then, when it was her turn, Irina sauntered along the carpet, side stepping what looked to be a piddle puddle left by one of the canine residents. She posed for the camera alongside Santa—setting up her pose, starting at her feet, then moving up to her hips, her hands relaxed right at her waist until she was movie-star ready.

She flashed a smile. The camera flashed a bulb.

Then she felt Max at her back—his presence a subtle cue to move along.

Oh, he wasn’t touching her or anything. Knox would’ve killed him if he did that, and it wasn’t in the process of saving her life. No, Max’s presence alone was enough to keep things trucking along.

The executive director, Naomi, met them at the door to show them around the facility, through the offices at the front to the area staged for the big event in the back.

“Most of our dogs come from the Four Corners area, but we also bring them in locally when animal control needs us.” She opened a door to what could only be described as a puppy playroom: an AstroTurf floor with fencing along the edge divided the area into sections. There were people and dogs everywhere in what could only be described as semi-controlled chaos.

“And we even fly a few in here and there from shelters all over the country that are just too full. We try to save the ones who will be put down. You know?” Naomi continued.

Irina mentally added on additional cash to her already planned donation.

“The dogs are divided into crews,” Naomi said, gesturing from cage to cage. “It makes it easier to keep litters together when we have them, and

makes naming groups simpler when a bunch come in all together. An adoption event can only have so many Rascals and Fidos, you know? So this is the pasta crew—Linguine, Spaghetti, Elbow. Over there is the Friends crew—Monica, Rachel, Ross... you get the idea.”

“Is there, uh... a breakfast crew?” Irina heard herself ask on behalf of her husband, even as she forced herself not to toy with the chunky hoop earrings dangling from her earlobes because if there was then she was totally toast.

Toast that would stay in Colorado instead of heading to Jamaica.

“Actually, uh-huh.” Naomi flashed a huge grin. “They’re on the other side, over by the big exit door. Corgi mixed with something that gives them long hair. We’re not sure what.”

“But I bet it makes them extra cuddly,” Irina murmured as time itself seemed to still around her. “Oh dear.”

“There’s little Maple. Blueberry Muffin. Pancake. That’s Waffles with his tush in the air. Bacon is over here because he found his family. They’re doing the paperwork as we speak,” Naomi continued, not understanding at all the earth shifting under Irina’s feet.

Irina looked to Courtney, then to the puppies.

“Oh, no, no, no. You told me not to let you bring a dog home,” Courtney said quietly, crossing her arms to punctuate her point. “You made me promise.”

Irina had made Courtney promise to be the voice of reason should she start to fall for any of the canines, but that was before there was a breakfast crew of corgi-mix puppies that needed some place to call home.

She gulped, and she was seriously considering giving up Jamaica.

Courtney had her number though, and she swooped into action, playing every part the role of publicist and getting Irina settled—signing autographs, taking photos with puppies as they headed out with their new families, despite her makeup getting licked off in the process.

Irina couldn’t help it; she kept one eye on the breakfast crew the entire event. Specifically, Waffles. Each and every time a family would approach him she’d get a hard knot in her throat and she both hoped that they would pick him... and prayed that they wouldn’t.

They didn’t. He sat there all alone as his littermates all found their homes. There he was, alone in his pen, waiting.

Waiting for something.

Damn. Gah. That knot got bigger in her throat because she knew exactly

what he was waiting for. No, not *what* he waited for... *who* he waited for
He was waiting for her.

CHAPTER 3

KNOX

Knox didn't trust himself around adoptable puppies, and he was okay with it.

Except he swore he heard barking again. He sighed. *Fuck, this has to stop.*

Every time he'd been to an adoption event like the one Irina visited today, he'd have to force himself not to bring home a new family member. He never made it happen, though. Never filled out the paperwork.

How could he be everything to a furry little guy when he was always on the road? Always working with the band?

Hell, before he moved into the Denver house, he hadn't had a solid place to call home. That wasn't fair to a pup.

But now he had a home. He had Irina.

When he'd bought the house it was a disaster—pink everything, including carpet that smelled like piss since the previous owners had a load of cats and, apparently, zero interest in litter boxes.

He'd torn everything out and replaced it all.

Once Irina moved in, she added her bold strokes of color. He loved it. Loved how alive everything was with her.

And he spent loads of time here now... so the old excuses all fell flat these days. Which was why he didn't trust himself one bit to tag along with her.

When a guy didn't trust himself to make good decisions, the important thing was that he recognized the issue and ensured it didn't become something more—something four-legged with fur.

Hell, he was going canine crazy because he kept hearing random barking

when there was clearly nothing there.

His chest felt heavy, but he refused to let it linger. Some things were meant to be, and some things were not. Right now he was meant to be in his music room off the living area with Dimefront's lead singer, Bax, pounding out the melody for a new Dimefront single.

*Perfect isn't in the ending,
Perfect is the space between where you start and just enough,
Perfect is... ruff...*

He dropped his hands to the keys, making a loud clunk on the keyboard. Then he pursed his lips and went back to the first line again.

"You're thinking about the dog again." Bax said this through a pencil clenched in his teeth, a notebook to his left, and a guitar on his lap. He also had a baby monitor on the table since his daughter Harley was asleep in the other room while they worked.

"Yes, I am," Knox admitted, going back over the melody one more time from the top.

Damn straight, he was. His brain was playing phantom puppy barks on a loop just to fuck with him.

"You wanna talk about shit?" Bax asked.

"Not really," Knox said, but, actually... "Maybe I'm scared."

"Of a dog?" Bax asked.

"Of the responsibility that comes along with it." He could admit that he was frightened and still keep his man card.

"Go on, my dude," Bax said. "Keep talkin'."

"He's going to rely on me for everything. What he eats. Where he sleeps. If he gets sick, I've got to make sure he's okay."

"Yeah, being a grown-up sucks sometimes. But in return, you get unconditional love." Bax spoke like he was some kind of expert on this.

"Why don't you have a dog?" Knox asked.

"Because Courtney and I have a baby, and I am not mature enough to handle caring for two living things," Bax continued talking as though it was no big deal. "It's good to know your limits."

Knox played a few new notes on the piano to round out the chorus. Bax echoed them on his guitar. They both nodded, not needing more words because that's how they worked best together when they were in the zone.

The phantom puppy barked again, but Knox ignored it. Even as it got louder and more persistent. He just pushed the keys harder to play over the

racket in his brain.

Bax dropped the pencil from his lips. "Are we still pretending not to hear the barking?"

Knox frowned. "You heard that too?"

Bax nodded. "You think you thought so hard about a dog that you Pinocchio'd one into reality?"

"Pinocchio'd?" Knox asked.

"Made something where there was nothing with only your mind," Bax said. Then he paused. "Hold up, I need to write that down. That's a great line." He snagged the pencil and scribbled onto the notepad.

Knox, however, stood from the piano.

"It's getting closer." Bax stood, too, moving to the front door to peek outside. "Whatever it is."

"From the garage." Knox hustled through the kitchen, past the pantry, straight to the garage.

The garage walls were lined with shelves of various tools and equipment. A long workbench along the backside of the room stood empty since neither Knox nor Irina really did much out there other than park their cars and store their shit. Knox's Porsche was parked next to the sedan Irina used most often. There was also a Range Rover, just in case they needed more trunk space.

Irina stood next to her car, wrangling a ball of wiggling brown fluff, her bodyguard unloaded bags of what seemed to be pet gear from the trunk, and Courtney stood to the side shaking her head.

Courtney lifted her hands in apparent surrender. "I tried, Knox. I tried. She wouldn't hear no."

"This is Waffles," Irina said brightly. "I found your Waffles."

Knox stared, because Irina wrestling with that dog was the best thing he'd ever seen in his life.

"What the hell is a Waffles?" Bax asked from beside Knox, his arms crossed, and his forehead furrowed.

"Corgi mix," Irina said, still struggling with the dog in her arms as she stepped toward Knox. "His name's actually Waffles. I didn't even have to change it. He came with it since he's part of the breakfast crew."

"I'm so confused," Bax said, shaking his head.

Knox didn't care because his wife may be gorgeous on a normal day, but today she was absolutely stunning, and she required all of his attention.

"You brought home Waffles?" he asked, his throat dry and the words

rough around the edges.

She nodded, her eyes twinkling. "Kind of a good news, bad news sitch."

Knox waited.

"We have a dog. Yay!" Irina handed over the little guy to Knox, plopping him right in his arms. "That's the good news."

"And the bad news?" Knox asked, bracing himself even as he rubbed the soft fur under Waffle's neck.

"Yeah, so, we aren't going to Jamaica." Irina pulled a *what-cha-gonna-do* face.

Knox's heart got all warm and seemed to melt in his chest. He took in the little dude struggling in his arms. "No Jamaica."

"But we get something better." Irina nodded, running her hand over Waffles's head.

"You're absolutely sure about this?" Knox asked, pressing his face against Waffles's neck.

Irina moved her hand over his. "I think the time to be sure about this has come and gone. It's done. There's no going backsies."

Irina told him the story of how she met Waffles, how no one adopted him, and she couldn't leave him there all alone.

She was absolutely correct. There was no going back on this one.

"What are you doing?" Courtney asked, her voice breaking through their moment.

Knox glanced up to where Courtney stared at Bax's cell screen, her eyebrows drawn together.

"Oh, I'm texting everyone. They're gonna want to see this," Bax said with a smirk.

"Tell Linx to bring his cat over so the two of them can meet," Courtney suggested.

Whatever. Knox had his girl and his dog. What more could he want?

He gave Waffles a tour of the house, going from room to room, explaining which areas were off-limits, while Irina sorted his dinner.

"You think he knows what the hell you are going on about?" Bax asked. "He doesn't know the word off-limits. He doesn't even know how to sit."

"He knows because he's super smart," Knox said. "Aren't you Waffles? You are just a smart boy. Yes, you are."

"We're here," Tanner, the Dimefront drummer, called from the front door.

He was the first to arrive with his wife Sam and—

“Why’s Babushka here?” Knox asked.

Babushka was a friend of Tanner’s. An elderly Russian woman who had a hand in all kinds of matchmaking for the band mates and anyone else who came through her path.

“Why are any of us here? You adopted a dog,” Tanner said, tossing his arm around his girl, Sam.

“I am valking with them. They say you bring home corgi. I like corgi. I come to say hello to your Vaffles,” Babushka said.

Waffles sniffed at her bag. Gave a little bark.

Tanner knelt down next to the dog. “Hey Waffles. Nice to meet you. I’m your Uncle Tanner and this is your Auntie Sam. We will be in charge of everything fun, and absolutely no cleaning up after you.”

“Dinner time,” Irina said singsong, coming from the kitchen with a bowl of kibble.

She set it down on the carpet in front of Waffles. He sniffed at it, then went back to Babushka’s purse. He barked again.

That wasn’t good. Dogs loved food, right? Dinner time was their favorite part of the day.

“He’s not eating. Why isn’t he eating?” Knox asked, trying to ignore the panic in his chest.

“Maybe he’s not hungry,” Irina replied, but her tone was off.

She was worried too.

“He’s had a big day. Of course, he’s going to be hungry,” Knox said. “Unless he’s sick. Do you think he’s sick? Should we call a vet?”

“Are you two always going to be like this?” Courtney asked.

“Probably,” both of them said at the same time.

Waffles barked again at Babushka’s purse.

“Ah, yes, he wants the steak.” Babushka opened her handbag and pulled out a Ziploc bag with a decent-sized, medium-well steak tucked inside.

“You carry steak in your purse?” Tanner asked, not with surprise, but with curiosity. The tone he used would’ve been the same if he asked about the flavor of chewing gum she chose to carry.

“Steak from Pistol Polly’s. Only the best,” Babushka said, pulling off a chunk and feeding it to Waffles, who sat on his little tush and practically begged for more. Babushka obliged.

Knox might not be the king of good decisions, but even he knew that

purse steak was probably a good way to get food poisoning.

“Isn’t Pistol Polly’s a strip club?” Courtney asked.

“Yes.” Babsuhka grinned huge. “And the best steak in Denver.”

“I don’t think your dog’s going to eat any bagged dog food,” Courtney said, glancing between the food bowl and Babushka sharing her stripper steak with the puppy.

“You’re right, Knox,” Bax said, again with the damn smirk.

“About what?”

“Your dog is really smart,” Bax agreed.

“Once you have the best steak, you don’t go back to the bad stuff,” Babushka assured.

But was she assuring Waffles or Knox? He wasn’t sure.

CHAPTER 4

IRINA

Waffles needed more food. And he was a finicky little guy. That much had become clear.

“You don’t trust yourself at an adoption event, but you’ll be fine at a jiggle joint?” Irina asked.

Knox was heading out to Pistol Polly’s, picking up enough steak to keep Waffles fed for a few days.

“There’s nothing there that I could want when I have everything right here.” Knox tilted her face up to his, pressing a light kiss on her mouth.

“Everything?” she asked against his lips.

“Everything,” he confirmed without hesitation.

“So you can go to dog adoption events, and it’ll be fine? You won’t have some incredible urge to bring home another puppy?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. Waffles is gonna need a playmate. We should probably bring home Lucy next.”

“Lucy?” Irina asked, one of her eyebrows quirking in that way of hers that was absolutely intentional.

“Yeah, that’s Waffles’s sister.”

Here they went again... “There is so much I don’t know about you.”

Knox kissed his wife. A quick peck on the lips this time. “That’s what makes marriage fun, right?”

ABOUT CHRISTINA HOVLAND

USA Today Bestselling Author Christina Hovland lives her own version of a fairy tale—artisan chocolatier turned romance novelist. Before opening her chocolate company, Christina’s career spanned from the television newsroom to managing an award-winning public relations firm. A 2017 Golden Heart® finalist, she lives in Colorado with her first-boyfriend-turned-husband, four children, the sweetest dogs around, and a cat that sort of likes her. Find out more about Christina [here](#).

Sign up for Christina’s newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

[Also by Christina](#)

The Mile High Matched Series

Going Down on One Knee, Mile High Matched, Book 1

Blow Me Away, Mile High Matched, Book 2

Take It Off the Menu, Mile High Matched, Book 3

Do Me a Favor, Mile High Matched, Book 4

Can’t Believe You Came, Mile High Matched, Book 5 (Coming Fall 2023)

The Mile High Rocked Series

Played by the Rockstar, Mile High Rocked, Book 1

Knocked Up by the Rockstar, Mile High Rocked, Book 2

Married to the Rockstar, Mile High Rocked, Book 3

Tapped by the Rockstar, Mile High Rocked, Book 4

Reckless with the Rockstar, Mile High Rocked, Book 5



TOO NICE TO BE NAUGHTY

MELONIE JOHNSON

ABOUT TOO NICE TO BE NAUGHTY

A buttoned up funeral director comes undone while helping a chaotic client work a Christmas miracle.

To Franny Girl

*Thank you for the ten amazing years of love and devotion you gave our
family.*

We miss you, you big sweet stinky baby.

CHAPTER 1

JOE

In the nearly six years since Joseph O'Sullivan had taken charge of running his family's funeral home, he'd learned to expect the unexpected. Everything from elderly widows brawling over the casket of their deceased husband, to a Star Wars fan's stipulation to be buried in his Darth Vader costume, to just last week when a community theater group had turned the funeral service for their director into a final performance of the play they'd been rehearsing. At this point, Joe figured he'd pretty much seen it all.

But nothing in his experience had prepared him for the human hurricane that whirled into O'Sullivan's early one stormy morning. At the sound of the front door banging open, Joe stepped out of the main office and did a double take. A woman hovered in the foyer, dressed in a neon pink raincoat so blindingly bright he had to fight the urge to signal her as if she'd been driving a car and had forgotten to turn off her hi-beams. Instead, he raised his hand in greeting and politely ignored the puddle quickly gathering around her equally ostentatious boots. "May I help you?"

Rather than answer him, the woman just stood there and stared from beneath the hood of her raincoat, shadows obscuring her face.

Joe moved closer, trying to discern her features. "Do you have an appointment?" he asked, even though he knew that was unlikely. The first client of the day wasn't scheduled to arrive for several hours.

Still no response. Her silence was unnerving, made even more so by the rhythmic *plop-plop* as water continued to drip from her onto the tile floor. Maybe she'd simply stopped in here to get out of the rain. It was December, and the fact it was raining at all was not helping Joe's mood. Chicago winters were bad enough, but he'd take a blizzard over this dreary deluge any day.

“Let me get you a towel,” he finally said, turning to head back down the hall.

“Wait,” the woman called out.

Joe paused mid-step.

“I don’t have an appointment.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, pivoting back to face her. “Would you like to make one?”

“Is now a good time?”

He raised his eyebrows. “We, ah, don’t usually take walk-ins...”

“Please,” she implored, her voice scratchy. Hoarse. As if she’d been crying. “Can you make an exception?”

Making exceptions was not something Joe did often, if ever. Things were done a certain way for a reason. To mess with the system was to invite chaos, and if there was one thing Joe couldn’t stand, it was chaos. Still. She’d made the trip out here in the pouring rain and was clearly distraught. He couldn’t turn her away, especially not when he had an opening on his schedule.

“As it happens, I do have a bit of time this morning.”

Her entire body went limp with relief. “Thank you,” she gushed, reaching out to wrap him in a grateful embrace.

It was not the first time Joe had been subjected to such effusive reactions from clients, though usually it was after he’d begun working with them, not before. He patted her back with a practiced hand, grimacing as his palm slid on the slick fabric. An unpleasant dampness had also begun to seep through his suit jacket.

Taking the woman by her soaked shoulders, he politely but firmly put some distance between them. “May I take your coat?”

She nodded, shrugging out of the monstrosity. Joe blinked. Hidden beneath her hood was hair as outrageously pink as the coat itself. She wore it twisted up in a pair of buns that sat atop her head like twin puffs of cotton candy. The woman held out her coat and Joe realized he’d been staring. As he hurried to hang the sopping thing on the rack in a corner of the foyer, he made a mental note to grab a mop later.

“Follow me, Ms...?”

“Monroe,” she supplied, lips pursing as if she knew how her unconventional appearance had affected him.

Joe nodded stiffly and led the way down the hall, annoyed with himself for losing his composure, even momentarily. So the woman had pink hair and looked like a cartoon space princess, so what? He gestured for her to enter the

office. "After you, Ms. Monroe."

"You can call me Carly," she said, taking a seat in the chair he offered her.

"And I'm Joseph O'Sullivan," Joe supplied, settling in behind the desk. "Feel free to call me Joe."

"Okay, Joe," she complied, wasting no time on further niceties. "I need you to arrange a funeral."

Her voice was tight, almost clipped. Some might have mistaken the brusqueness for rudeness, but Joe knew it for what it was. Grief. Tension radiated from her. And it was clear from the way she held herself that she was on the verge of collapsing. Grief affected people in different ways, and it was his job to help see them through the process of saying goodbye. In order to proceed, he needed more information, but he'd have to probe carefully.

"Is this for someone who is already deceased?" he asked gently.

"Of course. Why would you even ask that?" she demanded, eyes going wide with shock and confusion.

They were green eyes, a vivid hue that contrasted sharply with her pink hair. The effect was unusual but not unpleasant. Joe cleared his throat. "It's quite common to plan these things in advance," he began, though, truth be told, it wasn't common enough.

Most people didn't realize how many decisions were involved when it came to death. All too often they waited until it was too late, forcing their families to make these decisions for them, usually while exhausted and emotionally drained. Which meant Joe had to walk clients through the process of making incredibly hard decisions when they mentally weren't in a place to do so. He did his best to guide them gently and with empathy, but also objectively. This was still a business, after all.

"I'm sorry for your loss." How many times had he said those words? But he always meant it. "Do you have anyone who could be here to go through this process with you?"

"No." She shook her head, gaze dropping to the floor. "It's just me."

The weight of those words tugged on Joe's heart. After his parents had retired, he'd taken over running the business with his two siblings. As much as his brother and sister tried his patience, he was grateful for them and their close bond. Gathering himself, Joe opened his laptop and focused on the matter at hand. "I will need some information about the deceased," he began gently. "Name?"

“Charlie.”

“Charlie Monroe?” he prodded. Again, as gently as possible.

She nodded, hands twisting in her lap, fidgeting with a diamond ring.

“Your husband?” he asked, already typing the information onto the intake form.

“My brother.”

He paused, fingers stalling on the keyboard. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to assume…” his gaze drifted to the ring.

“It’s my mother’s,” Carly said, holding up her left hand in explanation. “She passed away a few years ago. I don’t know why I still wear this,” she added, twisting the diamond on her finger.

“Because it makes you feel close to her,” Joe said.

She nodded. “I guess.”

Once more, he was struck by the weight of her words. There was a heaviness to her presence that Joe recognized. This was someone who had faced a lot of loss in their life. He adjusted his notes on the file, updating her relationship with the deceased. “Charlie and Carly, huh?” He kept his tone light, hoping she’d appreciate his attempt at levity.

“I know,” she groaned, and he was pleased to see a smile flicker across her face. It was small and rueful, but real. “It’s awful, right?”

“I like it.” He returned her smile with a genuine grin of his own. “They fit together nicely, like bookends.”

“Yep, that’s us.” Her smile faltered. “Was us,” she corrected in a small voice. “We were twins.”

Joe ached to see the mist clouding those green eyes. “I’m so sorry,” he said, wishing there were more words he could offer. “This must be very hard for you.”

“It’s strange. When you’ve lived your life as a pair of something, to suddenly lose your other half, to have that bond broken—” she broke off, gaze drifting to the ground again. “I feel like the lone sock left behind after the rest of the laundry is done, not sure where to go or how I fit in.”

“That wouldn’t be a problem for my brother,” Joe joked, the words coming even before he realized what he was saying.

She cocked her head at him, and he was relieved to see she wasn’t offended by his strange comment. Confused, maybe. Perhaps curious.

“He has a chronic habit of wearing mismatched socks,” Joe explained.

A snort of laughter escaped Carly. “You make it sound like that’s a

crime.”

“I used to think so,” he admitted, gratified he’d been able to make her smile again, however briefly. “Now I view it as more of a lost cause.”

If Carly and her brother were a set of bookends, he and Mick were polar opposites. Joe was neat and organized. His brother was messy and disheveled. For a long time, Joe viewed his brother’s differences with disdain, but lately he’d begun to learn to appreciate Mick for who he was, rather than the person Joe thought he should be.

He cleared his throat and deftly steered the conversation away from his brother and back to hers. Taking someone through all the decisions involved in making burial arrangements could, understandably, be a difficult task. Considering her sudden soggy arrival this morning, Joe was surprised by the calm efficient way Carly moved through the process. She was turning out to be one of the easiest clients he’d ever dealt with.

That is, until they got to the details for the service.

CHAPTER 2

CARLY

“Dogs.” Joseph O’Sullivan—Joe—blinked at her.

Carly noticed he did that a lot.

Dark eyebrows inched above the neat line of his glasses. Equally dark eyes regarded her from behind perfectly polished lenses with... what? Annoyance? Frustration? Disbelief?

She couldn’t tell what he was feeling any more than she could determine the exact shade of his eyes. They were a brown so deep as to be almost black. Like the richest, chocolatiest brownies. She imagined sinking into them like a warm sweet hug.

Oof, that’s right. She’d hugged him. She wasn’t embarrassed by her outburst, but she thought he might have been. After a polite pat on her back by a surprisingly firm hand, he’d set her away from him, putting space between them with equal firmness. The man was all business.

Which was why she was here, Carly reminded herself. He’d asked her in a low voice as rich and warm as his eyes if she’d had anyone who could help with the process. She did not. As she’d told him, she was on her own. Well and truly alone now that Charlie was gone. The truth of those words tied a stone around her heart.

It was only a few weeks until Christmas. The last thing she’d expected to be doing right now was planning her brother’s funeral. But Charlie had died, suddenly and unexpectedly, and nothing was going to change that fact. These things happen.

These things happen. That’s what the doctor had said. She’d also said a bunch of other stuff regarding the abdominal aortic aneurysm that had killed Charlie, but Carly couldn’t remember much. Something about it often being

undetectable, that there was nothing anyone could have done. The doctor's sentences had blurred together. But nothing the woman said had mattered, really. It wouldn't change anything. Her best friend and only family—her twin—was dead.

And now the only thing Carly could do was figure out what to do next. You'd think, after losing both their parents fairly young, that she and her brother would have made actual plans for such things. They hadn't arranged anything official, but they had at least talked about it a little, which was why she knew he wanted to be cremated. Donate anything someone else can use and burn the rest, is what he'd actually said.

That was Charlie.

"Yes, dogs," she repeated. "My brother's dogs need to be at the funeral service. It's what he would have wanted."

Joe tapped his fingers on the edge of the desk. It was a big old-fashioned thing, made of some kind of fancy wood. Mahogany maybe? Carly had no idea, but it was buffed to such a glorious shine that when she glanced down, she could see her own reflection, her bubblegum pink buns nearly glowing in the glossy surface.

He'd blinked then, too. When he'd seen her hair for the first time. Carly was used to the second glances and odd looks. You didn't turn your hair a color like this without drawing some attention. That was part of the fun. Usually, she didn't care what people thought, but for some reason she was curious to hear Joe's opinion. Maybe it was because Joe was going to be handling the stuff with Charlie that made Carly value his thoughts. Made her want him to like her. It didn't make any sense, but there it was.

"I suppose we can make that happen," Joe finally said. "It's not the first time someone has requested their pet attend a service." He shifted, typing something on the laptop in front of him. "You mentioned *dogs*, plural. How many are we talking about?"

"Twenty-seven."

His hands froze on the keyboard. "I beg your pardon." He blinked. "How many did you say?"

Carly cleared her throat and repeated the number.

"Your brother had over two dozen dogs?" He blinked twice. "I'm sorry, but is that even legal?"

"They aren't his pets. They're rescues who haven't found their furever home yet."

Three blinks this time. “Furever home,” he repeated slowly.

Carly nodded. “Charlie ran an animal shelter that matched dogs up with families for adoption.” An idea burst into her mind, and she leaned forward. “Maybe we could invite all of them.”

“All of whom?”

“All the families who’d adopted from Charlie. And they can bring their dogs too!” Her nerves zinged at the thought, knowing how much her brother would have loved to see that. For the first time since this horrible ordeal began, Carly felt a blip of joy.

And then she saw the look on Joe’s face.

“Go ahead,” she ordered. “Do it.”

He frowned. “Do what?”

“Pop my balloon. Burst my bubble.”

“I don’t want to pop or burst anything, I assure you.” Joe adjusted his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. “But you must understand that what you’re asking is impossible. It simply can’t be done.”

Carly crossed her arms. “Why not?” she asked mulishly.

“The number of building and health code violations, for starters.”

“But it would have made Charlie so happy.” She sunk lower into her chair, arms still crossed, now more as an act of defense than defiance.

Joe returned to drumming his fingers on the desk. Finally, he said, “Before we continue planning the service, I think you should talk to my brother, Mick.”

“The mismatched sock guy?”

“That’s the one.” Joe nodded and stood, offering her his hand. “His office is just down the hall.”

Before Carly could ask any more questions, Joe was leading her through the building. After a quick knock, he opened the door.

“Hey, Asshole!” A strangely shrill voice called out in greeting.

Now it was Carly’s turn to blink. “Is that your brother?”

“No,” Joe grumbled. “That’s Seamus.”

“Good morning, Fucker,” the shrill voice chirped.

Carly peered into the room, tracing the sound to a cage that stood on the far side of the office. A pink bird with a bright red and yellow crest perched inside, eyeing Joe with beady black eyes that looked downright mischievous.

“Good morning, Seamus,” Joe replied, his mouth twisting.

“What are you doing with your face?” Carly wondered.

“Smiling.”

“Please stop it. You look like a serial killer.”

From the other side of the room came a cough that sounded suspiciously like a choked laugh.

Carly shifted her gaze and knew immediately she was looking at Joe’s brother. They shared the same dark hair and eyes and had clearly been cut from the same cloth. But where everything about Joe was neat and smooth, his brother was scruffy and rough around the edges. She could definitely imagine this man sporting mismatched socks. “You must be Mick,” she said.

“I am.”

Joe stepped forward, taking over the introductions. “Mick, this is Carly Monroe. She’s a new client. We ran into an issue while discussing the options for her brother’s service and I thought it might be good for her to talk things over with you.”

As Joe spoke, Carly’s attention drifted. Her gaze caught on the framed diplomas hanging on the wall behind the desk, and she stiffened. “Hey.” She tugged on Joe’s arm. “There’s nothing wrong with me.”

His brow crinkled. “I never said there was.”

“Then why did you take me to talk to a psychologist?” She pointed at the wall of diplomas. “I don’t need a shrink.”

The bird, Seamus, let out a loud squawk, clucking his tongue as if scolding her.

“Sorry,” Joe apologized. “If you haven’t noticed yet, that bird has an attitude.”

“Seamus isn’t a fan of the s-word,” Mick explained. “We prefer the term therapist. And needing a psychologist doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you. Though if it helps, consider my role here to be a grief counselor.”

“And you don’t have to talk to him if you don’t want to,” Joe added. “I just thought it might be good to hash things out.”

“You mean you want to see if he can change my mind,” she snapped. “Convince me I’m out of my gourd for wanting to bring dogs to a funeral.”

“Twenty-seven dogs,” Joe reminded her.

From inside the cage, Seamus began barking.

A snort of surprised laughter escaped Carly, diffusing her sudden burst of anger. She moved closer to the saucy bird, unable to resist being charmed by its antics. She glanced over her shoulder and asked, “Can I pet him?”

Mick nodded.

“Charlie would have loved to meet you,” she cooed, stroking the bird’s downy wing.

Seamus ruffled his feathers and repeated Charlie’s name.

Something between a giggle and a snuffle caught in her throat. “Yep, Charlie.”

“Was that your brother?” Mick asked, moving to stand next to her.

She nodded. “He loved animals.” Grief surged through her, gathering in her chest and throat. “More than he liked most people. Especially his dogs.”

“That’s why you want to have them at the service,” Mick said.

She nodded again. She knew he was probably doing his psychology thing on her, knew her request to include so many dogs in a funeral service was extreme. But petting Seamus was soothing, and maybe explaining her reasons would help make them understand. “After Charlie retired from active duty, he opened the center. It’s a no-kill shelter that takes the hard cases, the ones nobody else will. He treated every dog that passed through those doors like family, which I guess makes them mine too.”

“Do you also work at the rescue center?” Mick asked.

“Not officially. But I help out a lot.” Carly stilled as a new thought struck her. “Oh, God. What’s going to happen to that place? Aside from Charlie, most of the staff are volunteers.” Her voice rose as panic tumbled through her. “I can’t run it. I have my own job, my own—” *Life* she was going to say, but that felt too selfish. A sob escaped her, but she couldn’t help it, couldn’t stop the tears as they started to fall, faster than the rain outside.

Wordlessly, Mick handed her a tissue.

Carly took it and mumbled her thanks, embarrassed and mad at herself for breaking down, especially in front of Joe. It would only confirm his suggestion that she needed to talk to his brother. As she dabbed her tears and wiped smeared mascara from her eyes, she stole a glance in his direction. He didn’t look smug or appear to be judging her. His face was sympathetic, but not pitying or patronizing.

“What’s the name of the rescue center?” Joe asked.

“Comfort and Joy.” A bittersweet smile trembled on her lips. “Charlie always liked to say that’s what a dog provides.”

“Sounds very Christmassy.”

Another stab of panic struck her, and she gasped. “Fuck. Christmas.”

Joe’s gaze grew perplexed. “Why do you want to fuck Christmas?”

“I believe she said fuck, *period*, Christmas,” Mick clarified.

“Charlie had this winter festival thing he’d always do right before the holidays with a big donation and adoption drive. We were just reviewing plans for it last week, and now...” her voice faltered, fresh tears burning behind her eyes. “It’s impossible to imagine it happening without him.”

“What if it happened *for* him?” Mick suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Joe said approvingly. He turned to Carly. “When did this festival usually take place?”

“He always scheduled it the weekend before Christmas.”

“That’s a little over two weeks from now.” Joe nodded to himself. “And it was held at the rescue center?”

“In Bucktown, yeah.” She glanced between the brothers. They were looking at each other, and it was obvious they were hatching some sort of plan. “Why?”

“How would you feel about combining this festival with the service for your brother?” Joe asked.

“How do you think your brother would feel?” Mick added.

“You mean if we held the festival in his honor?”

“Like a tribute.” Joe nodded. “And you could have it at the shelter.”

Carly didn’t need to think about it, the answer bubbled up instantly, almost as if she could feel Charlie saying, ‘Yes! That is what I want’. Her spirits lifted, buoyed by the possibilities. “If it’s at Comfort and Joy, then all the dogs could be there.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Joe agreed. “O’Sullivan’s would still help with the planning, of course. We’d work with you on making all the arrangements for the event.”

“You would do that?”

The brothers nodded.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Joe said. His deep brown eyes were warm and kind as they held hers. “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of you.”

Carly’s heart squeezed, limbs weak with relief. She’d needed to hear that. It had been a long endless horrible night at the hospital. Amidst the sea of paperwork, she’d numbly done a search for funeral homes on her phone. This morning she’d walked into O’Sullivan’s cold and alone, completely unsure of what to do next. But now she had a plan, and support to help her tackle the next steps in this painful process.

Best of all, she had Joe. His calm, competent presence made her feel safe. Cared for.

Not alone.

CHAPTER 3

JOE

The following week, Joe made his way to the Comfort and Joy rescue center. A bell announced his arrival, followed immediately by a cacophony of barking canines reverberating through the building. He winced. Unlike his brother Mick, who got along with all kinds of four-legged creatures and was Seamus's best friend, Joe was nervous around animals, especially dogs. They made him uneasy, with their muddy paws and slobber and tendency to chew on things.

He heard Carly's voice coming from somewhere inside, but he couldn't make out the words. Whatever she was saying must have soothed the beasts because by the time she'd reached the entrance the noise had subsided.

"Hey, Joe!" She maneuvered around the front desk to greet him. "You are impressively punctual."

"Always." The festival was scheduled for ten days from now, and Joe had agreed to meet Carly at the rescue center to go over the details for the event, including her brother's service. He glanced at the package in his hand.

She followed his gaze, her lips pressing together as she took in the box he was holding. "Is that..." she paused, a myriad of emotions flickering across her face. "Charlie?"

"It is." He held out the box to her. For a moment, he thought she wasn't going to take it, but eventually she lifted her hands and gingerly accepted it.

She'd opted to go without an urn, saying her brother wouldn't want to be bottled up like some genie. With no coffin, no urn, and no reception at the funeral home, Carly was probably one of the cheapest clients they'd had in ages, but Joe didn't care. His siblings may think he was only concerned about the bottom line, and while money was important to him—it's what kept the

business afloat and put food on all their tables and a roof over their heads—it wasn't everything. In fact, Joe had been the one to suggest O'Sullivan's provide their services for Charlie pro bono. The rescue center was a non-profit, and it seemed like the right thing to do.

He could tell himself it had nothing to do with Carly, deny that the urge to help her was anything other than simply professional, but he'd be lying. She brought out all his protective instincts. Maybe it was because she'd lost her brother after already losing both her parents. It was that, but it was also something else. Something more. A need to care for her that went deeper, as inexplicable as it was instinctive.

Joe shook himself.

Carly was still standing in front of him, cradling the box like a puppy. "I should probably put Charlie in his office," she said. "This way."

He followed her through a maze of hallways lined with cages. The barking resumed, the shelter's tenants letting Joe know he'd entered their domain. The place seemed exceptionally clean, but as the pungent bouquet of animal aromas reminded him, it was still a kennel. Joe wrinkled his nose.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Trying to breathe through my mouth," he admitted.

She snorted. "It's not that bad, is it?"

Joe forced a polite smile but didn't answer.

"You're making that face again."

"I'm sorry, I can't help it. This is my face. That's what it does."

"You need to learn how to relax."

"You sound like my sister." Joe could hear Mary-Kate in his head, telling him to relax in her usual cool, it's-so-easy-to-be-me way she had. His sister would probably get along quite well with Carly, now that he thought of it.

"Maybe she has a point," Carly suggested. She peered at him, green eyes bright and assessing. "Do you even know how to relax?"

"I understand what relaxing is supposed to be."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"The absence of effort." Joe hesitated, not sure he should share this piece of himself. "But for me, relaxing takes a lot of effort. Doing nothing is hard."

"You don't like to sit still, huh?" she asked, lips sliding into a smirk.

"Hate it," he admitted. "There's always so much to do and if I'm just sitting, I'm not getting it done. Wasting time makes me anxious."

"But relaxing isn't wasting time."

“Yes, I know it’s supposed to be good for you. Decompress. Refill the well. Avoid burnout, et cetera.”

“You’re looking at chilling out like another to-do list.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t work that way. All the things you mentioned can be happy side effects, but if you try to make decompressing a goal, you’re only going to feel more...compressed.”

“I don’t think you’re using that word correctly.”

“What would you call the opposite of decompress?”

His mouth pinched, brain empty of a response.

Carly gave him a sly saucy smile, as if she’d scored a point in some game they were playing.

She’d made her point, anyway. He understood what she was driving at. “Even if what you’re saying is true, it doesn’t work like that for me.”

“Have you tried it?”

“Tried relaxing?” Joe shrugged. “Sure.”

She slid him a sideways glance, eyes narrowing.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

She shook her head, pausing in front of a door and turning to peer up at him.

“Well, I have.” He crossed his arms, chin lifting defensively even as he stared down at her, daring her to contradict him. But she didn’t say anything. Just stood there and continued to look at him. Her silence was unnerving. Joe had the irrepressible urge to fill it. To offer the explanation she hadn’t asked for. “I suppose you’re wondering what a guy like me considers relaxing?”

Still, she didn’t answer him, but she didn’t need to. He could read the unspoken questions in her eyes.

“I like reading.”

“Let me guess.” One of those pretty delicate brows arched. “Casket Quarterly?”

“I’ll have you know that comes out monthly.”

Her lips twitched and something hot and sweet flashed inside Joe’s chest. He wanted to see that hint of a grin bloom into a full smile, and he wanted to be the one to make it happen.

“Do you read anything for fun?” she asked, turning to open the door. “Something not involving work?”

“I like mysteries,” Joe admitted, stepping into the office behind her.

Carly cleared a space on the desk and carefully set the box down. “Can’t

seem to get away from corpses, hm?" she asked, but this time her tone wasn't judgmental. It was light, almost teasing. "What's your favorite?"

He hesitated, realizing it had been a long time since he'd read one. "Anything by Agatha Christie, I guess."

"Ah, the classic whodunits."

"Have you read them?"

"No," her expression flickered between joy and pain, "but Charlie and I used to stay up late watching Poirot movies together. He'd always fall asleep before the case was solved." She gave the box a tender pat.

"Would you like a few moments alone?" Joe asked.

"I think I'm okay," Carly said softly. "Thank you for bringing him to me."

"Of course." Unable to resist the instinct, Joe reached for her hand and squeezed. He'd done it countless times over the years as grieving people shared memories of their loved ones. He'd always felt empathy when he'd heard these stories, and it wasn't just because it was his job to listen to his clients and offer solace. He cared for them, felt a genuine sense of compassion for their loss. But the emotion had always been muffled. As if his heart was covered in a thick layer of cotton, shielded from the sharper angles of their sorrow.

Joe appreciated that protection, considered it an advantage in his line of work. Guiding people through the darkest moments of their life wasn't for the faint of heart, but one couldn't be heartless, either. Joe excelled at finding the balance between connecting personally with mourning clients while still maintaining a professional distance. Separating his work life from his personal life had always come naturally to him. Easy.

Until now. Standing so close to Carly in this small space, her hand in his, stirred feelings in him that went deeper. Joe released her hand, stepping back and glancing around the cluttered room overrun with stacks of paper and file folders.

"I know it's a mess."

"No," he began, searching for a polite word to describe the disheveled state of the office. But the way she was eyeing him let Joe know his face must have already given him away, so he finally nodded sheepishly. "Yeah, it's a mess."

Carly sighed. "It doesn't look like it, but my brother did have a system. His own version of a system, anyway." She plucked at a pile of folders. "I've

been meaning to sort through everything, but..."

"It's hard," Joe said gently.

She nodded and sank into the desk chair.

Again, the urge to reach out and comfort Carly overwhelmed him. But he didn't want to just hold her hand, he wanted to hold *her*. He cleared his throat and focused on business. "Tell me more about your plans for the festival."

"Aside from the adoption drive, the event is also a fundraiser. Local businesses donate stuff for raffle baskets. We'll have items for sale too, like gourmet dog treats and handmade holiday doggie sweaters."

"They make sweaters for dogs?"

"Dogs get cold too, you know," Carly informed him.

"Right." He blinked. "What else?"

"There's a craft station where people can make paw print ornaments, either with paint or a ceramic cast."

"Sounds messy."

"Very." She grinned at him. "And fun."

"Do you have people to help with all of this?"

"Charlie usually posted a sign-up sheet." She rummaged through the papers on the desk. "Most of our staff are volunteers, so the schedule isn't very strict. But I want everyone to be invited whether they're working or not, of course."

"Of course," he agreed. "You also mentioned something about inviting former foster families?"

"Yeah," she beamed. "Anyone who's ever adopted a pet here. I know they won't all be able to come, but it would be great if they could participate somehow."

"And their information would be somewhere in this office?"

"Somewhere." She sighed. "I think."

Joe scanned the mess, wondering what he'd gotten himself into.

"You're probably thinking this is impossible." The energy that had lit up her face moments ago dimmed.

"Not impossible." He hated seeing her lose hope. Hated thinking he could be contributing to her sadness in any way, but he wasn't going to lie to her. "Though it is going to be a lot of work."

"Whatever it takes," she said immediately, green eyes shining with determination and love. "Charlie's worth it."

Again, something twinged deep inside Joe's chest. *You're worth it*, he

wanted to say. The words filled his mouth, Joe could taste them on the tip of his tongue. He swallowed them down, took a deep breath, and said instead, "Then let's get started."

CHAPTER 4

CARLY

The holiday season always seemed to fly by, but the days leading up to the Comfort and Joy Festival careened past with astonishing speed.

Carly had expected time to drag, the hours and minutes crawling, weighed down by the loss of her brother. She did feel grief, Charlie was ever present in her mind, but she also felt guilt. Like she should be sadder, be grieving harder.

But she was too busy for that. On some level, Carly recognized what she was doing. Planning the festival in Charlie's honor had given her purpose. A goal. She may have been helpless to stop her brother's death, but she could do this for him. She'd agreed to try some counseling sessions with Joe's brother Mick, but even if she hadn't, she would have seen the frantic pace she'd kept the last week or so for the coping mechanism it was.

Despite her initial misgivings, talking to Mick had helped. As had spending time with Joe. He'd been a constant presence, turning the shelter's office into a command center and handling not just the arrangements for Charlie's service, but many of the details for the holiday festival itself.

Joe was one of those people who naturally took charge. The kind of person who was used to driving the car. And frankly, Carly had been grateful to let him take the wheel. But she didn't hand over control of everything.

She paused, grinning at the poster plastered on the office door. She'd designed the flyer for the festival herself. Joe had cringed at the slogan she'd decided on, "Fetch the Holiday Spirit," but Carly had insisted. If anything, his reaction made her like it even more.

Ever since their first meeting, even under the circumstances, she'd found a perverse pleasure in pushing the prim and proper Joseph O'Sullivan's

buttons. And the man had a lot of buttons to push. Carly opened the office door, eager to push some more.

Joe was sorting through one of the filing cabinet drawers, his back to her. As usual, he was wearing a suit, but he'd loosened up enough to ditch the jacket. It was draped over the desk chair. Beneath his trim waistcoat, the crisp white shirtsleeves were fastened neatly at his wrists.

Carly caught herself admiring the strong straight lines of his body. She imagined what he might look like with the sleeves rolled up, baring his forearms. Not that he would ever dare to risk wrinkling a shirt in such a manner.

"You changed your hair."

With a start, Carly realized Joe was looking at her over his shoulder. "Ah, yeah. I did." She'd traded her pink buns for pigtails dyed a festive red and green. "What do you think?"

He slid the cabinet drawer closed and considered her. "It's very...jolly."

A flush warmed her skin under his intense gaze. "Speaking of jolly..." She moved to the desk, now pristine and clutter free, and set the storage container she was holding down with a loud thump.

"What's that?" Joe eyed the box suspiciously.

Carly did her best to hide a sly smile. "It's for the photos with Santa Paws."

"Who?"

"You know, Santa Paws." She popped the lid off the container. "Like Santa Claus, but for pets."

Joe's grumpy grimace made an appearance. "That's not a thing."

"It most certainly is a thing," Carly assured him. "And you're going to be playing him."

"If I'm Santa Paws, who are you going to be?" He leaned against the filing cabinet and crossed his arms. "Mrs. Paws?"

"You wish." Carly snorted, but her brain tripped on the suggestion she'd play his wife. The notion of being Joe's anything made her insides run hot and cold. The sensation was unexpected, but not unpleasant. She shook off the ridiculous thought. "No, I'm going to be Mrs. Claws."

Joe's eyebrows lifted, hovering over his glasses in silent question.

Carly dug around in the storage container. "Mrs. Claws," she repeated, popping a set of kitty ears on her head and positioning them in front of her pigtails. "C-l-a-w-s," she spelled out. She held up a furry tail with a jingle

bell attached. "Get it?"

"That thing is going to give me nightmares," Joe declared.

"Aw, you'll be thinking about me in your sleep," Carly teased, clipping the tail to her bum and shaking it.

The expression on his face was priceless.

"Don't worry, your costume doesn't have a tail," she promised, pulling out the Santa suit. "Unless you want one," she added.

"I'll pass," he grumbled. "Wouldn't it be better if one of the volunteers wore this?"

"Not really." She shook her head. "The suit was my brother's. Charlie loved playing Santa." The silliness of the last few moments faded, replaced by a pang of grief. "He looked forward to it each year. Trying to pick his replacement from among our volunteers..." Carly hesitated, not sure how to explain. "It's complicated."

"You don't want to hurt anyone's feelings by singling someone out," Joe surmised.

"Exactly," she agreed, glad he understood. "Besides," she continued, fingers twisting in the scarlet fabric, "it would mean a lot to me if you would do it."

"Of course," Joe capitulated immediately. "Whatever you need."

"Thank you!" Relief surged through her as she rushed forward to wrap him in a grateful hug.

He started to hug her back but then seemed to change his mind. "I just hope you won't regret it," Joe said, arms dropping to his sides as he abruptly stepped away from her. "Can you give me a minute to change?"

"Sure." Carly tried not to be offended by what seemed like his aversion to touching her. Joe was a professional, and as nice as he'd been to her, this was still business for him. She needed to remember that. "I'll go get the dogs into their costumes."

"Costumes?" He blinked. "Why would dogs need costumes?"

"For the photos, silly." She grabbed the storage container and slipped out of the office. She'd just finished tying a bright red and green bow on Sophie, a pudgy pitbull, when Joe appeared.

"These pants are falling off of me." He shuffled toward her, clutching the fabric with both hands.

"Did you use the suspenders?"

He blinked in confusion. Carly rolled her eyes and helped him tug the

suspenders into place.

“They’re still too big,” Joe said, holding up the red velvet waistband sagging around his middle.

Carly snickered. “That’s what the padding is for.” She grabbed some pillows from the bottom of the container and motioned for him to come closer. “Hold those open for me,” she ordered, and stuffed one of the pillows down his front. “Now turn.” She added another pillow to his back.

“Ooh, Santa.” Carly patted Joe on his plumped-up rump. “You’ve got more junk in the trunk than Sophie here.”

Sophie sneezed, in offense or agreement, Carly wasn’t sure. She squatted down to give the pitbull a scratch. “Hopefully someone will be taking your cute chonky butt home for the holidays.”

Joe’s dark eyes shifted to the row of dogs she’d decked out in holiday gear. “How many do you think will get adopted tonight?”

“If we could match all of them, it would be a Christmas miracle. That’s why Charlie came up with the idea for Santa Paws,” Carly said, a bittersweet ache squeezing her heart. “Kids would sit on his lap and tell him what they wished for in a dog, and he’d do his best to pair them with the right one. Then they’d pose with their new pet for the first picture together as a family.”

“Are you sure you want me to do this?” Joe adjusted his glasses. “I’ve never been very good with pets.”

“Nonsense.”

“It’s true,” he insisted. “You saw how Seamus, our family bird, treated me. He doesn’t like me.”

“Animals react to what they sense from you.” Carly eyed him for a moment, considering. “Maybe the real problem is that *you* dislike pets.”

“I don’t dislike them, it’s just that they’re so loud. And messy. They shed and poop and don’t wear pants.”

“You’d feel better if pets wore pants?”

Joe sniffed. “I don’t think it’s an unreasonable request.”

A burst of laughter exploded from Carly as she tried to imagine wrestling some of the rowdier dogs at the shelter into a pair of pants. It felt good to laugh. Being with Joe felt good. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I.” He glanced down at himself. “Even if it means wearing this getup.”

“Ooh, I almost forgot...” Carly reached into the storage container and grabbed a snowy white beard.

“Is that really necessary?” Joe asked, looking around as if searching for an escape route.

“Does Rudolph have a red nose?” Carly challenged, cornering him and snapping the elastic around his head. “Of course, Santa needs a beard.” She fiddled with the straps, adjusting the fit. “Lift your chin.”

He did as she directed. “Is that mistletoe?”

Carly followed the line of his gaze to the ceiling where boughs of greenery had been hung. “Ah, yeah. I think it is.” She tried to keep her voice calm, even as her belly tightened, waves of hot and cold returning in a rush. “The florist you sent over must have put it up, she was here all morning, helping us decorate.”

“That sounds like Kat.” Joe made a face that was more affectionate than annoyed. “She’s my brother’s girlfriend and a hopeless romantic, though I can’t imagine there will be much kissing going on here tonight...right?”

“Not unless you count doggie smooches,” Carly chuckled nervously. Joe was standing so close to her, his mouth inches from hers, and in that moment, she realized she very much wanted him to kiss her.

What was wrong with her? He was here to help with the festival and her brother’s funeral service. How on earth could she be thinking about kissing him? Not that he would. Even with mistletoe as an excuse, he was too professional to cross that line.

Joe was too polite, too *nice* to be naughty.

CHAPTER 5

JOE

Standing with Carly under the mistletoe, Joe had the sudden urge to wrap her in his arms and plant his lips on hers. He shook himself. What was his problem? She was his client. She was grieving. He could not take advantage of her.

And yet, the way she was staring up at him, her green eyes as lush and inviting as her mouth...was it possible she *wanted* him to kiss her? He was on the verge of giving in, of stepping over that line he'd drawn in his mind, when something attacked his leg.

Joe jerked his attention away from Carly and glanced down in surprise. A small brown and black dog was humping his foot. "Excuse me, sir," Joe said to the creature molesting his leather dress loafer, "but I did not give my consent for such behavior."

"Walter!" Carly chided. "Sorry about that," she crouched down and tugged the dog off of Joe's leg. "This guy's a bit of a perv."

"Maybe he misunderstood the meaning of mistletoe," Joe suggested, feeling charitable to the animal for his timely interruption. Walter trotted over to another dog who was curled up minding its own business and proceeded to mount its head. "Or maybe he's just a perv."

"Knock it off, Walter." Carly clicked her tongue in warning. The randy beast looked over at her but kept up his bizarre assault.

"Leave poor Fiona alone." She shooed the deviant animal back into one of the cages. "Fiona is one of our most elderly rescues." Carly said, stroking the dog's wiry silver fur.

"Shame on you, bothering such a sweet old girl." Joe wagged a finger at Walter, who responded with a grin that was unrepentantly wicked. "That dog

has the naughtiest face I've ever seen."

Carly chuckled in amused agreement. "Walter boy is definitely on Santa's naughty list." She moved down the line of dogs, adjusting their costumes and securing them back in their kennels.

"Why are those two roommates?" Joe asked, watching as she settled two exceptionally large dogs together in the same cage.

"They're siblings." Carly gazed fondly at the pair. "That's Ziggy," she pointed at the livelier rust colored one, who was pacing the length of the kennel. "And this is Sven," she added, running a hand over the wheat colored one, who immediately rolled over and offered up his belly. Carly laughed and rubbed Sven's pale tummy. "They don't like to be apart. When they first arrived, they were put in different cages and cried all night." She gave Sven a final pat and exited the cage. "We're hoping to find a family who will adopt them both."

"It's good for siblings to stay together," Joe agreed. As much as he bickered and disagreed with his brother and sister, he loved Mick and Mary-Kate with everything he had and would do anything for them. Struck again by the weight of Carly's loss, Joe moved to stand near her while she locked the door, watching as Ziggy curled up next to Sven on the floor, the two brothers snuggling together.

Tenderness wound its way through Joe's chest. He'd told her he wasn't good with pets, and he wasn't. But he would do his best to help these animals, to help her. "Let's hope Santa Paws can make some holiday magic tonight."

It turned out to be a magical night, indeed. There had been a unique energy in the air all evening that seemed to infuse the event with something special. Joe wasn't superstitious, but he couldn't deny the feeling that they'd been watched over—guided, even—by a benevolent spirit.

If Carly's brother had been present in some way, he would have been very proud. Nearly every animal in the shelter had been adopted, and the few that were left had interested families who needed to check their apartment regulations first. One brave family had not only adopted Ziggy and Sven, but Walter too.

They'd finished the event with Charlie's memorial service, and Joe had surprised Carly with a special film made of recorded messages sent from as many of the families that had adopted from the shelter over the years as he'd been able to track down. Carly had been riveted, tears streaming down her cheeks as each family sent their love and shared memories of Charlie.

When the montage ended, she'd turned to him, her face a beacon of light. Joe had never seen her smile so wide. A rush of pleasure coursed through him at the thought that he'd played a part in making that smile happen.

He watched her now as she stood at the rescue center's entrance, bidding the last of the remaining guests good night. She was still wearing those ridiculous cat ears and tail. Joe followed that tail as it swished back and forth, his gaze trailing after Carly as she locked the front door and began to buzz around the room.

"I need to write thank you letters to all the businesses who donated, send follow-up emails to the families who adopted a pet today, and then check with..." her voice trailed off as she continued to mutter to herself, rattling off a list of tasks.

Joe wondered if this was how his siblings saw him when he was at work, a walking to-do list. It was true, he was constantly making task lists in his head and mentally checking things off. But tonight, his brain was strangely quiet, his mind clear of any task except one: spend time with Carly.

On her next pass across the room, Joe held out his hand, but she was so lost in her thoughts she walked right past him. He hurried after her, reaching down to grab her tail.

"Hey!" she yelped in surprise, whirling around.

Joe stumbled backward. "Oops," he said sheepishly.

"Did you just goose me?"

"I was trying to get your attention."

"Well, you succeeded." She propped her fists on her hips. "What was so important that you had to yank my tail out?"

"That part was an accident," he admitted and handed her back her tail, the bell tied to the end jingling merrily. "I was trying to tell you to take a break."

"What?" Carly gaped at him.

"You've had a really long day. All that stuff you were talking about doing can wait."

"Who are you?" She pierced him with her vivid green eyes. "What happened to the real Joe?"

“I’m serious, you need to relax.”

“Joseph O’Sullivan is telling *me* to relax?” She looked around in an exaggeratedly dazed fashion. “Did the earth stop spinning?” She clasped her chest in mock horror. “Did I break you?”

“Ha, ha, ha,” he grumbled.

“Don’t you mean ho, ho, ho?” she shot back, poking him in his padded belly.

Somehow, in the excitement of the evening, Joe had managed to forget he was dressed like Saint Nick. Something devilish possessed him. His gran would say he’d gotten a wild hair. Joe felt wild as he crossed to the plush chair he’d sat in to pose for photos earlier. He eased back into it and patted his lap. “Come tell me what you want for Christmas, Mrs. Claws.”

“I thought you already knew the answer to that, Santa Paws.” Carly pressed her lips together, but Joe caught the smile she was fighting to hold back.

“How would I know that?” he wondered, his breath hitching as she settled herself on his lap.

“Because Santa knows everything. Remember?” Her voice lifted in song, “He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake.”

“Are we talking about Santa, or one of those glittery vampires?”

Carly snickered. “You can be really funny, you know that?”

“Rarely on purpose,” he admitted.

She laughed again. “Well, it’s true. You have a great sense of humor, Joe. It’s just usually hidden under this.” She pulled her mouth into a cartoonish frown and waved a hand in a circle around her head.

“What are you doing?”

“Mimicking your grumpy face.”

“I do *not* make that face,” he harrumphed.

“Yeah, you do.” She tugged off his fluffy fake Santa beard and nodded as if in confirmation. “You’re making it right now.”

“I told you I can’t help it. It’s just what my face does.”

“Well, I happen to like it.” She leaned in and pressed a kiss to his bare cheek.

Her lips were cool against his heated skin. That beard had been freaking hot. It reminded Joe of what it felt like when he used to hide under one of gran’s thick crocheted blankets. Joe peered at her, perplexed. “You like my grumpy face?”

“I like *your* face, period.” She kissed his other cheek. “In fact,” she continued, lips hovering over his. “I like you.”

“Oh,” Joe rasped, at a loss for words.

“Oh?” She pressed closer and whispered in his ear, “Is that all you’ve got to say?”

He stifled a groan at the feel of her bottom shifting in his lap and the friction of her lips against his ear and struggled to gather his thoughts. “I could say I like you too, but—”

“But you don’t?”

“I do,” he insisted, brushing her hair away from her face, untangling a few strands that had gotten wrapped around one of her cat ears. “I like you very much.” He swallowed, trying to loosen the knot tightening in his throat. “The problem is I like you so much that I’m not sure *like* is the right word.”

“Oh.” Now it was her turn to respond with that single breathless syllable. Her eyes searched his, but she didn’t seem scared or revolted or even uncomfortable. Just curious...and maybe even hopeful?

Or was he the one that was hopeful, wanting there to be more between them and wishing she wanted the same. Even though Joe wasn’t sure it was prudent to keep talking—in fact, he knew it wasn’t—he decided to press on. “The word *like* doesn’t seem big enough to contain what I feel for you. I’m not sure what the right word is. I don’t think it’s love, either. It couldn’t be. Not yet. Not this soon. Oh God, I’m rambling.” He clamped his mouth shut.

She tilted her head, eyes dancing with mischief. “And you never ramble. Right?”

“Not usually. But I find myself doing a lot of things I don’t usually do when I’m with you.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“The old Joe would have said it was bad.”

“The *old* Joe?”

He nodded sagely. “BC. Before Carly.”

She giggled. “And now?”

“Now, it’s not bad. It’s just...” He searched for the right word and shrugged. “Different.”

“Maybe that’s because you’re different.”

“Maybe,” Joe allowed. He did feel different. “It’s a little scary, but I like who I am when I’m with you.”

“No one has ever said anything like that to me before.” The smile she

gave him then was so dazzling in its intensity, it could have topped a Christmas tree. “I don’t think I’ve ever met someone who made me feel the way you do.” She was quiet for a moment then, her verdant eyes pensive. “Is it wrong to be talking about this now? To have these feelings when...” she broke off and glanced toward the collection of photos that had been set up around the room. Memory boards in honor of her brother.

Joe pressed a palm to her cheek, his thumb gently wiping away the fresh tears that had begun to fall. “You’re allowed to hold more one than one feeling in your heart at the same time,” he said, talking to himself as much as her.

She sniffled. “At first, I was afraid to trust what I was feeling. Wasn’t sure if I craved spending time with you because of what I’d lost, or if there was something more.”

“I admit I was worried about the same thing myself.” Joe hesitated, thinking of that line he’d drawn in his mind. The professional one he’d always maintained. Until now. “You’re in a vulnerable place, and I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Carly’s laugh was dry. “I don’t think it’s possible for you to do that. You’re arrogant and bossy, but there’s not a selfish bone in your body. In the short time I’ve known you, I’ve seen how you put everyone else first: your job, your family...me. All your responsibilities.”

“You’re not a responsibility.”

“Aren’t I?” Carly slid off his lap. “Why did you agree to help with all of this?” She waved a hand at the remnants of the festival. “Any of this?” She gestured at his Santa suit.

Joe stood. “Because I wanted to.”

“Why?”

“Because...” he moved toward her and paused. He could say it was because she needed his help—because yes, he did feel it was his responsibility to offer help—but that wasn’t the truth, not all of it. He could have helped in other ways, ways that didn’t involve spending so much time together, didn’t involve him giving in to her every whim, right down to the ridiculous costume he was currently wearing.

The simple fact of the matter was he liked giving in to her whims. Joe was quickly realizing there pretty much wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do to see her smile. To make her happy.

“I didn’t come here tonight to help you out of some sense of

responsibility,” he said, “I wanted to do it. I like spending time with you.” There. That was the truth. Well, part of the truth. And what he’d said before was true, too. What he felt for Carly was more than like.

But was it love? Joe thought it could be. If given enough time and space...

No.

He wasn’t going to plot out a timeline for falling in love. If it happened—if it was happening—he was just going to let it. Yes, he, Joseph O’Sullivan, who never did anything without a plan, who always looked both ways three times before crossing the street was going to close his eyes and leap. He was going to let go and allow himself to fall.

Starting now.

“When I’m with you, I feel like I can never get enough,” he confessed. “I always want more.”

“If you want more of me, I’m right here.” Her eyes held his for a moment before she glanced up and stepped a few paces to the left. “Actually, right here,” she amended, positioning herself under the mistletoe. “Or are you too polite to kiss me?”

Joe caught the challenge in her voice. Earlier, she’d joked that she thought she’d broken him, but if anything, she’d fixed him. Not that he’d been broken, exactly, but he’d been too uptight. Too rigid. Carly had encouraged him to let go and loosen up. To bend, not break.

Well, this was him bending.

Or trying to, anyway. Except his Santa padding kept getting in the way. Literally. Every time he bent forward to kiss her, he bumped into her with his padding. Joe wrestled with the costume, pulling the pillows out of his pants and tossing them aside.

“Let’s try that again,” he growled, need and frustration and impatience clawing at him as he reached for her. Joe didn’t just cross the line, he stampeded through it. But once he had her in his arms, once he was touching her, he got himself in check. When he finally kissed her, he kept it gentle, pressing his lips softly to hers at first, giving her time to change her mind.

But this was Carly, and he should have known she wouldn’t hesitate. She dove headfirst into the deep end, gripping Joe by the suspenders and pulling him even closer, until her body was flush against his, warm and solid and real. Her lips parted and Joe accepted the invitation immediately, his tongue stroking into her mouth with hungry ferocity.

When they eventually broke apart, chests heaving, Joe peered down at her and said, “You never told me what you wanted for Christmas.”

She hesitated. “I’m not sure you want to know.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re so nice.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” He was more curious than ever now. “Just tell me,” Joe demanded. “Please,” he couldn’t help adding because she was right. He was a nice guy. Manners were built into his DNA. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t give her...whatever it was she wanted.

“Okay, if you insist.” She went up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear.

Joe shivered, picturing what she described.

“Is that too naughty for you?”

Joe flashed her a wicked grin worthy of Walter. “You know what they say about nice guys, right?”

But in case she didn’t understand his meaning, he decided it would be best to show her.

After all, it was what a nice guy would do.

You’re invited to spend more time with the O’Sullivan family in [TOO WRONG TO BE RIGHT](#), available now in print, digital, and audio!

ABOUT MELONIE JOHNSON

USA Today bestselling author Melonie Johnson—aka #thewritinglush—enjoys sipping cocktails that start with the letter m. Declared a “writer to watch” by Kirkus and a “fizzy, engrossing new voice” by Entertainment Weekly, her smart funny contemporary romances include the romantic comedies Too Wrong to be Right and Too Good to Be Real, as well as her award-winning Sometimes in Love debut series Getting Hot with the Scot, Smitten by the Brit, and Once Upon a Bad Boy. Her stories have been featured in Cosmopolitan and Woman's World, selected as Amazon Best Books of the month, and appeared on many most anticipated romance lists, including Goodreads, BuzzFeed, and BookBub. She lives in Chicagoland with her husband and their two redhead daughters. A former high school English and Theatre teacher, Melonie now spends her days in her Star Wars office, dreaming up meet cutes. Find out more about Melonie [here](#).

Sign up for Melonie’s newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

[TOO WRONG TO BE RIGHT](#)
[TOO GOOD TO BE REAL](#)

Sometimes in Love
[GETTING HOT WITH THE SCOT](#)
[SMITTEN BY THE BRIT](#)
[ONCE UPON A BAD BOY](#)



**MAKE ME BEG: A ROYAL RE-
DO SECOND CHANCE
ROMANCE**

TAWDRA KANDLE

ABOUT MAKE ME BEG

Amidst the merriment of the Cause for the Paws Benefit Winter Festival, Princess Daisy comes face-to-face with her ex, stirring memories of their painful past. As the holiday magic weaves its spell, will this unexpected reunion lead them back into each other's arms just in time for Christmas?

CHAPTER 1

“I cannot believe you coerced me into this.”

Sitting across from me, my brother Nicky—better known to the world at large as Prince Nicholas of Great Britain—grinned unrepentantly as I glared at him.

“Coerced is such an ugly word, Daisy. I prefer to think of it as . . . offered you an incentive to do something good.”

I kicked off my soft leather ballet flats and bent my knees, curling my feet beneath me in the comfortable black and white wing chair. Nicky and his wife Kyra had tried out several different homes in various parts of the USA after they’d left England, but just last month, they’d finally settled into a lovely home outside of Philadelphia. The sitting room where I was visiting with my brother looked over a garden that I imagined was breathtaking when it wasn’t covered in a light dusting of early December snow.

Turning my attention back to Nicky, I sighed. “I don’t generally need an incentive to do good, brother mine. It’s sort of what we’ve been raised to do, isn’t it?”

“True,” Nicky agreed. “But how often do you have the opportunity to combine philanthropy with a charming holiday event—as well as a long-overdue visit to your beloved brother and his family?”

“I’ll agree with you on the family part, but I think I’ll have to reserve judgement on the, ah—what did you call it? The charming holiday event.” I wrinkled my nose. “Dogs, Nicky? All of our lives, we Westhamptons have been the one holdout among the larger Royal Family. We don’t do dogs. Yes, Granny had her corgis—” I shuddered slightly, recalling the yippy little beasts that had chased me from the time I was able to walk. “And Auntie

Margo had her Spaniels. The current King and Queen seem partial to Jack Russell terriers.” I paused, musing. “Am I remembering correctly that Granny told us that George V had Labradors?”

Nicky shrugged. “That sounds right. Great-Grandpapa was a keen shooter, and those dogs are excellent birders.”

“Ick.” I shook my head. “Well, anyway. As I was saying. . . Mama and Papa, Alex, you and me—we’ve managed to avoid a canine affiliation for all these years. Why on earth would you want to ruin that record now?”

“Well—” Nicky’s mouth twisted slightly. “It was a reciprocal deal, and not entirely my fault. Kyra was introduced to a woman at an Independence Day party her grandmother hosted this year. Andrea is her name—and she was very enthusiastic about Ky’s work with Save Our Soil.”

I nodded. I was well acquainted with my sister-in-law’s passion for sustainable food production, which included protecting the soil in which we grow our crops. She’d launched this new project—Save Our Soil, or SOS—shortly after she and Nicky moved to America.

“Andrea offered to do some footwork for Kyra’s launch event. She rallied an incredible number of businesses to support SOS and even convinced some of the local politicians to attend.” My brother paused. “Consequently, when Andrea asked Kyra if she would be interested in making an appearance at *her* pet project—you’ll pardon the pun—Ky felt she had no choice but to say yes.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That’s an excellent explanation for why *you* and your wife are participating in the dog show, but I haven’t yet heard any reason for *my* presence to be required.”

“It’s not a dog show. It’s a winter festival that happens to have a particularly canine theme.”

“*Cause for the Paws.*” I snorted softly. “Oh, Nicky, how low I’ve sunk.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Daisy.” Nicky straightened. “This is a really excellent charity. Do you know how many dogs are in shelters or foster homes? And the compassionate people who offer that foster care often do so at significant personal cost. Andrea’s group raises funds to help support the shelters and the foster system. It’s a worthwhile cause, I promise you.”

“Well.” I crossed my arms. “I suppose that’s true. But I still don’t understand why I couldn’t . . . you know, write a check or sponsor a foster home. Why did I need to fly all the way over here and make an appearance?”

My brother’s smile was beatific. “Because you lost the bet.”

“Arggggh!” I flung myself back in the chair. “That damn bet. Honestly, Nicky, what sort of madman forces his sister to cross the ocean for a dog—” I stopped and held up my hand. “Excuse me, for a winter festival benefit for shelter and foster dogs? You won that damned bet fair and square, but you didn’t have to force the issue.”

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe the bet wasn’t only about this weekend’s benefit, Daisy?” Nicky’s face lost its teasing humor. “Did you think that maybe your family misses you and wished you would come to see us? Ky, the children and I have been here in America for over a year, and you haven’t visited once.”

I dropped my gaze to the brightly colored, intricately woven rug between us. “I know. I’m sorry. It’s just been . . .” I tossed up both hands. “Such a year. All of the changes we’ve been going through—I had to move, Nicky.” I leaned forward and gave him the big, imploring little-sister eyes that had almost always gotten me my own way in the past. “I had to give up my sweet little cottage and move back in with our *parents*. I had to go to all of the charities and organizations I’ve represented for years—the ones for which I’ve been patron—and ask if anyone could—you know.” I sighed. “Hire me.”

“Getting a job is not exactly shameful, Daisy.” Nicky steepled his fingers and regarded me fondly, if with a slight tinge of exasperation. “Some might find it admirable.”

“I do. You know I do.” My mouth twisted. “It’s only that I had fooled myself into believing that I brought some sort of value to these organizations beyond my name and my title. But when I approached them to ask about a paying position, pointing out that with such a role, I could do even more for them, very few were interested in that opportunity.”

“But you did find a job.” My big brother was ever encouraging, and I loved him for it, even as I deplored that he felt he had to be my cheerleader. “You’re working for that photo gallery now. Isn’t being a public relations rep for an arts-based company exactly what you wanted?”

“It is,” I acknowledged with only a slight grimace. “But I’m not so much working the PR for Progressive Arts Cooperative as I am acting as their public face. They want me to attend all of their exhibit openings and other events as Princess Daisy, not as Daisy Mountbatten-Windsor, their hard-working PR rep. I think they’re shocked—and maybe still a little skeptical—that I go into my office every day to work.”

“Ah.” Nicky nodded slowly. “I see. Well, Daisy, it sounds to me as

though you need to prove yourself to them, and the only way to do that is through steady consistency. Sometimes people only believe what you *show* them, not what you tell them.”

I remembered how hard my brother had struggled in earlier years to prove to *his* favorite causes that he could be more than simply a figurehead to raise funds. It had taken careful and methodical work to convince the people who ran No Hungry Child and Waste Not that Nicky wasn’t the playboy prince the press liked to put on the front pages of the tabloids. He knew what he was talking about, and his advice was sage.

“I know you’re right,” I answered him now. “Still, it’s exhausting, isn’t it? Take this trip, for example. When I told Chanda, who runs the Progressive Arts Cooperative and for all intents and purposes is my boss, that I was coming over here to make an appearance at a dog—ahhh, at a very important winter festival benefit—” I amended quickly, covering my not-so-accidental misspeak with a cheeky smirk—“she didn’t give me any difficulty about missing nearly two weeks of work. No, instead she was delighted. And she immediately contacted the organizers to arrange a sponsorship so that now I’m here in an official capacity.” I dropped my head, one hand covering my eyes. “They’re sending one of their photographers, and they’re planning to include the photos in a special exhibit. Chanda will probably call it something like *Our Progressive Princess Doing Good Works* or some such nonsense.”

“Andrea told us that Cause for the Paws really appreciated the sponsorship,” my brother noted helpfully. “And it’s not such a bad thing, is it, Daisy? You’re still making a difference in the world—for the better. You’re doing the sort of work that Granny brought us up to love.” He waited a beat before adding, “Just think if some of the photos for the show featured you with a whole gaggle of corgis. Granny would be delighted.”

I scowled ferociously.

“Anyway.” Nicky glanced at his smart watch and sighed. “It’s nearly time for the children to swarm us. We’ve kept your visit a surprise because Alice would have been beside herself for days, if not weeks, knowing that you were coming here. And as Duncan imitates his sister in just about everything, we would have had two small tornados on our hands.”

“I can’t wait to see them.” That much was true. Hanging out with dogs and being used as a pretty face for the company that was meant to value my work more than my position might have felt humiliating, but my brother wasn’t wrong . . . this visit to his family was long over-due.

And no matter how many smiles I'd have to fake at the festival, I was determined to make the best of it all.

CHAPTER 2

“**T**his is like the set of one of those greeting card Christmas movies.”

I glanced at my sister-in-law and beloved friend, Kyra. She was dressed for the weather in an oversized blue parka, a chunky knit stocking cap with a ridiculous pom-pom on the end, and matching mittens. Her cheeks were rosy, and although I couldn't see her eyes behind the dark sunglasses she wore, I was certain they were dancing.

“Remind me about those.” There were certain Americanisms—turns of phrase, activities and pastimes that Kyra had brought with her into our family when she'd married my brother. Some of them I understood, but others remained a mystery.

“Well, you know, this greeting card company—they're one of the most famous—has a channel that shows romance movies exclusively,” Kyra explained. “The holiday ones tend to be fan favorites. They're mostly set in small towns or winter resorts, and the plot usually includes a woman from the big city who comes back to her hometown and finds a second-chance at love with the man she'd left behind—who is usually, you know, like a farmer or a lumberjack or something.” She sighed happily. “They can be corny, but this time of year, I have to admit, I love watching them.”

“Ah.” I clasped my leather-gloved hands behind my back and surveyed our surroundings. We stood on the corner of Main Street in Ridgewood, Pennsylvania, deep in the heart of the Poconos. This was the site of the Cause for the Paws Benefit Winter Festival. The event was scheduled to kick off tonight with a tree-lighting ceremony and then would run through the weekend.

The entire small town of Ridgewood was covered in snow, though the

sidewalks had been shoveled and the streets were cleared. Festive evergreen boughs were strung across the thoroughfare and framed the storefront windows. Holiday songs played brightly, piped through speakers that were disguised as giant snowdrifts.

“Andrea and her team really go above and beyond with the benefit,” Kyra remarked. “She told me that this whole festival began as a party on a single afternoon, but they’ve had so much interest and excitement that the organization expanded to three nights and two days. Nearly all of the businesses in town participate. Local authors do readings at the bookstore, the restaurants serve special meals—one does a Santa Claus tea for the kids, and that’s very popular.”

“And all of the proceeds go to the cause?” My eyes went wide. “That’s incredible.”

“The donations from this weekend help keep them running the rest of the year,” Kyra agreed. “But it’s not totally one-sided. The festival brings such a huge influx of visitors that everyone benefits. The local inns, the little novelty shops . . . all of these people and their dogs are walking the streets, buying stuff, eating food—and not only that, they’re snapping pictures and sharing on social media so that more tourists discover Ridgewood.”

“Speaking of local inns, have you heard anything from my brother?” I inquired. “He was meant to be organizing our check-in this afternoon, wasn’t he?”

“He was, and he did.” Kyra checked her phone. “Your luggage has been left in cabin number twelve, which for this weekend has been rechristened The Columbia Inn.” At my questioning expression, she explained, “They renamed all of the cabins after hotels or resorts from holiday movies. Yours is the one from *White Christmas*. Nicky, the kids and I are in the Grand Hotel Pupp from *The Last Holiday*.”

“What fun.” I kept from rolling my eyes, but just barely. “I appreciate Nicky taking care of that for me.”

“No problem,” she replied cheerfully. “I’m going to collect the children from him now. There’s a snowman building competition put on by the town council. Sort of a warm-up for the other events of the weekend. Care to join us?”

“I wish I could.” I grimaced. “Chanda texted me that I must meet the photographer at the main event space. She wants us to set up a schedule for the weekend so that we can be sure to capture enough pictures to satisfy her.”

“I thought the photographer was just here to snap candid shots of you during the benefit.” Kyra raised one eyebrow. “Are you doing a photo shoot, too?”

“Apparently.” I gave my head a little shake. “Chanda has these grand ideas, you know. . . I think she believes that having me associated with her company gives it some sort of prestige. The show that she’s proposed—the one with photos from this weekend—she wants to use it to make a name for the gallery.”

My sister-in-law tilted her head. “At your expense?”

I lifted one shoulder, frowning slightly. “I don’t know, Ky. Nicky says that if I want to convince Chanda I’m serious about this job, I have to be consistent and accommodating. So for now, at least, I’m playing along with whatever she wants. Even if it means that I feel like a show dog.” I snorted softly. “Which I suppose means that this weekend at least, I’m in the right place.”

“Oh, Daisy, no show dogs here!” Kyra laughed. “This event is all about mutts and strays and other pups who wouldn’t be caught dead prancing inside a ring for judges.”

“That’s exactly how I feel sometimes,” I admitted. “Like a dog who’s been prepped and dressed to impress people I don’t even know.”

Kyra regarded me steadily for a long, silent moment. “But you’re not that at all, Daisy, and you never were. As long as I’ve known you, you’ve always been wholly and unapologetically yourself. You’re fun and passionate—and real.” She leaned over to kiss my cheek. “It’s just one of the many reasons why we all love you.”

“Maybe once upon a time. But now . . .” I shook my head and then squared my shoulders and squeezed Kyra’s arm. “Thank you, my bonus sister, for your sweet words. I promise, I’m all right. But I must excuse myself so I’m not late meeting the photographer.” I winked. “You know, it doesn’t do for Princess Daisy to be tardy.”

My sister-in-law giggled, and I waved to her over my shoulder as I picked my way through the snow to cross the street.

The GPS on my phone led me to a large stone building with a cornerstone

that bore the year 1878. The Hotel Ridgewood dominated this end of the street. It was bedecked for the holidays, of course, with a lit evergreen tree in both its front windows and an enormous fresh holly wreath on the impressive oak double doors.

The doorman nodded to me as he held open one of those doors, and the expression of admiration in his eyes warmed me more than the gust of heated air in the cozy lobby.

The desk clerk pointed me in the direction of the grand ballroom. As I walked that way, the heels of my boots clicking on the polished wood floor, I noted absently how pleasant it was that here in the United States, I could move about without anyone really recognizing me. While I wasn't totally incognito, most Americans tended not to know minor British royals like me by sight.

Even if the clerk hadn't given me detailed instructions on how to reach the ballroom, I would have known it by the bustle of activity surrounding the doorway. People wearing a wide range of Christmas clothing—from gaudy sweaters to themed sweatshirts to more understated turtlenecks or accent scarves—scurried in and out, carrying boxes and signs and all manner of holiday decorations. Music and chatter filled the air.

No one paid any attention to me as I slipped inside and glanced around. A group was gathered on the stage at the far end of the room, listening raptly to a woman with a large clipboard giving them some sort of instruction.

“Hey, are you here to volunteer for tonight's dinner or tomorrow night's auction?” A harried young man I estimated to be in his late teens approached me. I noticed that he too was holding a clipboard identical to the one the woman on the stage had.

“Ah . . .” I bit my lip. “Neither, actually. Or both, I suppose. But I'm not a volunteer. Not really. I was meant to meet someone here.”

“Oh—are you Daisy?” He cocked his head. “Then the guy you're looking for is over there by the table in the corner. He was asking for you.”

I followed the direction of his pointed finger, toward the opposite end of the ballroom from the stage. The lights there were dim, but I could see a tall figure bent over a camera.

“Thanks.” I made my way across the floor, skirting the many round tables that were in the process of being set for this evening's festivities. Chanda had let me know that the photographer she'd assigned originally had canceled at the last minute, and she'd had to scramble to find a substitute—someone I

didn't know.

Yet the closer I drew to the man, the more I began to suspect that I did, in fact, know him. And when he turned toward me at the sound of my approaching steps, my hunch was confirmed.

"Roc?"

He regarded me steadily with green eyes that were devoid of expression.

"Hello, Your Royal Highness."

"What are you doing here?" I blurted out the first words that popped into my mind, even though the answer was obvious.

Roc smirked. "Not to demand alimony, if that's what you're thinking, princess. I'm here strictly in a professional role. I was hired to snap photos of you in this . . ." He spread his free hand, the one without the camera. "Winter wonderland, as it were."

My heart was pounding, and my mouth was dry. "Of all the photographers in the world, you're the one Chanda hired? And you knew it was me, and you took the job? Why on earth would you do that?"

He shrugged. "It was a job, and I happened to be in the neighborhood. And why wouldn't I take it? I can't think of a single reason." His green eyes, still so bright and vivid, challenged me to offer a reply.

Dozens of responses danced on my tongue. *Because we were married. Because we haven't seen each other since the night after we eloped. Because you broke my heart and changed who I was into who I am now.*

But instead, I shook my head slowly. "No. Nor can I." Taking a deep breath, I called upon all of my reserves as a Princess of Great Britain, Ireland and Wales, as a granddaughter of Her Late Majesty Elizabeth II. I stood a little taller. "Right, then. Would you like to work out a schedule for this weekend?"

Roc set down his camera on the table. "I've got the list of events where you're committed to be—the tree lighting, puppy yoga, the dog walking race, and the auction. All you have to do is whatever is required by your commitment to the benefit. I'll show up and take pictures." He crossed his arms, and the sleeve of his thermal shirt rode up a bit, revealing a forearm that was still covered in ink. I remembered suddenly how incredibly sexy I'd found his two full sleeves the first time I'd seen him strip off his shirt . . .

"Does that work for you, then?" He cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Ah—" My brow knit. "Of course. The candid photos at each event, yes."

"And the photo shoot just ahead of the auction tomorrow night?"

I had missed that part. “Oh. Yes, definitely. I’ll be here . . . an hour ahead of time? Is that long enough?”

“Should be more than.” His lip curled. “That’s all. If anything changes, I’ll be in touch.”

“I—” I took one step backward. “What if I need to contact you? I don’t have your number.”

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t need it. You just . . . do your thing. Your royal princess thing, that is. And I’ll be where I’m meant to be. You can simply forget about me.” He paused before adding, “You’re good at that, after all.”

The stinging words hit me deep in the heart, in the spot where Roc had intended, I was certain. Without giving him the benefit of a response, I turned my back and left.

As he’d noted, it was something I was good at doing.

CHAPTER 3

“O h. My. God.”

Kyra’s mouth dropped open, and she sagged against the arm of the loveseat, holding her wine goblet carefully so that the Cabernet didn’t spill.

“I know.” I sat across from her in an overstuffed chair covered in chintz. “I couldn’t quite believe it. I mean, I never even thought that he might . . . that Chanda might hire *him* to shoot this event.”

Kyra took a sip of her wine and then set it down on the end table. “Have you seen him at all since . . . well, since that night? Since you came back to London, and all of us were at your parents’ apartment at Kensington, right after you eloped?”

I treated my sister-in-law to a long, wry gaze. “I think I recall that evening fairly clearly, Ky. But thanks for the run-down. And no, I hadn’t seen Roc since that night.”

She nodded. “I assumed not. You never mentioned anything about him. But that whole time is a little bit of a blur for me.”

I could understand that. Shortly after one of the most uncomfortable nights of my life—the night that I’d had to face my entire family and explain why I had impulsively run away to marry a man I’d only just met—Kyra’s beloved grandfather, a man who was adored by his family and friends, had died suddenly. Consequently, during those days when I was having difficult conversations with my parents and an army of Palace suits, Kyra had been here in the States, saying goodbye to Handsome.

“What was there to say?” I shrugged. “It was a mistake. The Palace took care of the annulment, and then it was as though it had never happened.”

“But it did happen, Daisy.” Kyra bent forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “You got married. You made that decision, and then everyone told you it was wrong, and within a few weeks, you weren’t married anymore. You must have felt *something*. You had to have been angry.”

“It wouldn’t have done any good,” I returned. “You’ve been in the family long enough to know that, Kyra. I married someone outside the church, without asking Granny’s permission.”

“I never understood how it happened.” She sat back again, her gaze resting on me thoughtfully. “You met Roc at a house party, and then you ran off to Gretna Green. At the time, I remember, Nicky and Alex kind of shook their heads and said it was just Daisy being Daisy. You know, you were young and a little . . . wild.”

“Maybe I was.” I traced a pattern in the chintz on my chair. “But Roc was . . . more than that. It was something—” I broke off as I felt emotion rise. “I’d never experienced anything like it.”

Kyra didn’t say anything, and I went on, sensing she knew I would elaborate.

“That night—it was the first time we were officially introduced to each other. But it wasn’t actually the first time we’d met. We had attended a few of the same house parties over the months leading up to that one, and we had . . . you know, flirted a bit. One evening, we were both out in the gardens of a grand house in Surrey, and we began talking about the meaning of life. What it meant to be a good person, what sort of responsibilities we had to the larger world. I remember that it was dark, and we couldn’t see each other, and I thought that made it easier to be honest and real.”

“I can understand that. It’s a sort of anonymity.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “We sat there on the grass in that garden until nearly sunrise, and I thought that if I could spend the rest of my days having conversations like that, I could be happy. At that point, we hadn’t even exchanged names, though I’m sure he was aware of who I was, and I knew he was a photographer.”

“But you had no idea that he was actually the son of the Marquis of Rockingham?” Kyra asked.

“Oh, none at all,” I assured her. “Some time later, I heard people call him Roc, but I assumed it was a nickname. When we met through Cassa—when she introduced us—he told me that his name was Griffin. Which it is, of course. He said—” I couldn’t help smiling as I remembered. “He said,

‘People call me Roc because of my last name, but you should know that I’m actually Griffin. You’ll need to use that name when you marry me.’”

Kyra gave a small gasp. “He actually said that to you?”

“He did.” I nodded. “And then he took my hand, and he never let go the rest of the evening. We sat together in a corner, talking. We went for a walk in the gardens. He told me that he’d never met anyone like me, someone who understood him and spoke the same language. He said that he didn’t believe in meaningless hook-ups, that he craved something real and lasting—and then he asked if I would marry him, and Kyra, I can’t explain it to you, but it felt like the most natural thing in the world to say yes.”

“Love at first sight,” she murmured. “Or perhaps not first sight, but first introduction. How romantic, Daisy. And yet—” She pressed her lips together. “You must have wondered why he was so eager for a quick wedding. Didn’t you? Didn’t it worry you at all that he was only pushing for marriage because of who you were?”

“Of course, I wondered.” I fisted my hands in my lap. “I told him that I couldn’t do anything without Granny’s permission. He accepted that and said only we should have some sort of binding ceremony to promise ourselves to each other. But then . . .” I closed my eyes. “He kissed me, and suddenly, I wanted to marry him. I wanted to belong to him, Ky, and I wanted him to belong to me. So I told him we should go to Gretna Green. And we did.”

I remembered our sweet, simple marriage service so clearly. Roc had held my hands and gazed steadily into my face as we’d both repeated the ageless vows, promising to love and cherish each other until we were parted by death.

And then we had slipped away together into the tiny room at a local inn, where we’d consummated our marriage . . . many times over. It had been the most beautiful, intimate and soul-jarring experience of my life, before or since.

“Well.” Kyra picked up her wine glass again. “What are you going to do this weekend, Daisy? Will you call Chanda and ask her to send someone else?”

I shook my head right away. “No. For one thing, it’s too late, and for another, I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing that him being here . . . has shaken me. He was rude to me this afternoon, Ky. Mocking and condescending, as though he was angry with me. I can’t imagine why he would be, unless marrying me really was about some sort of power trip or a

pay day for him, and the annulment crushed those possibilities. But given who he is, and how well he's done over these last six years, I can't understand why it would matter to him anymore. Why *I* would matter."

"Did you ever think, darling Daisy, that it was real for Roc, too?" Kyra leaned across the space between us and touched my hand. "You know, you really are quite beautiful, and you have a sparkling personality to match. Maybe he fell in love with you, and then his heart broke when he was forced to end the marriage."

"No one forced him," I objected. "He could have put up a fight. If he'd stood by me, if he had shown any resistance at all, I would have been able to —" I clamped my mouth shut.

"You would have fought the annulment?" Kyra finished my sentence. "Really, Daisy? You would have gone against the Queen's wishes, not to mention your own parents' objections—and battled all of those courtiers who work at the Palace?"

"Well." I crossed my arms over my chest. "I told him that just because we had to give in on the annulment didn't mean we couldn't be together. But he never spoke to me again. He never called, never reached out—and I knew then that I didn't mean anything to him. He couldn't have treated me like that if he truly loved me."

"Oh, Daisy." Kyra let her head fall back against the chair. "Do you recall what your brother did when we were dating, and he got it into his head that being with him was not in my best interest? Do you remember how miserable he made both of us over those long months after he pushed me away? And do you doubt that Nicky loves me madly?"

"I don't doubt it at all," I answered. "And yes, I remember. But eventually, he fixed it. Roc has had much longer than a few months to make an overture to me, and he never has."

"But you didn't know each other very well." Kyra sounded tentative, as though she didn't want to insult or hurt me. "Daisy, I don't deny the existence of love that ignites quickly. And sometimes, that sort of love can continue to burn for years. Decades, even. But it needs nurturing, and time, and attention. Do you think it's possible that even if Roc had strong feelings for you, those feelings didn't have a chance to blossom and grow?"

"You're mixing your metaphors," I responded tartly. "And while I take your point, Kyra, it doesn't matter. None of this does. What happened between Griffin, the younger son of the Marquis of Rockingham, and me six

years ago is in the past. I only need to get through this weekend, and then I won't have to see him again—or even think of him again.”

But even as I said the words, I knew they were mostly lies and bravado.

CHAPTER 4

“I wish someone would explain to me about puppy yoga and how it plays a part in fundraising this weekend.”

I stood in the small vestibule of the Ridgewood Yoga Studio with Nicky and a number of other men and women, awaiting the start of Puppy Yoga, part of the Paws for a Cause weekend festivities.

My brother chuckled as he unwound a long wool scarf from around his neck. “I imagine it’s something like goat yoga, only with young dogs. But I can’t be certain. Contrary to multiple press reports, I have not become a devotee of yoga and the like since our move to the States.”

I winced. British newspapers and other media outlets hadn’t always been kind to my brother and his family since they’d made the decision to live primarily in the US. Despite what was rumored, the entire Royal Family supported Nicky and Kyra’s choice. It made sense; since Granny’s death and the ascension of her son, our uncle, the Palace had shifted focus—and funds—to the main branch, which no longer included grandchildren of the late monarch.

But some tabloids had spun stories of what they termed the new LA lifestyle of Prince Nicholas. That was wrong on so many levels; for one thing, my brother’s passion and focus hadn’t changed since their move, and for another, they didn’t even live on the West coast. But maybe those finer points didn’t matter to the average Briton, eager to consume whatever news the papers served.

“Well.” I zipped up my fleece over my yoga pants and tank. The outer room of the small yoga studio was chilly, since the door let in a gust of cold air each time it opened. “I’ve never done goat yoga, either, so that doesn’t

help me much. And you still haven't explained how this raises money."

Nicky's expression was slightly pained. "Ah, as I understand it, the studio sold a limited number of spaces to attend this class . . . and they called it Puppy Yoga with the Princess."

"Oh, bloody hell." I rolled my eyes. "Are you serious, Nicky? Why did you allow this to happen?"

He had the good grace to look slightly abashed. "It was done before I could stop it. They'd already sold spots in the class by the time I knew of it." He hesitated. "But try not to worry. As I understand it, the people who paid to be here invested a fairly hefty sum of cash. They probably won't approach you—they just want to be able to say they did yoga with a princess."

"That doesn't help," I hissed. "I can't imagine what could make me more uncomfortable than twisting my body into various unnatural positions in front of gawking strangers."

The door to the yoga studio opened just then, and Roc stepped inside, pausing to stomp the snow off his ancient leather boots. I felt his eyes on me, knew the heat of his gaze as it traveled slowly down my body, clad only in form-fitting yoga pants and my snug fleece jacket. He stood still for a long moment, not bothering to hide his attention. To my own credit, I didn't flinch or look away until he'd moved from the door.

"I stand corrected," I murmured to my brother. "It turns out this *can* be even more uncomfortable."

Nicky followed my eyes. "Shit. I'm sorry, Daisy. Ky told me that he was here, that you didn't know he was coming." He frowned, a line forming between his eyes. "Would you like me to ask him to leave?"

"No." I shook my head. "He's got a job to do, and apparently, so do I. I assume we can both be professional." I hoped that I appeared to be as cool and confident as I sounded.

"If you're sure." Nicky's tone was dubious. "I have to collect Duncan from Kyra so that she and Alice can go to the hotel spa and have pedicures or something like that."

"Pedicures?" I popped my hands onto my hips, mock-glaring at my brother. "Why am I doing yoga with dogs while your wife and daughter are off getting pampered?"

"Ahhh . . . that's one question I'm not going to touch." Nicky winked at me as he pulled on his gloves. "Have fun with the pups, darling. And if you need me—" He glanced toward Roc. "I'm only a phone call away."

"I'll be fine. Go get your son and give your wife a few moments of peace." I watched Nicky slip out the door. Once he was gone, I turned around and marched myself over to Roc.

"Good morning." I lifted my chin. "I thought we should discuss how this is going to work."

He lifted one eyebrow—and suddenly, I noticed that the brow was no longer pierced as it had been six years ago. I had a very clear memory of my lips on that piercing as my husky voice murmured how hot it was . . .

"I assume you mean the class." His voice was deep and slightly mocking, just as it had been the day before. "As I told you yesterday, just pretend that I'm not here. Behave as naturally as you are able . . . Your Royal Highness."

I scowled. "Why must you call me that?"

"It's your title, isn't it? And it's proper, isn't it, that someone like me uses your title?" One side of his mouth curled. "I want to make sure I'm being proper."

"I don't use it. Not in my everyday life, anyway. I would appreciate it if you could . . . stop."

"Of course. *Ma'am*." He offered me a smile that was toothy and so clearly phony that I wanted to scream.

"Roc, I swear to God—"

"Attention!" A petite woman with gorgeous long white hair stood in the doorway to the studio, and I turned my head as she clapped her hands twice. "Those of you who have signed up for today's class with our special guests—and by guests, I mean our four-legged friends—please come join me in here and find your place on a mat."

I swallowed hard and gave Roc my back as I joined the others making their way into the large, airy room. I was glad to note that it was slightly warmer in here, as small heaters had been set up along the walls.

"Thank you for choosing to be part of this class today." The same woman who'd summoned us into the room was apparently the teacher. She stood on her own mat, beaming at us. "Yoga is a space for each of us to find what we need. Some of us may need peace. Others might be looking for challenge." Her smile broadened. "But I think we can safely say that all of us need . . . puppies!"

The doors opened again, admitting more people. But these folks weren't dressed for yoga class—and each of them carried in their arms a sweet, adorable puppy. Even I, who was clearly on the fence about dogs, found

myself melting at the sight of those furry bodies and eager, loving eyes.

“Now our guidelines here for puppy yoga are fairly simple,” the teacher went on, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the chorus of oooohs and ahhhhs of people cooing over the pups. “We’ll go ahead and run this class as normal while the puppies wander around. If this goes as it usually does, some of our special guest canines will snuggle up and snooze, while others will be very playful. A few might nip, but they won’t hurt you.” She beamed at us. “I’ll remind you that all of the puppies in class today are from local foster homes and are available for adoption—so if one steals your heart, be sure to speak to a volunteer when we’re finished.”

This wasn’t my first yoga class. I’d attended one regularly with my friend Cassa when I was much younger, and then more recently, I’d tagged along with my sister Alexandra now and then. I was familiar with the poses, and I found the teacher here easy to follow.

A tiny roly-poly ball of satiny brown fur ambled my way and plopped down on the end of my mat. His huge eyes watched me curiously as I stood in warrior pose, my arms stretched out.

“Hello, cutie,” I whispered, unable to hide my smile. The puppy cocked his head and wagged his short tail. He waddled closer to me and dropped down to sprawl over my foot. I couldn’t help giggling at the feel of his warm little body covering my bare toes.

Click. Click. Click.

A few feet away from me, Roc sat on his haunches, his camera hiding his face. I tried to ignore him, focusing on the puppy instead. That little fellow seemed to be quite content on my foot, at least until we had to change positions. He rolled onto his stomach and dropped his head onto his paws, still keeping a close eye on me.

When we finally ended up in the final relaxation pose, *savasana*, my small canine friend wandered up the mat to sniff at my hair, my face, and my neck. His cold nose tickled my collarbone, and I squirmed, laughing again, trying to keep quiet out of respect for my fellow yogis.

But the pup didn’t stop there. He scrambled up over my arm and onto my chest, peering down into my face for a few seconds before he scooted down my body, settling with a deep doggy sigh on my thighs. When I lifted my head to look at him, I saw to my delight that he was lying on his back, his head lolling and his back paws spread. His front paws were curled to his chest, like a tiny Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Echoing his sigh, I rested my head on the mat again and closed my eyes, letting my mind shut down as I drifted along with the teacher's hypnotic voice.

"It seems you made a friend."

I turned my head and looked up at Roc, who dropped down to sit on the floor next to my mat, seemingly oblivious to the rest of the room full of people who were standing up and preparing to leave.

His tone was warmer than it had been earlier, and I noted that his expression was more relaxed, too, as he reached down to stroke the puppy's velvety ears.

"I know." I kept my voice quiet, unwilling to disturb the sleeping animal. "He's adorable, isn't he? Or maybe she. I don't know. We haven't become very closely acquainted yet." I craned my neck back to look toward the door. "Everyone's leaving, aren't they? But I don't want to disturb this sweet baby."

I stretched my hand down to gently pet the dog's head, and my fingers brushed up against Roc's thumb. For a moment, I froze.

He moved before I did, shifting backward and clearing his throat. "The volunteers are coming in to retrieve their charges, I believe. So you won't be stuck underneath your biggest fan for much longer."

I managed a smile, the first genuine one I'd offered Roc. "It's funny. I don't really fancy myself a dog person. When Nicky told me about this benefit, I wasn't exactly enthusiastic."

Roc nodded, his eyes thoughtful. "I remember. That you didn't like dogs, I mean."

His admission sent a flood of warmth through my bloodstream, even as I spoke up to correct him.

"It's not that I don't like them, really. It's only that the corgis my grandmother loved were yapping little beasts, and always underfoot. One of them nipped at me when I was small, and I never quite got over it."

"Understandable, I suppose, although I have to think that it's a tad unfair to judge all of a species based on your experience with one privileged group of one particular breed."

“You might be right.” I wasn’t even thinking about what I was saying; I realized that I just wanted Roc to keep talking to me. I was certain that it wouldn’t be long before he remembered how much he seemed to detest me now, and I found myself greedy for his friendly attention.

Hadn’t I learned my lesson six years ago? Apparently not.

“Would you consider adopting this pup, then?” Roc stroked the dog again, and I shivered involuntarily. The dog lay just below the junction of my thighs, making me yearn for Roc’s fingers to wander just a little higher up . . .

“Hmmm?” I jerked my attention back to his question. “Oh—no, sadly, I don’t think it’s possible. Especially not now, since I don’t have my own home anymore.” At his curious head tilt, I explained, “I moved back in with my parents after my grace and favor cottage was bestowed on someone else who had curried more grace and favor, I suppose.”

“I didn’t know that. I hadn’t heard.” He frowned.

“Do you keep tabs on me, then?” The words spilled out before I could stop them.

“No.” Roc shook his head. “But one hears things at times.”

“Not so much, one doesn’t,” I countered. “Not anymore, at any rate. It’s been the one upside to—to the changes in the family.”

He rested his forearms on his knees, his eyes on my face. “The King took away your house?”

I opened my mouth to reply and then stopped, remembering that despite our history, Roc was a virtual stranger, not necessarily someone with whom I could entrust secrets that could hurt the Royal Family.

“No, not exactly,” I began, but before I could finish, an older man with a shiny bald head approached us. He chuckled as he spied my sleeping companion.

“Aww, little fellow’s all tuckered out after his yoga class.” He stretched out a hand to Roc. “I’m Al Jones, and my wife and I foster this pup.”

I sat up carefully, leaning back on my hands. “He’s so sweet. If I could, I’d take him home with me in a heartbeat.”

“Yeah, I don’t imagine a palace in England is a very dog-friendly home,” Al remarked. I was surprised that he knew who I was—and gratified that he didn’t make a big deal about it.

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” I laughed. “Most of my relatives adore dogs. Sometimes we like them more than we do our other family members.”

Al slapped his thigh. “I always say to my wife, people are people when

you get down deep to the important stuff. And you just proved me right.” He bent over a little and lowered his voice. “Truth to tell, I like the dogs we foster a whole lot better than I do most of my wife’s family!”

The puppy on my legs began to stir. When he spied Al, his tail wagged furiously, and he made low happy noises.

“That’s right, feller. I’m here to take you home.” He glanced at me. “Do you want to say goodbye before I scoop him up?”

“Oh, definitely.” I lifted the puppy close to my chest, smiling as he snuggled up to my skin. “Thank you for doing yoga with me, sweet baby. And for helping me relax at the end.”

The pup raised his nose toward my face, his pink tongue darting out to kiss my chin.

With one more cuddle and a regretful sigh, I handed my new friend back to his foster father, thanking him not only for bringing the dog today but also for the work he and his wife did in caring for needy animals.

“Well.” I rolled my shoulders. “I suppose I should find my boots and bundle up to go back to my cabin. I’m meant to present an award at a luncheon this afternoon, and then there’s the auction tonight.”

Roc nodded. I could see in his eyes that the icy walls of hostility were rising once again, and desperate to delay his withdrawal, I reached out to grasp his wrist.

“Could I see some of the photos you took during yoga?” I made a face, wrinkling my nose. “I can’t imagine that many of them are flattering. I’m really quite a novice.”

He hesitated briefly before picking up his camera, and after touching a button, passing it to me. “The arrows on the screen will scroll through.”

To my shock, the photos were . . . amazing. Roc had framed me in such a way that even when I might have looked awkward or ridiculous, I didn’t. And the pictures that included the puppy were so perfect that they hurt my heart.

“Oh, Griffin,” I breathed, not even noticing at first that I’d used his first name. “I don’t think I’ve ever liked pictures of myself more than these.” I offered him a rueful half-smile. “That being said, I don’t like most pictures taken of me, so that might be faint praise. But seriously, these are very well done.”

He stared at me silently for a long, heavy moment before he retrieved his camera from my hands.

“Thank you.” His throat moved up and down as he swallowed, and I was

suddenly aware that we stood very close to each other, in a room that was now empty except for the two of us. My heart pounded, and my breath caught as I wondered what—if anything—Roc might do.

“Will you . . .” His words were hardly more than a whisper. “Will you . . .”

“Yes?” My lips barely moved.

A tic jumped in Roc’s cheek, and he took a step away from me. “Will you be in the ballroom at the hotel an hour ahead of the auction’s beginning, please? I would like to make sure we have sufficient time for the formal photos.”

Disappointment flooded my chest, sinking down into my stomach.

“Yes. I’ll be there.”

He inclined his head, the mocking smile back in full force.

“See you then . . . Your Royal Highness.”

CHAPTER 5

“Y our Royal Highness? Good evening. Thank you so much for being here.”

I offered my hand to the dark-haired woman who’d approached me the moment I’d entered the ballroom. While we hadn’t been officially introduced, I’d seen her frequently over the past two days, usually moving at warp speed, as she was in charge of running this entire, multi-faceted event.

“Please, call me Daisy.” I smiled as we shook hands.

“Oh, thanks. I’m Andrea, and I work with the Pets at Risk Foundation. We’re part of the benefit this weekend.”

My eyes widened. “I think you’re being too modest, Andrea. As I understand it, this entire event was your idea, and you’re the one who’s made it happen.” I nodded. “May I say, congratulations on a job well done. I will admit that I wasn’t very enthusiastic about what I expected to be a charity dog show, but this whole weekend has been just lovely.”

Andrea’s cheeks went pink. “Oh, Your—I mean, Daisy. That’s very kind, and it means so much to hear you say that.” She turned to sweep one hand toward the stage. “I was so grateful that you agreed to be our mistress of ceremony tonight for the auction. This is the most popular part of the weekend—actually, the auction is how this entire benefit began.”

I nodded. “As I understand it, the guests will be bidding on celebrities?”

“Local celebrities who have graciously volunteered to help us. Each one—there are five men and five women—will appear on stage with one of our fostered dogs. The guests are actually bidding to support the dog—oh, and they’ll also get some sort of outing with the celebrity as well. It’s a fun way to bring more attention to the need for more foster pet families while we

support the existing homes.”

“It sounds like fun,” I agreed. “I looked over the notes you sent, and I think I’m ready.”

“Excellent.” Andrea rubbed her hands together. “Ah, there’s your photographer friend. He mentioned to me that he’s taking formal pictures before the guests arrive.” She gave a little bow, hardly more than a head nod. “I should check on a few last-minute things, so I’ll leave you to it—and I’ll see you on stage fifteen minutes before showtime!”

As Andrea hurried off, Roc approached.

“Your Royal Highness.”

I rolled my eyes, making no attempt to hide my exasperation. “Roc, why must you do this? Really, I’d like to know. Since I first saw you this weekend, you’ve made clear how you feel about me. You’ve mocked me, made snide comments, and treated me like a stranger.” I paused. “Although this morning, you seemed . . . different.”

“How would you prefer me to treat you, Your Royal Highness?” Roc snapped. “In case you’ve forgotten, we *are* strangers. Six years ago, you made that choice.”

“I made the choice?” I repeated incredulously. “I did no such thing.”

His jaw clenched. “You walked away from me. You had to choose, and you chose your family over me. You threw away our marriage and never looked back.” He lifted one shoulder. “As far as I was aware, you forgot about me completely. I wasn’t even certain you’d remember who I was when I agreed to take this job.”

Heat suffused my face, and tears threatened. “That is *not* true,” I whispered furiously. “It’s not at all true, and you know it. I didn’t walk away. You did.”

“Oh?” Roc’s eyes glittered with banked fury, and he rocked back on his heels. “How do you figure? I’m not the one who gave in to my family when they demanded that I seek an annulment. I’m not the one who decided that the whole thing was just . . . what did you call it? Just an amusing lark, wasn’t it? Just another wild night for Britain’s good-time princess.”

“I never said that,” I replied hotly, even though a twinge of memory said I might have spoken those very words quite flippantly the night we’d faced my parents. “I didn’t ever think of—of *us* that way. Never.”

“You’re an excellent actress, then.” Roc reached for his camera. “Now, if you don’t mind, ma’am, I have a job to do, and we’re wasting time. Will you

please come stand over here by this grouping of trees?”

I wanted to say more—I had a lot more to say, believe *that*—but I had been brought up to cooperate, to stand, to smile and to push down feelings like anger and hurt. So instead of telling Roc exactly what I was thinking, instead of defending myself, I walked over to the brightly lit and decorated Christmas trees and pasted a smile on my face.

For the next thirty minutes, Roc and I didn’t speak except when he told me where to move, how to pose, and when to smile—or not to smile. I listened and did what he said, but I didn’t say a word in response. Inside, though, I was fuming, replaying every single word he’d spit at me and brooding over every accusation he’d made.

Finally, Roc lowered his camera and let out a long breath.

“All right, then. I’ve got enough.”

I inclined my head. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“Fine.”

We both stood still, facing each other, neither of us making a move to leave.

“I didn’t mean it—when I said to my family that night that marrying you was just for kicks, just for fun, I was only . . . I don’t know, being flippant. I knew they were all going to be so angry, and more than that, so—disappointed in me.”

Roc’s lip curled, but he said nothing.

“But it wasn’t about you. The way I acted, I mean. It was about them, and about me. It was because I didn’t want them to suspect how important you were to me.”

“Don’t bloody lie to me,” Roc ground out. “Don’t pretend I meant anything more to you than just a diversion. Don’t try to tell me that you’ve given me any thought at all in the past six years, since that night when you threw me away like so much rubbish.”

The tears that I’d been holding at bay filled my eyes. “I didn’t. I mean, I didn’t throw you away. You ran—you couldn’t leave me fast enough. And if you’d wanted to find me in the past six years, I wasn’t exactly hiding. You knew where I was.”

He opened his mouth and then shut it abruptly. “Then I guess we can assume I didn’t want to find you, can’t we?”

It felt like a slap to my face, and I had to hold myself stiff to keep from

reeling. “Lucky for you that we’re finished, then. You can go back to forgetting that I exist. You can go home and have a huge laugh with your friends over the princess whose heart you shattered—twice.”

Turning on my heel, I walked away from him, fleeing the memories and pain as fast as I could go.

CHAPTER 6

From my earliest childhood, I had been taught that I was part of a very private family who just happened to live out some of our lives in a very public spotlight. I had been raised to smile even when I wanted sob, to make polite small talk when I wanted to rage, and never, never to let anyone discern my true feelings.

While I might have resented my upbringing along the way, tonight I was extremely grateful for it, because years of practice made it easy for me to host the celebrity and foster family auction with serenity.

I read the words on the teleprompter and went out of my way to add a raised eyebrow, a deliberate pause, or a scandalized smirk here and there to add to the script. Not one person in the audience could ever have suspected that inside, my heart was bruised and aching.

Well, perhaps one person.

But I pretended that he didn't exist, even when I caught a glimpse of him snapping photos of me. For this night, Griffin, the second son of the Marquis of Rockingham, was a nonentity.

Once the last local celebrity—the weatherman at an affiliate station in Philadelphia—had been won by an elderly woman with a dangerous gleam in her eyes and the final round of applause for our volunteers and donaters had died away, I climbed down from the stage to join my brother.

“Well done, Daisy.” He bent over to kiss my cheek. “You were magnificent!”

“Thank you.” I clung to his arm. “Will you take me back to my cabin, please? I’ve got a horrid headache.”

Nicky frowned. “No one could have guessed it by your performance.

Granny would have been proud.”

I thought about that as we drove through the frozen night. It was odd to see my brother driving an American car, on the wrong side of the street, not to mention the wrong side of the car! Yet Nicky seemed perfectly at ease with it. As a matter of fact, he seemed very happy with his life overall here in the States.

“Are you all right, Daisy?” He slid me a sideways glance. “Beside the aching head, I mean.”

I wanted to bury my face in my hands and weep, to pour out all of my grief and heartache on my brother’s shoulder. But I knew Nicky, and if I told him even a fraction of what Roc had said to me, my white-knight big brother would rush to my defense. The resulting mess wouldn’t help any of us.

So instead, I forced a smile. “Oh, yes. I’m fine. This has been a lovely weekend, Nicky. I’m going to do something rare for me and admit that I was wrong about the Cause for the Paws benefit. It’s been fun—and seeing the entire town get involved is positively inspirational.”

“I’m glad you’ve enjoyed yourself—glad you came, too.” Nicky stopped the car right outside my cabin. “I wish you could stay longer, though.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and reached across the console to hug him. “I really have to get back to London. Big job responsibilities and all that, you know.” I clung for a moment and then released him. “But now that I’ve been here, you’ll see more of me, I promise. I’ll visit so often that you’ll get tired of seeing me.”

“That could never happen,” he chuckled. “But I’d love for you to put it to the test.” He gazed at me soberly. “We’re here for you if you need, Daisy. I am, and Kyra is, too. You know, if things get too hard to bear at home, the US isn’t such a bad place to land.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” With one more last kiss on his cheek, I climbed out of the car and up the steps to my cabin door.

My flight the next day wasn’t scheduled take off until later in the afternoon, so I didn’t bother packing my bags after I’d changed from my dress and heels into my favorite pair of flannel pajamas. Instead, I pulled out a magazine and had just settled into bed when I heard a knock on the door.

Nicky, I thought, coming to check on me because I’d complained about my head hurting. Or maybe Kyra, sneaking over for a mini girls’ night after she’d put the children to bed.

But when I opened the door, standing behind it to keep out of the frigid

air pouring in, it was Roc who stood on my stoop.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He ducked his head, jammed his hands into the pockets of his coat and looked away from me, breathing out hard through his nose. “I need to speak with you . . . Daisy.”

He’d called me by my name, and that alone told me something. After a scant moment of consideration, I waved him inside.

“All right, then. Come in. It’s cold out there, and I have no desire to freeze.”

He stepped into the cabin, carefully stomping off the snow from his boots. “Sorry to bother you so late. I was . . . I saw your brother drop you off, and I started to come over, but then I thought you might be—I thought maybe I should just leave you alone. Let this die, let it all go away.” He sighed long, rubbing his forehead. “But I found I couldn’t do that. I found the idea of walking away and leaving you with the impression that I had—that my feelings toward you—” Roc stopped again. “I never laughed at you, Daisy. I never felt joy over your pain, and I sure as hell never forgot you. Not once, not one single day over these past six years.”

I gripped the back of the chair in front of me. “Then why didn’t you come to me? Why didn’t you call me—and why have you treated me this weekend as though I was lower than the mud on your boots?”

One side of his mouth quirked up. “Not much mud around these parts this weekend, princess. Mostly snow and ice. But I take your point.” He scowled down at the braided rag rug on the wooden floor. “The truth of the matter is that the night you married me was the best of my life. I had been in love with you for. . . months. That night in the garden, when we talked until sunrise? I’d never known that I could enjoy being with someone the way I loved sitting in the grass with you. But you felt so out of my reach until the night Cassa formally introduced us. And then miracle upon miracles, you seemed to like me, too. When I asked you to marry me, I only hoped to make you laugh and perhaps want to spend more time with me. But you didn’t laugh. You turned to me with those huge, beautiful eyes, and you said yes.”

I blinked back hot tears and nodded. “I thought you were serious. Are you saying you weren’t?”

“Oh, no, I was very serious,” Roc chuckled. “I just wasn’t very hopeful. But when you said yes, and then you said ‘I do’ when the priest asked the question. . . well, I began to think that maybe there was a real possibility for

us. I thought that right up until the moment we were in your parents' Kensington Palace apartment and you laughed at the idea that marriage with me could be anything other than a joke."

I swallowed. "I never meant that at all. I was only—protecting myself from the tirade I expected from my family. And maybe deep down, I was afraid that *you* thought our elopement was a joke and I was trying to laugh before you did."

"Ah, Daisy. We were both frightened and acting at cross-purposes." Roc shook his head. "And then the next morning, back at my apartment, alone, I got the phone call from the Palace that the annulment was proceeding, and then another phone call from my father, asking me what the bloody hell I thought I was doing to dare to think of marrying the granddaughter of the Queen. He was furious. My world came crashing down, and all I wanted was to be with you again."

"But you didn't call—"

"I did," he interrupted. "I tried to call your cell, and instead of reaching you, I was routed somewhere else and got someone at the Palace, someone who said that all communication should come through our respective attorneys."

"Oh." I took one tentative step toward him. "Ro—Griffin, I didn't know. Nobody told me. I asked Cassa, and she said that you'd gone to Scotland. I thought you had just left town and didn't care."

"I went away after I was given the brush-off by the suit at the Palace. I couldn't bear to be in town anymore, terrified that I might see you out with another man. But why didn't *you* call *me*?" he demanded. "The phone lines work both ways. I would have answered."

"I didn't know that," I replied miserably. "I assumed that if I called, you'd mock me and tell me to grow up, that the whole thing had been a way to make fun of the establishment by using me."

"Why would you think that? What did I ever do to make you believe that?"

I shrugged. "We didn't know each other so well, Griffin, and despite appearances, I don't always have the best opinion of my own self-worth. Or at least I didn't. I convinced myself that I'd been a terrible fool, and that you'd never cared for me. That you were ridiculing me."

We stood in silence for a few beats, and then Roc stepped closer to me, reaching out a hand to touch my arm. "I never did. I never would."

I nodded, unable to speak.

“Daisy, do you think . . . could there ever be any way you might—” He hesitated. “I know our past is complicated, but do you think, perhaps, that when we get back to London, you might consider having dinner with me?”

I lifted hopeful eyes to his face. “I think that I would like that very much.”

Roc drew even closer, pulling me against him gently. “We’ve done everything all out of order, you and me. We haven’t yet had our first date. But even so, I’d like to maintain that trend and ask if I could kiss you now instead of waiting any longer.”

I stretched up and looped my arms around his neck. “You don’t have to ask me about that, Griffin.” With a tremulous smile, I added, “I won’t make you beg.”

“Oh, princess.” Roc’s eyes glittered wickedly as he lowered his lips to mine. “Please. Make me beg.”

Do you want to know more about the bet that brought Daisy to the Cause for the Paws?

Do you need to read what happens back in London on Roc and Daisy’s first date?

[Click here to get a very special epilogue!](#)

ABOUT TAWDRA KANDLE

Tawdra Kandle has captivated readers with over 100 romances spanning across various genres, from contemporary to paranormal. With a talent for crafting relatable characters and sizzling love stories, her novels continue to garner devoted fans. Residing in central Florida with her Anglican priest husband, an adorable pup, and a plethora of cats, she enjoys the company of her grown children and two beloved granddaughters, all while rocking her signature purple hair. Find out more about Tawdra [here](#).

Sign up for Tawdra's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

(SERIES) The Anti-Cinderella Chronicles

[The Anti-Cinderella](#)

[The Anti-Cinderella Takes London](#)

[The Anti-Cinderella Conquers the World](#)

[The Anti-Cinderella Gets Crowned](#)

(SERIES) The Anti-Cinderella World Romances

[Fifty Frogs](#)

[Hot Off the Press](#)

[The Cuffing Season](#)

[The Royal Nanny Undercover](#)

[The Royal Rogue, My Fake Boyfriend](#)



DECIDEDLY WITH PAWS

STINA LINDENBLATT

ABOUT...DECIDEDLY WITH PAWS

Proposing to his girlfriend on New Year's Eve was supposed to be magical.
Too bad the universe has other plans.

CHAPTER 1

ERIN

What was the best way to spend New Year's Eve? Or, rather, early afternoon on New Year's Eve, at the community center's indoor basketball court.

That's right—face painting at the Cause for the Paws Festival with your best friend.

"There you go," I told the cute four-year-old girl sitting in front of me. I picked up the hand mirror and showed her the flower designs on her cheeks.

She inspected them like an art connoisseur examining a fine painting. A bright smile curved across her face. "Pretty!"

I helped her down, and she skipped to where her family was waiting.

Kelsey's phone pinged next to her paints. She checked the screen, tucking her blond shoulder-length hair behind her ear. "Jasmine confirmed she and her husband will be able to come to the party." They must have finally found a babysitter.

"I can't wait," I said, waving for the next kid in line to take the newly vacated seat. "It's going to be so much fun."

Kelsey released a soft sigh but still managed a smile for the five-year-old boy sitting in front of her. "It will be fun." The disappointment in her voice hit me in the chest like a wobbly Frisbee.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Owen had to cancel." Owen being her fiancé.

"Let me guess. He has to work." I stopped myself from rolling my eyes—just—but Kelsey no doubt heard the equivalent of it sneak into my tone.

She shrugged as she finished the paw print on the boy's face. "He's busy trying to make partner."

“And once he’s made partner, what then? Face it, Kels, he’ll still be too busy to spend time with you. You deserve better than that.” Owen hadn’t always been that way. In college, he’d been a great boyfriend, sweet and funny and always there for Kelsey.

She high-fived the boy and helped him down from the chair. “There’s nothing I can do about it. He’s my fiancé.”

“He might be your fiancé, but you aren’t married yet.” The way Owen was going with picking a wedding date, Kelsey and I would be old women rocking away on the porch, before she got to walk down the aisle with him.

“Would you like flowers and paw prints on your cheeks?” I asked the little girl now seated in front of me.

She replied with a rapid bobbing of her head.

“Not all of us have found such a devoted love of their life like you have.” Kelsey flashed me a smile that said I was the luckiest woman alive.

Now it was my turn to release the slow leak of a sigh. A sigh that hopefully no one else heard.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, echoing my earlier question.

I dabbed my brush in the purple paint and began creating petals on the girl’s cheek. The girl’s mother was chatting with two other women. All were oblivious to Kelsey’s and my conversation. “I think Darren’s having second thoughts about me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think he might be trying to find a way to end things with me.”

Kelsey’s shocked-eyed expression almost had me doubled over in laughter...if my heart wasn’t stumbling over what I suspected.

“Why would you even think that? The man is absolutely in love with you. I wish Owen looked at me like Darren looks at you.”

“How does he look at me?”

Kelsey’s expression turned dreamy. “Like you’re his world, sun, and universe wrapped up with a shiny gold bow.”

I’d always thought that was how he looked at me. But lately?

“He’s been acting weird,” I explained. “And secretive.”

“In what way?” She handed the mirror to the boy so he could check out the paw prints on his face.

“It’s hard to explain. It’s just...well...” I glanced at the line of kids waiting their turn. Now wasn’t the time to go into why my gut was telling me something was wrong.

The same gut reaction I ignored when my last boyfriend started acting strange. What happened? Turned out he'd been offered a job in Tampa. Not exactly San Francisco's next-door neighbor.

Oh, and he didn't tell me the news right away.

Nope. He hadn't been ready to give up sex with me quite yet, so he'd kept that info to himself.

I found out about it two days before he moved away.

Nice, huh?

What if Darren was getting ready to dump me because he'd been offered a job across the country? He was a brilliant electrical engineer with a graduate degree in robotics. Who wouldn't want him?

Asha, a tall curvy woman with magenta protective braids knotted on top of her head, approached our table. The coordinator for the animal rescue shelter wore skinny black jeans, a bright green tunic and a worried frown.

"Kelsey. Erin. You haven't seen Mashed Potato, have you?" Her faded Jamaican accent lifted her vowels.

"Mashed Potato?" I asked. "Like the food?"

"No—as in one of the dogs up for adoption." Asha held up a piece of paper with the picture of a small dog. His hair was a mix of cream-and-golden fluffy curls. "He was accidentally let out of his enclosure, and we don't know where he went."

My heart squeezed at his cuteness. "Oh, he's adorable."

"He is. And very curious. His curiosity has a habit of getting him into trouble."

He sounded like Darren.

According to Darren's mom, her son's curious nature had landed him in all kinds of trouble growing up. He was always figuring out how things worked, taking them apart, and putting them back together again. For the most part.

As a kid, he hadn't been into sports. Books—especially science books—had been his passion.

Yep, Darren and Mashed Potato had something in common.

Well, not so much the reading part. Or putting things back together.

"We'll keep an eye open for him," I tell Asha.

"That would be great. Thank you." She hurried off to the next table.

"Speaking of Darren." Kelsey nodded toward the entrance of the indoor basketball court.

My boyfriend—hot as always in jeans and a dark green Henley—was walking our way. His wavy hair looked as if he'd recently ran his fingers through the light-brown strands. My heart and horny bits let out a lust-felt sigh.

Four and a half days. That's how long it was since I'd last seen him. He'd been in North Carolina for work.

I finished painting the pink flower on the girl's cheek while my heart pounded happily in my chest. Much like it had when I'd first met Darren.

How did we meet?

Kelsey and I were sitting on the ground at the park, eating lunch and watching a group of guys playing Frisbee. Okay, I was ogling them. Kelsey had been texting Owen. She said something to me—I don't remember what—and I turned to look at her.

Something smacked me on my forehead, and a Frisbee landed on my lap.

A shadow fell over me as I picked up the Frisbee. I glanced up, and a pair of friendly blue eyes met mine. The man's hair glowed in the sunlight, and for a heartbeat I thought perhaps he was an angel.

He knelt in front of me, shirtless, his skin pale like he'd spent a fair amount of time indoors. He said something to me, but I missed what that was. I was too busy appreciating the view. The guy obviously worked out, his muscles long and lean.

"Are you okay?" he repeated. I assumed that was what he'd said the first time.

"I'm fine thanks." I smiled, even though I was still a little dazed from the Frisbee collision.

His mouth curved into a grin, and I had an impossible time tearing my gaze from his lips. I was vaguely aware of Kelsey coughing back a giggle.

"I'm glad you're all right." He picked up the Frisbee and jogged back to the men. They went back to playing the game, but he kept coming over to make sure I was okay. That I didn't have a concussion.

It was the third time he came to check on me that he'd asked my name.

The fourth time, he told me his name.

And the fifth time?

The fifth time he came over to our blanket, he'd knelt in front of me...and asked me out on a date.

"Hey," Darren said, bringing me back to the present. He gifted me with the goofy grin that usually turned my stomach fluttery. This time was no

exception.

I rocked onto my toes so I could reach his mouth. His spicy scent that was all Darren draped around me like a cozy blanket on a cold rainy day.

His phone rang in his pocket. He put his finger up for me to hold my thought and answered the phone. I dropped back onto my heels.

Without saying a word to me, he turned and walked away.

Hot disappointment oozed through me. I flashed Kelsey a *see-what-I-mean?* look.

She rolled her eyes, the meaning behind the action directed at me. She probably had a point. Answering the phone wasn't weird behavior.

But that didn't stop the nagging feeling things were about to change between Darren and me.

Something bad. Something that would rock my world...and not in a good way.

CHAPTER 2

DARREN

What was it with bosses and their bad timing?

I'd driven straight to the community center from the airport just to see my girl and kiss her. Well, straight here after a quick stop at my apartment to shower and grab the ring.

That's right. *The* ring.

The two-carat diamond engagement ring. I'd planned to propose to Erin as we counted down the new year.

New year. New chapter of our life.

"Are you planning to keep me in suspense?" Jamieson, my boss, asked. "Did Craigson agree to the changes?"

You would think the two men could've hammered this out on Zoom. But nope. Jamieson had felt it would be better if I flew to Charlotte and talk to Craigson in person.

"He did. He was impressed with the suggestions and wants to go ahead with them." It had been my idea to make the changes to the surgical robot arm.

"Glad to hear that."

Various booths had been set up throughout the gym. Booths with games and other activities to entertain the kids. Booths selling foods and crafts. My friend, Conner, was headed my way from one of the tables as I ended the call. His volunteer shift at the festival finished a few minutes ago, which meant Erin would also be finishing her shift soon.

"So? You're still planning to propose tonight?" He jerked his head to where Erin was painting a pink flower on a redheaded girl's cheek.

"Yup. During the fireworks." Erin happened to be a big fan of romantic

gestures. I was notoriously known for being a romantic doofus.

But not this time.

This time, I would prove to her and everyone else that I could be romantic.

“Isn’t that kinda cliché?” Conner’s mouth twisted into an annoying smirk.

“Ha! What do you know? I bet McKenna”—his girlfriend—“would love it.”

He lifted a yeah-I-don’t-think-so eyebrow.

“Proposing during the fireworks is a great romantic gesture. Women lap that stuff up.” Besides, even if it were cliché, it wasn’t like Erin would say no. We’d already talked about marriage and about having kids. It was something we both wanted. But since we hadn’t discussed it in a while, she wouldn’t see my proposal coming.

Conner’s phone pinged, and he checked the screen. “Speaking of McKenna, she’s ready for me to pick her up from work. I won’t be long.” He smacked me on the arm, his way of saying *later*, and walked toward the exit.

And I headed to the face painting table.

“If you had a pet unicorn,” Erin said to the four-year old girl in front of her. “What would you name it?”

The girl seemed to ponder the question, her lips twisted to the side, her expression thoughtful. “Bubble Gum,” she replied with a big grin.

“That’s a great name.”

Erin continued painting the pink flower on the girl’s cheek, and the image of her one day doing the same to our kids popped into my head. Without a doubt, she’d be an amazing mother.

My chest grew warm thinking about it.

The girl scooted off the chair, the flower completed, and ran over to a woman waiting to the side. Erin pushed to her feet and turned to face me. My favorite smile spread across her face, and my heart stammered like it always did when she aimed the smile my way. “I’ve officially finished my volunteer shift.”

I pulled her into my arms, her light floral scent reminding me I was home. Her arms and sweet body were home. My lips met hers in a kiss that wasn’t the hungry, soul-satisfying kind I’d been craving for the past four days. It was a quick, family-festival-friendly kiss that left me unsatisfied.

“A dog has gone AWOL,” she said, her eyes wide with an emotion that made me think of hope. “I thought we could help search for the poor thing.

He's waiting to find his forever home, and I'd hate for him to miss out on that."

The one thing I'd learned when it came to those beautiful green eyes of hers?

I could never say no to them...or her.

"Of course. Whatever you want."

She smiled, and there went my heart stumbling again.

"I'll go tell Kelsey." Erin walked over to her best friend, spoke briefly with her, and returned to where I was standing. "She'll join us once her replacement shows up."

"Any idea what the dog looks like?" I asked.

Erin showed me a picture on her phone of what looked like a photo printed on paper. "His name is Mashed Potato."

I chuckled. "He looks more like a twice-baked potato minus the skin."

"I think he's adorable." She smiled lovingly at the phone. The little dude had clearly won her heart.

We set off on our mission.

Erin threaded her fingers with mine and led me to the tables several yards away. Pamphlets had been spread across the tablecloth. In the background, a recent Taylor Swift hit played through the gym speakers. The music wasn't loud to drown out conversation—just loud enough to be noticed. A group of little girls were jumping around to the song. "How was your trip?"

"It was good." It would have been better if she'd been with me. "Glad to be home though."

"How about we play a game?"

Okay, not what I was expecting. "What kind of game?"

"Word association. I'll start." She crouched in front of a table, picked up the edge of the tablecloth, and peered underneath. "Missing."

"Dog."

Erin looked up at me, her mouth curled adorably to one side. "I hope not all your answers have to do with Mashed Potato."

I returned her smirk. "Guess that depends on the word. My turn. Table."

"Chair." She pushed to her feet. "Job."

"Income. Kisses."

We walk toward the next table.

"You." She lifted the edge of the tablecloth and checked under the table. "City." She shook her head, letting me know the dog wasn't there.

“San Francisco. You know, there are more fun games to play,” I said, pulling her to her feet. “Like strip poker.” I shot her a teasing glance. She laughed.

We continued searching for Mashed Potato. We were on the other side of the gym, with no clue to where the little dude could have gone, when Erin’s brother, Trent, and Kelsey approached us from opposite directions. Kelsey wore jeans and a lightweight sweater. Trent had on a business suit and had obviously come here straight from work.

Kelsey stopped walking and her eyes went wide. She stared at Trent as if he was the last person she’d expected to see, which made sense. Erin’s brother was a notorious workaholic.

A blush reddened Kelsey’s cheeks. *Interesting.*

Erin searched for Mashed Potato behind a pile of shipping boxes. Without saying a word to Trent, Kelsey rushed over to join her.

A friendly grin curved across Trent’s face. “Hey, Darren. How are things going?”

“Good. You?”

“Can’t complain. I’m looking forward to tonight’s party.” He glanced at Erin and Kelsey, except I got the impression he was staring at Kelsey...or more specifically, her ass. His best friend’s sister’s ass. The best friend who was a Navy SEAL.

But even if he was interested in Kelsey and her brother didn’t care if they hooked up, Erin would never go for it. Trent wasn’t allowed to date any of her friends. That was her number one rule when it came to her brother. He’d been involved with one of her friends in college. From what I’d gathered, things had not gone well. Something about his ex-girlfriend going psycho on Erin after Trent ended things.

“Can I ask you a question?” I said, distracting him from watching Kelsey.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“I’m planning to propose to your sister during the fireworks. Do you think that sounds corny?”

He pressed his lips together as if trying not to burst out laughing. “You really want to marry her? Your funeral.” He wasn’t saying it to be malicious. He loved Erin. Both her brothers loved her. Luckily, he and I had always gotten on well.

Amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes. “In truth, it’s not Erin you have to worry about impressing. It’s me. And Curtis. As a retired SEAL, he’s

not easy to impress.” Trent crossed his arms, flashing me a devious glance.

“How are you planning to impress us, lover boy?”

I rolled my eyes. Trent was not the one I had to impress.

Not by a long shot.

That honor went to the woman I was in love with.

The woman on the floor, looking under another tablecloth.

CHAPTER 3

ERIN

I checked behind the cardboard boxes. Still no sign of the missing fluffball. “I’m not getting anywhere when it comes to pumping info out of Darren,” I told Kelsey. “I still have no idea why he’s acting so weird.”

But what did I expect? The word association game? Not exactly high on the list of the CIA’s most used interrogation techniques. Had I really expected him to spill everything when I said *job*?

Apparently.

Kelsey didn’t respond. She seemed to be staring at my brother, Trent, but that couldn’t be what held her interest. She’d known him since we were little kids.

I shrugged off the feeling I was missing something. She probably wasn’t even looking at him. “Kels?”

She gave her head a small shake, as if waking from a trance. “Huh? Sorry. What did you say?”

“Where were you?”

She looked down at her feet and then up at me. “Right here.”

“That’s not what I meant.” And she knew it. The twitching of her mouth gave that away. “You were a million miles from here. Were you thinking about Owen?” And how her dumbass fiancé wouldn’t be bothering to show up for our New Year’s Eve party this evening.

“Yes...that’s...that’s it. What were you asking me while I was daydreaming about my wonderfully sweet fiancé?” A cheery smile brightened her face.

“I tried to find out why Darren’s acting weird, but I struck out.”

“What did he say?”

“I didn’t ask him. I played a word association game with him to try to figure it out.”

“A word association game?” Kelsey sounded out each word as if attempting to make sense of them, but the corners of her mouth were twitching again. “And how did that work for you?”

I lifted my shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. “Not very well. It’s hard to know what words to use if you don’t know what’s going on in the first place.”

Kelsey and I continued searching for Mashed Potato, checking under the tablecloths and behind boxes. Trent and Darren were talking. Trent looked amused. I couldn’t see Darren’s face.

Kelsey got down on her stomach and peered under the stage, where a group of actors were performing a skit for the kids. “Why don’t you just ask him why he’s acting strange?”

I groaned—the sound drowned out by the kids’ laughter. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” She pushed to her feet and we turned around.

“Because no one likes being told they’re acting...” My sentence came to an abrupt standstill, and I stared at the man approaching us. Kingston Bourne. Yes, *that* Kingston Bourne. “Oh.”

He was the boyfriend who’d crushed my heart when he moved away because of a job opportunity. He hadn’t changed much in the past three years, other than his golden hair was a little longer around his ears, enhancing his rugged good looks.

He still smelled the same. His sandalwood scent used to make my body go tingly.

And now?

Not even a teensy tiny tingle.

“Erin?” He looked at me as if I were an illusion. “You look as beautiful as always. Are you also here to adopt a pet?”

Mashed Potato’s image flashed in my head, and my heart melted. “No. I was volunteering as one of the face painters. Kelsey and I were.”

He smiled at her. “Good to see you again, Kelsey.”

“You too, Kingston.” Her voice sounded slightly off-kilter, as if she was being diplomatic to him while at the same time giving me a mental big hug.

Something moved in my periphery, and I glanced down. The missing dog was sitting by my feet, looking up at me expectantly. He cocked his head to the side.

“Mashed Potato!” I crouched and stroked him. “Where’ve you been all this time?”

He barked and scrambled to his feet, his tail wagging.

I scooped him up. He licked my face. His tongue tickled, and I giggled.

“I’m going to check out the kitties’ room,” Kelsey told me. “Will you be okay?”

I knew what she meant. She was asking if I was okay with her leaving me alone with my ex.

“Yes. I’ll be there in a few minutes, after I give Mashed Potato to Asha.”

She nodded and hurried off.

“Yours?” Kingston scratched Mashed Potato behind the ears.

“No, he’s one of the dogs up for adoption.” I turned Mashed Potato so I could see his face. “Aren’t you? And some amazing person is going to be your human parent.”

He licked my face again.

“He seems to like you.” A smile curved across Kingston’s face.

“Are you here to adopt a pet?” Yes, I might have been a little curious at what he was doing here.

“That’s right. I moved back to San Francisco before Christmas. Figured I could use a companion. So here I am.” He spread his arms wide, indicating to the festival.

“I thought you had a great job in Florida.” The way he’d talked it up before dumping me, it had been his dream job.

“I did. But my girlfriend and I went separate ways at the beginning of the year. Tampa wasn’t the same for me after that.”

Wow. I hadn’t even known he had a girlfriend. It wasn’t like I’d kept up-to-date with his life on social media.

Truth?

I’d unfollowed him right after he told me he was moving to Tampa. “So you moved back to San Francisco?”

“Yep. A job opening recently came up for here. I’ve always liked the city”—his gaze flicked briefly to my lips—“so coming here was a no-brainer.”

“You found Mashed Potato?” Darren’s deep voice had me turning my head. The voice that always sent my heart executing somersaults that would’ve impressed even Simone Biles.

“He found *me*,” I explained. “I was just about to return him to the dog

adoption room.”

Kingston scratched Mashed Potato behind the ear again, his fingers accidentally brushing mine. “I’ll come with you. I was headed that way to check out the dogs. We can catch up on the way.”

Darren glanced between Kingston and me. The small frown that popped up whenever he was puzzled about something—the frown I thought was adorable—appeared on his brow. “I take it you two know each other?”

“Kingston, this is Darren.” I nodded at the man I was in love with. “Darren’s my boyfriend.” Despite him acting weird lately, my insides turned gooey at the boyfriend reference.

“Erin used to be my girlfriend,” Kingston said with a grin, as if he was proud of the fact.

“Before he moved to Florida,” I pointed out. I could tell the second Darren pieced things together. He knew about the past relationship that had left my heart broken until he came along.

Not wanting to skip farther down memory lane, I left the gym, Mashed Potato in my arms. Darren and Kingston flanked me. By the time we entered the dog adoption room, Kingston and I had only skimmed the surface on how our families were doing.

“Good luck with finding your forever home,” I whispered to Mashed Potato and kissed the top of his head. Smiling at him, I handed the sweet dog to Asha.

She grinned at him. “You really are a little rascal.” Her gaze flicked up to mine. “Thanks, Erin, for locating him.”

“You’re welcome.” I skipped over how he found me...because that would have sounded like I was adopting him when I wasn’t.

Darren’s phone rang, and he answered it. From what I could tell, the call had something to do with work.

“I’m going to find Kelsey and Trent,” I mouthed to him, figuring the call might take a few minutes. They usually did when they were about his job—especially when his team was approaching a project deadline. He nodded.

Kingston was talking to Asha when I slipped out of the room.

“Darren has accepted the position in Charlotte,” a familiar woman’s voice said.

I glanced at where it came from, and my heart walked into a brick wall. Katarina Dewitt. One of Darren’s supervisors. She was talking on the phone but didn’t seem to have noticed me. “That’s right. He’ll be a tremendous

addition to their team.”

She walked off, preventing me from hearing the rest of her conversation, and climbed the staircase to the main level of the community center.

Damn. Darren hadn’t mentioned the position or that he’d accepted a job offer. Guess that explained why he’d been acting weird.

The air in my lungs whooshed out on a hard breath. I felt like a partially inflated lawn Santa left up after Christmas, my legs weak and wobbly.

By some small miracle, I got my feet moving and entered the cat adoption room.

Kelsey was over by the cages. Trent was on his phone, standing near the wall on the opposite side of the room. Work, no doubt. Trent took being workaholic to a new level. Even more so than Darren did.

At least Trent and Darren were here. At least they’d be coming to the New Year’s Eve party—unlike Kelsey’s fiancé.

Darren came into the room and joined me. He leaned down, his warm breath brushing my ear. His smell—a mix of his spicy cologne and him—sent my body into tingling overdrive. And for a heartbeat I forgot all about the phone call I’d overheard.

But reality rudely intruded on the moment, and I opened my mouth to ask him about the new job.

My airway tightened, preventing the words from coming out.

“Christ, Erin, I’ll go crazy if I don’t get to kiss you soon.” The husky need in his voice was all it took for my thoughts to splutter to a standstill.

“I want to kiss you too,” I told him. And not the G-rated kisses from earlier.

If I were smart, I would break up with him now since he was moving away soon. But, as the devil on my shoulder so keenly pointed out, I might as well make the most of Darren’s and my remaining time together.

I’d worry about my broken heart later.

Darren threaded his fingers with mine and led me out of the room. Doors lined either side of the hallway. He opened them one by one, but none of the rooms were empty. All were being used for the festival.

He opened the last door and peered inside. “In here.”

“The janitor’s closet?” It wasn’t even that big. There was only enough room for two people to stand in each other’s space and grab supplies from the metal shelves.

Or to kiss.

I stepped inside, tugging Darren in with me, and clicked on the single light bulb.

He closed the door behind him, and his lips crashed into mine.

My mouth welcomed him in, my tongue playing the gracious host. Stroking. Tasting. Teasing. My arms hooked behind his neck, and I stretched up on my toes.

He grabbed the backs of my thighs and hoisted me up. My legs wrapped around his hips.

He turned in the cramped space and pushed my back against the door. The soft thud was the only noise that permeated the air beyond our panted breaths and equally soft moans.

“God, I’ve missed you,” I murmured, our lips barely parting.

I pressed my aching core against his hardening length. Hunger burned in my veins, pulsed between my legs. I shifted, my body accidentally rubbing along his hardness. The resulting ache, desperate with longing, sent a thrill through me.

“I want you so badly,” I whispered.

“I want you too.” His thick, gravelly voice sent another wave of need spiraling through me.

I traced my fingers down his torso to between my thighs and brushed his cock. “We can’t be long,” I reminded him. “Trent and Kelsey will wonder where we vanished to.”

“So a quickie?”

“God, yes,” I moaned, every inch of my body on board with the plan.

“You’ll have to be quiet.” He grinned, and the devilish quirk of his mouth came close to incinerating my panties. “Do you think you can do that?”

No. “Absolutely.” I flashed him an innocent smile. I wasn’t known for being quiet during sex. That wasn’t my fault. No one knew how to give me orgasms the way he did.

Darren lowered me to the ground. I kicked off my boots and shimmied out of my jeans and panties. His gaze traveled over me, his light-blue eyes dark, ravenous, but he didn’t appear to be in a rush to do anything, other than to stare at me. A deluge of heat coursed to between my legs, turning me wet.

“Hi,” I whispered. “Staring at me like that doesn’t make this a quickie.”

“Right.” He tore his gaze from me and lowered his jeans and black boxer briefs to his ankles.

He hoisted me up again. My legs encircled his hips, and I hooked my

ankles against his taut ass.

His fingers slipped between us and teased my clit. A soft moan fluttered from between my lips.

“You’re gonna have to be quieter than that.” His chuckle brushed my ear.

“Okay.” My reply came out more like a squeak than a whisper.

“You’re already soaking for me.” His words poured out on a rumbling groan, which I swear made me wetter. He lowered his forehead to mine. “I need to be inside you, Erin. Now.”

I nodded, incapable of doing much else, teetering on the edge of an orgasm.

He pressed the thick head of his cock against my opening and eased his way in.

Oooooooh, God. He’d only been gone four days, yet my body was acting like I hadn’t had sex in four years. My body hugged him, loved him, worshipped him while I silently pleaded for him not to move to North Carolina.

I dropped my head back on the door. Darren thrust inside me. The door banged against the jamb.

“Oops,” I giggle-whispered and double-checked the tiny space. But nothing had changed in the last few minutes. The only spot without shelves was the door and the gap near us where a mop leaned against the wall.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked once more. I nodded, the movement eager. I wasn’t going to last much longer. Stopping wasn’t an option.

He thrust again. *Bang. Bang.*

Five more thrusts, then my world imploded, the fireworks lighting up the sky. The New Year’s Eve ones? A pale kissing cousin.

My soft heat squeezed tight around Darren’s cock, unwilling to surrender it. And I watched his face as his own orgasm powered through him. He looked so beautiful, so breathtaking, so free.

I blinked away the tears that misted my vision.

I’d never loved a man like I loved Darren, and I would soon be losing him.

A goodbye fuck...that’s what this was. Or should be. But I couldn’t...not yet. I needed to make love to him one more time before I ended things with him. Because that was what I needed to do once the new year began. End things between us. To make leaving easier for Darren.

But even if it made things easier for him, when it came to me, there would be nothing easy about what I had to do.

My heart would shatter. Shatter into a million unfixable pieces.

Darren kissed me one last time, stealing my breath and my wit, and lowered me to my feet.

I bent to retrieve my clothes. Something glinted on the floor, Darren's jeans partially covering whatever it was. I nudged the denim aside, revealing a ring.

A gorgeous diamond ring. *Wow.*

I hadn't noticed it when we came into the closet, but I hadn't exactly been looking at the floor.

I picked up the ring, the silver warm against my fingertips. "Wonder who this belongs to."

CHAPTER 4

DARREN

The engagement ring between Erin's fingers gleamed in the light from the single bulb. Her eyes were wide with emotions I wasn't sure how to label. Shock? Curiosity?

Fuckity damn.

I'd wanted the proposal to be magical. Romantic. Something Erin would never forget.

True, being proposed to in the janitor's closet—next to a dirty mop, no less—might be something Erin would have a hard time forgetting. But that wasn't the story I'd envisioned one day telling our children.

So I did the only thing I could. "It's Conner's."

Erin blinked, her jaw practically hitting the floor. "Conner is proposing to McKenna?" Her surprised expression quickly morphed into confusion, crinkles creasing her forehead. "If he's proposing to her, how did the ring end up in here?"

Good question.

"Because..." My voice lilted up at the end in almost a question but not quite. "He gave it to me. For safekeeping. He was worried about losing it before he could ask her. And...and he gave it to me when he got here." I rubbed the nape of my neck, hoping Erin would buy the lame explanation. "It must have fallen out of my pocket."

She chuckled, handing the ring to me. "You're not doing a good job so far keeping it safe."

"You're probably right about that."

"But the orgasm was definitely worth it." She flashed me a grin. "It's a gorgeous ring. I'm sure McKenna will love it." There was something slightly

off about Erin's voice at the last part, but I couldn't place what it was. "Haven't they only been together two months?" She started to put on her clothes. "I didn't realize they were that serious."

I pulled my underwear and jeans up my legs. "I know. I was surprised too." I zipped up my jeans.

"So when's he planning to ask her?"

"During the fireworks." I stuffed the ring in my pocket.

"Oh, that's so romantic."

Ha! I was right. I knew Erin would love that. "We should probably get out of here before someone wonders what we're doing." Especially if anyone heard the closet door banging. Repeatedly.

"Good plan. I'm going to see how Kelsey's doing with the cats."

"Okay, I'll catch up with you there. There's something I need to do first." Like warn Conner that Erin thought he was proposing to his girlfriend tonight.

I walked with Erin to the cat room, and then returned to the room with the dogs for adoption.

Mashed Potato was sitting next to a Black woman with magenta braids tied in a knot on top of her head. She was talking to another couple.

The couple thanked her and walked away.

I strode over to her, dodging past a young child patting a medium-sized dog on the head. Several dogs in the far corner of the room let out a series of small barks.

I wasn't the only person heading toward the woman, but Erin's idiot ex beat me there.

"I'd like to adopt Mashed Potato," he told her.

Oh. Shit.

Mashed Potato looked up at his name and barked.

"Really?" The word shot from me, a sarcastic tone singeing the edges. Erin's ex turned, his eyebrow raised. "You don't seem like the small-dog type," I said. Except, hell if I knew what type of dog lover he was.

"Well, you know what they say about not judging a book by its cover." He turned to the woman from the animal shelter. "The woman I care about has fallen in love with this dog. And he's won my heart over too."

"My girlfriend has also fallen in love with Mashed Potato," I explained to her. "Maybe we should see who *he* would prefer to live with." That would make the most sense.

“I’m pretty sure Mashed Potato has made it clear he likes her.”

Something about the way he said that set off sirens in my head.

“You aren’t talking about Erin, my girlfriend, are you?” I asked, hoping I was wrong. If he adopted Mashed Potato because of her, it meant he wanted to be in her life again. And what man adopted a dog so a woman could friend zone him?

“Doesn’t matter who the woman is,” he replied. “The main thing is finding Mashed Potato a loving family to go home with.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” The woman from the shelter smiled at Erin’s ex, as if he’d had offered her the contents of Fort Knox.

I’m planning to one day have a family with the woman in question, I wanted to throw in his face. But I had already let Trent and Conner in on my plans of proposing to Erin. Did I want these two strangers hearing the news before I could ask Erin to marry me?

Hell no.

“Here you are,” Erin said from behind me. I turned to find her and Kelsey approaching us. Kelsey had a box in her arms. A box that let out a plaintiff meow.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Kitty Whiskers,” Kelsey said. “We’re going home very soon.”

“You adopted a cat?” I asked, not all that surprised. Kelsey loved cats.

“It was love at first sight. Plus, I’ve been planning to get one for a while.”

A short laugh powered from Erin. “She’s had the supplies for several months now.”

Erin’s ex leaned in and said something in her ear that I couldn’t hear. She giggled. Actually freaking giggled. Like she’d used to do when we first met and she flirted with me. Her cheeks pinked, and she ducked her head.

What the hell?

I was about to step in on their private moment when I spotted Conner coming into the room with McKenna in tow. Erin also noticed them, and she flashed Conner a grin that hinted she knew his big secret. *Oh. Shit.*

“I’ll be right back,” I told the two women, crossing my fingers that Erin’s ex didn’t adopt Mashed Potato while I was gone.

I didn’t slow my pace when I reached Conner. I kept going, grabbing his arm and pulling him along. “I need to talk to you. Now.”

He must have sensed my urgency. He didn’t protest or pull his arm away. McKenna continued over to Erin and Kelsey. At least Erin wouldn’t blurt the

engagement news to her.

We stepped outside the room, and Conner leaned against the wall, amusement tilting one side of his mouth. “So, what’s up?”

“Erin found the engagement ring.” I patted the pocket where I kept it. “And now she thinks you’re proposing to McKenna tonight.”

His amused expression didn’t budge. “Why does she think that?”

“I panicked and told her it was your ring.”

Conner groaned. “You’re an idiot. You realize that, right?”

“It was that or propose to her in the janitor’s closet,” I grumbled.

His face was free of emotion for a fraction of a second, then he burst out laughing. “Christ, you were busy while I was gone. I’d better give McKenna the heads-up or else she’s gonna wonder why your girlfriend’s acting weird around her.”

“Good idea.”

“Just so you know,” I said with a grin. “Erin thought your fictitious plan to propose to McKenna during tonight’s fireworks was romantic.”

He snorted a laugh. “That’s only because she believed it was me proposing to McKenna.” He smacked me on the chest and went back inside the room.

Maybe he was right about the proposal. Which meant I needed to come up with a new Plan A—especially since I’d already told Erin about Conner’s fictitious plan to propose during the fireworks.

What I needed was to do something unexpected.

And that was where Mashed Potato came in.

But first I needed to convince the shelter to let me adopt him instead of them giving him to Erin’s ex.

CHAPTER 5

ERIN

“Are you still interested in adopting Mashed Potato?” Asha asked Kingston.

“You’re adopting him?” I failed at keeping the high-pitched surprise out of my voice.

“That was the plan...but your boyfriend also wants to adopt him.”

“He does?”

Darren and I had talked a few times about getting a dog, but that had been more like a hypothetical. We didn’t even live together. I was living with Kelsey while she waited for Owen to pick a wedding date.

Kingston nodded. “Got the impression he wants to adopt him for you.”

“Really?” Any warmth inside me was snuffed out like a flame in a storm.

Was Mashed Potato a consolation prize because Darren was moving to North Carolina? *Thanks for being a great girlfriend. Enjoy your new companion.*

“You sound surprised.” Kingston crossed his arms, looking a tiny bit smug. “You don’t want a dog?”

“No, I would love to have one.”

“So, about Mashed Potato?” Asha asked as Darren and Conner joined us. “Are either of you still interested in adopting him?”

“I am.” Darren glared at Kingston as if to dare him to argue otherwise.

Kingston lifted his chin. “Me too.”

Asha glanced between the two men, her eyes wide, seemingly at a loss at what to do.

“Maybe they could arm wrestle to see who gets to adopt him,” Conner suggested with a chuckle.

“That’s. Um.” Asha cleared her throat. “That’s highly unusual.”

“It’s not a bad idea.” Kingston leveled a testosterone-loaded gaze at Darren. “Unless you’re afraid you’ll lose.”

Darren pierced him with the unwavering glare. “Bring it on.”

A laugh erupted from Conner. “Unusual or not, looks like the competition is on. Gentlemen.” He pointed to an empty table in the corner of the room.

Darren and Kingston didn’t wait for Asha to voice her concern. They walked over to the table, both looking prepared to go to battle. Determination smoldered in Darren’s expression.

They took a moment to warm up, jogging on the spot and stretching their arms and shoulders.

“Are they planning to win at arm wrestling or enter an Olympic event?” McKenna asked, laughter cozing up in her tone.

“Men!” I muttered. McKenna and Kelsey snickered.

Darren and Kingston sat in the chairs opposite to each other and put their elbows on the table.

Conner placed his hands flat on the table between the two men. “Is it the best of one or three?”

Darren and Kingston eyed each other up, possibly to calculate the odds of winning on the first go. Their builds were similar, so it could go either way. “One,” they said simultaneously.

“Okay. Get into position, and I’ll count you down.”

They did as instructed.

“On the one,” Conner told them. “Three. Two. One.”

The muscles in Darren’s and Kingston’s upper body tensed as they fought for dominance. Their faces turned red from the strain, but their arms remained in an upright position, barely swaying a fraction of an inch in either direction.

My heart beat rapidly as if I was the one arm wrestling. I pressed my teeth into my bottom lip, the anticipation too much.

“You can do it, Darren!” I cheered, louder than I probably should have, given we weren’t the only people in the room.

Kingston’s arm moved two inches, gaining an advantage over Darren. My stomach dropped to the tile floor.

I gasped. I might have whispered, “No!” I wasn’t positive.

And then it was Darren who, in a sudden burst of energy or by some divine intervention, was pushing Kingston’s hand toward the table. The back

of his hand touched the surface.

Darren's stunned expression wasn't that of a man who had won due to a burst of energy or divine intervention or anything like that. Kingston shrugged, but I recognized the look on his face. He'd let Darren win—and Darren knew it.

"He's all yours." Kingston looked between Darren and me, as if asking which of us would be Mashed Potato's owner. As if he also knew Darren would soon be breaking my heart and moving away.

He doesn't know. Only I know the truth. Tears clouded my vision. *Happy thoughts. Don't let them see you cry.*

Not that it mattered. Everyone would assume these were tears of joy because Darren had won Mashed Potato.

"Perfect," Asha said. "Do you want to start the paperwork now?"

"Yes," Darren told her as Mr. Kitty Whiskers let out another plaintive meow.

"I should get him home," Kelsey said. "And finish setting up for the party."

"I'll walk you out." I needed to tell Kelsey, before my world fell apart, about the phone call I overheard. I tugged a smile onto my lips, straining to keep it from falling flat on its face, and directed the smile at Darren. "I won't be long."

Kelsey and I headed for the exit. "I can't believe you guys are getting a dog," she said, her voice all breathy. "That's a huge step in a relationship."

"It's Darren's way of breaking up with me."

She adjusted the box in her arms. "He's not breaking up with you. The man loves you. He's adopting Mashed Potato because you love the dog."

I shook my head. "I overheard his supervisor earlier talking on the phone. Darren accepted a job in Charlotte."

The last time I'd seen Kelsey this surprised....well, I'd have to get back to you on that. But I could guarantee it had been a very long time. "Are you sure? Did you talk to him about it?"

"Not yet. I guess he's waiting till tomorrow to tell me. He didn't want to ruin my New Year's Eve." My heart stumbled and tripped and my chest hurt just thinking about it.

I pulled open the door, and we stepped into the hallway. A few people walked past us, heading toward the indoor basketball courts at the other end.

"That does sound like something he'd do," she said. "I'm so sorry, Erin."

And as soon as I put this box in my car, I'll give you a big hug."

"Thanks. I definitely need a hug." More than Kelsey could've possibly realized.

CHAPTER 6

DARREN

As I filled in Mashed Potato's adoption paperwork, I was hit with a new-and-improved idea for proposing to Erin.

"Can I buy the ribbon in your hair?" I asked the white college-aged volunteer who'd handed me the papers. "I want to tie a surprise to Mashed Potato's harness for my girlfriend." His big floppy ears would hide the ring.

"If you promise to give him a good home," she said, untying the blue ribbon from her ponytail. "I'll throw in the ribbon for free."

"I promise."

She gave it to me, and I handed her the completed paperwork. She checked it over. "Congratulations! You're now his lucky owner."

I'd be even luckier if Erin said yes when I propose to her at midnight.

I kneeled next to Mashed Potato and secured the ring to his harness.

All right, maybe that wasn't a great idea. I still had to pick up supplies for him on the way home.

I took hold of the end of his leash, and we headed out of the room.

A white cat darted out of nowhere, bolted past us in the hallway, and barreled up the steps to the main floor of the community center.

Mashed Potato barked and lurched forward, straining on his leash.

And a second later, the leash went lax in my hand with Mashed Potato bounding up the stairs, leaving his end of the leash on the floor in front of me.

I snatched it up and went after them, taking two steps at a time. Luckily, the door to the main entrance was shut so they couldn't escape the building that way.

The cat hightailed it around a corner. Mashed Potato followed in pursuit, seeming to have the time of his life.

Erin entered through the glass double doors in time to witness the butt end of her dog disappear around the same corner.

“Mashed Potato’s leash came unhooked,” I said in a rush and sprinted after the two animals with Erin right behind me.

He vanished into a room farther down the hallway. I chased after him.

The large room had clearly been set up for a New Year’s Eve party. Long tables lined the periphery of it, their black tablecloths decorated with glittery gold runners. Pearlized helium balloons in black and silver and gold crowded the ceiling, their ribbons dangling in the air.

Afternoon sunlight shone through the picturesque windows along the outside wall, giving the room a warm, magical glow.

“Wow, this place looks incredible,” Erin said behind me, her voice an awed whisper.

“Guess we should get those two out of here before they cause trouble.” I assumed the cat was also in here.

“They couldn’t have gotten out of this room. They must be under the tables. Mashed Potato?” Erin called out.

A loud hiss came from under a table opposite us. Followed by a bark.

A blur of white shot out from under a table, then Mashed Potato poked his head out from under the tablecloth. He scampered out the rest of the way, his small body dragging the cloth with him.

I darted to the table in time to prevent a decoration tragedy, but I wasn’t fast enough to catch Mashed Potato. He went chasing after the cat again, but this time at a more leisurely pace.

“Mashed Potato!” Erin beckoned. He turned and bounded over to her, his tail wagging, the cat quickly forgotten.

Erin crouched and scratched behind his ear. A small divot formed between her eyes, and she lifted up one of Mashed Potato’s floppy ears. The ear over where I’d attached the diamond ring.

This was it. Forget fireworks and proposing in front of our friends. This...the room, the private moment between us, Mashed Potato as our witness—it all felt more right than anything I could have planned.

I walked over to Erin, kneeled in front of her, and untied the ring.

Outside the window, the clouds separated, casting a bright ray of light on us like a spotlight. “Erin Taylor Salway. I love you with all my heart. I love

waking up next to you in the morning, and I love falling asleep with you in my arms at night. I miss you when you're not by my side, and I count down the seconds until you're with me again. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?" The words came out easily, without a hint of hesitation.

Did Erin look happy? Overjoyed? Not exactly. More like taken aback. Confused.

Definitely not the reaction I was expecting.

"Um, wow," she said, stumbling over her words. "Why are you proposing with Conner's ring?"

"It's not Conner's ring. He's not proposing to McKenna. I am."

Erin's eyebrows shot up, wrinkling her brow. "You're proposing to McKenna?"

Damn. "No, I meant I'm the one doing the proposing. To you." Which I had just done. Did she miss that part?

Erin stared at me.

Shit. Did I get that all wrong? I'd thought she wanted to one day get married and have a family. Maybe she did. Just not with me.

My heart dropped, taking my stomach with it.

"B-but you're moving to North Carolina," she said, her voice so soft, I barely heard her. "You didn't even ask me if I wanted to go with you. You just accepted the job."

Now it was my turn to be confused. I shook my head. "I'm not moving anywhere. I'm staying in San Francisco. What job are you talking about?"

"I don't know. I overheard Katarina Dewitt on the phone. She was telling the other person you had accepted the position in Charlotte and you'll make a great addition to the team."

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise. Darren Carmichael was offered a job there. Not me."

"Carmichael?" Erin dropped her head in her hands. "God, I heard her say Darren and assumed she meant you. I thought you were going to break up with me and move there."

I pulled Erin's hands away from her face. "Hey, if I was offered a job, I would talk to you about it first. It would be both of our decisions. I love you, Erin. I have no intention of going anywhere without you."

"You don't?" Her eyes shone in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

I caressed her cheekbone. “Never. The only place I want to be is with you.”

She released a featherlight breath from between her parted lips. “Okay, ask me again. Ask me if I’ll marry you.” Hope filled her eyes, her voice, the lines of her body.

“Erin Taylor Salway. Would you do me the honor of being my wife?” My voice caught on the last part, the emotion of the moment catching up with me. A moment that couldn’t have been more perfect.

“Yes. I’ll marry you, Darren.” She laughed, her eyes glistening, but fortunately for a different reason this time. “I want to be with you. Forever. With you and your dog.”

“Our dog.” I looked down at the fluffball and up at the balloons covering the ceiling. My gaze snagged on the clock on the wall. The hands were seconds away from 2 p.m. our time.

Seconds away from Athens welcoming in the new year.

I slipped the ring on her finger, the diamond glinting in the sunlight, and my heart inflated like the helium balloons.

I cupped Erin’s face with both hands and kissed her. The tender brushing of lips set off fireworks inside me that none other could compare to—not even the ones ringing in the new year.

“I love you.” I deepened the kiss, my tongue worshipping the woman who had my heart and body and soul.

And who would always have them—now and forever more.

Want to find out if Kelsey gets her happily-ever-after ending? Check out Trent and Kelsey’s story in *Decidedly Off Limits*. <https://books2read.com/DecidedlyOffLimits>

ABOUT STINA LINDENBLATT

Born in Brighton England, USA Today bestselling author Stina Lindenblatt has lived in a number of countries, including England, the US, Finland, and Canada. This would explain her mixed up accent. She has a kinesiology degree and a MSc in sports biological sciences. In addition to writing fiction, she loves photography, and currently lives in Calgary, Canada, with her husband and three kids. Find out more about Stina [here](#).

Sign up for Stina's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

By the Bay Series

[Decidedly Off Limits](#)

[Decidedly with Baby](#)

[Decidedly with Love](#)

[Decidedly with Mistletoe](#)

[Decidedly by Chance](#)

[Decidedly with Luck](#)

[Decidedly with Wishes](#)

Love Undercover

[While You Were Spying](#)

[Spying Under the Mistletoe](#)



THE HOWLIDAY CONTRACT

MK MEREDITH

ABOUT...THE HOWLIDAY CONTRACT

After a heart-wrenching betrayal, Sybil Averoff may have to close her organic pet food store forever unless she can persuade the mouth-watering and risk-averse CFO of Moscardi Farms to go against his better judgment and take a chance.

Yet the more time they spend together, the harder it is to resist their attraction and sparks fly with an unexpected sexy rebound. When business meets pleasure, can she seal the deal or will this holiday contract remain unsigned?

CHAPTER 1

Sybil Averoff rolled over with a groan to the musical compilation of pending doom that was her social media notifications. Ding-ding... ding-ding-ding...

Closing her eyes for a moment, she wished going back to sleep would somehow magically erase the horror of the past few days, but the truth was, she didn't think anything could fix the damage her cheating ex had caused all within a seventy-two-hour period. The hard-fought success of her organic pet food, Averoff Organics, was being canceled with every notification dinging from her phone, and worse, her customers' beloved pets were getting sick.

From her pet food.

Devastation squeezed her heart in a tight-fisted grip, and the one around her stomach wasn't any less fierce. The weight of it all felt as though her legs wouldn't hold her up—if she even found the courage to get out of bed at all. She pulled her blanket over her head, trying to block out the reality of her life. Hiding forever seemed like a reasonable solution.

In a sudden whoosh, her blankets flew from her body; then her room flooded with light. Blinking against the harsh brightness, she groaned, “Rissy, close the blinds.”

“Get up. There is no fucking way we're letting that asshole destroy your company. We're facing this head-on. Grab your phone and robe and meet me in the kitchen.” Her sister, Iris—Rissy to friends, marched across the room then paused briefly at the door. “Now.”

“Fuck off, Rissy. I'm not...” But her sister had already disappeared down the hall. Nothing sounded worse than facing the hate and vitriol from the social media masses. And she didn't blame them. They'd trusted her with the

health and wellbeing of their fur babies and her small-batch, handmade, organic pet food caused them gastric issues not for the faint of heart. Her only saving grace so far was the remaining fact that no beloved pets had been lost.

Grabbing her phone, she took a peek at the morning's latest posts on the social media app. Moments later, the first image that came across her feed was the smarmy smirk of her ex sharing a kiss with the woman he'd cheated on her with. To make matters way worse, the same woman had tried to sell her spoiled grain. Sybil refused the order, but apparently, Jeremy thought it would be a great idea to go behind her back and make a deal. As she studied his face, it hit her—she was devastated by the injury to the fur babies, not the loss of him. On a scoff, she swiped through her feed, landing on the lush goodness of Moscardi Farms advertising an adoption event, Paws for a Cause, with proceeds going to the local animal rights organization.

Making quick work of a sweatshirt, joggers, and a baseball hat, she swept past her sister, grabbing her keys as she went. "Come on."

Rissy slid into the Jeep's passenger seat. "Where are we going? We have work to do, Sibby."

"Agreed. And I know the best place to start. Mom and Dad didn't raise us to hide or blend in, so I'm not going to." Sybil pulled in a deep slightly shaky breath. "I have to face it, fix it, and come back stronger." She reached over and squeezed her sister's hand. "It's a hell of a lot easier to do knowing you're right beside me."

Rissy grinned. "That's my girl. Averoff girls don't hide."

They fist bumped through to an explosion, and Sibby could finally breathe for the first time in three days.

Moscardi Farm in the winter was as spectacular as in spring, more so in many ways. It never failed to amaze her with its lush and earthy beauty, and as the two women drove along the drive to the event site on the farm, they gawked at the beauty of red and gold garland, Christmas ornaments, and larger-than-life snowflakes that led the way.

Christmas on Moscardi Farm was magical. Plain and simple.

The Paws for a Cause event space was bordered with evergreens bedazzled with twinkling lights. An array of refreshment stands boasted local

merchants, including hot cocoa and egg nog, and different sections were roped off by decorated Christmas trees and candy cane ropes in order to contain the dogs and puppies and cats and kittens. "This is spectacular," Rissy said.

Nodding, Sybil got out of the jeep and slammed the door as an afterthought. "Incredible." The sight of sweet furry muzzles and snow-white whiskers warmed her battered heart a little.

"Are you okay?" Rissy rubbed her arm, looking her closely in the eye.

"Yeah, I will be." Sybil pulled her shoulders back. "I want to be visible. I want to take responsibility for what happened and fix it. But first, I need to feel some furry goodness and wet kisses."

"Now that sounds like fun. What party are *you* going to?" The deep voice came from behind her, skittering up her spine and leaving a tingle in its wake.

Sybil slowly turned her head to find sage green eyes staring back in interest, a mischievous smile pulling at the corner of delicious lips, and dark wavy hair flopped over a strong brow. A powerful urge to smooth it back had her shoving her hands into the front pocket of her sweatshirt.

A slow whistle came from Rissy's lips, making Sybil want to pinch her.

Sybil tilted her head. "Excuse me?" Why was her heart pounding so fast? Surely not from the depth of his eyes that spoke more to long conversations by the fire or the lumberjack build of his body that made her itch to climb a tree. She resisted the interest urging her to step forward. A rebound, though a good distraction, wasn't going to help her save her dream.

"I'm just saying...furry goodness and wet kisses don't sound like a bad plan." With a wink, he flashed a grin and stuck out his hand. "Nikolai Moscardi."

She laughed. "Ahhhh, a Moscardi brother, of course." She gave his hand a shake but dropped it quickly, shocked by the flutter caused by his touch. What the sweet hell was that? "Sybil Averoff."

"Oh, I know." He teased with an arched brow. "Sorry to hear about what happened with your dog food. But hey, if it helps and you find yourself tumbling in furry goodness, I'm your guy for the wet kisses."

Bracing against the onslaught of heartbreak from the painful reminder, she tried to search for some sort of witty banter. "Absolutely, the day I get furry, the wet kisses are all yours."

He gave a slow salute. "Now that...is a deal I'll take."

She slammed her mouth shut in mortification.

“What the hell was that shit storm of awkward?” Rissy chuckled as the two women watched his sexy ass disappear around the corner of one of the adorable greenhouses.

“Oh my god. Kill me now.”

Rissy sucked air in between her teeth. “That man is hot.”

Sybil shook her head though her body was nodding yes. “That man’s a distraction.” Feeling more ridiculous by the minute, Sybil headed toward the dogs waiting to be adopted, the sight of so many healthy fur babies a salve to her battered heart. A beautiful white and gray Husky caught her eye, his icy blue stare one of longing rather than the predatory study often associated with the wolf-like glance. As she approached the segmented-off section, he spun and then pawed at the kennel latch.

“Hi, sweet boy.” She slid her fingers between the metal slats of the kennel and dug them deep into his floof. “How’d such a sweet boy end up here?”

He tossed his head back in a silent bark as if trying to tell her a secret.

Huskies were usually quite avid talkers, so his silent though dramatic huffs lulled her into forgetting a very important personality trait. She opened his kennel to pet him more easily, and before she could swing the door open, he shoved past her and took off.

“Don’t let him out!” The deep bellow of Nikolai Moscardi hit her ears too late.

She’d forgotten that huskies were notorious flight risks...

Without thinking, she took off after the fluff.

...and the harder they’re chased, the faster they run.

So typical.

Nikolai tempered down the “fuck” that threatened to choke him upon seeing the husky dash past Sybil Averoff. She was in the business, for fuck’s sake. The husky in question was named Marley; he had a few anomalies when it came to the breed, but running off wasn’t one of them. The smile on his face as he looked over his shoulder to see who was in hot pursuit spoke of the joy he took in the freedom of flight.

“Stop chasing him!” he yelled out, but Sybil couldn’t hear him over the din of people jumping out of the way, spilling their hot cocoa, or catching the

temper of a disturbed cat mid-petting session. Nikolai tried to gauge where Marley was running to head him off down his path.

“Niko! What’s going on?” Eldest brother and old soul Stefano Moscardi pushed through the throng to assess the damage. Fano to friends and family, he lived his life trusting his emotions and talking his plants into their healthiest best lives. He was a unicorn of a man and an incredible big brother. Niko looked up to him to this day.

“I got it. I got it. Marley got out and took off,” Niko said. He waved off his brother. “Go back to the adoption registrations. I’ll take care of it.”

Fano followed the trail of chaos until he caught sight of the brunette in the baseball cap chasing the escape artist. He jerked his chin. “Who’s that?”

Niko followed the direction of his brother’s gaze, his body tightening as he took in the sight of the interesting woman dashing between Christmas trees to rein in Marley. “Sybil Averoff from Averoff Organics.”

Fano raised a brow. “Really?”

Niko recognized the quiet respect in his brother’s question.

“She’s going through some tough shit with the sins of her ex blasted all over social media.”

Niko nodded. “She is, but it was on her watch. Her company. Ya gotta own your shit.”

Fano held his gaze a beat then looked out over their guests and the animals hoping to be adopted. “And sometimes you’re just given it.”

Once his brother returned to helping Paws for a Cause match fur babies to their new home, Niko focused back on the problem at hand. Ducking between two sheds, he set out to cut Marley off at the evergreen-bordered edge of the field. It didn’t pass by him that Fano was giving Sybil the benefit of the doubt about her situation, but for Niko, the numbers told the story. She was the founder and CEO. She was solely responsible for the hiring, the project management, and results within her company.

She had to deal with her shit, so to speak, and as he took in her determined expression and agile footwork as she tried to corner Marley, he couldn’t help but be drawn to her strength, to the fact that she was there, facing her pet world in the face of aggressive online attacks. The lady had some huge balls.

Sprinting across the open grass to head Marley off from the opposite direction, he gestured to Sybil to guard her side. Marley skidded to a halt, grin wide, tongue flopping out of his mouth as he panted in excitement. “You

can't chase him; he thinks it's a game."

"Now you remind me." She threw him an accusatory look.

"You're the one with a pet food company. Don't you know your dog breeds?" he tossed back as he slowly walked toward Marley.

She scowled. "I'm sure you're loving this. Cherry on top—"

"Look out!"

Marley sprinted directly toward her.

Before she could even lift her hands, the husky launched from his hind legs and sailed through the air, shoving her off her feet to her back with a sickening thud. Sprawled across her body, the excited dog licked her face, thinking it was a game as she tried to shove him off her. With an excited growl, he launched back, play-biting her forearms and licking her face.

"Get him off of me!" Her laugh belied her demand, and when she held the husky's face in her hands and kissed his nose, Niko felt a shift that he couldn't describe. No way was he getting involved with a woman mid-rebuild of her life. But damn.

He grabbed Marley by his harness and reached down to help her stand up. Her Mediterranean skin was blushed with her efforts. Her skin void of any makeup shone luminous. Her deep brown eyes sparkled with good humor, and that mouth...

His eyes dropped to her body and widened at the sight of white poofs clinging to every visible area of her sweatshirt and joggers. She was covered in fur.

"Ya know, we had a deal." He couldn't hide the drop in his voice as he helped her to her feet.

"Thanks," she laughed, trying to brush off the hair. "Wait, what deal?"

Before thinking through his decision-making, he tugged at her hand, bringing her close to his chest. "Wet kisses."

Her deep brown eyes widened in surprise, and her generous lips parted.

The velvety softness of her mouth landed against his and hit him with such a punch he widened his stance to stay on his feet. With a deep press, he let himself get lost for a heartbeat then inhaled and tore his mouth from hers before he turned his playful move into a mistake. But, fuck, he'd never forget her taste or how perfectly her mouth fit against his. As if made for one another.

He stepped back and cleared his throat needing to check himself; he was sounding like his brother, for fuck's sake.

If her dazed expression was any indication, she struggled the same, which went a long way in boosting his pride. It apparently hadn't occurred to her yet that maybe she should hit him or at least give him a resounding fuck you.

Instead, she grabbed Marley by his harness. "Deal's a deal." Then she led the happy dog back toward the party.

Niko watched her as she went, unable to take his eyes off the sway of her ass in her joggers.

What was going on?

He was a man of numbers, not sentiment. His job depended on it. He procured business and assessed risk. Emotions didn't factor, data was everything.

And the data for Sybil Averoff wasn't good, but her lips...fuck, her lips were an eleven on a ten-point scale.

CHAPTER 2

In the back office of her very quiet store, Sybil edited her video, making sure her apology was direct with no passive-aggressive nonsense. She owned what happened, would take care of any medical bills for the fur babies affected, and would work tirelessly to earn the trust of her clients again. Once she was satisfied and set the accompanying text, she pushed her post out on all Averoff Organics' media sites.

That was step one of a long process, but step two was on his way. After the kiss at the farm, she hadn't been able to get Niko out of her head or dreams, which was nonsense. Her mini obsession was definitely a sign that her heartbreak from her ex had everything to do with the animals and nothing to do with the loss of the asshole.

What she needed from Niko wasn't the healing distraction of rebound sex, but whoa, wouldn't it be great? What she needed was a partnership with Moscardi Farms. If she could get them to sign a contract with her to provide her ingredients, farm-to-table style, then she could leverage their solid reputation to help repair her own. Her pet food was special, damn it. Her yearning to provide healthy nourishment to these little angels who changed lives was everything to her. She'd never make the mistake of letting her personal life cross over to her professional life again. Hell, after her experience with Jeremy, she was pretty much done trusting anyone, much less herself.

From now on, she was all about solid, well-thought-out strategies, Averoff Organics first, and apologies and amends followed by rebuilding. That was her plan. That was her future. Because she had nothing without it.

Now, she just had to get Nikolai Moscardi to agree.

The new age chime of the store door floated to her ears, alerting her to Niko's arrival. She made her way through the earthy and succulent aisles until the gorgeous man came into view. It would certainly be a hell of a lot easier if the guy wasn't quite so appealing.

"Hey, Niko, thanks for stopping by." She smiled, trying to block out the sensation of his lips pressing against hers. The heat, the savory promise.

She blinked.

His grin was slow as he studied her face. "Stefano wanted me to give you this paperwork for Marley, so I'd be here regardless."

She took the paperwork and set it on the front counter. "Thank you."

Rubbing her hands on the front of her relaxed jeans, she pulled in a fortifying breath. "So, I wanted to talk to you about something."

His green gaze was curious as he approached the tall counter. "Concerning?" He drew out the word, implying something intimate.

"The farm, of course. The farm," she said quickly, hoping the heat along her cheeks didn't show.

The brief look of disappointment would have elated her if the stakes had been different, but she had to save her business. Business, not pleasure. She bit her lip.

"I would like to set up a meeting to propose a business proposition for Moscardi Farms. I'd like a supply contract, a partnership. Similar to what you'd set up with a farm-to-table restaurant."

He put a hand up. "We don't really do that, so I appreciate the—"

"Hear me out." She blurted. "Look, I need this. I'm determined to come back from this horrible situation, Niko. I'm not giving up on my dream." She swung her hand out, indicating the usually bustling store now silent and empty.

"Sybil."

"Sibby."

He tilted his head with a slight dip to his chin. "Sibby, that's a risk I refuse to let Moscardi Farms take on. I appreciate your situation"—he put his hand up to stop her from interrupting—"I do, but we can't help you."

Her stomach turned sour. She had to make this work. She couldn't think of any other way, and man had she tried. She and Rissy brainstormed for hours. Even Rissy's best friend Six came over and hashed out ideas over wine. This was the way. Her only chance. She needed the strength of an established, respected business to lend her the credibility needed for even the

chance to redeem herself.

“Look, I’m taking full responsibility for what happened. I’ve issued statements, satisfied the cost of any vet bills, and made promises to my clients. This is a promise I’m determined to keep, Niko.”

He shook his head.

“Give me a week. Do a proper assessment.”

“Sybil...Sibby.” He put his hand out in apology, and she couldn’t help but notice the calluses along the upper ridge of his palm. That was a surprise.

“One week. You owe me.”

That brought him up short. And he raised a brow with the Moscardi family arrogance. “I owe you?” She imagined his sharp narrow gaze kept the best of men silent, but it only inflamed her in more ways than one.

“I should have knocked you out for that kiss. But I let it go, let you keep your dignity in the very public loss of my own.” She hoped he couldn’t see through her lie. She hadn’t thought this at all. As soon as his lips had touched hers, any thought in her mind disappeared in a blast of white bliss.

He grimaced as she reminded him of her floof covered joggers. “Come on. It was a joke, a claiming of our deal.”

“It was spontaneous, not thought out, and presumptuous. Very un-Nikolai Moscardi if you ask me.” She mirrored his stance and narrowed her own gaze. “I’m just asking you to continue that trend and analyze my business. If, in the end, you don’t think Moscardi Farms can carry the burden”—her stomach turned at the thought—“I’ll accept your verdict with no ill will.”

His beautiful green eyes studied her hard. “For me or the farm.”

“Not an ounce.”

He sighed. “Fine.”

With a squeal and avalanche of relief, Sybil launched into his arms. “Thank you!” He smelled of ocean and evergreen, and she didn’t think she’d ever smelled anything more delicious.

“One week. Starting now.” He gave her a tight bear hug of a squeeze, lifting her feet from the ground; the kind where every hard plane and firm mound of muscle imprinted on her body. Then, he very purposely untangled from her arms and set her away from him. His manner was all business, but his eyes were all bedroom.

Clearing his throat, he snapped his fingers twice. “Clock is ticking. I want to start with your books.”

A few hours later, Niko pushed back from her desk. “The numbers look good. You took a pretty big hit this week, but as long as nothing crazy happens, you’ll carry through this month.”

A fiber of tension released in her neck. She’d put off his inspection of the recent social media posts as long as possible in favor of showing him all the strong and meaningful facts about Averoff Organics. “Great. Why don’t I show you production?”

As she led him to the back of the building where the magic happened, she couldn’t help but be aware of his large body looming behind her like a great wave. She just didn’t know yet if it was a wave that would take her under or one that would lift her up.

A trickling noise, like water in a small fountain, could be heard from behind the double doors of the cooking room, and with a quick glance over her shoulder, she pushed on through.

“No!” Her chest squeezed tight, and her limbs exploded with the sensation of pins and needles. The large commercial sinks were spewing water so fast that the floor drain couldn’t keep up, and there, in the middle of the small pond, was Marley in a wet sploot, very focused on chewing through a third black hose.

Her heart sank. ‘Nothing crazy’ just happened and then some. “Marley, no!” She splashed through the water to find the main water valve. Once it was turned off and the water quit filling the floor, she slowly turned around to take in the destruction. Fortunately, most of her ingredients were on shelves, but the most recent delivery of grains sat soaking in inches of water.

“It looks worse than it is,” she assured Niko. “Nothing a few fans can’t fix.”

He sloshed through the ankle-deep water then hunkered down by the sinks. Reaching under the middle one, he pulled out the rest of the hose and broken piping that connected the set. He didn’t say a word as he held the evidence toward her with a raised brow.

Gritting her teeth, she stretched her lips into a smile. “How much could it be?”

Niko wanted to pull the woman into his arms and shield her from the view, the forced smile on her face belying the pain he knew she must be feeling. But he also knew she didn't want saving. Besides, he wasn't in that business. And he reminded himself of that fact over and over again.

Dropping the offending piping, he pulled the other piece of the hose away from the Husky, who blissfully sprawled in the cool water.

She clapped her hands. "It's fine. It's fine." The word ended on a high note. She pushed open the side doors, and Niko yelled out, "Watch Marley!"

Unconcerned, Sybil pushed the rest of the doors open, barely glancing back at the menace. "It's the weirdest thing. Ever since I brought him home, as long as he sees me, he won't step outside unless he's on a leash with me. Drives my sister mad when she's tried to take him for walks. I have to disappear before he'll go with her.

He glanced back at Marley to find him still happily sprawled out in his happy place. Huskies were notorious flight risks, but sometimes, rescues know a good thing when they find it.

As he watched her move about the room, opening windows, mopping water toward the drain, and setting out fans, he had to agree. There was something pretty special about Sybil Averoff.

The rest of the afternoon flew by in a flurry of husky floof, plumbing estimates, and supply purging. Sybil, or rather Sibby, took it all in stride. She was cool and focused under fire. He imagined it was the only way to get through the crappy situations she was in. And the whole time they righted the wrong of Marley in the cooking room, not one client came through the front door.

"So, what's the damage?" he asked.

Running her fingers through her long dark hair, she gathered it up high onto her head and fashioned it into some sort of bun, anchoring it to her head with the pen in her hand. "Well, my insurance covers everything but my deductible. That takes a good portion of my emergency fund, but ideally, that's what it's for. Unfortunately, it sets back production, but let's face it; if today is any indication, demand is way down." She pulled in a deep heavy breath.

Quelling the urge to pull the woman into his arms, he leaned against the tall counter of the storefront. "What's that mean for this next month?"

He already knew the truth. If nothing changed, and soon, it meant the doors would close for good.

She shook out her arms as if trying to make the negative energy of late fall go away. With a hard, long look, she stepped close.

His body immediately jerked to attention at the look in her eye as her sweet scent wafted about him.

She leaned in with a look in her eyes that was both panic and determination. "I can't think about next month. In fact, I don't want to think at all."

The luscious velvet of her lips slammed against his, and her body followed suit. The feel of her breasts pressed against his chest stole his air, and his hands filled with her commanding curves. If she didn't want to think, he could definitely support that decision. Lifting her against him, he covered the few steps to a display table and set her luscious ass on top, spreading her legs with his hips. Without asking, she wrapped her strong thighs around him, anchoring him against her heat.

Sibby's hair tumbled down from her bun, the pen clattering to the floor, and he dove his fingers through her silky hair, angling her head so he could have the access he desired to her delicious mouth. As their tongues slid and tangled around the other, she moaned deep, the sound pushing him closer to the edge. "Good God, Woman."

She grabbed his ass and pulled him in tighter, grinding against his hard cock as if he were her lifeline. And he was there for it. He slid his tongue along her jawline to nip at her earlobes. She tasted like honey and smelled like vanilla, a drugging combination he'd never forget and feared now would always crave. Following the line of her neck to her collarbone, he pushed aside her white button-up to press his lips against the delicate skin just below. He filled his hands with the generous mounds of her breasts, lifting them together, pressing his face into the bared cleavage.

"More," she demanded.

His brain in a frenzy, he hungrily complied, releasing the buttons of her shirt then pushing down the thin sheer fabric of her bra to release the tight tan peek of her nipple. His mouth watered before he even got a taste. "Fuck."

"Yes, right there. Yes." She demanded against the side of his neck.

Sibby continued to rock against his body faster and faster as he savored her

"Oh fuck. Don't stop. Niko, don't stop."

He couldn't if he wanted to. His cock was straining to reach her, painfully hard, and it was the best fucking feeling in the world. She was too decadent,

too rich to resist. His wet dream—since meeting her—come to life. This incredible woman...needing him, wanting him, in his arms, crying out for release. Hell yes.

She squeezed her thighs around him, rearing her head back in a full arch that pushed her breasts higher for him to taste, and ground into him hard as she came. He'd never forget the look of pure ecstasy on her face. Brow furrowed, white teeth bared. Such an intimate, primal vision.

As her breath slowed, a strong urgent need to protect her rose in his chest. Two things were true: There was no way he'd push himself on her now, and it killed him to think there was nothing he could do to help save her company.

Pressing her fingers to her lips, she looked up at him in a combination of mortification and challenge. "I should be embarrassed, but I really, really needed that."

Dropping a hard wet kiss to her mouth, he grinned. "Glad to be of service."

She dropped her legs, sitting tall on the table, a flush of effort on her cheeks. "And I appreciate it, but please don't get any ideas. I really don't have time for a rebound."

He flashed her a grin. "Who does? But what a way to fit it in."

Gently urging him back so she could stand, she righted her bra and blouse, smoothed her disheveled hair back from her face, and cleared her throat. "I know this was my idea, but I'm no longer in the trusting people frame of mind so, no offense, but this can't happen again."

Eyeing the bulging front of his jeans, she bit her lip. "And I recognize that I suck because you're left..." She waved her hands toward his junk. "Undone."

His bark of laughter filled the room, and he grabbed the bulge in his jeans. "Woman, you've given me enough material to take care of myself over and over and over again. So don't think another thing about it." With a growl, he kissed her hard.

She grinned. "That was fun, wasn't it? Does this add in a positive way to my analysis or..."

On a chuckle, he wagged his dark brows. "I'm very good at my job, Ms. Averoff. Business and pleasure never affect the other...even when the pleasure is very, very good."

Her shoulders dropped just a hint, but she masked the deflation well.

Lifting her chin, she challenged. “Was it?”

Niko stopped short. “Was what?”

“The pleasure good.”

“Wasn’t it?” He didn’t know where she was going with this and looked for the trap.

“It was for me. I did all the work.”

He quickly yanked her to him while her eyes popped wide and her lips parted. But instead of taking her mouth and showing her, he just barely slid against them in the merest whisper and said, “Sibby, when I get my hands on you—and I mean really get my hands on you—you won’t remember your name or why you came to me in the first place.”

At those words, she snapped out of whatever post cum stupor she may have operated in and straightened to her full height just below his chin. “I have to get back to work. Thanks for stopping by.”

He let her win and made his way to the door. He wasn’t positive about what caused the change, but he had an idea, and a nibble of guilt worked away at his gut.

“Sunday, dinner at the Farm. Eight p.m. Don’t be late,” he said.

“I’m not coming to the farm, Niko.”

“Yes, you are. We have all our prospects come out. Stefano and the family like to meet anyone we’re considering. Come or no analysis.”

He held back a grin. She’d certainly cum.

Sibby sneered with more humor than bite. “Fuck you very much, Niko.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it.”

CHAPTER 3

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Sibby muttered as she pulled her car up to the front drive of Moscardi Farms. She couldn’t get her dry-humping orgasm out of her head since she’d jumped Niko and relived it at least five times in her dreams. God, but her body needed the release after the days of negative onslaught.

It had done the trick, focusing her mind and efforts even harder on saving her company. She’d released a series of videos showing the integrity and promise behind her pet food; she attended interviews and owned the mistake, and she checked in on the affected pets to make sure all were healthy and thriving once again.

Stepping out of the car, she opened the door for Marley to join her.

“Wait!” A deep bellow sounded from across the green by a long dining table sparkling with silver and glass. The space sat between the main house and a matching work building with large wood beams spanning across the top like a pergola. Hanging lights swept from board to board, casting a soft glow.

Stefano Moscardi jogged forward, his eyes wide with concern.

“Hi, Stefano.” Sibby waved, meeting him halfway, Marley at her heels, tongue hanging out and a wide smile on his furry face.

“How in the world?” The large, gorgeous man stared in wonder as her special floof pup didn’t run off.

“I don’t even know, but ever since we got home, he’s been stuck to my side.” It was quite an achievement and unheard of in the husky world. Her very own little miracle, and she had Southern Pet Sanctuary to thank.

Stefano shook his head with a look of pleasantly surprised disbelief as she took in the evergreen centerpieces bedazzled in mini ornaments and topped

with lit stars. Large, garland-adorned heat lamps radiated warmth making the space feel more indoor than out.

“Niko!” Fano shouted into the doorway of the house. “He’ll be out soon.” Stepping toward her, Fano kissed her cheek. “Now that my heart’s calmed down, Welcome to Moscardi Farms...again.”

“Thank you for having me. And thank you for even considering my business.”

Fano studied her quietly, his deep dark eyes sparkling as if he knew her secrets. Compassion shone from them in a way that was surprising from the larger-than-life man. “I was sorry to hear what happened to you, and I’m glad the animals involved all ended up being okay.”

The kindness challenged her composure. He was the first person to say they were sorry versus asking what she’d missed, why she hadn’t known better, stopped it, or would trust such an ass as her ex. “Thank you.”

Niko joined them, eyeing the situation with interest. “Hey, how much time before we eat?” The question was directed toward his brother.

A small grin stretched Fano’s scruff-covered cheeks in a way she didn’t trust. “An hour. Taking her to the maze?”

Niko shrugged. “Giving her a tour. That’s the point, right?”

“Whatever you say.” His brother went back to picking fresh basil from a potted plant.

With a shake of his head, Niko grabbed her hand to lead the way past the villa-styled house and along a long row of vines. “Where are we going?” The warmth of his hand made it hard to think. She remembered the slide of his strong palm along her sides and then the heat of his hands cupping her breasts.

Without answering, he ducked them through a vine-covered archway and into make-believe.

She sucked in a breath. “Wow, what is this place?” she asked, spinning in place.

Marley joined the game, chasing his tail in a dramatic fashion, which made them both laugh.

“It’s the maze.” He pulled her through the winding vine-bordered trail. There were so many twists and turns she feared she’d never find her way back. Or was it her feelings for this man?

No. No. No.

Tugging, she made him stop. “Where are we going?”

Niko pulled her hard against him. “I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since that kiss.”

Leaning her head back, her heart skittered in her chest with a familiar energy she craved. “You call that a kiss? I can’t wait to see what you call actual sex.” She laughed.

His eyes darkened to a deep evergreen. “I hoped you’d say that.” He pulled her deeper into the maze until it ended at a center that boasted a wine mosaic table flanked by two cushioned lounge chairs. The lattice supporting the grape vines went up and over the space, only letting bespeckled sunlight through.

Swinging back toward her, he grabbed her hips and pulled her close. “I was thinking a rebound would be exactly what you need to help get over that asshole.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders. “Niko, when is a rebound really ever very good?”

“This time.”

“I don’t want to hurt you. I can’t jump into anything, I’m...” She looked around, searching for the right words. “I’m trying to rebuild. I don’t know if I want to be with anyone...ever. I think I’m done.”

He placed light kisses along her jaw, sending goosebumps down her neck. “I’m not asking for anything. I’m not going to fall in love with you, and you won’t fall in love with me. We’ll save that kind of romance for my brother. But I want to taste you, to feel you, to see you soar again.” His voice was low and hoarse. “I can’t get you out of my head. But if you don’t want to, then of course—”

“No strings?” She demanded he say it again. Too much was on the line, but every fiber in her being wanted this man. Maybe a little rebound sex was exactly what she needed to clear her head. That way, she’d quit thinking about it and him all the time.”

“None.”

“What about our business?”

“I told you those two paths will never cross.”

His cologne clouded her mind and sharpened her senses at the same time. Walking her fingers from his wrist to elbow, she enjoyed a visual tour of his jeans and dark button-up shirt. He was always groomed, always put together, and the desire to mess him up a bit pulled a mischievous grin from her lips.

He watched her intently as if in pain, as her fingers slid along the waist of

his jeans, dipped inside, and then wrapped around the hard length of him, he released all the air in his chest in one deep woosh. “Fuck yes,” he groaned.

“Agreed,” she quipped, reveling in the long, thick potential in her hands. The heat and weight of him delighted her deep in her core. Her whole body tightened with wanting, and she glanced furtively around trying to assess just how private the maze really was.

This was insanity. But once they got started, she didn’t think anything could stop her.

His mouth slammed down on hers in a demand as much as a request, and her answer was an unequivocal yes.

Their tongues met sending an arc of need straight to her core. Niko grabbed fistfuls of her long cotton skirt and dragged it up above her hips as he walked her backward to the lounge, lowering her to her back. He quickly dropped his jeans and boxer briefs then shrugged out of his shirt, leaving her mouthwatering at the sight of him. The chair was covered with a soft knit throw, a warm contrast to the cool air and the searing heat from his gaze.

A growl of surprise at finding no underwear in his way pulled a euphoric giggle from her throat.

“It’s a good thing I didn’t realize this sooner,” he said, spreading her thighs to accommodate the width of his shoulders.

She gasped as his hot breath met the sensitive skin between her thighs. “Well, you better control yourself in the future.”

His tongue slid with a slick, sure pressure along her folds until it found that one spot that sent her to the stars. Again and again, he supped. A suckle here, a swirling there. His hands were everywhere, gliding across her bare thighs and sending goosebumps down her legs and up her back. Then he dipped beneath her cropped sweater to cup her breasts, skimming his fingertips across the sheer fabric of her bra, causing her nipples to tighten with a delicious zing.

“Niko.” She couldn’t help but say his name. His mouth continued to work magic, lifting her higher and higher. She gripped the throw tightly in her fist as she turned control of her body over to the desires of the man between her legs. “Oh my god, Niko.”

With one more slow, purposeful suck of her clit, he slid up her body until his lips met hers, and his pulsing heat slid with a hard insistence against her folds. She arched her back, pushing her breasts into his hands and lifting her hips to invite him in.

He hesitated, pressing lightly with the large round head of his cock, then again and again.

Continuing to gently massage one breast, he slid his other hand between their bodies and, grabbing himself, mimicked the swirling motion of his tongue with his cock then dragged it back to her center and entered her with one, slow, agonizingly sweet stroke. Her body stretched and contracted around him as pleasure teased and built in a frenzy.

“God, you’re fucking perfect.” He slammed his mouth to hers as his strokes turned to thrusts. Each met with the same insistence of her rising hips.

They rode the wave together to the apex of pleasure, and as the sensation grew unbearable, it burst, sending waves of exquisite pleasure through her body. Wave after wave, stealing her breath and her thoughts. Nothing mattered but this moment.

Clamping her thighs around him, she dropped her head back in ecstasy. Dragging their clasped hands to her mouth, she stifled her cry of pleasure-pain from her orgasm as he did the same against the pulse of her neck.

Their bodies eased to a steady rhythm of pulsing pleasure echoes as they caught their breath and regained their senses.

“Wow.” She could barely manage the one-syllable word. “That was...”

Earth-shattering. Life changing. The realization of her thoughts snapped her from the fantasy. Niko leaned back. “Agreed.”

She pressed her hands against his chest and sat up. “Exactly what I needed.”

He stood, staring at her with a quizzical look in his eye.

Grabbing his clothes, she tossed them to him. “We’d better get back before we’re missed. “

Glancing around, she spotted Marley curled up alongside the maze wall. “Come on, Marley.” He gave a lazy stretch then joined her side. Dropping her skirt, she smoothed out her sweater, and finger combed her hair into place.

“Okay, presentable?” She forced herself to keep a light, playful tone while, on the inside, she panicked from the depth of her feelings. Sex with Niko was supposed to ease her from the wanting, not increase it. He was a distraction, a coping mechanism, not potential for a future...anything.

But, the more time she spent with him, the more future kept flashing before her eyes. He was dedicated to his family, to their business. He was steadfast and precise, and she loved watching his brain work. He was fair and

attentive, and when he touched her, the world stopped, embracing her in an ecstasy-filled moment of sensorial bliss. She sucked in a breath and smoothed down her sweater.

Niko, now dressed, stayed blessedly silent but dipped his chin in confirmation.

With an arcing gesture of his hand, he invited her to lead them from the maze.

And with Marley happily trotting alongside them, Sybil prayed she could adopt the same carefree attitude before joining Niko's family for dinner.

Niko watched a myriad of emotions flit across Sybil's face. There was no telling what was going through her mind, but one thing kept going through his. That was the greatest sex of his God damned life.

Hands down.

But why?

It wasn't anything different or special that she did. Which meant it was just...her.

And what the hell was he going to do with that?

Back at the table, Sybil charmed and impressed. He'd swear Stefano was smitten right along with his Nona. And miracle of all miracles, Marley stayed by her side, never straying further than the length of her shadow.

Niko was beginning to understand why.

She was brilliant.

And a few hours later, his brother confirmed the sentiment. "She's smart. Good head for business, savvy at building relationships, and clearly dedicated," Stefano said as the two men watched her and Marley disappear with the fading tail lights of her car down the long drive.

Niko nodded.

He hoped his analysis showed the same positive review.

Because he kept his promises, he never crossed business with pleasure.

CHAPTER 4

Niko added a few of his own offerings under the ten-foot Christmas tree glittering front and center of Sibby's store. She put together a Christmas miracle of 'gifts' that included pet food, treats, toys, training accessories, and gift cards to help cover vet costs for the community affected by the tainted food that got by her.

It was generous and thoughtful and just another reason Niko dreaded this meeting.

He paced, running the numbers through his head again. It was business, not personal. That was his promise.

A promise that was really hard to keep as her taste and delicious scent ran through his memory, triggering an insatiable craving for more. Watching her soar under his touch was the hottest thing he'd ever experienced. Something shifted, and he never wanted to go back to living in a world without Sibby.

But now, he was about to shoot her out of the sky with no net to catch her fall.

Her scent hit him first—sweet and savory with a hint of vanilla. He swallowed hard.

"Hey! I didn't hear you come in." She bounded up to him, her dark hair framing her face in big waves that his fingers itched to touch. There was light in her eyes, humor, and heat. Like a punch to the gut.

She gestured toward the store entrance. "Be extra careful with opening the doors, every time I'm up on the ladder, Marley thinks I've gone outside and tries to go find me."

He grinned in understanding. He always wanted to be around her too. "Noted."

Her mouth took his in a thorough, quick kiss, and her body molded to his as if they were made for this moment.

Fuck.

He framed her face with his hands and kissed her twice on the mouth. “Your tree is amazing. I don’t know how you manage to fit this in your operations budget.”

She wrinkled her nose with a drawn-out, “Well...” Rounding the tree, she picked up a foil-wrapped gift, turned it over in her hand for inspection, then carefully returned it to its spot. “I didn’t. It came out of my pay.” She put her hand up to stop him. “As it should. The pets harmed were my responsibility. It was my trust that let them down. And I’m doing what I can to win that trust back. It’s important.”

Her integrity rocked him, and the tight band of pressure in his neck traveled up to wrap around his head. Squeezing the bridge of his nose. He gestured toward the counter. “I brought the paperwork to go over with you.”

She clapped her hands and joined him. “Great! I’ve been so nervous, but I feel really good about this. I’ve done everything I can, and I know a partnership with Moscardi Farms would be life-changing. And your brother likes me.” She winked in triumph.

Niko cleared his throat. “Stefano definitely likes you. The whole family does, even Nona, and she’s not especially friendly with outsiders.”

Sibby clapped her hands.

“But—”

Her clap slowed, and she twisted her mouth in question. “But what, Niko?”

With a sigh, he laid the numbers out in front of her. “I’ve gone over the math time and time again. And the numbers don’t lie. I promised to keep our business and personal separate. I’m keeping that promise.”

Sybil’s face grew pale, and she stepped back. “What are you saying?”

“It’s not going to work—”

“No. I did everything right. I—,”

“Sibby.” He reached out.

“Sybil. And don’t touch me.” She rounded to the other side of the counter. “Is this just a game to you? Ease me into trusting you? Take me home to the family? For what? To get me into bed? You could have saved yourself the trouble. All I wanted was a fuck to get you out of my system in the first place.”

“That’s unfair.” He kept his hands at his sides and braced against the pain of her words.

She grabbed the document and scanned it with disgust. “No, what’s unfair is this one-dimensional graph. What’s unfair is getting screwed over by every single man I ever let into my life.”

She dragged a ladder from the wall over to the tree.

“What are you doing?”

She climbed up the ladder. “The star is crooked.” With a wave to the door, she added, “You can let yourself out.”

“Sybil, come on.” He had to get her to understand. The risk assessment was foolproof.

However, the dawning reality that he’d fallen for her was a clear indication that he was a huge fool.

Sybil squeezed her eyes shut to stop the tears. She needed Niko to leave now before she humiliated herself further.

“I said go!” She didn’t mean to yell quite as loud as she did, and it caught them all by surprise.

Niko stared for one torturous moment longer then pushed the store door open.

Just then, Marley came bursting into the front of the store, apparently having heard Sybil’s voice. He ran under the ladder, glancing off the tree and then out the door.

“Marley!” Niko and Sybil screamed after him while, in horror, they watched the tree wobble and fall, leaving Sybil with nothing but the star in hand.

Holding tight to the ladder, she closed her eyes against the shattering pops of ornaments and the tell tale smash of porcelain dog food dishes. Without thought or care for her own safety, she jumped down the ladder and ran past Niko onto the street. “Marley!”

He followed her out, shouting the same.

Turning on him, she gripped her hands into fists. “Just go! You’ve done enough, Niko.”

“Sib, let me help you.”

With a shake of her head, she stared at him through her tears. “I don’t need your kind of help.”

It was all she could do to walk away with even a small modicum of dignity to go look for Marley. She prayed he didn’t dash into the streets. They’d walked the blocks around the store a million times by now, so all she could do was hope he found his way to the small park not too far away.

All of her dreams had dashed out the door. Whatever she naively thought she was building with Niko was nothing but...just nothing. Her business would not recover without a solid partnership, and now the new love of her life was missing. Once she made it to the corner, she glanced back to see Niko still standing in front of the store with his hands at his sides. She didn’t care and took the corner. As soon as she was safely out of view, she dropped to the nearest bench and buried her face in her hands.

And cried.

She just needed the release if nothing else. She had to let go of all the stress and pain, and humiliation.

Without an audience.

After a few minutes of wringing the emotion from her heart, she brushed off her jeans, smoothed her hair from her face, and continued down the block to look for Marley.

Once again, she’d fallen for the wrong guy and failed those most in need.

Niko slammed the door behind him as he stomped into the kitchen and tossed his portfolio onto the counter.

The zipped leather case slid across the surface to land just shy of a full glass of water. Stefano shot his hand out just in case. “Whoa, what the hell, man.”

“I’ve had a shit day.” Niko stepped to the sink and braced himself against the edge, hanging his head. He needed a moment to breathe, to figure out how the fuck he could fix this mess.

Fano pulled up a stool and sat. “What happened?”

Their sister Alina came in with an energy that visibly eased as she read the room. “Oh, man. What’d you do?”

Niko rolled his eyes. “Of course, *I* must have done something.”

Only ruined the hopes and dreams of someone he cared deeply for, destroyed her Christmas tree, and let her beloved dog loose.

He turned from the sink to lean back against it. “Shit. I fucked up.”

With a quick gesture toward his portfolio, he said, “I went over the numbers with Sybil. It isn’t a viable partnership.”

Fano narrowed his gaze at his brother then tapped the leather folder. “On paper, it isn’t viable? And what about here.” He swept his hand out toward the room.

“Here what? In real life? The numbers are real life.”

“Oh boy.” Alina whistled and sank into a stool. “I’m so here for this.”

Fano gave her a look then continued. “Niko, your numbers do a lot to protect us, and when it comes to customers, partners, or opportunities with people we don’t know, they’re great. But you know Sybil. She and her business are more than a few numbers.”

Niko shook his head. “My system protects us.”

“To what end?” Fano asked. “Sometimes, we miss opportunities in the name of playing it safe. In the time we’ve spent with Sybil Averoff, we’ve seen a dedicated and passionate businesswoman who is determined to bring a healthier alternative to pet nutrition. Who just so happens to have trusted the wrong person.”

With a nod, Niko agreed. “Exactly. She trusted someone she knew instead of a quantitative analysis, and look where it got her.”

“Niko, look around. If we are all judged only by our measured mistakes, then we can never see our efforts and intentions. Our victories often mean more.”

Alina nodded. “I like her. A lot. And for you. You’ve been so wound up, closed up, and for the first time, we saw you laughing and joking. She didn’t get into trouble because of her bad decisions but because she trusted the people around her. As she trusted you to look at her as a whole person, not just a business.”

Niko swallowed hard against the dread clawing up his throat. She trusted him to be fair, but had he been? Hadn’t he made his decision from the beginning? Overprotective. Overly safe.

“Fuck.”

Fano stood from the counter and pushed the leather-bound folder back toward Niko. “Look at the numbers again. Add in qualitative measures as well; then see where Averoff Organics lands. I’m not asking you to go

against your numbers but to look at them from different angles.

Maybe his siblings were right. He'd always been very literal in his assessments. Business was either good or bad. Safe or risky. By the books, by the numbers. But what had he missed by not adding the element of history and individual qualities of the person?

"Do you think I can still fix this? I haven't even told you about the destroyed Christmas tree or losing Marley."

Alina's jaw dropped open. "Niko."

Fano nodded. "You must. We'll help."

"How did you lose Marley? He sticks to Sibby's side like glue?" Alina asked.

"She was up on a ladder. He didn't see her." At their confused looks, he waved away any more questions. "I'll explain more later. Right now, I have a Husky to find."

If he fixed nothing else, he had to find Marley. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to the pup. And neither would Sybil.

CHAPTER 5

Rissy handed Sybil a large dirty martini. “This will help.”

“Thanks, Rissy.” Sybil took it, knowing nothing would fix her situation. But her sister and the Michaels sisters were determined to try. Six was Rissy’s best friend and an impressive entrepreneur. Her sister, Seven—Savannah Michaels to her fans—was a bestselling romance novelist known for her breakout hit, *Seven Rules of Seduction*. Seven had nicknamed her little sister Six because there was no way she’d let her have a higher number. And it stuck.

So, she found herself wrapped in the well-meaning intentions of Rissy, Six, and Seven. It sounded like an 80s rock band or a few of the missing dwarfs from *Snow White*. Either way, she was thankful to have them.

Six brought out a few large cable knit blankets to the terrace, tossing them onto the outdoor couches. Sybil pulled one up to her chest. She wasn’t really cold but needed the comfort. “Thank you. I love this terrace. The view down this street is adorable, and the gas fire table makes it so cozy.”

Six breathed in with a satisfied smile and looked around. “I really do love it. Seven knew I would straight away when she helped me search for this condo.”

“It’s a beautiful part of Seattle and has great proximity to the restaurant and any other business you dream up,” Seven said, pushing her long dark hair back over her shoulder.

Rissy sank to the couch close to Sybil, pulling part of the throw over her legs as well. “Okay, so what’s your plan?”

Grief and regret constricted Sybil’s throat. She played the scene with Niko over and over and over again in her head. She guessed she couldn’t

fault him. She'd been at the helm when her customer's beloved pets were hurt, and he'd promised not to mix business and pleasure. He wasn't lying. She had to give him that.

But she would be lying if she didn't admit that she believed to her core that who she was would play a part in his decision. He could see how dedicated and determined she was to never let anything like that happen again, so how could he take this from her unless he truly didn't see her? And if he didn't see her for who she was, then the time they'd been spending together was all just a fling, a distraction, a benefit of doing business with him.

"I don't know. I really thought that, in knowing me, he'd give me the chance. Without the partnership..." She trailed off as her eyes filled with tears. Losing her business was an impossible comprehension, and not knowing if Marley was okay left her more than heartbroken.

"You can't give up, Sibby. Not on your business and not on finding Marley. We put the calls out and the fliers up. Someone will find him."

Pressing the heels of her palms into her eyes, she rubbed them dry on a sniff. "I hope so. What I do know is I have to stop crying. I need to figure this out."

"So, what did Niko say exactly? That you were too big of a risk, right?" Six asked.

Sybil nodded. "Basically."

"And when you proposed your prevention and contingency plans to ensure the situation would never be repeated, what did he say?"

Sybil tried to focus on Six's words: Prevention plan? Contingency plan? Shit. With a small shake of her head, she said, "I was so focused on fixing my trust with my customers and demonstrating a profitable business plan that I didn't put my thoughts together on prevention."

She pushed the blanket down from her chin and sat up. "I mean, I have them. The thoughts...the plan. Just not documented." A small sliver of light crept through the cracks in her heart. "Do you think that would make a difference?"

Rissy sneered in good big sister fashion. "I still think he should know your value without it."

Six squeezed her best friend's arm. "I know you love Sibby. We all do, but no matter how much I love all three of you, when it comes to business, I wouldn't step foot into a partnership with any of you without documentation,

plans, and contracts. There's just no other way."

"Hey, I'm family." Seven raised her brows in feigned insult.

Six lifted her martini glass in acknowledgment and grinned. "Especially with family. And Jake would agree." The mention of Seven's sexy boyfriend brought a light to her sister's eyes. Six walked over to her bar and pulled out the shaker for another drink. "I've been researching the Moscardi family farm for my own proposals down the road. Stefano, the oldest, runs a tight ship, based on relationships. Nikolai is all numbers, and their sister Alina is the free spirit determined to make her own way."

"What's your point?" Hearing Niko's name felt like a million tiny slices in her heart.

Six looked at each woman one at a time as if waiting for them to catch up. "My point"—she sighed with exasperation as she shook her martini—"is that knowing Niko is a numbers guy, go give him the numbers. And not your profits, Sib, but profit protections, your safety projections based on a viable plan. Put it in writing; don't make him hope it's there based on how good you are in bed."

"I do think that should play a part!" Seven demanded with a laugh.

Sybil wiggled her brows. "Well, I *am* really very very good. I mean, how could I not be when I deploy all *Seven Rules of Seduction*?"

Seven's eyes lit with appreciation. "Nicely done." She raised her martini glass in the air.

"Okay, I have a plan." And, for the first time since she lost Marley, Sybil felt like she could breathe just a little bit easier.

She had a plan.

"Okay, okay. But are you sure we have time? I don't want to be late. This is my only chance." Sybil drummed her fingers on the armrest of her sister's Audi. She had her plans and a meeting with the Moscardi family.

She may not be able to save the romantic relationship with Niko, and that cut deeper than she wanted to admit, but she held a small sliver of hope that she could save Averoff Organics.

"Yes, we have time. I scheduled the meeting with Stefano myself. I just need to swing by your store. I left my bag there yesterday when we were

cleaning up. You check your office, and I'll check the back of the store by the puppy playground."

Sybil strained to pull in a breath. She tried to picture calm waters, finding Marley, anything to calm her anxiety, but with everything on the line and her fur baby still not found, she couldn't manage it.

She unlocked the front door to the store and stepped inside.

Out of nowhere, a furry blur caught her eye, and before she was able to focus, Marley launched himself through the air toward her chest. "Marley!" Confusion and delight collided with such a rush she had to blink several times before she'd believe what she saw in front of her or felt with her own hands.

Dropping to her knees, Sybil pressed her face into Marley's furry neck and wrapped her arms around his wriggling body. "Oh, baby! I'm so happy to see you! Oh, Marley, my sweet boyeee."

Nothing could stop the tears of relief and happiness from streaming down her face. As she wiped them from her cheeks and Marley took off to greet Rissy, Sybil stood and turned to her sister with a million questions.

Then she froze in her tracks. There, standing tall and beautiful and fully adorned with twice as many presents as before, was her tree. The lights twinkled, and the packages sparkled. The fresh scent of pine wrapped around her head. And in front of the tree stood Nikolai Moscardi.

"Marley somehow found his way to the Farm, and I found him waiting outside for me on my way over this morning."

Tears threatened, but Sybil held them and her breath, curious as to why Niko was in her store.

She stepped toward him, taking in the breadth of his shoulders and the deep green of his eyes that matched the Juniper. "You did this?"

His chuckle was low and deep and held a bit of a nervous edge. "It was the least I could do." He grabbed a stack of papers from the counter. "Here, this is for you."

With a small shake of her head, Sybil stepped closer. Warmth radiated from him, and she could smell the heady spice of his cologne. Flashes of tight abs and tanned skin made her swallow hard.

"What is it?"

"I made a mistake. I promised you that I'd keep our personal and professional relationships separate, but instead, I think I unconsciously analyzed with a narrow focus and an unfair disadvantage. While I

painstakingly looked over your business, I forgot to include...you. Sybil Averoff. Stefano brought it to my attention.” He handed her the documents.

In her hands was a binding partnership contract between Moscardi Farms and Averoff Organics. “But I thought you said...I brought you...” She held up her own documents.

With a confused raise of a brow, he took her offered stack then flipped through the pages. “Prevention and contingency?” He grinned.

“I realized it’s your love language.” A shy smile stretched her lips.

With that, he dropped his head back on a laugh.

Hope tried to creep into her chest, but Sybil found it easier to believe that Santa was real than the fact that her dreams might be saved.

Niko pulled the papers from her hands and set them on the counter. “Look.” He swung his arm out for her to take in the tree. It was amazing with twinkling white lights, ornaments of every color and shape, berries and holly, snow-covered pine cones, and sitting at the very tippy top was a shining glass star that read *Averoff Organics* in the center of it.

She sniffed. “It’s wonderful.”

“And all your gifts were replaced plus a few more. Donations in celebration of our new partnership. That is...if you’re still interested. All you have to do is sign.”

“What about your family?”

“Sibby, sign it, for God’s sake!” Rissy said in a fierce whisper.

“His family thinks it’s about time he got his head out of his beloved ass.” Stefano walked up from the back of the store with Alina at his side.

“You have to forgive our brother.” Alina grinned. “He had our best interests at heart but just a little...”

“Misguided.” Stefano finished. “He didn’t want us to think he was putting the farm at risk, and all the while we couldn’t wait to work with Averoff Organics. What you’ve built here is quite impressive.”

Elation choked Sybil. She’d been so scared for so long, but now her special store had the backing of Moscardo Farms through a supply partnership. Marley was home. And Niko...

She turned back to the man who captured her heart and soul with his endless green eyes and analytics.

He watched her, hands in his pockets, as if assessing the risk of opening his mouth. “Well?”

“I’m sorry for the things I said.” She stepped close and put a hand to his

chest. “I was lost with the idea that my store was gone. And then Marley—”

He put a hand over hers. “I’m sorry I lied.”

“Lied?” She tilted her head in confusion.

“I promised I wouldn’t fall in love with you and that you wouldn’t fall in love with me.”

Her heart expanded ten times its size. “Who says I did such a crazy thing?”

A slow grin pulled the corners of his mouth wide. “And I’m sorry for letting business and pleasure mix, but unfortunately, I’m going to have to do it again.”

Afraid to believe what was right in front of her for the millionth time, she bit her lip with a flirtatious eye flutter. “Oh really?”

“Yes, but there’s no contingency plan, just hard work, forgiveness, and a lot of—”

“Sex,” she whispered in his ear. “Please say sex.”

With that, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her high onto his chest. She loved the feel of his heat, his hard planes, and his firm embrace. She loved him.

“Sex,” he whispered back just before pressing his lips to hers in a searing promise.

Sybil kissed him back with all the pent-up passion and anxiety of the past few months. She tasted him and touched him and promised herself never to look back.

“It won’t always be easy. And there’s going to be risk,” she said against his lips.

“Yes, there will, but this time, I’ll keep in mind who I’m working with. A woman I love.”

Her heart soared. “I think this rebound thing really works for me.”

“Can I get that in writing?” Niko teased. Pulling her tight to his chest, he stopped her from answering with a deep, thorough exploration of her mouth.

She’d happily save the paperwork for later

ABOUT MK MEREDITH

USA Today bestselling author MK Meredith promises an emotional ride on heated sheets. Keep turning the pages through all her connected series: Cape Van Buren, Scripted for Love, Seattle Crush, and International Temptation to find your happy ever after. Living with her husband, two teens, and Husky outside of Washington D.C., this two-time breast cancer survivor is working on her very own happy ever after. Find out more about MK [here](#).

Sign up for MK's newsletter [here](#).

[On the Cape Series Novels: Love, Honor, & Cherish](#)
[Cape Van Buren Series Novellas: Coastal Holiday Fun](#)
[International Temptation Series: Destination Romances](#)
[Scripted for Love Series: Lights, Camera, Get Some Action](#)
[Seattle Crush Series: Loving by Numbers](#)



DOGGY STYLE

TRACEY PEDERSEN

ABOUT DOGGY STYLE

When Cooper's borrowed dog and Vivienne's borrowed dog get friendly in the doggy park, it leads to all kinds of fun afternoon activities between these two strangers. Will a trip to the end of year pet fundraiser solidify their new relationship?

CHAPTER 1

COOPER

On what planet does that woman think hot pink jeans and a canary yellow puffer jacket are the best clothing choice for a muddy dog park on an overcast Melbourne day? Yep, that's the random thought that pops into my head when I see the laid-back golden-haired blonde leaning against the rickety fence at my local dog park. That, and the fact that she's staring straight at me.

I'm frazzled when I arrive at the park and my best friend's dog knows it. He runs around and around tangling me in his lead and barking over and over, as if to say, come-the-fuck-on, I have socialising to do! A few heads turn as I spin around and try to unwind the lead, all the while cursing under my breath.

I eventually manage to free my legs and get us through the two security gates and into the open expanse of the park. I bend down and unclip his lead hoping he'll do exactly as Dylan promised and run the fuck away now that he's in his favourite place.

He doesn't disappoint.

The golden retriever bounds like a crazy thing across the enormous, grassed area. I watch as he races through a concrete tunnel, stops to do some very friendly sniffing with a tiny cocker spaniel, then leaps again and races off in the other direction, shoulder to shoulder with a Great Dane. Considering the only photos I've ever seen of that dog are of him in his designated spot on Dylan's couch, this level of activity comes as a shock. I thought golden retrievers were quiet and slothful. I should have been alerted by the whining and barking in the car for the entire trip, I guess.

With a shrug I glance around to see if there's anywhere to sit. If I'm stuck

here in K9 boot camp for a while I'd like to sit. My plan was not to be here at all so I'm wearing inappropriate footwear and will be pissed later when I try to get the mud off my sneakers. Note to self: when going on emergency dog-walking adventures, do not wear white shoes.

My phone beeps and it's Dylan. The message says, 'Send a pic please so I know you didn't lose him.' Fuck me. He calls me at seven in the morning, wakes me up, drags me out of bed to go pick up his dog and take him to the park, then has the audacity to besmirch my dog caring skills.

Admittedly I've never owned a dog, so his doubts could be warranted. I realise I don't even know this dog's name should I need to call him from across the park. I'll save the self-congratulations about a job well done until I get what's-his-name back to his cozy spot on the couch.

I send a pic to Dylan of his pride and joy chasing a white fluffy mutt in the far reaches of the park and I'm about to ask for his dog's name when the canary yellow jacket lady speaks from right beside me.

"I think our dogs like each other."

My body has a visceral reaction to her husky voice, and I force myself to ignore it as my eyes travel to where she's pointing. I see the white fluffy mutt is doing an amazing impression of trying to mount my very tall golden retriever. Fluffy jumps, sniffs, spins and generally surrounds Dylan's dog and my charge shows an equal amount of interest in fluffy.

I shrug because I have no idea how dogs communicate. "It definitely looks like they're friends. I hope they have a lot of fun running around so I can get a minute of peace."

"Tough morning?" she asks.

"You could say that. My best mate called me to bring his dog here since he's been otherwise detained from last night."

"Oh." She snickers behind her hand. "So, you got babysitting duty?" she asks, a gentle smile curving her lips as the smirk subsides. "What's his name?"

"The dog? I don't know," I admit with a sheepish grin, again enjoying the way her voice seems to slide across my skin. If I let myself, I might notice how her green eyes stay firmly on mine as she talks. "My friend never gave me the memo, or maybe he did but it was early, and I missed it. I've never even met this dog in person until today."

Her laughter has a musical quality that I like a little too much when she says, "Well, then you get to name him."

I grin, embracing the opportunity to christen the nameless pooch, if only for more of a chance to talk to her. “That sounds fun. How about... Duke?”

Her smile widens. “I like it. Duke it is.” She points to a bench I hadn’t noticed tucked behind a tree. “You want to sit? I think we’ll be here for a while. My dog’s name is Molly. She belongs to my sister. So, we’re kind of on the same mercy mission.”

We sit and our attention returns to the dogs, now engaged in lively play, darting, and chasing each other around the park. There’s even the odd lick which seems very familiar for playmates that just met, but what do I know? A second later their noses hit the ground and they take off together, no doubt following an interesting scent.

Duke is on his mission, and I relax a little, sure I can manage a little K9 dating in the park. The blonde is sitting closer than I would have expected on the park bench next to me and my attention is drawn to the way those pink jeans hug her thighs.

I blink, surprised at my observation. I did not have ‘meet a blonde-haired, green-eyed beauty’ on my bingo card for today. She’s hard to ignore, though, and if I’m not mistaken that waft of gorgeous floral scent is coming from her. Her feet are tucked beneath her, and she leans an elbow on the back of the seat before resting her head on her hand.

Her sexy stance makes me realise four things: I can still recognise flirting, even though I’ve been single for over a year; her jeans are going to be caked in mud from her tucking her feet underneath her; she’s making serious eye contact; and my dick is responding in a very inappropriate way.

Duke might not be the only one to make new friends today.

VIVIENNE

The guy in the too-white shoes who didn’t bother to find out his dog’s name is one of the most gorgeous men I’ve ever laid eyes on. His wide shoulders are shown off perfectly in his black leather jacket, and the deep brown eyes that crinkle at the corners when he squints across the park at the dogs are to die for. And since I secretly borrowed Molly so I could meet someone, I’m not wasting the chance to chat him up.

No fucking way.

This is my third Saturday morning in the dog park and I’m close to giving up this stupid effort. I promised my mum on her deathbed six months ago that

I'd make an effort to date, though, and I hate dating apps so here I am. I don't know why I followed through. She staged a full recovery that still has me wondering if she faked that near-death experience.

My sister refuses to confirm or deny.

The guy isn't wearing a wedding ring, but every woman knows that doesn't mean shit. He could have a whole litter of kids at home, where his wife patiently waits for him to return on a Saturday morning so she can get out and do the grocery shopping. Best to find out straight away.

"You sound like you might be a little jealous that your friend didn't make it home last night."

I can pry, right? What difference does it make? If this goes nowhere, I'll never see him again and that will be that. If I'm not his type or he's married, he won't even remember the overly forward woman from the dog park in the yellow jacket. He'll probably never set foot in this park again since the dog isn't even his.

He shrugs. "Not jealous. Dylan likes the crazy girls, so even now he's probably trying to slither away without handing over his number." He laughs and the sound rolls around our little space as he glances at his watch. "I'd like to still be in bed. It's only half past eight and it's a Saturday. I should be warm and snoring right now."

"You're not a morning person?"

He laughs again and I decide I'd like to hear that sound a whole lot more. "Not on Saturdays. That's my sleep-in day after what is usually a long week for me."

"What do you do?" *Really, he made that way too easy.*

"I'm a lawyer." He raises his hands before I can speak. "Don't hold it against me. I'm one of the good ones."

"Hey, I love lawyers. I'm a legal secretary." I laugh at the coincidence. Not everyone loves lawyers.

He raises an eyebrow as though he thinks I might be making that up. "Well, you're used to the likes of me, then. Maybe we should get married, and our borrowed dogs can live happily ever after."

Bingo. Not married.

"I'd like that." I put on my best seductive voice and lean closer, even though it reminds me of play-acting. I reach out my hand, "My name's Vivienne. If we're getting hitched I'd like to stay with tradition and know your name first."

He laughs and covers my tiny hand with his enormous one. It's warm and smooth and gives me tingles all the way to my elbow. "I'm Cooper. Where do you want to get married? I'll warn you, I'm not much of a church guy."

I swear, he's being as brazen as me. Getting some of his likes or dislikes into the conversation to test the waters. For the first time in three weeks, I have a premonition that I might not be single until I'm seventy-five. Maybe I can find a guy I have chemistry with after all. Maybe I can shove aside the memories of my last crappy relationship and eventually be happy.

My tone is as flippant as his when I reply, "Me either. I'm not fussed where the ceremony takes place, but I think Molly and Duke should attend. They are the reason the ceremony is even going to happen. Without them, we're nothing," I quip, and Cooper laughs.

"Deal. If I don't have to wrangle them at the wedding, they can attend."

We laugh together and a warm spot settles low in my belly, like liquid chocolate. He turns himself toward me and looks deep into my eyes as we exchange more banter. Today will be a good day even if I don't see Cooper again. Everyone likes a good man to react to them in the ways Cooper appears to be reacting to me. I decide then and there to ask him out. I'm grabbing all the bulls by the horns today and throwing caution to the wind.

Before I can open my mouth to ask another leading question, there's a small commotion across the park. I can hear Molly barking and see her jumping around Duke. He's spinning around each time and sniffing her butt and trying to put a paw on her as if to hold her down. I've been here enough weeks in a row to know she's gonna need a bath when we get home. Her soft white fur will be muddy on her tummy and by the look of it Duke has made sure she'll have paw prints all over her back.

The dogs seem to pause their sniffing as their tails wag side to side. As if in slow motion Duke rears up on his hind legs, places both paws on Molly's back and umm... does the unthinkable.

"Oh no," Cooper says, his eyes widening. "Is that normal? Are they...?" The unspoken question hangs in the air, but the proof is right across the park from us.

"Indulging in some canine romance?" I finish, astonished. "Yes! They most definitely are. What do we do now?" I blush, though I have no idea why. "Is Duke desexed?"

"Shit. I don't know. How do you tell?"

"No idea. I have an awful feeling that Molly is not, though."

We rise as one and rush across the park, covering the ground quickly. By the time we reach the dogs they are well and truly locked together and poor Molly looks very uncomfortable with her hind legs in the air, as they're now stuck back-to-back. She whines and growls and I almost laugh when I glance at Cooper. He looks like he might pass out. He's furiously texting and his whole expression says he does not want to be here anymore.

"All I know is you don't separate them when this happens," I say, though I'm not sure he hears. "We have to wait them out otherwise they can get injured." I frown. "At least I think that's it. Maybe we should check online."

"Shit," Cooper says for the second time as he starts to search the internet on his phone. "Dylan texted that Duke is not desexed." He looks up at me with a half-smile. "Also, that Duke's name is Titan, not that that matters right this second."

He looks back to the screen as I helplessly watch the two dogs. People are looking at us across the park and I make a promise to myself not to return here next Saturday.

Or ever.

My dog park man-hunting days are officially done.

CHAPTER 2

COOPER

“Dylan says he won’t be home until the afternoon. I’m sorry to say it but he is not taking this seriously at all.”

Vivienne looks up from her phone. “I have similar news. Beth is an hour’s drive away. I think we are freaking out a lot more than the prospective puppy grandparents.”

I laugh and look down at the two dogs that have caused us a near heart attack this morning. They’ve been stuck together for over thirty-five minutes and now they’ve separated. We’ve been standing here chatting as we waited for them to be done and I can’t tell you how many people came over to look. I know we’ll be a topic around the dinner table tonight for plenty of these people.

The chance to talk to Vivienne was nice, though, and now I don’t want to leave without a way to contact her. It feels like if I let her go, I won’t see her again and that’s not how this ends for me.

I’m surprised at these feelings. I don’t know her, but I know I want to see her again. A lot. Too much. Even in mismatching shocking pink and the brightest yellow I’ve ever seen, she’s the most tempting woman I’ve met in recent memory. The whole time we stood here chatting and sharing stories I wished we were back on that park bench sitting close together. The way she stands close to me and doesn’t wander away even when people come over to talk to us makes me wonder if she doesn’t wish the same.

“I guess I’ll take Molly home and let her rest up.” Vivienne is frowning at the little dog. “What’s the protocol in a situation like this?”

“I have absolutely no idea, but I think at the very least we should swap numbers.” I pull my phone out, hoping she goes for it. “There could be vet

bills to work out for poor Molly.”

She slides her finger over her phone screen, taps a few times and hands it to me. “Put your number in and I’ll call you, so you have mine. I imagine I should pay if there are expenses.”

“Yeah, same. Please tell your sister I’m willing to pay for everything. I had no idea Duke... err... Titan would do that. Dylan should have clued me in.”

“He should have,” Vivienne says, without any sign of malice. “But I guess when you meet your perfect match all bets are off.” She winks at me and bends down to pat Titan on the head. The baby voice she puts on before she speaks to him makes me laugh. “Isn’t that right boy? You couldn’t help it, could you? She was just too irresistible, wasn’t she?”

I laugh and now I really don’t want her to go. Fuck it. I’m throwing caution to the wind. YOLO and all that.

“Vivienne, do you want to go to one of our places instead? Or to Beth’s place so we can wait for her?” Her eyes pierce mine as she straightens, and I hope she doesn’t think I’m being creepy. “Maybe we should get this sorted out, so no one is unhappy.” I throw in another option, in case she needs an out. “We could also take them to the beach if you want. To kill some time.”

“Hmmm.” She looks from one dog to the other before she replies. “Let’s go to my place. I don’t want to return Molly caked with sand from the beach on top of mud from the dog park. It’s bad enough she might be going home pregnant. My place isn’t far from here and I have a fenced yard which no one will be able to escape from. The last thing we need is to get talking and one of them goes missing.”

“You’re right. We’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

Vivienne grins at me and winks and my heart almost stops. Then she bends down and clips Molly’s lead to her collar and turns toward the gate. Over her shoulder she says, “I wouldn’t go that far, Cooper. There could be more excitement coming for us.”

VIVIENNE

Way to sound like a total floozy, Vivienne Montgomery. When I said there was more excitement in store, I meant the explosion when Beth gets home, and we have to apologise in person. From the glint in Cooper’s eye and the immediate smirk on his lips he’s thinking of something else. I ignore

the flutter in my belly and lead the way to the carpark.

Cooper loads Titan into his red sports car and I can't help but take a photo of the two of them squeezed into that tiny space. Titan's golden head and shoulders take up the entire window and he woofs when Cooper starts the car.

"I think you have the wrong dog." I point toward my roomy sedan and place Molly on the front seat, where she has plenty of room to spin around and jump up to the window.

Cooper laughs and puts his car in reverse. "Not my dog, remember, and never supposed to be sliding around on these custom leather seats. I'm going to kill Dylan."

"Well, it's only for a minute. Follow me and he'll be running around in the yard in no time."

Five minutes later that's what's happening. Molly and Titan are running back and forth in my back garden and Cooper is busy searching his phone to find out if they are likely to try to mate again so soon.

He's leaning against my kitchen counter and I buzz around him making coffee and pulling some chocolate Tim Tams from the refrigerator. Several times my arm brushes against his and he stiffens. He doesn't move, though. Just stays partly in my way like he's enjoying himself. When I bend down to get a plate from a cupboard behind his legs, I grip him behind the knee and laugh out loud.

"You're doing this on purpose aren't you?"

He chuckles as I retrieve my plate, replace his leg in front of the cupboard with a theatrical sigh, and stand up to find myself chest to chest with him. He glances down to my lips and back to my eyes and I find myself holding my breath. He smells bloody amazing and his eyes close up are deep pools of darkness. I could get lost in those without too much encouragement.

Cooper's voice is low when his free hand drops to my hip and he says, "Can I kiss you?"

I nod, unsure whether any words will come and then his soft lips are on mine. He's gentle, not trying to eat my face off, but rather searching and sliding his tongue gently over my lips. His fingers tighten slightly on my hip, and he drops his phone on the counter, before sliding that hand with a gentle touch into my hair.

The effect is delicious, and I melt against him, kissing him back as softly as he's kissing me. My hand searches for the edge of the counter so I can get

rid of the plate I'm holding, then my hands are free to explore. I grip his shirt in the front and slide one hand around his neck, holding him to me as he lets out a faint sigh. There is a definite reaction below his waist and a zing of excitement courses through me. Kissing him is a treat for all my senses.

We stand together, enjoying each other, not making a move to up the stakes or kiss harder or faster. It's like we're savouring each other, taking note of every single detail and I know I'll be replaying this kiss in my head for years to come.

The universe lets me have a few minutes of this bliss, then of course my phone dings and I recognise Beth's custom chime. Hopefully she's not outside about to catch me bright eyed and with flushed cheeks from making out in my kitchen with a guy I met two hours ago. She's the kind of sister who would comment on my hard nipples with Cooper standing right beside me.

"I have to get that. It's Beth." I drop a soft kiss on his bottom lip and pull away. "Sorry. Give me a second."

His face is as flushed as mine feels, and I have a warm glow inside knowing it's not only me recognizing the pull between us. I grab my phone from my pocket and read the text.

"Damn." I can't decide if the message is a gift from the heavens or an unwelcome distraction. "Beth's car has broken down. Let me call her." I dial and she picks up on the first ring. "Hey, do you need me to come get you?"

It does not escape my notice that Cooper is drawing warm circles with his index finger on the back of my neck. My eyes close involuntarily for the conversation with my sister.

"Nope," Beth says, and she sounds extremely cheery for someone stranded on the side of the road. "I've already called the mechanic and he's on his way. I'm going to be a while, though. Probably at least two hours by the time he gets here and tows me back to the depot and then I get to yours. Possibly longer."

"The mechanic you've had your eye on for two years, Beth?" She laughs and I have a sneaking suspicion about this breakdown. "Did you sabotage your own car? Today of all days?"

"I did not," she says, followed by a long cackle. "But if I knew how, I would have done it already. Is Molly ok?"

"Yes, she's fine. I have nowhere to be so let me know when you're on your way. I have the other dog and his foster dad here, too. We'll talk to you

when you arrive.”

“Oh, invite him to the pet cafe on the weekend would you? The more the better.”

I roll my eyes at Cooper. “Yep, will do. Bye.”

We disconnect and I look up from my phone. “Did you hear all that?”

“I did. We’re going to a pet cafe together on the weekend, which sound fascinating.” He grins and pulls me close again. “Two hours or more before she arrives is the more pertinent information I focussed on, however.” He kisses my chin, then moves back to my lips and the magic of the previous minutes is still there. My brain is screaming instructions at me, and I’m tempted to listen to them.

The facts are there’s a man in my house that I’m wildly attracted to and who seems to feel the same. I went to the dog park specifically to meet someone and now here he is. He kisses me like I’ve never been kissed, and it makes me wonder about his other skills.

Would it be so wrong to take this further and enjoy myself for once?

I pull back and stare into his eyes, trying to decide. Something I see staring back at me makes me brave, and a touch reckless.

I’m not about to let this opportunity pass me by even if I might regret it later.

YOLO and all that.

CHAPTER 3

COOPER

As Vivienne leads me up the narrow staircase to her bedroom I almost swallow my tongue. She squeezes my hand and looks back over her shoulder as though to check I'm really there. I grin up at her and resist the urge to rush her up the stairs. We've shared such gorgeous slow kisses that I want our lovemaking to go just the same way.

I've never had a one-night stand so I don't know if they are meant to be a hard and fast adventure, but I have no intention of this mood floating out the window. These feelings are too bloody great, and I want more of them. I want to savour every moment with her, even as I keep one eye on the clock, expecting the arrival of her sister.

Let's hope that mechanic returns Beth's interest and she's delayed.

By hours.

Yes, I said hours. I'm gonna need every moment of the next few hours to explore Vivienne and my attraction. It's only right. She deserves every second of my attention on her. Maybe if we really click this can be more than a one-time thing.

Her bedroom and bed is as expected - bursting with ten million cushions all piled up. She gives me an apologetic smile before she rushes forward and throws them all onto the floor. It takes her a minute because there are so many, but then she's back in my arms and we resume the kissing festival that started downstairs.

She tastes so fucking great that I can't believe I didn't kiss her in the dog park. I wanted to. That's how strongly she has affected me. Instead of dwelling on how wildly inappropriate that would have been, I kiss down her neck, slowly unbuttoning her shirt and then undoing the button of those pink

jeans.

I slide my hands over her butt and dip my fingers inside the coloured denim, sliding the fabric over what turns out to be the most perfect ass. She returns the favour, her fingers quickly on the buttons of my shirt after she dumps my leather jacket on the floor. I slide her jeans all the way to her feet and help her step out of them, her fingers lightly rested on my back as I do. Then I use the opportunity to kiss my way up her belly, across her breasts and up her neck, finally stopping when I reach her mouth.

She moans and that's the end of the gentle exploration. I'm desperate for her and in one short movement I undo her bra and throw it to the side. She wiggles out of her panties and I push her gloriously naked form backward onto her bed.

Her eyes don't leave mine and she raises an eyebrow and beckons me closer. I lose my own jeans and slide off my socks before I cover her body with my own. Our skin is warm and we slide perfectly together. The light touch of her fingertips on my back drives me crazy and my cock is so hard it feels like it could burst. I want to take my time but I also want to crawl inside her and have her wetness envelop me.

Vivienne's moans as I suckle one nipple and slide my fingers around the other shoot straight to my cock. There's no more time for cuddling, but to delay the moment of pleasure as much as possible, I roll off her and push one leg to the side. I slide my fingers between her thighs and dip inside the wetness I find there. She sighs and grabs my hand, pushing my fingers deep and squeezing herself around me as I continue to lick and suck her breast.

I'm surprised when she pushes me away, but she moves to her knees and crawls over me. "I can't wait Cooper. I'm sorry but we need to go faster."

Her words are music to my ears and her hand wrapped around my length is delicious but I manage one coherent thought. "We need a condom."

"Oh." She sits up straight and frowns. "I don't have one." She lets out a laugh and climbs off me. "I don't usually do this. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I don't do this either." I slide off the bed and grab for me jeans. "It's cliched but there's a ten million year old one in my wallet." I'm surprised at my own giggle as I pull the wallet from my jeans pocket, flip it open, then hold up my prize. "Bingo."

Vivienne frowns and takes it from me, bringing it close to her eyes and examining it. "Did you put this in there when you were sixteen? It's seen better days."

We both laugh and then I take the condom back and flop onto the bed. “Let’s pretend it’s from this century.” I take her hand and place it back on my cock. “Now. Where were we?”

A grin splits her face and she climbs over me again, pumping my length as I get harder. She licks her lips and makes sultry eyes at me and it’s not long before I’m tearing open the packet, and she’s sliding it all the way down my shaft.

“I still can’t wait,” she says, then straddles my thighs and guides me inside her, before pushing me deep.

She pulls her own thighs up beside me and begins to ride me hard, guiding my hands to her breasts. I raise my head, sucking an erect nipple into my mouth as we move together, grinding and groaning as one. I’m balls deep inside her and it’s still not enough. The sensation is so fucking amazing, even with the condom on, and I don’t want it to stop.

I’m blessed with the ability to go all night and I have every intention of showing her the best time of her life. With her warmth sliding all around me, however, I find myself desperate for release. Desperate to come inside her at the exact moment she unleashes.

Her soft moans mean I’m out of control, unable to hold on and as she cries out her climax I’m right there with her, thrusting up and down, my mind going blank as we come together.

I collapse back onto the bed and she takes a moment to catch her breath. Once she can get oxygen again she resumes the light touches on my chest she did earlier and it’s fucking glorious. She runs her hands up and down my stomach, kneading and tickling and I’ve died and gone to heaven.

Her touch is amazing and I don’t want it to stop but I have skills that she needs to know about, so after a few minutes of touching I pull out and roll her over. I push her thighs apart and she laughs awkwardly. Then I slide my thumb inside her and she gasps when I rub the wetness over her clit.

Lust pools in her eyes as she watches me watching her. I slide, and probe, getting off on her moans. She closes her eyes and I go to town. She doesn’t know it yet, but she’s in for several orgasms before I’m done with her beautiful body.

VIVIENNE

I press my back against the cool wall of my bedroom, closing my eyes as

I think. My heart is still racing from the unexpected passion I've shared with Cooper, a man I met today. It feels good, though. Like we were meant to meet and this is what was supposed to happen.

Never have I experienced four orgasms during sex, and certainly never with a new sexual partner. My legs are still wobbling a little.

The connection between us is undeniable, but I can't shake the nagging feeling that it's all too good to be true. I've been burned before, and even though I went prowling at the dog park, trusting someone new doesn't come easily to me. Beth will die when she finds out I let this get so far today. I can hardly believe it myself.

"Hey." Cooper's voice breaks through my thoughts as he emerges from the bathroom, his wavy hair still damp from the shower. His brown eyes sparkle, making my heart skip a beat. "You okay?"

"Y-yeah," I stutter, pushing myself off the wall and trying to regain my composure. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Cooper asks, stepping closer to me. The concern in his eyes is genuine, making me feel more vulnerable. I'm not used to people caring about my feelings, especially not in a romantic sense.

"Look," I sigh, folding my arms across my chest. "This is probably premature as hell, but I just... I have some reservations about commitment, you know? I've been hurt in the past, and I don't want to rush into anything. Even though my actions today..." I glance down at myself wrapped only in a towel, knowing my hair is tousled and I have that just-fucked look, "...might imply something else."

A small smile plays on Cooper's lips, and he nods in understanding. "I'm glad," he says, running a hand through his hair. "I've had my own struggles with commitment, and I felt dumb mentioning them to you since we met five seconds ago. But I've been shocked at my reaction today and I want to explore this with you. So, how about we take the commitment part slow? Maybe a week from now we'll wonder why we lost our heads so quickly. Why don't we see where this goes without any pressure or expectations?"

My heart swells at the sincerity in his words, and a weight lifts from my shoulders. "I'd like that," I admit, a timid smile gracing my face.

"Good." Cooper grins, taking my hand in his. "Let's enjoy each other's company and not worry about labels or the future. We'll figure things out as we go along."

"Okay," I agree, warmth spreading through my chest at the touch of our

intertwined fingers.

“Besides,” Cooper adds with a teasing glint in his eyes, “we already know we have one thing in common—our love for dogs!”

I laugh. Molly will look at me funny for the rest of time whenever I visit my sister.

“True,” I say, squeezing his hand. “That's a great starting point.”

“Exactly.” Cooper smiles, pulling me close for a soft, tender kiss that sends shivers down my spine. As we break apart, an urge to pull him back into bed takes over. For someone who wants to take things slow I sure can't get enough of him.

Instead, he tugs me toward the shower. “You didn't get clean yet. I think you'll need someone to wash your back and I'd be honoured if you'd allow me to be that someone.”

“But you just showered,” I say, as he pulls me slowly toward the door he just emerged from.

“Not really. I spent the whole time waiting for you to come in. I didn't realise you were out here having an existential crisis.”

“So you need your back washed too?” I ask with a playful lilt as he tugs my towel away and drops it on the floor.

“My back.” He grins and turns on the water. “My front. My lower regions. Anything that gets hard while we're in there will need a good slippery wash please.”

Maybe, just maybe, this could be the beginning of something beautiful.

CHAPTER 4

VIVIENNE

The scent from my cup of hot chocolate wafts up and caresses my face as I sit across from my sister, Bethany, at our favourite little cafe. The sun is shining through the window, splashing a warm glow on the table between us.

I wrap my hands around the ceramic mug, feeling its comforting warmth seep into my fingers as she fusses over Molly. When she looks up at me I try not to laugh at her flushed cheeks and air of anticipation.

“Okay, spill it,” she urges, her eyes wide. “What happened at the dog park?”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, gathering my thoughts. “Well, Molly got a little too much action.”

“I know what Molly got, and I already told you the vet says we have to wait and see if there are baby Mollys on the way. I mean what happened with the guy?” She suddenly sits up straight in her chair. “If Molly is pregnant, can we call the guy your baby daddy?” We both laugh. “Maybe he’s your puppy daddy?”

“Well, he did ask me to marry him and we did joke that both Molly and Duke had to be there.”

Her eyes nearly bug out of her head. “Shut. Up. He did not ask you that.”

I shrug and I can’t help a tiny smug smile creeping across my lips. “He so did. Of course he was joking, but it was fun to play along.”

“Okay, well, start at the beginning.” My sister has always loved gossip and she wastes no time picking up her cup of tea, resting her elbows on the table and settling in for my story. “Tell me everything.”

“I met Cooper while I was walking Molly at the dog park, as you know.

He was friendly. Super outgoing.” I pause, and that small smug smile is back, tugging at my lips as I recall his easy charm and disarming grin. “Really good-looking.”

Bethany leans in closer, her freckles dancing in the sunlight as she grins. “And then what? I’m so bummed he’d already left when I got to your place yesterday”

“And...” I sigh, looking down at my coffee. “I don't know, Beth. I'm not sure if I'm ready for something new. You know how my last relationship ended. It's made me hesitant to consider getting involved, even while I imagine how great it could be. I was only really looking because of Mum, you know.”

“Viv,” she says, reaching across the table to place a reassuring hand on mine. “I get it. You were hurt, and that's made you cautious. But you can't let one bad experience dictate your entire life. You deserve happiness. And Harrison was a special type of dick. You’re unlikely to run across a man like him ever again. Fingers crossed.”

“I know,” I say. “It's... what if this guy is just mucking around? What if he's being nice, or worse, playing me to get out of paying the vet bill? I don't want to get my hopes up only to have them crushed again. Plus,” I hesitate here, unsure if I want to tell my sister how far Cooper and I went after just one meeting. Will she look at me differently after I confess? I bite my lip and decide honesty is the best policy. “Plus, we kind of got naked while we waited for you.”

Tea spills over Bethany’s hand and she swears as her cup clatters onto the table. “You what?” She laughs and several people turn to look at us from other tables in the cafe. “You? Mrs I-don’t-know-if-he’s-only-being-nice? You slept with him?”

I bat my eyelashes rapidly and try not to sound like the cat who got the cream. “There was no sleep, Beth.”

“Well, oh my God. My sister. Who would have thought? No wonder he left before I got there.” She picks up her cup and resumes her gossip-ready position. “Have a little faith in yourself, Viv. You're an amazing person, and anyone would be lucky to have you. And apparently this guy got lucky.”

My gaze drifts to the window, watching as a couple strolls by, their hands entwined and laughter bubbling between them. I can't help but feel a small pang of excitement, wondering if Cooper and I could have that same kind of happiness somewhere in the distant future.

“Maybe you're right,” I say, looking back at my biggest supporter. “But it's hard to let go of that fear, you know? To take that leap when there's no guarantee it'll work out.”

“Life is full of risks, Viv. And sometimes, taking those risks can lead to the most beautiful moments.” She smiles at me, her eyes filled with understanding and encouragement. “If you didn’t take a risk when you met him, you’d have never gone as far as you did. The risk is already behind you. Give yourself a chance to find out.”

As I sit there, sipping my hot drink and mulling over her words, I can't shake the image of a naked Cooper from my mind. His warm brown eyes, his inviting smile, the way he oozed confidence. Could I take a chance on him long term? On us?

Maybe it's time for me to be brave and face the unknown – even if it scares me to my core.

“You can't let fear hold you back forever,” Bethany reminds me, her face etched with concern. “You deserve happiness, and Cooper might be the one to give you that.”

I glance at her, my heart pounding as I weigh the possibility of taking a chance on this budding connection with Cooper. I already told him I’d try so why am I here having second thoughts? My fingers tap nervously against the side of my cup and I know for sure if he were the one across the table from me, I’d be having no doubts. But he’s not and we don’t have plans to catch up again before the pet cafe, so maybe it will turn out to be a one time thing.

“I know you’re right,” I concede, my voice barely above a whisper. “But what if he's not interested in anything serious? What if it was just talk?”

“You'll never know unless you try,” my wise sister insists. “I trust your judgement, though, and you should too. He sounds kind of perfect and you’ve already sampled the goods. The rest should be easy.” She grins and waggles her eyebrows up and down. “Besides, I think you're already interested in him too much, whether you want to admit it or not, and he’s coming to the pet cafe, so he’s a keeper.”

I look away, unable to deny the truth in her words. It's true – there's something about Cooper that makes me feel alive, like a spark has been ignited inside me. Maybe, for once, it's time to trust not only in others but also in myself.

“Alright, I'll think about it,” I say finally, a hint of determination creeping into my tone.

“Good!” Bethany exclaims, clapping her hands together with a grin. “Now, let's finish our drinks and get outside and enjoy this beautiful day. I think we're lucky Molly can walk straight after the adventure she had yesterday morning. The same possibly applies to you, Sister.”

COOPER

Dylan clinks his half empty beer bottle to mine and nods his head toward a group of women in a booth in the corner of the bar. We've been here ten minutes and his attention is already focussed on checking out every woman in the place. Sometimes I wonder how he's my best friend.

Scrub that. Yesterday I slept with a woman I'd just met. I cannot cast judgement since I'm apparently more like him than I realised. For the first time in ages I feel a pang of vulnerability, wondering if I did the right thing.

“So, Coop. What's this Vivienne like? Is she hot?” He takes a long pull of his beer, his eyes not leaving the women in the corner.

“Dude, she's scorching hot. Like, I couldn't take my eyes off her the moment I saw her staring at me.”

“She was staring at you?” He clinks my beer again, as though to congratulate me on my efforts and my comment piques his interest enough for him to focus his full attention on me. “Damn. That's always a good sign.”

“I don't know if I can do it, man,” I confess, almost under my breath. “I mean, I'm really into her, but you know I've always struggled with commitment. I don't want to hurt her. She seemed... fragile somehow.”

Dylan leans back in his chair, studying me as though he's stumbled over a foreign life form. “Who are you and what have you done with my best mate?” That pulls a smile from me but he frowns. “So, you already said she's hot. It sounds like she was into you. She didn't freak out when Titan emulated his father and sealed the deal with the fluffy white puppy hottie and you got her number. I'm confused why you seem so down.”

“I got her number to keep in touch about her sister's dog.”

“That's just semantics. She could have taken yours and not given you hers, but she didn't. She's into you. Just roll with it. Aren't you going to the pet thing on the weekend, too? From the way that you're acting, you're a little more than just into her, so why do you look like someone pissed on your birthday cake?”

I screw up my face. “You are gross. How are we friends?”

“A question I ask myself weekly,” Dylan says with a smirk. “I’m way too cool to let you hang around with me.” He takes a moment before speaking and he looks like he’s trying to dredge up some advice that’s not complete garbage. “I get that you’re scared, but sometimes you have to take a leap of faith and trust that things will work out.”

“Easy for you to say,” I scoff, taking a swig of my own beer. “You’ve always been the relationship guy. I’m... well, I’m me.”

“Yep. You’re you, and I’m not the relationship guy. I’m the jump into bed at the first invitation guy.” Dylan says with a firm nod. “So if Vivienne is into you, then she’ll be into all of you – commitment issues and all. Picture this.” He waves a hand in front of his face as though he’s directing a scene. “You and Vivienne exploring new places, discovering what makes each other laugh. Getting naked often.” He leans back on the bar. “There’s only one way to find out if something real could happen between you two, though.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, searching Dylan’s face and hoping for more than his usual advice to go for a quick roll between the sheets.

“By giving it a shot,” he replies. “Form an emotional connection with her. Let her get to know the real you, not the charming, outgoing guy everyone sees on the surface.” He shrugs. “You take a risk, man.”

Well, wouldn’t you know it. The man is more than a walking advertisement for women to run the other way.

“I know you’re right, and I feel it with her. It’s a surprise, you know?” He watches me intently while I speak. “I wasn’t even looking for someone.”

“Hey.” Dylan scratches at his beard. “I know what you’re going through. When I met Laura, I was so scared of getting hurt again that I almost let her slip away. But forming that emotional connection with her changed everything. It made our relationship stronger, and it helped me grow as a person. At first, it’s terrifying. But once you let yourself be vulnerable, it becomes this incredible, life-changing thing. And trust me, man – it’s worth every ounce of fear.”

Dylan sounds so sincere that I glance up at him, guilty that I haven’t confided about how much Vivienne and I got to know each other. “Umm... who is Laura? Did I miss something?” Searching his face for some hint of doubt or deception is a waste of time because he’s now rolling around laughing.

“Ok, you got me. There is no Laura.” He slaps his leg and signals the bartender to bring us another round. “But if there was, I’d definitely go for

the emotions and snag that hot thang.”

Thank god I didn’t tell him. “Oh my god, Dylan, you are such a dick.”

“This is true,” he replies, clapping me on the shoulder. “But just go get the girl, would ya?”

CHAPTER 5

COOPER

“Earth to Vivienne,” I tease, nudging her with my elbow as we reach the entrance to the pet cafe. There must be two hundred people lined up to pay their entry fee and eat their lunch with a whole lot of enthusiastic pups.

“Sorry, got lost in thought,” she says, blushing slightly and squeezing my hand. “I guess I’m trying to wrap my head around everything that’s happened.”

“It’s a lot to process,” I acknowledge, stepping forward to the cash booth to try to get us through the door quicker. “Let me pay and we can get started choosing something yummy for lunch. I wonder if the dogs have been fed or if they’ll be running around begging for food.”

Inside, the aroma of fresh bread and herbs fills the air, making my stomach growl with anticipation. We approach one of the counters, scanning the chalkboard menu above and I glance around the huge area set aside for the day. Dogs don’t seem to be desperate to be fed. Indeed, many of them are lying down, content to receive a pat from the odd passer-by. Question answered about them being looked after and well-fed I guess.

“Hello!” the cashier greets us warmly. “What can I get you two today?”

“I’ll have a veggie panini please,” Vivienne says.

“Make that two veggie paninis,” I reply, glancing at my companion. “You want a drink?”

“Just water for me.”

“Two waters as well, please.” I’m eager to taste the sandwich. Part of the appeal of today is supposed to be a spectacular lunch to lure people in to join in the fundraiser. The smells wafting around the area have me desperate to

get my hands on our selection.

“Great choice,” the cashier chirps, ringing us up. “Everything will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Oh, look. There’s an obstacle course. You can bet on the winner.” Vivienne points to the far end of the building. “And you can have Santa photos.” She laughs. “Imagine having photos with a dog that’s not yours.”

“We should have brought Molly and Titan.” I join in her laughter as she frowns. “Or not.”

“I think we’ve done enough for those two lovebirds. I’m not sure Molly will be coming anywhere with me anytime soon. At least not without Beth.”

“Isn’t Beth coming today?”

The cashier calls out our number and we collect our lunch and move to one of the many tables that have been set up at the back of the hall.

Vivienne takes a bite of her panini before she answers. “Beth is coming. I think she’s leaving Molly home, though. She promised to man one of the stands and I promised to buy loads of items from it.”

“I’ll see how I go. I might donate today, instead of taking things home I don’t need. Like Santa photos with strange dogs.” We both laugh and then the flavour of our lunch hits us.

“Oh my god,” Vivienne moans. “This is spectacular. What have they put on it to make it so great?”

“I don’t know but I want the recipe.” I let out my own sigh of appreciation. “Please make sure you invite me next year. I cannot live without another one of these. In fact, I might buy one or two to take home for dinner.”

“You better line up soon, then. The line is getting longer by the minute.”

We finish our lunch and start to explore. There are stands with games set up and everything has a dog theme. There’s whack-a-dog with giant stuffed pooches as prizes. You can fish to catch dogs wearing cute little scuba masks and exchange them for a prize.

There are giant dogs you can ride like horses for a couple of bucks a turn. Then there’s the cupcake stand where every sweet morsel is the cutest damn dog face you ever saw. We purchase a dozen of those against my better judgement.

When we reach the stand where Beth is in charge, I know we’re in trouble. She has house plants for sale and the pots are all cute dogs. Some are just faces and others are the whole body. There’s even a few giant terrariums

that have tiny dog families inside them, lounging around between the plants.

This event is a dog lover's paradise and I can see why they manage to raise so many thousands of dollars each December when they run it. Vivienne is enjoying herself and it's a joy to see the wide smile on her face as we uncover each new pet themed stall.

"Are you alright here for a bit?" I ask, handing her the cupcakes I've been carrying. "I'm going back to get those paninis to take home."

"Sure." She smiles up at me. "Don't be away too long. I still have cash left to spend and we might need to hire a trailer if I have my way."

The thought of her lugging home all these dog themed items to a house that doesn't have a resident pooch is hilarious and I promise to return quickly or be responsible for organising transport home for her stash.

We're lucky this isn't a pet adoption event. If it was, we'd be going home with more than sweet treats and parsley in dog pots.

VIVIENNE

Any man who carries a dozen iced cupcakes, buys extra treats to take home and doesn't say a single dang word about carting home all the silly dog themed items you bought to help charity is a keeper.

Just sayin'.

EPILOGUE

VIVIENNE

Mid afternoon on a perfect summer's day is the perfect time for a beach swim and Cooper and I are not wasting a single second of it on our first anniversary. As the sun dips in the sky, casting an array of oranges and pinks across the horizon, a sense of peace washes over me. Cooper and I wade into the ocean, hand in hand and the water swirls around our legs, the waves rhythmically crashing against the shore.

We have two hours before he drops me at Beth's place for a meeting I promised to attend for the next canine fundraiser. Then he'll pick me up and we'll have the entire perfect night to ourselves. I can't wait.

"Race you to that buoy!" Cooper challenges, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Ha! You're on!" I laugh, relishing the playful side of our relationship. We dash through the water, splashing each other as we run. My heart thumps like crazy in my chest, not only from the exertion but also from the thrill of being close to him.

We reach the buoy at the same time, both panting and grinning. "I guess it's a tie," he says, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me closer. Our lips meet in a passionate kiss, the taste of salt lingering on our tongues.

"Vivienne," he murmurs against my lips, "you know I'm crazy about you, right?"

"You tell me every week. How could I not know?" I remind him, a tingle spreading through my chest. Our bodies press together, the water lapping at our skin like a tender caress. I lose myself in the feel of him, and the way our bodies fit together as if they were always meant to be.

The sounds of the waves crashing and the seagulls calling overhead fill

the air, creating a symphony that seems to celebrate our intimacy.

Cooper insists I hold onto the buoy with both hands, then he proceeds to do delicious and naughty things to my body. He slides my bikini bottoms to the side and ties my top around his arm so the slip of fabric doesn't float away. As we make love in the ocean, I can't help but think about how right everything feels in this moment, how perfect we are together, and how happy he makes me every single day.

On the beach, a couple walk their dogs, oblivious to the two of us out here. I bite Cooper's shoulder as my body shudders with the release he never fails to create in me and we both sigh when he moans out his own climax. I dig my fingers into his shoulders, massaging and kneading him the way I know he likes it.

The sun drops lower still, throwing a golden glow over everything. My body tingles with sensation and the coolness of the water as it ebbs and flows around us.

"Cooper," I whisper, resting my head on his shoulder, "you are fucking amazing."

"You too, baby," he replies, his voice filled with sincerity. "No matter what happens, no matter what we face or how many dogs we get pregnant, I want you to know that I'll always be by your side. Now let's go home. I have a little surprise to get ready for you tonight."

The soft glow of flickering candles fills my apartment hours later as I walk through the door, taken aback by the sight before me. Cooper moves to the centre of it all, a proud smile on his face, clearly delighted by my surprise.

"Cooper, what is all this?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper as I take in the romantic scene before me.

"Surprise." He grins, tugging me inside by the hand. "I thought we could use the night to do more than just snuggle." He taps my bottom to get his message across.

My eyes scan the room, taking in the meticulous effort that Cooper has put into creating a cozy atmosphere. The dim candlelight casts shadows across the walls, making the space feel intimate and inviting. The table is set for two, with elegant white plates and gleaming silverware atop a deep red tablecloth. A beautiful bouquet of roses serves as the centrepiece, the petals vibrant against the warm hues surrounding them.

“Wow, this is incredible,” I murmur, feeling my cheeks heat at the unexpected gesture. Cooper chuckles, clearly pleased with my reaction, and guides me to my seat.

“Only the best for you,” he replies, pulling out my chair before taking his own seat across from me. “Although I do wish these were real candles.” He leans forward and picks one up to show me the fake flame inside. “I was worried the house would burn down while I went out to pick you up from Beth’s.”

I laugh. It’s just like him to think of every little detail.

“I hope you're hungry – I cooked up a storm in the kitchen,” he says and as if on cue, my stomach growls, and we both laugh.

We clink our wine glasses together before diving into the delicious meal he's prepared: seared salmon with a tangy lemon-herb sauce, fluffy garlic mashed potatoes, and crisp green beans cooked to perfection.

“Cooper, this is amazing,” I praise, savouring every bite. “How have you not cooked for me for an entire year?” I tip my head and squint my eyes. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

He laughs. “Maybe just a bit. But you’ve just kind of done it and it never came up.”

“Well, we’ll be changing that from now on. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

He smiles sheepishly, taking a sip of his wine before answering. “After my last relationship ended, long before I met you, I found myself with a lot of free time and needed a creative outlet. Cooking became my therapy, in a way.”

I nod, understanding the need for something to occupy the mind after a difficult experience. “It's funny how we find new passions when we're trying to heal,” I muse, thinking back to how I immersed myself in animal rescue work following my own heartbreak. Molly wasn’t the first fluffy friend I volunteered to take to the dog park each week.

“Exactly,” Cooper agrees.

As we continue our meal, we share new stories of our childhoods including the many pets we both had. Cooper listens, his eyes focused solely on me. He shares tales of his adventures with his mother's dog, recounting their countless hikes and escapades over many weekends. I’ve already heard some of these stories and it’s so nice to think this has become our new normal.

The more we've talked over the last year, the more I've felt connected to him. A rare occurrence for me. From the day we met there's been something about Cooper's genuine interest and gentle demeanour that's made me feel safe in sharing parts of myself I usually keep hidden.

"Thank you for tonight. This means more to me than you know," I say softly, reaching across the table to take his hand. He squeezes my fingers gently, his eyes locked on mine.

"I'm always happiest when I'm with you," he replies, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face. "I hope we keep communicating and opening up to each other. I want us to always be like this."

And in that moment, surrounded by flickering candlelight and the warmth of newfound connection, I can't help but know that I want that too.

As we finish our last bites of dessert, a rich chocolate cake that has been both sinfully delicious and impossible to resist, I feel the weight of the evening's conversation settle in my chest. We share so much, and open more and more, even a year later, but there's always more to be said. More fears and hopes to be addressed, and amazing plans to be made for the future. I truly am in love with this man.

I might be in love with a mind reader because he stands and pushes in his chair, then moves to my side. He drops down on both knees and raises a flat hand in front of him. In the centre of his palm is an open red velvet box and my heart rate goes into overdrive, knowing what that diamond ring glinting up at me means.

"Cooper," I begin hesitantly, my fingers hurriedly placing my nearly-empty wine glass on the table. "I have to admit, I'm a little scared about where this might lead."

He looks at me, his eyes black in the reflection of the candlelight. "It leads to happiness, Viv. Pure and simple."

"It leads to not being able to live without you." My eyes do not leave that box in his hand.

He grins, finally understanding my fear. "I have my own fears too, but I'm already there. I already can't live without you, whether we're married or not. So how about we take the plunge? Will you marry me? Please."

I nod, not quite able to speak as my throat closes over. I had no idea he was planning this, but it's what I want with all my heart.

Cooper grins and it reaches all the way to his eyes. He lifts the ring in front of me and throws the box over his shoulder, making us both laugh.

Then he slips it on my finger and pulls me to my feet. His arms wrap around me and he kisses me just like that first time. Our lips move slowly and gently and our tongues slide together, languidly tasting each other. My fingers grip his shirt and his sigh turns into a quiet moan.

“I love you, gorgeous man.”

“Mmm.” He kisses my neck and nibbles my ear. “I love you too, wife-to-be. And who knows? Maybe one day, we can even adopt a dog or two of our own.”

ABOUT TRACEY PEDERSEN

Tracey Pedersen is an Australian author who has finally accepted that she is meant to write, write, write! In 2016 she released her first romance novel and hasn't looked back. Now writing full time, and fighting the urge to write every second of the day, she loves travel, crocheting, replying to reader emails and spending WAY too much time on Facebook! Find out more about Tracey [here](#).

Sign up for Tracey's newsletter [here](#).

[The Secret Billionaire's Club Series](#)

[Finding Sweet Love Series](#)

[One Week Love Story Series](#)

[Married This Year Series](#)

[Men About Town Series](#)



RESCUED BEATS

ARELL RIVERS

ABOUT RESCUED BEATS

Angus is a Scottish transplant to NYC, working at the same whisky distillery his family has for generations, despite his broader interests. Livie's a newly unemployed IT worker who wants to spread her wings but is afraid to cross her helicopter parents. What could these two acquaintances possibly have in common? More than you can shake a stick at!

This story, in the Untamed Coaster series, will make you want to run out and put on a Santa suit – or volunteer at a local animal rescue. But watch out for those doggy snacks!

CHAPTER 1

ANGUS

At the familiar ping, I pick up my mobile, which shows the continuation of a group text I joined soon after I arrived here in New York City. A smile touches my lips before I even read the words:

Gordie: Dinner tonight at Vinnie's Place. Be there at 7!

A string of my friends respond, most of whom unfortunately can't make it. I skim through the replies, my decision sealed when Livie says she's coming. I've been trying to get to know this lass since Gordie first invited me to join his rowdy crew months ago, but she's always buttoned-down. Perhaps her demure attitude draws me to her?

I have managed to learn she's Gordie's college friend, beautiful in a young Mila Kunis sort of way, and hides many secrets behind her gorgeous hazel eyes. And she recently was laid off from her IT job. Never would've pegged her for a computer geek, but we all can't be perfect.

Perfect. Ha. As if I dreamed of working for Moray Distillery as a kid. Oh wait. Maybe I did. Rather, my family's experiences offered me no alternatives. In Scotland, the MacDonalds have been employed by the whisky maker for over a hundred years, so I'm following in their footsteps. Truth be told, I'm proud to be Callum's executive assistant. He's a great guy and a fantastic boss. Ever since he met Quinn, he's becoming more of the person I knew when we were kids together back in Elgin.

If only I could expand my own universe with a lass. Livie pops into my mind, causing me to dwell on Gordie's friend before pushing her aside for something more attainable. Like diving into merchandising opportunities. As *if*.

Since nothing good comes from such frivolous thoughts, I shove away from the desk and walk over to Callum's office. I knock on the trim around his door to announce myself, then breeze in. "Hey. Got an invite to dinner tonight at a restaurant in the Upper East with a group of my friends. Would you and Quinn like to join us?"

Callum looks up from his computer, his face in deep thought until he blinks several times and focuses on me. "Thanks, but Quinn and I have plans. We're double-dating with her sister Paige and her husband Jesse."

"Oh, cool." I've met the couple on several occasions. "Have a good time. Is there anything else you need from me before I call it a week?"

His forefinger taps his chin, his tell when he's thinking. I don't mind going above and beyond for his family's distillery and have no hesitation doing extra work for him. *Be nice if I were exploring some merch concepts.* I quash this errant thought. I'm in a good place.

"Nah. I wish you could do this request for proposal for me, but it's my millstone. As soon as I finish this RFP though, I'm taking off for the weekend." He wiggles his ginger eyebrows—a color that matches mine.

"I read you." Curiosity takes over and I stride to his desk. "What's the RFP about anyway?"

He rubs his temples. "Dadaidh and some of the others over in Scotland want to expand into selling merchandise. You know, glassware, towels, hats, that sort of thing. I'm putting together an RFP to look for a company to carry out this goal."

His father, whom he's called Dadaidh ever since we were wee bairns in the Highlands, is the CEO of Moray Distillery. Callum was tasked to bring the whisky label to America and is doing a braw job of it. The content of this RFP interests me beyond anything, however. Trying to appear casual, I make my way behind his chair and peer at the document. Skimming, I realize this is exactly what I've been dreaming of doing, although I'd like to add in a touch of Scotland as well.

What would Callum think of me branching out and expanding my duties here at the distillery? My body gains one hundred pounds as the truth settles that I've been his right-hand man for so long, there's no way he could think of me in any other capacity. I place my heavy hand on his shoulder. "Let me know if I can be of any assistance."

"Will do. Enjoy yourself tonight and have a great weekend."

Trying to appear nonchalant, I bob my chin. "I always do." His chuckle

escorts me back to my desk.

With my mind abuzz with possibilities related to the RFP, I finish my work and chat with my co-workers. Gathering intel, celebrating happy times, and generally doing my unofficial executive assistant duties—keeping my finger on the pulse of the company and its employees to prevent any possible problems.

Confident the distillery is in good shape for the weekend, I hop on the subway and take it up to Seventieth and Fifth. When I pass through the doors of Vinnie's Place, the hostess Shelby greets me with kisses on both my cheeks. I told her such a greeting isn't Scottish, but she insists. Anyway, when a pretty lass wants to kiss me, who am I to refuse?

Trailing Shelby to the table in the back, I greet my friends. Sometimes only four of us can make it, like tonight, while other times we have to pull tables together to accommodate twelve or more. I shake hands with Gordie, kiss Livie's friend Maureen on the cheek, and do the same to Livie. Her sweet and seductive floral scent lingers in my nose as I select a chair directly across from her and Maureen, who sit on the banquette.

Once we've caught up and placed our dinner orders, talk turns to our plans for the weekend. Gordie goes first. "I'm heading to my family's for my sister's birthday party."

Before I can respond, my mobile pings with an incoming text.

Pointing at it, I check to confirm Callum doesn't need me. Rather than my boss, Bennett Hardy's name stares at me. I met the lead singer of Untamed Coaster—UC to their fanbase—right before Moray Whisky was introduced to America, as his band was the headliner at the launch party. Even after these months, it's still jarring to see his name on my mobile.

Bennett: We're going to be performing at Madison Square Garden next month. How many tickets should I set aside for you?

Being personal friends with a rock star sure has its perks. Yet, I don't want to take advantage. With a quick glance at Livie sitting across from me, I reply back with "two." Hey, a Scot can dream!

I'm pushed to the side from my left. Gordie asks, "What's so important, dude? Work?"

Not about to exploit my friendship with the mega band, I reply, "Nah. Just a friend updating me about his plans." My gaze lingers on the beauty

facing me for a brief moment.

He nods. "So, what are you up to this weekend, Angus?"

"Honestly, I don't have anything planned. Probably for the best. I can get my holiday shopping done and avoid lugging my presents on the plane by mailing them to Scotland."

"Sounds like a smart strategy." Maureen takes up the conversation. "I'm hosting a big fundraiser at Pet Paws tomorrow, thanks to my bestie." She taps Livie. "My new business coach suggested a Holiday Photo Pawstaganza."

Livie's now a business coach? Makes sense—much more than IT. While quiet, she's the type who's always ready to help out whenever needed.

Livie clears her throat. "I only expanded on an idea Maureen had."

"And gave me marketing ideas, hooked me up with a photographer, and set up a timeline for me to execute." Maureen turns toward her friend. "You also—"

Livie places her palm across Maureen's mouth. "That's enough. No one wants to hear about boring business stuff. Tell them about how you got professional photos taken of all the adorable pets waiting to be adopted."

With that, Maureen bubbles about her shelter. Yet it's her best friend who consumes my interest. A million questions dance across my mind to ask this intriguing woman. Did she take classes to become a business coach? What training did she need? How did she transition from IT to this? Everything about Livie calls to me, begging me to find out all her secrets. *Does she enjoy UC?*

Maureen's mobile rings, causing the table to fall silent for a second. I seize on this opportunity to ask some of my own questions. "So, Livie, is business coaching your new direction?"

Her nimble fingers move the silverware. She glances from me to her friend to Gordie before landing back on me. She shrugs. "I don't know. I wanted to help Maureen, that's all."

"From the sound of it," I persist, "You did a great job."

Pink stains Livie's cheeks. Before she can reply to me, Maureen lets out a sigh that could be heard all the way to Scotland. Big, light brown eyes brimming with tears face the table.

Livie reaches toward her. "What's wrong?"

"Roscoe has Covid."

Livie sucks in a breath. The two women's shoulders slump as if their entire beings crumpled in on each other. By contrast, Gordie and I mirror

each other with our heads tilted to the right.

Since this Roscoe catching Covid seems to be an awful thing, I surmise he must be a person rather than an animal. Although my family had a golden lab named Roscoe when I was growing up. “Is he a relative?”

Maureen shakes her head. “No.” Her eyes widen, clearly recognizing we’re baffled. “He’s my friend who agreed to play Santa tomorrow at Pet Paws.” She clarifies, “For photos.” Her shoulders bounce, and Livie pulls her into an embrace.

Gordie tries to offer comfort. “I’m sorry your friend caught Covid. Do you have a backup Santa?”

Livie shakes her head as Maureen replies, “No.”

My heart goes out to the distraught Maureen. Something lower in my anatomy reaches toward Livie. Gordie has a family commitment, but I’m available. I could help the lasses out. Possibly even get closer to the enigmatic woman sitting across from me.

“I can do it.”

My words are greeted with a snort from Gordie, whom I ignore. Not trying to impress him. For her part, Maureen’s tear-filled eyes stare at me, while Livie’s mouth falls open. She’s the first to find her voice. “You’d do that? For the shelter?”

For you, I supply, but keep this to myself.

I shrug. It’s no biggie and they’re in a pickle. “Seems like you need someone and I have time to help.” I sit back in the chair. “On one condition, though.”

Catching her breath, Maureen leans forward. “Yes. Whatever you want, I’ll get it done.”

Have Livie go out with me.

Unaware of my wayward thought, she continues, “I’ll switch up the photo timing. Get you extra lattes. Import haggis. Tell me what you need.”

I look between Maureen and Livie, my gaze lingering on the business coach. “I’ll be your Santa so long as you promise me the suit won’t clash with my gorgeous ginger locks.” I throw my head back and laugh, earning a rare smile from Livie.

Tomorrow’s going to be interesting.

CHAPTER 2

LIVIE

“**W**hat if I set these up on an angle?” Maureen fiddles with fliers on the table containing information about Pet Paws.

I place my hand on her arm. In a calming voice, I say, “It’s fine.”

Maureen puts her hands in her back pockets, surveying the inside of her animal shelter. The main room has been transformed into a winter wonderland, with decorations donated from a nearby holiday rental store. Photography equipment and lights are at the ready. An oversized chair sits in the middle where Angus will sit—it’s perfect for Santa and at least two smallish dogs.

Angus got here ten minutes ago and is changing in a supply closet we designated as the dressing room. When he said he’d take over for Roscoe last night, I knew the universe was looking out for me. My first job as a business coach almost failed before we even held the fundraiser. Well, “job” might be stretching it as I’d begged Maureen to let me help her and try out some strategies I learned in my online class. Free help for her, experience for me. Either way, I need today to raise the money we anticipate. A win will mean as much for my bestie as it does for me.

The red-headed Scot getting changed is an altogether different animal from those Maureen tries to place. Angus MacDonald has a big personality, an even bigger laugh, and eyes filled with mischief. Trouble with a capital T, as Mom would say. Something I’ve avoided all my life, per her guidance.

My parents, especially Mom, have directed my activities since day one. It was easier for me to let her pick my friends, my boyfriends, my sports—if ballet qualifies as a sport. It didn’t matter I wasn’t interested in arabesques or

fifth position, she made me stay in lessons throughout high school because it looked good on my resume. At least I met Maureen in class when she moved to town freshman year, so I guess it wasn't all bad. However, if I ever have to do another pli  , it'll be too soon.

Maureen fiddles with containers filled with holiday-themed doggie snacks for purchase. "I can't believe Angus agreed to help us out. It's very nice of him."

"Agreed. I hope Roscoe feels better quickly."

My friend offers a lame smile. "He texted he's not feeling too badly." She points to the photography setup. "How does this look?"

I survey the entire space one final time. "It's perfect. Everything's in place and ready. I'm sure you're going to meet your fundraising goal for Pet Paws. By the way, I'm very happy you shortened your last name in the title of your company. Peterson's Paws doesn't have the same ring to it."

"Which was your idea, if I remember correctly. You've been a business coach for years and didn't even know it. I think this new line of work suits you much better than IT."

Her mention of my old job—the one selected by my parents—is a sore spot. While I was good at everything computers, my heart really wasn't in it. Yet, I listened to them and majored in computer programming in college and landed a job with a well-known company. They assumed I was set for life. Until the economy soured and I was laid off last month. Mom's been leading the crusade to find me a new job ever since.

Shaking my head, I thrust these thoughts aside and focus on today's event. One I helped Maureen orchestrate. If the stars align—and I somehow manage to come clean to my parents that I don't want to return to IT—I can launch my consulting agency, with this as a shining example of my skills. Thus, the fundraiser has to succeed. I check my phone. "The photographer should be here any moment. She'll make whatever adjustments she needs, so don't worry."

Maureen pulls me in for a tight hug. "I have you to thank for today."

The bell above the front door peals, and our photographer enters, together with her assistant and all her equipment. "I'm going to help them out. Why don't you check in on Angus? I can't wait to see how the sexy Scot plays St. Nick."

I turn and look at my best friend. "You can't say he's sexy. You have a boyfriend." Who's absolutely in love with her.

“Sure do.” She gets a dreamy expression on her face. “Still, he’s in the military and won’t be home for fifty-three days. But who’s counting?” She examines me in a way that makes blood rush up my neck. “However, I’m not dead.”

I focus on my suddenly fascinating chipped nail polish rather than allowing myself to agree with her assessment of Angus. When she adds that Angus is single, I shove away from her, ignoring her laughter heckling me through the hall. I can keep my interest in the troublesome Scot in check. *Not. A. Problem.* I round the corner and thump on the door to the supply closet.

“Aye!”

Taking this one word as an all-clear to enter, I open the door and pop my head in, while keeping my gaze on the floor. “Everything going okay in here?”

“Working on it, lassie. Can you please help me out?”

Assuming he’s decent, I close the door and turn toward the larger-than-life Scotsman. He’s wearing red pants and boots with a long-sleeved white shirt proclaiming *Aberdeen Football Club Rules*. He lifts the padding and shakes it. “At home, Santa usually wears a kilt, so these trousers were a wee bit of a shock to me. But this? I take it I have to add one hundred pounds to play the bugger too?”

I giggle at how grumpy he sounds in order to avoid picturing him in a kilt, remembering what Maureen told me—real Scots don’t wear anything underneath. *Gah*. “Haven’t you heard Santa’s belly shakes like a bowl full of jelly?” With my hands around my flat tummy, I fake a Santa laugh.

He drops his arms to his sides and stares at me for a second, then breaks into a broad smile. “Your laugh is contagious, Livie.”

I can’t help myself and grin back at him. The way he pronounces my name—*lee-vee*—makes it sound exotic and special. *I wish*. This thought returns me to the task at hand. “Here, let me help you with the padding. Hold it in front of your stomach and I’ll tie it around your waist.”

After I secure the first side, I move to the opposite. His cologne is fresh and clean with hints of lemon and bergamot, if I’m not mistaken. It’s an empowering scent. One that fits the confident guy beneath the red suit. Finally, following a couple of unsuccessful tries, the padding is in place. Next, I help him put on the jacket, and secure the black belt over it.

Touching his now protruding stomach, I admonish, “You better lay off the whisky for a little while.” He laughs and the belly bounces. “Perfect for

Santa, though.”

He cracks his knuckles. “The indignities I have to suffer to help my friends.”

For some reason, his statement calls to me. I kiss his clean-shaven cheek. “And we appreciate you all the more for it.”

He blinks. The air changes. It must be the small room. Or maybe it’s the puppy chow.

He directs my hand to his lips and kisses the back of my palm.

No.

It’s *Trouble*.

I snatch my hand back. In a voice much higher than normal, I toss him the wig and beard. “Put this on while I get your hat and glasses.” I make a lot of commotion around gathering the remaining pieces of his costume.

“There’s no mirror in here. How’s this?”

A white-haired Angus turns to me, wiggling his chin so the beard bobs. For the second time today, despite my better judgment, I giggle at his antics. “It’s almost right.” All he needs is some minor adjustments, which I make short work of, ending by planting fake spectacles over his eyes. “Once you put the hat and gloves on, I’ll believe you really came from the North Pole.”

He gets into the spirit of the day with a hearty, “Ho, ho, ho!”

Make that three giggles today. “I’ve never heard a Santa with a Scottish accent before.” I wipe a stray tear off my cheek.

To complete his outfit, he plops the fur-trimmed hat onto his head. Smacking his rounded belly, he says, “Do you think the pets will be okay with me as their Father Christmas?”

The way he cares about how he’ll perform for Maureen’s business during the fundraiser warms my heart. I’ve never met a man quite like Angus. Perhaps I have to leave the country to do so? I give him the reassurance he seems to need. “You’re going to do great today. Trust me. All the pets will love you.”

The “L” word hangs in the air.

I launch for the door and open it. “Are you ready to meet your adoring public?”

He walks in my direction, sideswiping the shelves a little as he adjusts to his new center of gravity. His face swivels toward a shelf. “What do you think if I bring these? Maybe I’ll make more friends if I give them out?” He holds up a bin filled with treats.

I shrug. Never having had a pet growing up—Mom claimed she was allergic to their fur—I’m out of my depth. Yet Maureen always rewards good behavior with a treat. “Sure. Why not?”

I wait while he fills a baggie with treats, and we go into the main room where Maureen welcomes everyone to Pet Paws. In an orderly fashion (as orderly as dogs, cats, and rabbits can be!), the pet owners all line up. An eager Jack Russell terrier approaches Santa first. The dog is placed on our Scottish St. Nick’s lap, and his leash is removed. *Looking good so far.*

The dog stuffs his nose into Angus’s pocket, wriggling his back end, pulls back, and barks. Then his snout is buried again into Santa’s crotch. Angus squirms, stuffing his hand into his pocket, obviously reaching for the treats.

“Popeye!” The dog’s owner rushes forward, leash flapping. In a wimpy voice, she instructs, “Down!”

Popeye doesn’t bat an eyelash away from his goal, barking his demand for a treat. His antics rile up the next two dogs in line, whom their owners try to contain, much to their loud barks of complaint.

Angus, holding the baggie of treats, offers one to Popeye. And another. And a third. The dog’s owner tries to get the leash on him, but Popeye leaps straight up, snags Santa’s hat and bounds for the door with his new prize.

A bare-headed Santa yells, “Ach! Come back here!”

My hand flies in front of my mouth, knowing now isn’t the time to laugh at the Scottish accent coming from the bearded man in the red suit. Who knew treats could cause such a ruckus?

Maureen manages to corral the dog before he can escape. *Crisis averted.* Good for my bestie!

While she handles the animals like the pet whisperer she is, I walk over to the side, retrieve Santa’s hat, and pass it to Angus. Even underneath all the hair, from the way his eyes crinkle, I know he’s smiling one of his signature wide smiles. The one that makes me want to get lost in him.

His lush tenor voice urges me along this inappropriate path. “Thanks, lass. Who would’ve guessed I almost started a pet riot with the first four-legged pooch?”

I get myself under control. After all, I am the business coach here. “At least Maureen wrangled the dogs in no time. Shows the owners more about her than any amount of marketing could do.”

“Well, in that case, happy to have helped.” He adjusts his fake glasses and plops the hat back onto his head.

I hold out my hand, wiggling my fingers. “Fork over the treats, Santa. You’ve proven you can’t be trusted with them.

“Ho, ho, ho!” He leans forward. “Do you want to sniff my pocket the way Popeye did?”

His suggestion makes my girlie parts tingle. “You wish.” I manage to keep my hand outstretched. As he retrieves the baggie filled with treats, my gaze sweeps over his hat, which is askew. Since there’s no mirrors out here, I take it upon myself to fix it. “There. You look like a perfect Santa again.”

His hand snakes out and grabs mine. “I appreciate your kind attention, Livie.”

My brain goes to mush as I register his gentle words and the caress of my name from his lips. *Trouble.* Stepping back, I swallow. I’m saved by the photographer, who directs “Santa” to return to his throne for photos.

Grateful for the intervention, I flee Angus and approach Maureen. “Great job with the dogs.”

She fixes her ponytail. “Thanks. Nothing like a dog stampede at the beginning of the Holiday Photo Pawstaganza to get the blood pounding.”

“Here’s the culprit.” I pass her the baggie of doggie treats. “Angus had these in his pocket. We thought it would be good to give them to the pets during their photo shoot, but it seems like it wasn’t a brilliant idea.”

Maureen laughs. “That would be a no, as you can see. I’ll let the photographer use them as a reward.”

The day speeds by without another incident. As the final dog gets his photo taken, the volunteers approach Maureen. The event was a huge success. Ten pets were adopted today, and we raised more money than our reach goal for the fundraiser.

Finally, the doors are locked. While the photographer packs up, Angus joins us by the register. Sans the hat, wig, beard, and glasses, he appears more like the guy I’ve come to know. He rubs his wet ginger hair with his now-ungloved hand. “I never imagined having my picture taken could be this demanding.”

Both Maureen and I laugh. She says, “Wearing a Santa suit didn’t help. Thank you so much for what you did here today. You made a lot of pet owners very happy. Us, too.”

“I was glad to be able to help. At least all of the pets were housebroken.”

Maureen laughs, “Truly a lucky day!” She cranes her neck toward me. “Why don’t you help Angus out of the costume and bag it for return?”

Great. My *former* best friend has decided to play matchmaker.

Angus extends his hand, palm up. “C’mon, Livie. Please help me shed a hundred pounds.”

Against my better judgment, I put my hand in his, which he squeezes. Why does Trouble feel beyond exciting?

CHAPTER 3

ANGUS

The more time I spend with Livie, the more I want. As we walk through the hall, I run my thumb over the back of her palm, savoring our sweet connection. This lass is unlike any of the others I've met over here. Her clothes are form-fitting but not overly so. While she goes out and enjoys herself, she never gets hammered. She has a calm composure, a quiet manner of taking in all around her. On the rare occasions I've witnessed her laughing, her entire being gets involved. She intrigues me. A lot.

I open the door, allowing her to enter first. She has a nice bum to match the rest of her. Hey, I'm a red-blooded Scot! I can notice these things. It's Gaelic law or something.

She reaches the back of the room with the table where I left my clothes and the return bag for the Santa suit. In her signature husky voice that drives me wild, she says, "Thank you for being such a good sport. Sorry about the treat incident at the beginning."

"Not a problem. I should've considered they could cause a panic. My Labs would lose their minds over a dog bone." I unbuckle the belt around my inflated waist and pass it to her.

She curls it into a circle. "You have a dog?"

"Not here," I clarify. "Back home, my parents have a bunch of Labs on the farm."

She sighs. "It must've been wonderful growing up in Scotland. I've seen pictures. It looks beautiful there."

"Aye. 'Tis the most gorgeous place on earth, if you ask me. But I may be biased." A chuckle escapes while I take off the hot jacket. "I wanted to compliment you on a great job today. I understand people were in line around

the block for photos.”

“Maureen did all the work. I only gave her some pointers.” She approaches me and unties the padding around my midsection, starting on the left.

“Is that what a business coach does? I’ve never worked with one, but I’d love to hear about it.” When she walks to my other side, I hold up my right arm.

“Well, a business coach helps with all aspects of a company, from organization to marketing. The goal is to help business owners clarify the vision of their business and how it fits in with their personal goals.”

“Wow. This sounds like a very important piece of the puzzle. I’m impressed you seized this opportunity to make the leap away from IT. I bet you’re going to do very well.” She helps me lift the padding over my head and places it on the table. When she remains quiet, I ask, “Will you still be working with Maureen now the fundraiser’s over?”

“I’m not sure.”

Before I can take these damn trousers off, I have to get rid of the black boots. Planting my ass against some boxes of dog food, I set to work on the task. “If you do, I noticed some missed opportunities to raise more money for Pet Paws. For instance, she could sell logoed T-shirts or even branded dog leashes.”

Livie turns and focuses her entire attention on me. “Those are fabulous ideas.”

At her praise, I straighten. As well as I can with one boot on and the other off. “You like them?”

She nods. “I do. Very much. Maureen might be able to convert a small corner into a shop. Perhaps even give a trinket of some sort when a pet is adopted.”

I admire how her mind works. How she takes an idea and runs with it. I’m about to compliment her when she asks, “I thought you were Callum’s executive assistant at Moray Distillery. Do you do any marketing for them as well?”

I bend down and busy myself in removing my other boot. “Nah.”

“You should. I mean, you were only here a few hours, and your comment sparked a super new direction for raising money. I bet you could do the same for your own company.”

Without taking my eyes off my task, I murmur, “Like respond to the

RFP.”

Footsteps bring Livie nearer to me. “Excuse me? I didn’t catch that.”

Kicking the other boot to the side, I push away from the boxes, a bit surprised by how close she’s standing—not that I mind. My hands go to the zipper on my red pants, and I undo the button. She sucks in her breath. Perhaps it’s her nearness, or the purity of her inquiry, but I find myself replying, “My boss is putting out a request for proposals about adding merchandise to the distillery.”

Her eyes get big. “Sounds perfect for you. I bet your suggestions would be well-received.”

My lips clamp shut. Deciding against taking off the pants—no need to demonstrate how her nearness affects me at this moment—I reach for the hem of my shirt, which is soaked through after its time under the Santa jacket and beneath the photographer’s hot lights.

She prompts, “Are you going to submit a proposal?”

I strip off my shirt and take a deep breath. “I don’t have any training about such things. I only consider what I’d like to have at home as a keepsake. The RFP references glassware, hats, and towels. In my opinion, branded whisky glasses and shot glasses, bar towels, and baseball caps would be a welcome addition.” My eyes return to my socked feet. “I can also see artwork depicting the distillery in Scotland, framed pieces of the Scottish countryside, that sort of thing. You know, to play up our roots in Scotland.”

“What a brilliant idea. We here in America always have been enamored with the Scottish countryside, and you’d be playing right into that. You definitely should submit a proposal.”

Her eyes roam over my bare torso. Despite our rather heavy conversation, I can’t help but flex. “I don’t think the distillery considers me to be more than Callum’s executive assistant. It’s what’s expected—what my family’s done for a century.”

She focuses on a point on the wall roughly above my shoulder. “Your ideas are innovative, I truly believe, but that’s not what’s important. Do you feel you have something more to offer the company?”

I consider her question. “I might have a different take on merchandise we could sell rather than the standard keychains and cookbooks.”

“I like your ideas. You definitely should put together a proposal. I can help you with it, if you’d like.”

While I never considered going through with this, my ideas nevertheless

spill out. “I’ve been thinking about how we might enhance a guest’s stay at the distillery. For example, expanding the tasting room. In addition to offering samples, we could create a short and fun film explaining the distilling process. Talk about the history of the label. You know, make it sort of an experience.” Now I’m just running off at the mouth.

“What else do you envision?”

I can’t stop myself. “I’d like to give tours of the cask and bottling rooms, perhaps even add in a small restaurant of some sort.” At her nod, I continue, “I’m sure there’s a piece of real estate in the big room that would accommodate food and whisky pairings. Sell traditional items, plus my more unique ideas.” The more I think about it, the more excited I become.

Livie claps. “You owe it to Moray Distillery to submit your proposal. Maybe even talk with Callum about it, since the ball’s in his court to make the decision, right?”

“Well, yes it is.” I crack my knuckles. “But, the MacDonalds have worked in the fields and on machinery at the distillery for generations. I’m sure Callum can’t picture me as more than his assistant.” Although, we did grow up together, and he brought me to meet UC when they filmed the video for the launch party...

She plays with a ring on her right hand. Her chipped nail polish cements my view of her as unique among women. “Then it’s your job to show him you’re more than a pretty face.” Her palm flies in front of her mouth. “That didn’t come out right. It’s a figure of speech.”

Livie’s as smart as she is adorable. Given her last comment, I hope she’s warming up to me. I’m certainly not immune to her. She’s validated my creativity and convinced me to go ahead with a proposal. Now it’s time to test my more enjoyable theory. My hands fall to my fly and I pull the zipper down.

“Oh.”

This is her only response.

The need to be with this lass, who supports my dreams and sees value in them, is overwhelming. No one has ever encouraged me to step beyond the boundaries set by my ancestors over a hundred years ago. She recognizes me for who I am, and stands behind my ideas. I need such positivity in my life.

Since she hasn’t made a move, I’m emboldened to shimmy the pants over my hips. Soon they’re in a puddle of red at my feet. I kick the material away from both of us. “Oops.” I stand before her in only my Holiday Spirits boxers

—depicting a bunch of liquor bottles with holiday ornaments ... perhaps the Distillery could also sell these with Moray Whisky on them?

The air in the small closet shifts as she takes faster breaths. I grip her slim shoulders. She doesn't pull away, rather lifts her chin toward me. I can't hold back my desire to taste her any longer.

"I've wanted to do this for a long time, Livie. You're unlike anyone I've ever met. I need you."

Our lips touch.

CHAPTER 4

LIVIE

Angus's lips coax me to share all of myself. They make me want to rip his boxers down his muscular legs. They encourage me to fling my own clothes off my body to get closer to his sexy one. They dare me to forget all my inhibitions about him being Trouble.

Can I do this? I've never colored outside the lines prescribed by my parents before. Unless you count taking on the business coaching role for Maureen. *What they don't know can't hurt them.*

Angus drops his mouth down my neck, and I tilt my chin to allow him better access. When he nips my earlobe, I almost jump out of my skin. I breathe, "What are you doing to me?"

In response, his tongue traces the shell of my ear. "Something that's long overdue."

A shudder runs through my body, only causing me to press against his nearly naked one. Of their own volition, my hands skim over his arms, exploring all the hard muscles, reveling as they bunch under my touch. I've never been with a man who could be a model before, yet Angus—with his chiseled features, well-defined torso, and alluring smile—easily fits the bill.

He's my kindred spirit, allowing himself to be ruled by his family's role. His amazing ideas must be shared with the world. With my last ounce of sanity, I promise myself I'll help him create the best proposal. He deserves it.

Angus's mouth returns to mine, his tongue pressing against the seam of my lips. Everything my parents instilled in me since birth be damned, I want to be with this man. This one time, I'm going to embrace Trouble rather than run away from it.

"Please," I moan.

“With pleasure, lass. Livie. My Livie.”

His response fans the flames even more from deep within. I don’t stop him when he lifts the hem of my shirt over my head. I’m on board when he caresses my breasts on the outside of my bra’s cups. Especially when his thumbs strum over my nipples, which beg for his touch. Especially then.

“Your white bra is perfect.” He bends down and kisses me through the lacy material. “But it has to come off.”

My answer trips out of my mouth. “Okay.” I want this man like none before.

Within seconds, he unsnaps the hooks and pulls the straps down my arms. His hands travel beneath my breasts as he weighs them in his large palms.

“Ach. You’re more beautiful than I even imagined.”

His lips cover my nipples, his teeth giving me tiny bites, which cause my knees to buckle. I don’t think or analyze. I simply feel. I rub my chest against his, entwine my arms around his neck, and pull him to me for a kiss that eviscerates all my remaining ability to compute. His hands encircle my waist, ending by clenching my butt.

My fingers tangle in his thick hair. “I need what you’re offering, Angus.”

“You’ll get it. First, off with your pants.”

He kisses me while sliding them down my legs. I kick my shoes off and stand before him, both of us in only our underwear.

For once, I don’t want to be a passive player.

For once, I feel a true connection with a man of my own choosing.

For once, I was the one selected, not for professional reasons, but simply for being me.

All these facts combined take me so far out of character I don’t recognize who I am. But I like this version of her. My hands reach the elastic waistband of his boxers—funny ones, which suit him perfectly—and I pull downward.

He chuckles. “’Tis good to see such a bonnie lass matching my desire.” He makes equally quick work of my panties.

Naked and breathing hard, I luxuriate in all his planes. Not to mention the part of him pointing at me. Saliva pools in my mouth as, for the first time, I want to give a blowjob. Not stopping to think, I let my hand stroke his hardness.

He hisses. “Nay. I cannae let you do that. I need to taste you first.”

I survey the small closet and can’t imagine how on earth this is going to work. “I don’t think there’s room.”

“Ye of little faith.” He picks me up and, by their own accord, my legs go around his middle. With sure strides, he brings us to the back of the closet where the bag for his Santa suit rental sits. With a quick slashing motion, he clears the table and places me on it.

I giggle. “Guess that’s one way to do things.”

He smirks. “Ye’ll soon find out I have many ways to do all the things.”

He steps between my legs and caresses my sex while his mouth kisses its way down my body. I squirm as my entire being begs for him. I don’t usually get to enjoy these preliminaries, as the guys I’ve been with have only been interested in the main act. Even in the small confines of this closet, Angus takes care of my needs ahead of his own.

Boy, does he take care of me.

With his tongue, he worships my clit. With his fingers, he enters my core. With a curl of them deep inside me, he touches a spot no one ever has. Screaming “Yes!” I explode around his mouth and fingers.

Before I can come back to my senses, he steps away from my overheated body, rustles with what I believe to be his clothing, and returns to me. Holding up a packet, he asks, “Want to do the honors?”

Dazed, I stare at his hand until it dawns on me what he’s asking. Condom. He wants me to put it on him. After the most memorable orgasm of my life, this is the least I can do. I snag the packet and open it with my teeth. *Who am I?*

I take the latex and bring it to his shaft, but instead of rolling it downward, I lick over his tip. I’ve been too afraid to try this in the past, but his salty taste is addictive. It encourages me to do it again.

Angus groans. “No more of that unless you prefer me to come on yer tits rather than inside your pussy.” He reaches for my sex. “I know my choice.”

“Oh.” I want to feel him in me this time. *This time?*

While I dither, Angus takes the matter into his own hands, plucks the condom out of my hand, and rolls it over his dick. “I can’t wait, Livie. My vote is inside.”

With those words, he enters my body with little pushes, until he’s seated deep inside. I bite his shoulder as I get used to how big he is. “You feel amazing.”

“Lass, I’ve never been welcomed home like this before. It’s as if you were built for me.”

I like his comment. When he starts moving, I like that better. His hips

pound into my body, alternating his strokes between hard and fast, then slower, then fast again. Within moments, my breathing hitches like he didn't make me come only minutes ago.

"What are you doing to me?"

"The same thing your tight walls are doing to me."

He pumps into me twice more before I go off like a rocket with another wordless scream. He joins me over the edge, shuddering his release deep within me.

Bless all things holy. This man made me see heaven.

While I pant, he pulls out of me, ties off the condom, and looks around for a trashcan. Finding one across the room, he walks over there without taking his eyes off me. Until he steps on a squeaky toy, causing me to giggle.

Wearing nothing but his gorgeous wide smile, he tosses the condom away and returns to me, his gaze skimming over my body. "You've marked me, Livie." He holds up a finger. "The way you sent me to the stratosphere, you've ruined me for other women." He adds a second digit. "Plus, I'll never look at dog toys the same."

Our laughter is cut short when a text pings, this time from my cell. "I better get it." I pad across the floor—avoiding squeaky toys along the way—and pick up my phone. Mom. I don't want her to intrude on this glorious moment. However, the first few words show on my screen, and force me to read the message. With a quick glance toward the still-naked Angus, I click on it. Great. She arranged an interview with another IT firm.

With a sigh, I return to the amazing Scot and wrap my body in his. "Bad news?"

Against his chest, I sigh again. "Mom set up an interview for me."

"As a business coach? It's wonderful they're so supportive."

I lower my forehead. "I haven't told them about my business coaching."

He pulls back and raises my chin to him. "Another IT company?" His brows come together.

"Yes." I trace the defined muscles on his chest. "I have to take the interview."

"The hell you do. Look what you talked me into doing—you encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone and write a proposal in response to the RFP." He leans forward and kisses me. "You need to tell them about your desire to become a business coach. I'm sure they'll support you."

I shake my head. "You don't know my parents. They want me to stay in

IT. It's what they picked for me."

His hand crushes mine to his chest. "You inspired me to detour from my family's path because you think my ideas are good enough. I'm good enough." He squeezes. His voice kicks up a decibel. "You can do the same for yourself. You're going to be an excellent coach."

Hands still connected against his chest, I look into his molten blue eyes. "You don't know them. I have no latitude but to heed their instructions. They never left any room for me to make my own decisions."

He doesn't drop my hand. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five." I shake free of his hold.

"You've lived a quarter of a century under your parents' thumbs?"

His comment and tone are accusatory—kicking my sluggish anger into gear. I only encouraged him to try something he was thinking about doing anyway. My situation is totally different. *Isn't it?* I lift my chin. In a hard voice, I reply, "You don't have the right. To. Dictate. My. Life."

It's as if the moment is frozen in time.

Glaring at me, he storms away to gather his clothes. "I'd never presume to give you orders about how to live your life." He shoves his jeans up his legs and throws a new shirt over his torso. "I merely suggested you take control of your future the way you told me to do with my own." He picks up his Timberlands. "I get it now. It's 'do what I say, not what I do' with you, right?"

I wince and wrap my arms around my cold, naked body. My clothes land next to me.

From across the closet, he spits, "I'm taking charge of my life from this point forward, family history be damned. I only hope you find the courage to do the same before it's too late." Angus yanks the door open. Without looking back, it slams in his wake.

He can't be right. He barely knows me, except in the biblical sense. He has no idea what it was like growing up in the Hamilton house.

Yet, his words cut me to the quick.

Am I a fake? Not able to take my own advice?

The walls come closer and tears fall.

CHAPTER 5

ANGUS

How dare she? She was all high and mighty when she urged me to go for it with the distillery. Told me to ignore my family tradition and submit a proposal. One she'd help me prepare.

In the hallway, I drop my shoes onto the floor and lean against the wall. Inhaling, I breathe out all the angry words said over the past minutes. My mind replays our last hour. Filled with touches and sounds and kisses, all of which far surpassed anything I've encountered in all my twenty-eight years on this earth.

I tie my left shoe. She was more open and giving with me than anyone has been. Prior to the "text incident," she was supportive of my merchandising concepts. Urged me to respond to Callum's RFP because she thought my ideas were sound. Made me come harder than anyone else ever.

Was I too harsh on her?

I put my foot into the right shoe. My fingers pull the shoelaces together. Did she deserve the way I lashed out at her?

I tie a bow. Did I superimpose my negative feelings about my own situation onto her?

I slide up the wall, my chin buried in my chest. My gaze slinks toward the door I just exited in such fury. She didn't warrant my rage.

Even if all I said was true, I could've couched it in much better terms. After all, I've been wanting to get to know Livie since we met. Our time together was explosive.

I'm an arsehole.

My desire to make amends forces me to the closet. My fist pulls back as if to knock, but I stop myself. I've mucked up everything between us

extraordinarily—no need to rest on niceties now. I open the door.

Livie is still sitting on the table. I take a step into the small room and realize not only hasn't she moved, but she's still naked. And crying.

My battered conscience propels me forward. When I reach her miserable form, I'm unsure how receptive she'll be. Like with the RFP, I guess I'll never know if I don't try.

"Shhh." I snag her neglected shirt. Man up, Angus. "I'm so sorry."

Her tear-stained face tilts upward. The anguish in them almost propels me backward. Her lips—the ones that brought me to ecstasy—fall open, but she remains silent.

"I shouldn't have said what I did." When she doesn't speak, I shake her shirt. "Lift your arms. Let me get you dressed."

Like a child, she raises her hands. Being this close to her naked body but not allowed to touch is my penance. I slip the material over her torso, careful not to skim her perfect boobs, or their even more succulent nipples. Due to my terrible treatment of the lass, I don't deserve them. The material slides into place. At least she's somewhat covered up now.

Not knowing what else to do, I say, "I'll get Maureen." I run my fingers through my hair. "I'm truly sorry."

I turn toward the door but stop as if I hit a brick wall when her scratchy voice reaches my ears. "You were right."

I stare at the door. "I regret saying those things."

I hear rustling from behind me, but don't move. A minute later, she walks around and stands in front of me, thankfully fully dressed, sans bra. She places her dainty hands on my forearms, which are crossed over my torso.

"What you said. You made me realize how much of a hypocrite I've been." Her red-rimmed eyes match the red tip of her nose.

"I didn't mean to make you cry."

Her cheeks inflate. "Seemed like the right thing to do when my entire worldview was knocked on its axis." Her chest rises. "You had me pegged. I did urge you to submit the proposal. But I did it because your ideas are fantastic and need to be considered. Not because I felt you had to rebel against your family."

She wipes her hand over her face. Feeling unworthy to comfort her, I drop my arms to my sides, but don't reach for her the way my body's begging me to do.

"You said it straight, though. I've been a coward in not telling my parents

about my desire to be a business coach. To help others achieve their goals. To figure out strategies for success that have nothing to do with computer programming and IT, the field they've pushed me into since middle school."

She shrugs.

I can't hold back any longer, so I open my arms. Thankfully, she comes to me and rests her head against my chest. In a miraculous moment, she melts into me.

Following a few healing minutes, I whisper, "Tell them. Let your parents know you are taking charge of your own life from now on. That you'll always be their little girl, but you're going to stand on your own two feet from today forward." I run my palm over her shiny hair. "You'll never be alone. I'll be right here cheering you on, if you want me."

Her arms tighten around my waist. "I'd like that."

Livie and I have been nearly inseparable for weeks. We've gone out to dinners and danced at clubs. I've spent the night in her apartment, and she in mine. We squared away plans to see Untamed Coaster at Madison Square Garden. She's turned my life upside down in the most amazing way.

I provided the support she needed to come clean to her folks about the interviews and intentions for the future. I also held her when they weren't supportive. She knows business coaching is the right career path for her. I hope they yield sooner rather than later.

Standing over my shoulder, she stares at my computer screen and claps. "I think it's perfect."

"Thanks to you." I attach my proposal to an email and send it to Callum.

My eyes slam shut. Her arms come around my neck and she kisses my cheek. "You did it."

"Let's see what Callum says."

"He's going to say how lucky he is that his executive assistant also has a brilliant mind for merchandising." She maneuvers to sit in my lap and kisses me with the passion I've come to learn is all Livie. I like it. More than like it.

We take our party into the bedroom, where I make her scream my name over and over and over. Life here in America is good.

The next morning, I put on my suit and Livie fixes my tie. Her eyes shine.

“Knock ‘em dead today. Callum’s going to love your proposal. I believe it. More importantly, I believe in you.”

“Only because the best business coach gave me pointers.” I kiss her. “I’m thrilled to have had her attention, though. Rumor has it she has two new clients, and her business is getting so busy she won’t have any time for charity cases like mine.”

She softens against me. “You are anything but a charity case. I’m proud of what you’ve accomplished, even if your proposal isn’t accepted. Which I fully believe it will be.”

“From your mouth.”

“I much prefer yours.”

She traces my lips with her finger, which I catch in my mouth and suck. Her giggle is my reward. She laughs much more now since we’ve been together. I’d like to take some credit for her new outlook on life. Her parents remain on the periphery, but she’s not allowing them to tread over her desires any longer. I’m just as proud of her as she is of me.

Her hand caresses my ass before she swats it. “Time for you to go. Have a great day at work, and make sure you tell me the minute Callum accepts your phenomenal proposal.”

I chuckle at her enthusiasm and hold onto it as I enter the office. Today could be the first day of the rest of my professional life. All thanks to Livie.

I’m doing my regular morning routine when Callum opens his office door. In a serious voice, he asks, “Angus. Can I see you for a moment, please?”

This has to be about my proposal. “Sure thing, boss.” With a notebook and iPad, I jump up—perhaps a bit too eager, but that’s what nerves do to me.

He sits behind his desk, as per usual, and I take my normal seat in the guest chair. He tugs on his ear, and I allow him time to gather his thoughts with my lips clamped shut. I’m going to start prattling if I open my mouth.

“I’ll get right to the point. I read your proposal, and I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me.”

“Excuse me?” Is this bad or good? Please let it be the latter.

“While I think you’re a fabulous executive assistant, from your submission, I can tell you have an even better merchandising head on your shoulders. I’ve often wondered if you were interested in expanding beyond your current role, and now I know you are.” A smile stretches across his face.

“If you’d spoken up sooner, I wouldn’t have wasted my time writing up that damned RFP. Your ideas are on point. I’m recommending you be the head of merchandising for the entire enterprise, both here and in Europe.”

He swirls before me. Is this my life? He wants me to be the *head of merchandising* for the whole company? I want to say something, but no words come out.

Taking pity on me, Callum continues, “My only request is you train your replacement.”

My chin moves up and down. I owe all this to Livie. After what seems like an eternity, but probably is no more than a few seconds, I finally find my voice. “Yes. Definitely. Thank you.”

I leap to my feet with my hand extended. Ignoring it, Callum pulls me in for a warm hug. “I’m thrilled for you, brother.”

“I’m honored, boss.” I pound his back.

On cloud nine, I return to my desk and call Livie. Not waiting for her “hello,” I burst, “I’m going to be the distillery’s first ever head of merchandising. All thanks to you.”

A shriek sails through my receiver. “You did it! Congratulations!” I fill her in on my meeting with Callum. “Want to celebrate with our friends?”

Her question brings me up short. “I was thinking of something a bit more private.”

She giggles. “We’ll get to that later. But you have to share this great news!”

“Fine. A wee dram and then I’ll bring you home.”

“Deal.”

I pick up my mobile and text the group, mimicking an earlier message from Gordie. One that started this entire wonderful journey:

Dinner tonight at Vinnie’s Place. Be there at 7!

At seven on the dot, I approach the hostess stand, where Shelby kisses me on both cheeks and leads me to the table where everyone’s already seated. As soon as she sees me, Livie springs to her feet and flings herself at me. Our lips lock in a heated kiss, garnering catcalls from the rest of the table.

Breaking apart from Livie, I turn to my friends. With my arm around my girlfriend, I announce, “You’re now looking at Moray Distillery’s first head of merchandising.”

The table erupts in cheers. Gordie, Maureen, and our other friends offer

handshakes and hugs. Soon, champagne is brought, and toasts are made to honor my promotion, as well as Livie's part in making it happen.

Someday, I anticipate additional toasts. To our engagement. Wedding. Bairs. Right now, though, it's time for me to make one. I fish out the extra key I had made, palm it, and raise my glass. "To Livie. Today wouldn't have been possible without this amazing woman's help." I hold up the key. "From a Holiday Photo Pawstaganza to roommates, I can't wait to see what the new year brings!"

A tear tracks down her cheek. Amid more clapping, she grabs my face. "So long as the treat stashed in your pocket belongs only to me, I'm all in!"

I toss my head backward and laugh. Life with Livie promises to be a wonderful adventure.

ABOUT ARELL RIVERS

USA Today Bestselling Author Arell Rivers pens steamy celebrity contemporary romances, with heroes who are hot, heroines who are driven, and passions that ignite the page. This Jersey Girl promises with each of her books, you'll laugh, cry, and go on an emotional rollercoaster—all ending with a HEA. Find out more about Arell [here](#).

Sign up for Arell's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

[The Hold Series](#)
[The Hunte Family Series](#)
[Sins of the Fathers series](#)
[Untamed Coaster Series](#)



MUTTS ABOUT YOU

BRENDA ST JOHN BROWN

ABOUT MUTTS ABOUT YOU

Freya Northcote has a successful career, a terrific house in London and a bunch of old photo albums full of memories of her first love. When she has a chance to see Ben again at a dog adoption drive in the Cotswolds, she's on the train faster than you can say Chihuahua. Maybe she'll finally figure out what went wrong - or maybe she'll leave with even more questions than she came with.

CHAPTER 1

At ten-thirty on a Sunday morning in the Cotswolds, everything is still closed, but it doesn't stop me from looking around hopefully for an open coffee shop. Christmas baubles? Check. Artfully arranged holly and Christmas bunting in every other shop window? Double check. A decent source of caffeine? Nope, nope, nope. Not that I need the caffeine. I'm jittery enough thinking about today.

"I can't find any information about who to contact once we arrive." My assistant Charlotte scowls at her phone, her boots clicking on the pavement as she tries to match my stride. "I wish you'd told me about this earlier so I could, you know, do my job."

I ignore the grouchiness in Charlotte's tone and shoot her a grin over my shoulder. "I'm sure it will be fine. It's a dog adoption drive, not the BAFTAs."

"If it were the BAFTAs, at least I'd know there would be security," Charlotte mutters.

I roll my eyes, but don't turn around this time. Charlotte is amazing—thirty-seven, sharp as a tack, organized, patient, even willing to travel on short notice. Although today's journey from London to Bourton-on-the-Water has definitely pushed the limits of her good will.

I slow down so Charlotte can catch up, and so I don't make her genuinely cross. I've got ten inches of height on her 5'1" frame and she regularly jokes that she does double the steps I do trying to keep up with me. "I don't need security. I promise, this is not a big thing," I say with a grin that I hope looks convincing. If Charlotte catches a whiff of my anxiety she'll stick to me like glue today, which will ruin everything.

“I disagree. You’re Freya Northcote. What did *The Telegraph* call you in that article last weekend? Britain’s Julia Roberts?” Charlotte allows herself a small smile.

This time I let Charlotte see my eye roll. “I’m a fifty-three-year-old actress whose last rom-com role was over twenty years ago. That *Telegraph* writer is delusional.”

“He meant you were as recognizable as Julia Roberts. You know, the trademark smile and all that...hair.” Charlotte flicks her hand in the direction of my hair. To be fair, it is one of my defining features—a mass of wild brown curls shot through with threads of silver that I refuse, on principle, to cover. Tom Hanks doesn’t get any pressure to color his grays; why should I? Charlotte grins a little and says, “Although you’d never see Julia taking on your current role. Speaking of the BAFTAs.”

“From your lips to God’s ear.” I laugh. I’m currently playing an overwhelmed housewife with murder on her mind in a BBC mini-series that’s getting some serious awards show buzz. I took the role because the writing is amazing, and I thought it would push me out of my comfort zone. That it has is its own reward—that’s my story and I’m sticking to it—but a little gold statue would be pretty damn great, too.

My pace slows as we approach a gate with a vinyl sign saying, *Cause for the Paws*. Dogs looking for their fur-ever home here today. Come in for a cuddle and a cuppa.”

“Cute, right?” I say, pointing to the sign. “Maybe you can adopt a dog for Christmas?”

“How about *you* adopt a dog for Christmas?” Charlotte wrinkles her nose, then continues. “Do you know where we’re supposed to go once we get here?”

“No, but I’m sure it will be obvious.”

Charlotte bites her bottom lip. Hard. I can imagine some of the things she’s not saying and I appreciate her restraint. Because if she asked why I insisted on coming here today, I’m not sure what I’d say. I mean, I’d give her an answer. It’s Christmas. I love dogs. Rescue dogs are a cause close to my heart.

But the real reason is in the pages of those photo albums I brought down from my loft a few months ago and the memories they conjured up. I spent hours reliving touches that made me melt and kisses that took on mythic status, until I convinced myself I had to know. Were they as amazing as I

remember? Was *he* as amazing as I remember?

Last Tuesday I decided the only way to find out was to kiss my first love again. Dramatic? Maybe. Effective? Well, time will tell.

Charlotte strides through the gate and I follow. I hear barking as we round the corner, and a young man looks up from a clipboard with a ready smile. He's wearing a red holiday jumper with a dog on it, visible under his open jacket, and a red and white Santa hat. "Hi, and welcome to the Bourton-on-the-Water Cause for the Paws Adoption Drive. I'm Harry. Are you here to adopt a dog today?"

"Maybe." I give Harry my best smile. "I'd love to meet your dogs and help out if you need an extra hand today. It looks pretty busy."

Cause for the Paws is by far the hottest place in town. There are loads of people milling about and it's barely eleven a.m.

Harry nods. "There's a rumor that Freya Northcote is supposed to be here today. I doubt it's true, but it's good for publicity."

"Well, you know what they say, no publicity is bad publicity," Charlotte says.

"True that." Harry gives us a look that's halfway between a smile and an eye roll. "If you want to help out, we need a hand on the coffees and teas. The girl who was supposed to do it had a night on the lash last night and she's currently throwing up in the loo."

"Well, no one wants her near their tea, then, do they?" I give a brisk nod. "Coffees and teas it is, if you'll point the way."

Harry points forward. "Keep walking and you'll see the marquee. The harder-to-adopt dogs are there, too, if you want to talk them up."

"Got it," says Charlotte. She takes a step forward and then stops, saying, "Oh, and if you see Freya Northcote, send her our way."

"I will. I don't imagine she'll really come, but you never know. I'm working at the gate for a reason."

Charlotte waits until we're ten feet away before mumbling, "I guess the joke's on you, Harry." To me, she says, "I can't believe he looked right at you and said that."

"Maybe he's looking for the Julia Roberts version of me." Some people would be upset not to be recognized, but not me. I'm an actress, not a movie star, and I live in relative anonymity, which is exactly the way I like it. Would I like to win the BAFTA this year? Yes. Would I like to go out to dinner with my kids and not be stalked by the paparazzi? Also yes. Luckily,

the latter is the norm—when my kids deign to go out with me at all these days—and the award looks possible for the first time ever.

“More likely he’s looking for the Virginia Dial version of you. If I’d thought of it, I could have brought your muumuu and slippers,” says Charlotte.

I laugh as we make our way towards the blue marquee. Virginia Dial is my current role and to say she’s constantly on edge is like saying dogs are only a little bit cute. She’s a hell of a character to have living inside my head, but I’ve often been accused of biting off more than I can chew.

Mostly by my ex-husband. He was wrong about a lot of things, but that wasn’t one of them. Being here today is a prime example.

My pace slows as we approach the refreshment tent. There are several dog crates set up around the outside, each with a laminated paper tag flapping in the breeze on the side. I pick one up and read:

Barnes

Retriever/Pitbull mix - Male

Age - eight

Barnes is a quiet chap who loves a cuddle. He’s not particularly fussed about much of anything, although he loves going in the car. Don’t let the pitbull in him scare you. He was raised in a family home and was sadly surrendered due to a change in circumstances that left the family unable to care for him. This boy would make a terrific companion for a working family, as he’s fine being left on his own for several hours.

I peer in the crate at Barnes and he gazes steadily back at me. His black snout has the slightest tinge of gray and his ears are more Labrador than pitbull, which will probably increase his adoption odds. I squat down and put my fist up to the cage so he can sniff my hand, saying softly, “There you are, boy. Are you a big softie? I think you are.”

“He’ll make someone a wonderful family pet,” says a deep male voice over my shoulder.

My knees wobble, my hands turn clammy and bees swarm in my chest. I wondered what I’d feel when I saw him, which feels incredibly stupid now

because the thing I hadn't considered is that I'd feel everything.

The deep timbre of his voice melts away the past thirty years faster than boiling water over ice cubes. I swallow hard and give Barnes a long look. He stares back at me and I imagine him saying, "Madam, if you can't look at him, how on earth are you going to kiss him?" in his poshest accent.

The thought of Barnes with an Eton accent is funny enough to make me put my hands on my knees and push myself to my feet. I lose my balance a bit, which forces me to spin around on my heel, bringing me face to face with the man I intend to kiss before this day is done. He's also the man I proposed to thirty years ago on a beach in Greece at the end of a perfect day. I hadn't planned it, but it felt right at the time.

Until Ben McNamera said no.

Gently, but firmly, no.

CHAPTER 2

Christ on a bike, Ben has aged well. I've seen him on Instagram via the Cotswolds DogsTrust account, but seeing him on a screen isn't the same as seeing him in real life. His shoulders are broad, his dark brown hair is still thick and slightly wavy, and those blue eyes are as piercing as they were back in uni. And, dammit, they still make my stomach swoop when they're trained on me like that, too.

"Freya?" Ben's voice rises and his eyes widen. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I came to volunteer. I'm supposed to be helping with coffees and teas." I glance at the tent behind me to see Charlotte tying on an apron while a woman with a sleek gray bob points to the hot water urn. Charlotte is going to kill me for abandoning her, but I'll make it up to her. I turn back toward Ben, thanking my long acting career for the breezy expression I paste on. "What are you doing here?"

"I run the Midlands DogsTrust and this is our biggest adoption drive of the year." Ben's expression hasn't gotten any less incredulous. "I heard a rumor that you were going to be here, but I thought it was just a rumor."

"Nope, I'm really here." I shove my hands in my coat pockets because the urge to reach out and touch Ben is almost overwhelming. He's really here in front of me, after all this time.

"But, why?" Ben asks. "Don't you have a series to finish? I think your Virginia Dial character is incredible, by the way. It's a real showcase of your talent."

Ben's cheek pinken, which makes me feel ridiculously pleased. He wouldn't watch my series if he didn't at least remember me fondly, right?

Aloud, I say, “We don’t film on weekends. But thank you. That’s generous of you to say.”

“It’s the truth.” Ben stares at me in that direct way of his I always found so disarming. Then he shakes his head as if remembering something and says, “I, um, should let you get to your coffees and teas, and I’m supposed to be making the rounds. There are over eighty dogs up for adoption today and we’re aiming for a seventy-five percent adoption rate.”

No, no, no, no. He can’t go yet. Glancing around, I see Barnes and my words come out in a rush. “If I post a selfie with this guy here and tag your event, would that be helpful?”

“Are you kidding? That would be bloody amazing. DogsTrust has a fraction of the followers you do. Do you mind if I repost as well?” Ben pauses and looks a little sheepish now. “I mean, since the rumor about you being here is true and all.”

“Right. Of course.” I kneel by Barnes’s crate and smile, holding my phone out with one hand, but it doesn’t look right. Even though my head is spinning, my media training is still intact. Charlotte would be proud. “Is there any chance we could open his crate and I can put my arm around him or something? I think it would give off a better vibe.”

“A better vibe?” Ben raises an eyebrow and I’m immediately transported back to Leeds University library. Ben and I met in a first-year psychology class. I took it as a discovery module and he was taking it as part of his required coursework, which meant he took it way more seriously than I did. When we were paired up for a group project, Ben was dismayed to say the least. Before I won him over, he spent a lot of time giving me “that look”—slight disbelief tinged with amusement. It became a running joke between us over time and I came to see it as a sign of affection.

Which Ben definitely does not intend now, no matter what that swarm of bees inside my chest might believe. They roar to life again and I bite the inside of my lip before saying, “Barnes is cute, but the crate makes him seem unapproachable. Unless he’s going to bite my hand off, I say we open the crate.”

“He’s a big softie. Let’s do it.” Ben reaches across me and a pine/sandalwood scent envelopes me. It takes quite a lot of willpower—and another incisor embedded in my bottom lip—to keep myself from asking what happened to the Obsession for Men he used to wear. He opens the latch on the crate and in a low voice says, “Hey, buddy. Come on. You’ve got

someone who'd like to meet you."

Ben puts a finger gently through Barnes's collar, stroking him under his chin, and leads him out of the crate, leaving the door open. Barnes wags his tail and looks around, but he doesn't seem fussed by the people or the barking of other dogs. I reach out and stroke his side softly, and although he turns and gives me a curious look, he's not startled or reactive.

"What's his story anyway?" I ask.

Ben sighs. "The owners got divorced about a year ago. He moved to Dubai and left the dog with her. She has MS and has deteriorated quite rapidly over the past year. She can't really walk him anymore, so she surrendered him. We tried to connect her with dog walkers who could help, but the truth is, Barnes was her ex-husband's dog and the situation was too hard emotionally on top of her physical challenges."

"Well, that's shit." I scoot closer to Barnes and rub his ears. He leans his head into my hand and I smile. "I feel for her, but it's still shit."

"He's a good dog." Ben nods at me. "He seems to like you."

He does, and I like him, too. But I didn't come here to adopt a dog today. I came here for...something else. I shake my head and say, "I see what you're doing there and you can stop right now. What do you say we take this photo?"

"You can't blame me for trying." Ben laughs, then says, "He's not going to bolt, but you should hold onto his collar just in case."

He loosens his grip on the collar, but waits until I wind my finger through to let go, and our hands brush together. The jolt that runs up my arm is part thrill, part nerves. I give Ben another pasted-on smile and fish my phone from my coat pocket, saying, "Got it. If you take a few photos, I'll post one and hopefully we can get this guy adopted."

I give Ben my phone, making sure our hands don't touch this time and he looks at the black screen, saying, "Are you going to unlock it for me?"

"There's no password. Just scroll up." I squat and put my arm around Barnes's neck. He immediately snuggles up to me, almost knocking me off balance, and I laugh.

I look up and Ben has my phone pointed at us. He says, "That was a great one, but how do you not have a passcode on your phone? That's security 101."

"Why do I need a passcode? The only people interested in what's on my phone are my sons, and they just want to hack my social media." I give an

exaggerated eye roll. I love my boys fiercely, but taking the piss out of their so-called famous mother is a long-standing hobby of theirs.

“I forgot you had sons.” Ben’s expression softens. “How old are they?”

“Liam is nineteen and Caleb is twenty-one.” I hesitate before adding, “Liam’s at Leeds now. He loves it there.”

“What’s not to love?” Ben aims my phone at me and Barnes again. I assume he takes a few more shots before handing my phone back and saying, “That should do it. If you post and tag us, I’ll repost and hopefully that will help a bit.”

“Of course. I’ll do it right now.” I scan through the photos Ben took as I straighten. They’re good, especially for candid.

“No rush. I mean, relatively speaking. I assume you have to filter and retouch, and anything else you do before posting on social media.”

“I, uh, don’t do any of that, but thanks.” My tone is prickly, but Ben hit my number one pet peeve on the nose. I give him a brisk nod. “Give me a couple of minutes and I’ll have a post up.”

“Great, thanks.” Ben takes a deep breath and it looks like he’s bracing himself for something as he says, “Freya, maybe we can—”

“Bloody hell. Stop her,” someone yells behind me. “Lucy, stop right now.”

I turn and see a blonde woman, her black coat billowing behind her, chasing a small white dog. The woman looks panicked, but Lucy the dog looks like she’s having the time of her life. She’s also got a lead attached to her collar, which should make it easier to stop her, but everyone’s attempts to step on the lead—including mine—fail.

Of course, in all of the confusion, I’ve forgotten about Barnes, and so has Ben. No one is expecting this “quiet chap who isn’t fussed about much of anything” to take off after Lucy, but that’s exactly what he does. He races after her like this is the best game he’s ever played, and Ben follows. I’m about to break into a sprint, too, when a man thrusts a small dog into my arms and says, “Hold on to her for me? Ta.”

He keeps running and I look down at the dog. She’s some kind of pug mix, tan with a dark brown face, and she’s shaking like crazy. Instinctively, I cuddle her closer to my chest. I can’t run with this terrified dog chasing after other dogs who may also be terrified, or who may be having a jolly. I also can’t chase after Ben, no matter what he was about to say. So, I do the only thing I can do and head to the coffee and tea tent to meet Charlotte.

CHAPTER 3

Charlotte is grinning like a loon when I enter the tent, and I'm pretty sure it's only because she doesn't want to laugh in my face. I bite back a grin in reply and say, "Whatever you're thinking, keep it to yourself."

"I didn't say a word." Charlotte throws up her hands and says, "But if I were going to say something, I'd say that I suddenly understand a little better why we're here."

Oh no, Charlotte, you definitely do not. I'm tempted to confess my real reason for being here, but instead I settle for a small sigh and say, "It's complicated."

Charlotte narrows her eyes at me and says, "Is it though?"

"I'm not discussing it." I glance down at the dog in my arms. She's still shaking, but maybe a little less. "Look at this poor baby. She's traumatized."

"She's adorable." Charlotte reaches over to scratch between her tiny ears and fights a grin as she says, "You know the fastest way to a man's heart is through his causes."

"I'm ignoring that statement. But I did tell Ben I'd put up a post on my socials." I fish my phone from my coat pocket and hand it to Charlotte. "Will you do it for me since I'm otherwise engaged?"

"Of course." Charlotte flicks open my phone and aims the camera at me, saying, "One more for good measure"

I watch her fingers fly over my screen for a second before turning my attention back to the dog in my arms. Her big brown eyes stare up at me and I lean down and bury my nose in her neck. I haven't had a dog in a long time—not since the boys were tweens—and I forgot how much I missed this easy

giving of affection. Caleb and Liam are amazing, but their tolerance for hugs from their mum is a fraction of my willingness to give them. Add in the fact that neither one of them lives at home and, well, maybe I should get a dog?

“I think you should,” Charlotte says, handing my phone back.

“Should what?” I snuggle the dog closer, pulling the lapel of my long black coat over her haunches. Maybe she’s shaking because she’s cold.

“Get a dog,” Charlotte says. “It would be good for you.”

I didn’t realize I’d said that aloud, but my house has been feeling big and empty lately. So much so that I’ve been looking at flats in the Sunday real estate section of the paper. The house was perfect when the boys were there. Even after my disastrous split with Julian—who said on the eve of his fortieth birthday that being Mr. Freya Northcote wasn’t how he wanted to spend his next four decades—the house still felt like home. The boys filled the rooms with noise and laughter, and there were always a few of their friends hanging out on my sofa, raiding the pantry. Our house was the gathering spot and I loved it that way, even in the messy teen years. Now, the only person hanging out on my sofa is me, and it’s often only to fall asleep after a long day of filming. I don’t need four bedrooms and a garden for that.

To Charlotte I say, “I’m not home enough.”

“Jude brings his dog to the set. You can bring that sweet little cupcake.” Charlotte gives the dog one more scratch before saying, “Speaking of, people are queuing and we’re supposed to be pitching in. Why don’t you and Cupcake go and mingle until your man comes back from his dog chase?”

Ben went running by at least ten minutes ago now. Either those dogs are giving Ben and his fellow dog catchers one hell of a chase or they’ve caught them and are having a laugh and a leisurely stroll back. Regardless, Ben isn’t here to finish our conversation and I can’t make coffee and tea one-handed, so I step outside the marquee and paste on my best smile.

“Come on now, Cupcake. Let’s go steal some hearts and get you a forever home,” I whisper as I approach an older couple wearing matching Barbour jackets. “Steak dinners for life with these two.”

The couple give me polite smiles as I sidle up next to them and say, “Hi there. Are you here to adopt a dog today? This little girl is gorgeous.”

“We’re looking for a dog we could train to go hunting with me,” says the man with a firm nod. “The dog probably needs to be bigger than the pheasants it’s retrieving.”

“Fair enough. I saw a black Lab mix earlier. You might luck out with

him.” I can’t imagine Barnes retrieving pheasants either, but I think he’d have fun trying.

“Oh, I love a Labrador retriever,” says the woman. She reaches for Cupcake and gives her a little pat on the head. “Although I would like a little lap dog someday.”

Cupcake buries her head in the lapel of my coat and the three of us laugh. “She’s a shy one,” I say.

“She looks pretty cozy with you.” The woman smiles and then lowers her voice an octave. “The man at the front gate said that Freya Northcote is here. Apparently she posted something on the Instagram?”

Bloody hell. This is the kind of situation I hate. I don’t mind if someone recognizes me, but when someone doesn’t recognize me to my face, I feel like an idiot calling myself out. I’m trying to think of a reply when Ben comes around the corner, red-faced, shirt untucked, and calls, “She’s here. Freya’s got her.”

He stops in front of me, holding tight to Barnes’s leash and says with a hint of accusation in his tone, “We’ve been looking for Blossom everywhere.”

“Blossom?” I peer down at the little dog in my coat, who’s lifted her head. “I’ve been calling her Cupcake.”

“Call her what you’d like, but I didn’t realize you had her.”

Before I can remind him that someone literally thrust her into my arms, the woman I’ve been talking to says, “Oh my goodness. You’re Freya Northcote, aren’t you? Of course you are and I’m a muppet for not clocking it.”

I nod and her husband adds, “Victoria Dial is an achievement. We loved you in *The Luxembourg Hotel*, but Victoria is bloody brilliant.”

“Your character—” the woman starts.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but Freya, if you’re done with Blossom I can take her back to try to get her adopted.” Ben’s tone has evened out, but his face is still flushed and he still looks frazzled.

“I don’t know. I’m quite enjoying my little snuggle buddy.” I swear Blossom/Cupcake presses against me even more as I say this. “Maybe I’ll adopt her?”

Ben bites his lip and places a hand on my arm. “Can I speak to you for a minute, please?”

“Of course.” I give him an innocent smile—BAFTA-worthy, if I may say

so—and then look back at the couple I’ve been talking with. “But first, these lovely folks are interested in a Labrador mix. I thought maybe they’d like to meet Barnes.”

Who is sitting obediently by Ben’s feet, showing zero signs of the wild tear he just led Ben on. Good dog.

Ben has no choice but to introduce them to Barnes, who is a star. He preens when they pet him and even gives the woman his paw. They step out of the queue for tea to talk to Ben, and even though I’m not officially part of the conversation, I linger shamelessly on the edge of it. I feel so invested that when Ben sends them off to the adoption tent to fill out the paperwork, I give a little cheer.

Which lasts exactly as long as it takes for Ben to turn his gaze on me. He doesn’t smile or look in any way pleased about Barnes’s pending adoption or my tiny part in it. Instead, his eyes are like steel when he says, “Okay, Freya, out with it. What on earth are you doing?”

“What am I doing...here?” I ask, letting my voice lilt up at the end. I also strategically push Cupcake’s bum up so her little head is visible.

“Well, for starters, yes.” Ben crosses his arms over his chest. He looks perplexed, which isn’t surprising. Now that the reality of the fact we’ve not seen each other for thirty years has hit, he’s probably having a WTF moment.

To be honest, he’s not the only one.

“I follow DogsTrust on Instagram and I saw there was an event today for this chapter. When I looked up the chapter and saw that you were in charge, my curiosity won out and, well, here I am.” It’s a mostly honest answer.

Ben shakes his head and barks out a laugh that sounds kind of amused. But only kind of. “Glad I could satisfy your curiosity.”

“I found my old photo albums not long ago and after a walk down memory lane, I started wondering what happened to you.” I shrug like I haven’t been borderline stalking the DogsTrust Instagram for glimpses of Ben since I found those old albums. My voice softens and I can’t help adding, “I mean, what did happen to you?”

Ben’s expression crumples. “I...I’m sorry. All those years ago...”

I cut him off because I can’t bear the regret in his tone. “I don’t want to rehash what happened thirty years ago, but I’d love to know what your life has been like since then.”

“How much time have you got?” Ben runs his hand through his hair, making it stand on end. It’s more attractive instead of less. “That’s a lot of

years.”

“What do you say to a drink after the event is over? I don’t have to get back straight away.” Charlotte can take the car back and I’ll figure something out. There are a million ways to get back to London.

“I think after all this time, I can at least buy you dinner.” Ben says, then adds sheepishly, “I’d love to catch up properly if you’re up to it?”

“That sounds lovely.” My voice is surprisingly even, but those damn bees are back with a vengeance. This is what I want. Drinks lead to dinner. Dinner leads to a kiss. Bang, mission accomplished. But I feel like a moonstruck girl with a crush on someone new, and Ben definitely isn’t new. I cuddle Cupcake a bit closer to my chest and say, “I’ll let you get back to it, but I’ll find you after the event.”

“Great. It’s a date.” Ben nods and then someone calls his name. As he walks away, he gives me one more glance.

I try to turn away. I really do. But I end up watching him until he turns the corner and disappears.

CHAPTER 4

By the time Cause for the Paws is over, I've officially adopted Cupcake, to the surprise of no one. I've also signed at least one hundred autographs, taken a bunch of selfies with fans, and successfully dodged Charlotte's questioning glances. It's only as she's getting ready to leave that she corners me for a conversation.

"What if this guy is a psychopath?" Charlotte raises an eyebrow at me.

"He's not." I give her my best serious look, but I suspect it loses a lot of its impact with Cupcake nestled against my chest, where she's been all day.

"Jeffrey Dahmer had a dog. You can't judge a man by his pets."

"I don't even know if Ben has a dog." Although I assume he does. If I had his job, I'd probably have ten of them.

"Not my point." Charlotte puts a hand on her hip.

I let out a sigh. "You were the one trying to pair me off with him earlier and now that I'm actually going out with him, you're worried about him being a serial killer?"

"That was when I thought you'd have a drink while I lurked in a nearby pub with my book. Then we'd very sensibly go back to London together." Charlotte pauses and gives me a meaningful look. "Now I've booked you into a bed-and-breakfast and asked them if they'll get you a toothbrush."

I don't owe Charlotte an explanation, but I think it will help to recount it out loud before I'm one-on-one with Ben. I let out a long sigh and say, "Ben and I dated in uni. It was serious and I asked him to marry me when we were twenty-three. He said no and a week later I flew off for an audition in New York. I ended up staying for three years."

"That was when you ended up in that off-Broadway play, right? Where

you met that producer who decided he wanted to cast you in everything he ever did?" Charlotte knows my biography as well as I do.

"Yes, although it was also where I waitressed in that dive bar in the East Village and got paid under the table because I didn't have a visa." I can't help grinning. "Is it weird to say that might have been the best job I've ever had?"

"So much for Virginia Dial then, hey?" Charlotte shrugs, but there's a grin tugging at her lips.

"Virginia Dial is the best role I've ever had. It's different." I shrug too, then say, "But the point is, Ben's not some serial killer. He's the one who got away."

"And you want to show him what he's been missing?" Charlotte raises an eyebrow.

"Weirdly, no." My tone turns sheepish as I say, "I just want to know if he's who I remember. I've been thinking of him as my one true love, but maybe it really is all in my head."

Charlotte bites her lip and doesn't respond, but an hour later, sitting in The Cat and Fiddle pub, Cupcake sleeping on my left foot, I can't help wondering what Charlotte would have said. Because so far, Ben's giving off friend vibes only.

"So, are either of your boys following in your footsteps, then?" Ben asks, taking a sip from his pint of lager.

"No." I can't help smiling. "Liam wants to be a barrister and Caleb is a trainee investment banker working all the hours God gives him in the city."

"Been there, done that." Now it's Ben's turn to smile. "You see how that turned out."

"What happened? I mean, how do you go from a corporate high flier to DogsTrust?" I cringe a little at how snobbish that sounds. "It's a great job, don't get me wrong. It just seems like opposite ends of the spectrum."

"You mean between having a life and not?" Ben doesn't seem offended, thank God. He shrugs. "The money was amazing, but it came at the cost of my marriage and kids and I decided I wanted the rest of my life to actually be one I enjoyed."

Thanks to Google I know Ben was married and has a twenty-one-year-old daughter and a twenty-four-year-old son, but I take a gulp of my Guinness and ask, "How long were you married?"

"Ten years. Sonya, my ex-wife, is great. She's remarried and we're still friends, but she deserved better than I gave her. I know that." Ben's

expression is filled with such regret that I reach over and put my hand on his arm without thinking. His forearm is warm and solid beneath my palm and it takes all of my effort not to squeeze.

Ben doesn't even react as he asks, "What about you and Julian? Obviously the story was in the tabloids, but it's never the real story, is it?"

"It was pretty close to the truth." I remove my hand and put it back in my lap because it feels wrong to be feeling warm fuzzies for Ben while talking about my ex-husband. "We had a pretty contentious split and we're not friends, although I hear he's doing fine. The boys usually go skiing with him at least once a year, and I'm glad they have a relationship with him and doubly glad I don't have to go on ski holidays anymore."

Ben laughs and I feel my first genuine smile surface since we've been in this pub. But it's quickly erased when Ben says, "I was surprised you married him, honestly. He always came across as someone who resented how bright your star shone."

Ouch. That's a little too close to the bone from someone who's been a casual observer of my life for thirty years. Still, I can't help asking, "Why do you say that?"

"His body language when you were photographed together, mostly. And I saw you two on Graham Norton one night, and you were talking about your role in *Darling Dakota* and Julian didn't react. At all." Ben takes another sip of his lager.

"Julian always fancied himself above the trappings of commercial entertainment and he hated being dragged along to my publicity events. One of the pitfalls of being celebrated in the art world. Talk show appearances aren't *de rigueur*." I shrug, then say with an indifference I definitely don't feel, "You seem to have followed my career pretty closely for someone who dumped me."

"Damn. That's harsh." Ben winces and clutches his chest like I stabbed him.

"It sounded different in my head. But I've always wondered why, you know." I feel the bees regrouping and do my best to ignore them, taking a sip of my Guinness so I don't try to fill the awkward silence covering us like a shroud. I don't want to fill the silence. I want to know what happened—something I didn't stick around to find out back then.

The awkward moment extends to five because the waitress brings our food at that particular moment—bangers and mash for Ben and veggie chili

for me—and we have a whole conversation about condiments before she leaves us alone again. I stir cheese through my chili and take a tentative bite, but the longer Ben doesn't respond, the worse I feel.

He's under no obligation to answer me, especially after all this time. But if my plan to kiss him is—at least partly—about closure, I need this conversation.

Ben sighs and puts his cutlery down. He leans across the table towards me and says, "I never meant to refuse, but you caught me off guard. You'd been talking about all the auditions you planned to do and parts you wanted to play, and when you asked me to marry you all I could think about was that I didn't want to hold you back. You were such a free spirit and my five-year plan felt etched in stone. It wasn't that I didn't want to marry you. It was that it felt unfair to ask that of you."

"But you never asked." My voice is small. "You never gave me the choice."

"You left." Ben hastens to add, "I went back to the hostel to wait for you, and when you didn't show up, I went to that taverna by the beach where we'd been hanging out. By the time I got back to the hostel the second time all your stuff was gone, and it wasn't like we had mobile phones back then. I checked all the other hostels on the island, and even went to Athens in case you decided to stay there. When I got back to England, I called your parents and they said you'd left for New York, which felt like a sign that I was right to let you go."

"And that's it?" The words feel like treacle in my throat. I don't know what I expected, but Ben's matter-of-factness isn't it. My face flames and I feel ridiculous for expecting any different. He isn't the boy I was in love with anymore—he's a solid, practical man, and the thing I'm starting to realize is that he always has been. I just missed the signs.

"Look at you now, Freya. You can't tell me I didn't do the right thing." Ben reaches across the table, letting his hand rest in the middle.

I want to take it. I really do. It's the first step towards what I came for. But it feels wrong. My whole plan feels wrong now.

"I came here today because I found my old photo albums and the more I looked at them, the more I convinced myself this is what I've been missing. But it's not, is it?"

"Depends on what the 'this' you're looking for is." Ben's hand still rests in the middle of the table.

It feels both stupid and naive to tell Ben I'm looking for the magic of my first love, so I shrug and turn my attention back to my chili. I eat in silence for three bites, then ask brightly, "So, are you still an avid Liverpool fan?"

Ben gives me a calculated look that lets me know he knows exactly what I'm doing, but he plays along. Over the next hour and a half, we talk about sports, film, books and our favorite holidays. It's easy and friendly, and it's not until Cupcake shakes and emerges from underneath the table that I realize we've talked through our meals and another drink—and that we're the only people left here aside from the staff.

I point to the bar. "We should probably head out. They're restocking in earnest now."

"How can you tell?"

"The bartender is putting the fruit away. I worked at a bar in New York and that was always a sign to our regulars that the bar was closing."

"Did you enjoy New York?" Ben asks as he signals for our server. When she approaches he hands over his credit card without even seeing the bill and I'm glad we aren't going to have to go through the awkward dance of who's paying. We're quiet while the server runs his card and I wait until she walks away before I answer. I don't think she knows who I am and this is not the time for an oh-my-god-you're-Freya-Northcote moment.

"I loved it. It was a struggle at first, but it was my big break, too. The producer I worked with there basically launched my career."

"I know I said it before, but you've had an incredible career so far." Ben pauses, then adds softly, "It makes me think I was right all those years ago."

"You may well have been." I stand and fumble into my coat so Ben can't see my expression. I thought we were done with this conversation. We'd moved past it. I'd put it in a box for later to file away with the photo albums from my loft.

I busy myself with Cupcake's lead as we leave The Cat and Fiddle and neither one of us speaks until we're outside on the quiet, frosty sidewalk and Ben says, "I am sorry, you know, for how I handled things back then. I know my apology probably isn't worth much after all this time, but I appreciate you allowing me to say it."

"Oh, Ben." I reach out and squeeze his arm. "I owe you an apology, too. For then and now. I came here today under the guise of wanting to see you again, but the truth is, I had my own agenda and that was selfish."

"I'll always want to see you." Ben furrows his brow like I'm speaking

French with my usual terrible pronunciation. “I was selfish back then, so you’re more than entitled to your turn.”

Am I? Are we both just inherently selfish? Ben didn’t marry me because he assumed it was what was best for me. I came here wanting to kiss him again because I assumed it would fill a void I’ve been feeling. But I didn’t actually think about Ben himself, and that feels like a terrible oversight.

I don’t get to think about this more because Ben is speaking.

“I know we’ve just spent the past several hours together, but I still can’t believe you came to a DogsTrust event in the Cotswolds.” Ben smiles. “If I’d known you were coming, I would have gotten a haircut or something.”

“Then I’m glad I didn’t tell you. You look perfect just the way you are.” I feel the slightest buzzing in my chest again, but unlike the bees from earlier, this isn’t panic or stress. It’s something softer. Easier.

“If anyone looks perfect here, it’s you.” Ben covers my hand still resting on his arm with his. He takes a small step and says, “Is there somewhere I can take you? I assume you’re heading back to London?”

“No, actually. I’m staying at the Seven Wives Inn. My assistant assured me I could walk there?”

“You’re staying?” Ben’s voice lilts up in surprise. “I have plenty of room if you want to stay with me?”

His offer is genuine. I hear it in his tone. It’s tempting, but I shake my head because I’m not sure my agenda wouldn’t follow me to Ben’s house. “Thank you. That’s generous of you, but I’m going to stay at the Seven Wives.”

Ben nods like he expected this and we start walking down the sidewalk arm in arm. It’s cozy and sweet, and I feel a warmth in my chest that leaves a smile playing on my lips. It grows when Ben says, “You know, if you’re around tomorrow morning, the local bakery has amazing pain au chocolat.”

“I could be convinced. As long as I can pronounce it as *pane ah chocolate*.”

“It’s mandatory here to pronounce it that way.” Ben laughs.

“Then I’m in.”

“Eight a.m.?” Ben asks. “Are you still a morning person?”

“Only if there’s coffee involved.” I shake my head. “Life has turned me into more of a night owl.”

“Same.” Ben chuckles. “If you told me when we were watching all of those sunrises in Greece that I’d prefer sunsets one day, I wouldn’t have

believed you.”

“Some of those sunrises were from when we hadn’t been to bed yet, so I think we’ve both always had night owl tendencies.” I laugh, too.

Ben’s pace slows and he stops in front of a Tudor-style building. There’s a big placard saying *The Seven Wives* with a cartoonish picture of Henry VIII on it. Before I can remark on its cleverness, Ben says, “This is you. The woman at the front desk is called Hannah and she’s a crabby one. She’ll ask you for your autograph if you’ve booked under your real name and if you haven’t, she’ll act like you’re arriving in the middle of the night even though it’s not even ten.”

“Charlotte always books me under a different name. Tonight, I’m Hortense Hightower.”

“Hortense, huh?” Ben peers at me a little more closely. “I assume she always picks the most flattering possibilities?”

“Charlotte likes to take the piss and I don’t mind because she’s amazing.”

“It sounds like you’re lucky to have her.” Ben pauses for a second, and then says, “Can I ask you a question? You said you came here today with your own agenda. What was it?”

Yikes. Talk about being lulled into a false sense of security. I consider lying for approximately three seconds, but lying to Ben at this point would be like slapping my own face—stupid and pointless, and more than a little painful. Still, I can’t make myself just blurt it out either, so I try to look nonchalant as I say, “I’m not sure it matters much at this point.”

“It might not, but how will you know if you don’t tell me?”

Ben’s not pressuring me. The expression on his face is warm and curious. I think he suspects what I’m going to say, so I let the words play in my head until I release them in a voice only slightly louder than a whisper, “I came here to kiss you.”

Judging by the look on Ben’s face, that isn’t what he expected at all, but then the corner of his lips tilt up and he asks, “Did you change your mind?”

“Not really,” I admit. “I didn’t change my mind as much as realize I was looking for the wrong thing. I was looking to see if what we had was real, but of course it was.”

“Yes,” Ben says softly. “It was very real.”

“I know. I guess I needed to see you to remember that and to realize that we’re different people now. What we had was real, but neither one of us is who I remember and that’s okay.”

“So, no kiss then?” Ben’s eyes are fixed on mine. They’re warm and kind and I couldn’t look away if I tried.

“Is that an invitation?” I lick my lips, which Ben takes exactly as I intend.

“You tell me.” Ben’s words are barely out before we’re kissing.

His lips meet mine and his breath is warm on my skin. I let my lips skim his and for a second, it feels like this is as far as this will go. Then his hands cup my face and my fingers dig into the wool of his coat and we’re kissing like we’re drowning. His tongue tangles with mine as his thumbs trace my cheekbones, cradling my face in a way that’s gentle and possessive at the same time. I press up against his hard chest and wind a hand around Ben’s waist in an attempt to pull him closer. A moan escapes my throat because this is exquisite torture. We’re close, but not nearly close enough, and I wonder—

A not-so-polite cough behind us finally makes me break away. There’s a man reaching for the door of The Seven Wives and he gives me a glare when I pull Cupcake out of the way. I wait until he’s inside and then giggle.

I giggle.

I can’t remember the last time I giggled. I sound like a teenager.

Ben smiles and says, “I should let you go before we end up in the *Daily Mail*.”

“I’ve been in the Daily Mail for worse things.” I smile back and Ben squeezes my hand.

“Maybe, but Cupcake is freezing.”

We both look down and she’s shivering enough that I have to reluctantly agree. “I’ll see you for breakfast tomorrow?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Ben leans in and gives me another light kiss. “I can text you in the morning to meet you here?”

“Is that your way of asking for my number?” I say as I fish my phone from my coat pocket and place it in his outstretched palm before he can answer.

“That obvious, huh?” Ben keys his number into my phone and hands it back to me, his palm lingering on mine.

I don’t want him to go and for a second I wonder how bad it would be to take him up on the offer to stay at his place tonight. We’re both consenting adults, and it’s not like we don’t know each other.

The thought stops me in my tracks and I slide my hand back into my pocket with my phone. The truth is, we don’t know each other anymore. Not the people we’ve grown up to be, at least. And if this is going to be anything

at all...

"Go inside before your newly rescued dog freezes." Ben places one hand on my hip and reaches for the door with the other.

I let him guide me into the small lobby and feel a shiver of pleasure as he gives me one more kiss on the cheek before turning and leaving. I watch him disappear down the street, a goofy smile on my lips that even Hannah the cranky owner can't extinguish.

It's only once I'm cozy in bed, Cupcake on the duvet next to me, that I attempt to text Ben. It's easier said than done and I erase at least four attempts before looking at Cupcake and saying, "I'm being ridiculous, aren't I?"

Cupcake raises her head to look at me and then lets it flop back down on the duvet. I don't blame her. I am being ridiculous.

Finally I type: *Great to see you. Looking forward to breakfast tomorrow.*
Xx

I debate the double kiss at the end then press send before I erase the whole thing and start over.

My phone pings with Ben's reply a minute later.

Thank you for coming today. I feel like I must be dreaming, but I'm pretty sure it's real? xx

Followed two seconds later by: *Too cheesy?* xx

I laugh out loud and startle Cupcake, my fingers flying over my screen this time as I type: *Not cheesy at all. And trust me, it's very real.* Xx

I'm glad. X Ben's reply comes seconds after I press send.

Me too. X

I lay back on my pillows with a happy sigh and pull Cupcake closer. Today didn't go like I planned. It wasn't a fairytale reconciliation. But it was real. And that was better.

ABOUT BRENDA ST JOHN BROWN

Brenda is a displaced New Yorker living in the English countryside, although even after sixteen years she still doesn't really understand Celsius. She writes contemporary romance to make you giggle and swoon. When she's not writing, she enjoys hiking, running and reading. In theory, she also enjoys cooking, but it's more that she enjoys eating and, try as she might, she can't live on Doritos alone. Find out more about Brenda [here](#).

Sign up for Brenda's newsletter [here](#).

Castle Calder Series

[A Brit on the Side](#)

[A Brit Unexpected](#)

[A Brit Complicated](#)

[A Brit Player](#)

[Rival Hearts](#)

[The Blind Date Diaries](#)

[Maid in England](#)



IN ROVER MY HEAD

SYLVIE STEWART

ABOUT IN ROVER MY HEAD

If the grumpy Water Rescue chief thinks Mindy needs rescuing, he can go jump into a freezing cold lake. She's doing just fine on her own—thank you very much—with a successful dog bakery, a happy kid, and a sister who's always got her back. But maybe a helping hand from by-the-book Hugo wouldn't be the worst thing when Mindy unexpectedly finds herself in way over her head at a holiday fundraiser.

CHAPTER 1

MINDY

■ didn't intend to take a swim in the bitterly cold French Broad River in December, I swear.

But when your daughter's beloved dog forgets he can't swim and dives into the water while chasing a bird, what's a mom to do besides come to the rescue?

"Spaghetti!" Brooke shouts with glee from the riverbank as I hold her tiny, dripping, dimwitted mutt over my head and try not to get swept away by the current. Good god, it's cold in here!

"Don't come any closer!" I yell, afraid Brooke might become impatient and start wading in herself.

"Ma'am! Stay where you are!" a new voice shouts from behind, but when I turn to find the source, my foot slides on a rock in the riverbed, and I'm no longer standing. Well, shit. This isn't good.

Splash! My head goes under, and I lose my hold on Spaghetti the mutt. Flapping my arms to try to locate him and keep myself from drowning, I whack my hand into what might be a person. This is confirmed when two strong arms pull me to the surface, my wet hair blinding me, and Brooke's panicked shouts from the bank filling my ears.

Before I can even try to regain my footing, I'm hoisted up into the same strong arms, and then I'm being lugged to shore where the dude—because, let's face it, those muscles don't belong to a woman—deposits me on my feet on blessedly dry ground.

"Spaghetti!" Brooke cries again, and just as I'm searching for the words to break it to my sweet five-year-old that her dog was killed by his own stupidity, I hear a familiar bark. Hands sweeping my soggy hair from my

eyes, I finally take in the scene before me.

And then wish that I'd been allowed to drown instead.

Brooke is hugging a dripping Spaghetti to her chest as six members of the Asheville Water Rescue team stare at me in my soaked, bedraggled state. Actually, that's not true. Four are staring while one wraps towels and blankets around Brooke and Spaghetti, and the sixth glares at me so hard I'm surprised poison darts don't launch themselves from his eye sockets.

"Oh. Hi." It's all I've got.

"Mindy?" One of the crew steps forward, and because my humiliation wasn't quite complete to this point, I recognize my sister's very hot boyfriend, Wyatt, dressed in an elaborate scuba suit and frowning my way.

"Hey, Wyatt." I offer a weak wave as my body threatens to seize with cold.

"No time like the present, newbies!" Mr. Poison Dart barks, and two crew members immediately swarm me while a third talks into her radio.

"You know this woman, Adler?" the guy who fished me out asks Wyatt before turning that icy glare back to me. He's visibly older than the rest of the team, with a short salt-and-pepper beard and a crooked nose that's clearly been broken a time or two. He's dressed in identical gear to the other crew members, except that his is soaking wet, and he's wearing a life vest with a rope secured around him.

"Uh, yeah." Wyatt helps him shed his equipment as the crew at my side hands me a blanket and starts pulling my clothes off.

"What are you—hey, give that back!" I lunge for the down vest they just stripped me of.

"Ma'am, we need to get these wet clothes off and get you warm and dry. The ambulance is on its way."

"Ma'am? Ambulance?!" I can't decide which is more offensive. "I don't need an ambulance. Wyatt! This is ridiculous," I protest, my teeth chattering around my words.

We've started to attract an audience, I notice, as a few people watch from the warehouse shops walkway above us. Oh, goody, my dream come true—even more strangers watching me get naked.

As a blonde woman descends from the shops toward the bank, I recognize her as a local dog groomer named Hollis who stocks some of my Woof and Wiener Dog Bakery treats at her shop. She stops to talk to a younger crew member who's warming Spaghetti up before approaching me and my new

personal valets. I can feel the grouchy guy still staring daggers at me, but I ignore him.

“Are you okay, Mindy?” Hollis’s concern is apparent, and I’m getting more embarrassed by the second.

“I’m *fine*.” I direct the words at the guy yanking my jeans down my legs in front of the world. Thank goodness I listened to my mother all those years ago and never leave the house without nice underwear on. For Hollis, though, I muster a weak reassuring smile under my frozen lips as I draw the blanket around me. “This is a huge overreaction. I just fished Spaghetti out of the river, that’s all.”

The wail of an ambulance in the distance promises to make my humiliation complete very shortly.

“You want me to take Spaghetti up to my shop and get him cleaned up?”

Relief floods me. I can literally see her shop from here, and maybe I can even sneak up there with her. “Please. That would be amazing.” I teeter on one foot as the guy on my right pries one wet sneaker off. “Can you take Brooke with you too? I don’t want her seeing the ambulance and getting worried.”

“Absolutely.” Hollis winks at me and goes to collect my naughty dog and headstrong five-year-old, who’s now showing off her dance moves to the young guy holding Spaghetti. If I weren’t so busy trying to hide my lace bra from the crowd, I might laugh at how close that little apple falls from my tree. I’ve always been good at singling out the young cute ones.

Wyatt comes over to check on me as the ambulance pulls up, and then I’m whisked into the back of the vehicle, where I’m covered in more blankets, given a warm drink, and my vitals are checked. I can’t imagine how much this is going to cost me. That dog is eating bargain kibble from here on out.

My teeth have finally stopped chattering, so that’s a plus, but when I beg Wyatt not to mention this incident to my sister, Daphne, his expression tells me it’s a lost cause. The guy has got it bad for my sister, and no way would he risk her wrath if she found out on her own. My big sis tends to be a tad protective.

“Too late,” he tells me, not even trying to inject any regret into his tone. “She’s on her way.”

I groan and bury my face in a blanket.

“What in the hell were you thinking wading into the river in the middle of

winter?” I recognize the voice of my cranky rescuer—not that I needed any rescuing, mind you. When I lift my eyes, I see he’s now wearing a dry uniform jacket and a matching red beanie. His eyes are still frozen, however, their slate-gray suggests he’s probably made entirely of stone. “You had no way of knowing the water’s depth or how strong the current is! What would make you do something so reckless and irresponsible?” he practically spits at me.

Now, if this man had met me before, he’d know that calling me irresponsible is perhaps the best way to earn a punch in the nuts. Wyatt’s groan from a few feet away tells me he wouldn’t have made the same mistake.

I straighten my spine where I sit on the cot and feel my lips curl into a snarl. “What was I thinking? Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I was thinking I didn’t want my daughter to witness her best friend turn into a popsicle in front of her eyes.” I up the sarcasm and prop a finger on my chin as I continue, “No, wait! I should have let my five-year-old jump into the freezing water to swim after her dog instead—which is exactly what she was trying to do before I restrained her and went in myself. That sounds like a winner of an idea, don’t you think?”

Wyatt takes a step back from the pissed-off lady and is joined by the young crew member Brooke was flirting with minutes ago. I notice a few more witnesses as well, but this guy has picked the wrong momma to mess with. “And, speaking of what people are thinking,” I continue, “did it occur to you that barking at me—while I was doing fine on my own, by the way—might startle me and make me lose my footing?” I yank at my mass of soggy hair that took a bath thanks to his shouting earlier.

One of the EMTs interrupts to hand me a form to sign.

“Thank you,” I tell her, deliberately making a show of my appreciation to highlight the lack of thanks I’ll be extending to this asshat.

But he’s not done with me yet. “Oh, so you think it would be better for your daughter to watch her *mother* drown than an animal?” His hands are perched on his hips now, and he’s got his sneer perfected.

“Spaghetti is not just an animal.” I gesture in the vague direction of the warehouse shops where my daughter and mutt are safely tucked away. “He’s a member of the family. And where I come from, we take care of our own.”

“Where *I* come from, we use common sense to assess risks before jumping recklessly into action. You’re lucky we were doing a training

exercise down the way, or you might be dead right now.” The man’s head jerks in a frustrated shake while I shed my blankets and rise to my feet. It’s much easier to be indignant when you’re standing.

“Oh, please. The water didn’t even go up to boob level.” I gesture down at myself, immediately regretting it when this yahoo’s eyes drop to my tits—the ones encased in only a sheer sodden bra now. I gasp and throw a blanket over myself again. Perv!

But I refuse to let him see me flustered, so I power through. “I had it covered. It’s not like we’re in the middle of nowhere. The warehouse shops are right there—warm and dry.”

“Cold water immersion and shock hit you out of nowhere, not to mention hypothermia. Even an Olympic swimmer can drown in seconds in water this cold. You’re damn lucky you made it.”

“Your tone makes it sound like you’d rather I *had* bitten the dust. Some rescue worker you are.” I scoff, knowing I’m likely taking this a little far, but the guy is on my last nerve—and he just saw my nipples. And my underwear.

“Now you’re being even more ridiculous,” he bites back as his eyes scan my blanket-covered figure from head to toe. He sends me one last frown before turning and stalking away, saving his parting words for Wyatt and the other guy. “I’ll be at the truck.”

I might have flipped him off behind his back if there weren’t witnesses.

“We gotta fill out a report,” the young guy says as he and Wyatt approach the ambulance, his friendly tone a stark contrast to his older colleague’s. Wyatt introduces his coworker as Denny while I pretend these guys didn’t just see me mostly naked.

“Hugo’s not wrong,” the Denny guy tells me. “But I can understand why you did what you did. If it had been our family’s skunk, I would have done the same thing.”

“Th-thank you,” I stutter, momentarily thrown off by the idea of a skunk as a pet.

Vindicated, I relax on the cot again as he and Wyatt ask me a few questions and confer with the EMTs. Before long, I’m released, having signed the form saying I refused the offer of a ride to the ER. I’m just ready for this Friday to be over with so we can get on with our weekend.

Without any more input from the icy-eyed cranky rescue dude, thank you very much.

CHAPTER 2

HUGO

“**Y**ou promised you’d try,” Ashley scolds me from her dorm room eighty miles away.

I stop at the crosswalk to wait for the signal as I respond into the phone, “I promised to *think* about it.”

“Same thing,” my kid argues.

While I love the connectedness mobile phones offer, sometimes I miss the good old days when kids had to resort to landlines to nag their parents. “I don’t like the idea of you wandering around the house by yourself with nobody to talk to now that we’re gone.”

“I’m not a hermit who’s outlived all his family and acquaintances. I do have a life, you know,” I inform her as the signal turns to WALK. I look both ways before crossing.

“Work and the occasional drink out with Father Joseph doesn’t count. Who’s going to stop you from eating the entire gallon of ice cream now that Nicole and I are both in college?”

“First, ice cream comes in half-gallons, not gallons, and second, I haven’t even bought ice cream in months.” I don’t tell her that Father Joseph has been in Wilmington since October.

She gasps. “It’s worse than I thought! Please just sign up for *one* dating app. Please?”

My daughters have been pleading with me for a couple years now to find a girlfriend, but I want to tell Ashley I’m as likely to sign up for a dating app as I am to base jump off Mount Rushmore. But I don’t. She just wants her old man to be happy.

Which I am. Mostly.

I continue down the sidewalk along the park as I deftly change the conversation to Ashley's social life and the upcoming winter break. Pack Square Park is always bustling with visitors and activities, today being no different. The local pet shelter appears to be hosting an event at the Reuter Terrace section of the park. It reminds me of the yappy chihuahua my ex-wife had when the girls were young, which then has my mind going back to that woman and her dog from yesterday.

Not only was her behavior careless and irresponsible, but she refused to admit even a modicum of fault or regret for her actions after she nearly froze to death in front of her daughter! I'll never understand people who don't think before they act. Impulsiveness is the best way to find yourself in the kind of trouble there's no coming back from.

"Nicole is supposed to pick me up next Wednesday on her way from Raleigh, but I'll let you know if plans change," my daughter tells me, her words immediately clearing any negative thoughts from my mind.

Okay, I can admit it gets lonely at times, having the house to myself. But it takes time to get used to any big change—and the girls will be filling the house with their chatter and laughter again before I know it. I can't wait.

Going from single dad to empty nester can be a challenge, but having a plan is the key to navigating any situation. And I've been following mine to the letter.

First, I got a new hobby—something to look forward to when I'm off work. Taekwondo was the perfect choice, and I've been attending classes religiously three nights a week. I enjoy the discipline it requires, as well as the workout.

Next, I opened up my work schedule and now volunteer for shifts that crew with family tend not to prefer. Since I'm the chief of the Asheville Water Rescue Unit, I technically have first pick of just about everything, but I've never been one to take advantage of it.

I don't need a girlfriend or a wife to fulfill me. I'm doing just fine on my own. The occasional casual hook-up gives me what I need and doesn't require letting someone nose their way into my life. No thank you.

But Ashley threatens to destroy my peace of mind again with her next comment.

"And, fair warning, Nicole and I have already talked, and if you haven't secured some kind of date by the time we come home, we're setting you up."

I stop in my tracks on the sidewalk along College Street, causing a guy

behind me to almost plow into my back. I apologize and step aside into the grass. A small crowd has gathered around the animal shelter's tent, and I can see dozens of pens and crates filled with animals.

"You wouldn't," I challenge Ashley.

"Oh, I would. And so would Nicole."

I need to nip this in the bud right now before my girls have a chance to level up their scheming. "Fine, you win. By the time you get home next week, I'll find myself a companion."

"Don't try to trick me, Dad. An *unmarried, unattached, female* companion."

"Absolutely," I agree.

When she's sure my tone is truthful, she lets me go and we hang up.

I head over to the tent where I hope to hell I can find a low-maintenance pet to *technically* keep my word to my daughter. I wonder how you can tell the gender of a goldfish.

CHAPTER 3

MINDY

“Oh, these cookies are for dogs, not humans,” I warn as I turn away from an elderly man whose eyes lit up when he saw the iced paw print cookies at my table. He’s the fourth person at this fundraiser today to mistake my distinctly non-sugary treats for the regular kind. I can imagine few things worse than biting into a liver cookie expecting it to taste like a snickerdoodle.

“How are we doing, Brookie?” Daphne asks as she approaches my table, her blond bob swinging at her chin as she smiles at her niece.

“We’ve raised, umm, two thousand dollars so far,” my kid tells her aunt.

“Two *hundred*,” I correct before Daphne can be too impressed. But the day is young.

I’m donating all of today’s profits to the animal shelter fund. They’re holding a holiday fundraiser in the park today to take advantage of people’s holiday-giving spirit as well as find homes for some of the shelter residents.

Since I own a dog bakery, I work with them and lots of dog-owning community members here in Asheville. My favorite part is seeing the kids’ faces when their parents give in and adopt a pet for them. This same event last year is where my own kid sweet-talked me into adopting Spaghetti. We already had a beloved senior dog named Wiener—the namesake of Woof and Wiener Dog Bakery—but it was love at first sight between Brooke and Spaghetti, so I knew I was toast. Thankfully, Spaghetti is safe at home with Wiener today after yesterday’s river adventure.

“Looks like the weather held out for you guys, so I’m sure the crowd will only get bigger,” Daphne says as we both survey the twenty or so people circling the excited dogs in the pens.

“Oh god.” My heart plummets when I recognize the salt-and-pepper beard on one of the attendees. I spin around and face the green behind us so he won’t see me.

“What?”

“That’s the guy!” I tell my sister through clenched teeth, as though the jerk could somehow read my lips through the back of my skull.

“What guy?” For a brilliant operations analyst and a straight-A student, my sister is doing a terrible job of keeping up.

“The guy from the river yesterday. The one who made me fall.” Okay, well, perhaps I’m stretching the truth a little, but multiple people saw me naked yesterday; I’m allowed a little leeway.

My sister comes around to situate herself in front of me. “You want me to go kick him out? Tell him good swimmers don’t deserve dogs?” Her sarcasm is unhelpful. “Which one is he?”

“Tall guy, salt-and-pepper beard, navy coat.”

Her eyebrows spike. “He’s hot.”

“No, he’s not.” I frown at her. “He’s rude.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“You’re being very unsupportive, just so you know.”

She shrugs, unable to hide her amusement. “What can I do to help you? You want me to run your booth so you can hide behind a tree till he’s gone?”

I sigh, knowing I’m being ridiculous but not quite ready to give up yet. “You’re going to make me act like an adult, aren’t you?”

“I can’t make you do anything, but you’ve got two customers arriving in three, two, one.”

I spin around, a forced grin plastered to my face. “Good morning! Welcome to Woof and Wiener!” Ugh. The looks on the women’s faces tell me I’ve overdone it. And not only that, but the volume of my enthusiasm has caught the attention of half the people pet shopping.

Taking a cue from me, Brooke assumes her best mini-me persona. “Wiener is the name of our dog! And we have another one named Spaghetti! We like food!”

I can’t look. I just can’t. Because now I’m *sure* my rescuer has noticed us and is likely preparing another condescending speech to deliver.

“Brooke and I will take care of these customers.” Daphne nudges me aside before hip-checking me like a professional hockey player and sending me staggering toward the dog pens.

When I look up from my stumbling feet, I'm toe-to-toe with Mr. Poison Dart. Only he's left the darts at home, it appears.

His hands are buried in the front pockets of his jeans, his expression wary. "I figured it would be rude not to at least say hello."

My responding smile is brittle at best. "Oh, no. It wouldn't have been rude. I promise."

My comment makes his mouth do this thing—like he's trying not to allow himself to smile, but his lips have other ideas. And, for some inexplicable reason, this motion has my pulse kicking up. What is going on here? It must be reserve adrenaline from our encounter yesterday gearing me up for a rematch.

I decide to be civil, giving him no grounds on which to berate me again. "So, what brings you here today?"

"I'm not sure," is his baffling response.

"Do you often wander outside your home not knowing where you're going? I hear that can be a sign of early dementia."

This time, his lips tell me my sarcasm is unappreciated. Who doesn't enjoy sarcasm? A stick-in-the-mud, that's who.

"I meant I didn't know this event was taking place; I just happened upon it."

"Ah, well, there's no rule saying you have to stop. Especially since I know family pets are not your thing."

He frowns at me. He's quite good at the frowning thing. "That's not true."

I dip my chin, challenging him with a look I learned from Daphne.

He shakes his head and sighs like he's giving up on our fight before it can even start. Round one to Mindy! "I find myself on an unexpected mission to find an unmarried, unattached female companion."

This is the absolute last thing in the universe I expect him to say, so my reply is unscripted. "You came to a pet adoption to find a date?"

He laughs, and I don't hate the things it does for his face. Okay, so maybe Daphne wasn't entirely wrong. He's decent looking, I can give him that.

He shrugs. "It's a bit tricky, but I'm thinking about adopting a pet. A female pet."

"Why female?" It's my turn to frown. "Is this a kink thing?"

He barks out a laugh this time, and I almost find myself enjoying this little repartee we have going. "No. The furthest thing from it, I promise you."

“Well, they’ve got a few cats. One is bound to be female. And, hey, her natural fear of water will ensure you never have to jump in a freezing river to save her—not that you would anyway, right?” *Me-freaking-ow!*

His posture relaxes, and he sighs, amusement still lurking in his gray eyes. “Okay, okay. I can see you’re not letting this go. I can admit I let my frustration get the better of me yesterday, and I shouldn’t have shouted. I apologize. But you put yourself in real danger... Mindy, is it?”

“It is. And you are?” I’m annoyed at myself for remembering his name is Hugo, so I feign ignorance.

“Hugo Gamble.” He extends a hand, and I finally get over myself to accept his handshake. I can feel the calluses on his warm skin, no doubt earned the old-fashioned way.

“Well, Hugo Gamble, I’ll promise not to jump in any more rivers if you promise to give your next rescue victim the benefit of the doubt and keep the insults to yourself.”

“Fair enough.”

CHAPTER 4

HUGO

I don't remember her being this attractive. Although, her appearance was the last thing on my mind yesterday. Except maybe when she flashed all of us in the back of the ambulance. It'll be quite some time before that visual vacates my brain. Maybe she's right—maybe I am an asshole. I'm not supposed to look at women's bodies when I'm doing my job!

But, technically, by that point my job was done—and she's the one who dropped her blanket, so it wasn't as if I was trying to get a peek at her curves. And damn, if she doesn't have nice ones. The body combined with her knockout smile, waves of blond hair, and whiskey-colored eyes, make for quite the package.

Stop being a pig, Hugo. Adopt a damn fish and go home.

"I don't know that I'm quite ready for a cat," I confess, glancing back at the pens full of exuberant dogs and the pet carriers housing who knows what.

"Personally, I'm a fan of dogs, as you probably guessed." She cocks her head to the table behind her with a banner that reads Woof and Wiener Dog Bakery.

They have bakeries just for dogs now? I'm about to ask if this business is for real, but rethink the idea given the fresh and tenuous nature of our truce.

"Definitely not ready for a dog." Dogs require too much commitment.

The young girl from yesterday runs up and pulls on Mindy's arm. "Momma, there's a puppy named Cupcake. It's like it's meant to be!"

Mindy frowns down at her daughter, and I notice the girl has the same shiny hair and warm whiskey eyes as her mom. I wonder if there's a guy in the picture. She's not wearing a ring, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything.

“That’s not gonna work on me two years in a row, Brooke.” Mindy glances over at me. “This is my daughter, Brooke. She’s under the mistaken impression her mom is a sucker.”

But the girl isn’t giving up that easily—no surprise given her genes. “You’ve got to come see her. Come on.”

Mindy allows herself to be dragged closer to the dogs, and I follow for some reason. Maybe because I need help with this pet thing—or I’m not quite ready to go home to my empty house. Ashley and Nicole would be having a field day with this one.

“I’ll look, but we’re not getting her, do you hear me?” Mindy’s words are clearly falling on deaf ears as we follow the little girl to the other side of the tent.

Brooke drops her mom’s arm after we round the pens, her head swiveling as she grips the metal edge of an enclosure. “She was just here. Where is she?”

Oh, damn. I think I know what’s coming, and I don’t envy Mindy this parenting rite of passage. I’ve spent more nights than I can count consoling my own daughters through varying degrees of heartbreak.

“Sweetie, I think she was probably adopted.” Mindy runs a hand over Brooke’s blond hair. “But that’s a good thing. It means she found a home, just like Spaghetti and Wiener did with us.”

“No! But she was supposed to be *our* dog. She had a food name and everything!”

Tears shine in her eyes, and I’m transported back in time fifteen years.

Mindy scoops Brooke up into her arms and settles her on her hip to bring her face-to-face. “I know you’re sad, and that’s okay, but we already have two dogs. Let’s let other people find out how fun it is to have a dog.”

Brooke buries her face into her mom’s neck, sniffing and hugging her tight.

I send Mindy a reassuring smile, knowing she can use all the support she can get. Nobody likes seeing their kid hurting.

Mindy deftly switches to distraction, throwing me under the bus in the process. “Mr. Gamble here is looking for a new pet. Should we help him find just the right one?” I don’t miss her sly smile—or how attractive I find it, despite myself.

Brooke raises her head again. “Are you adopting a furbaby?”

When I hesitate in my answer, not wanting to commit myself to whatever

a furbaby might be, Mindy laughs and explains, “She means a pet, not an actual fur-covered baby.”

“Oh. Um, maybe. I could sure use some help though. I’m new to this whole pet thing.”

My response has the desired effect when Brooke wipes her tears away and untethers herself from Mindy. “They have a ferret in a cage over there. You should definitely adopt the ferret. You can name him Roast Beef.”

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER 5

MINDY

Oh, good lord. It took only sixty seconds for Brooke to wind Hugo around her little finger. I'm now trailing the two of them as Brooke drags him by the sleeve toward the stacks of pet carriers. I try to ignore his broad shoulders and friendly nature toward my offspring—two of my biggest weaknesses.

It's taken me thirty-eight years to come to terms with my weaknesses and strengths, and I know for a fact that my number-one weakness is my awful taste in men. Take Brooke's dad, for instance. All it took was a sexy wink and a ride on the back of that loser's motorcycle and I gave it up like he was a freakin' rock star and I was a young mega-fan with a backstage pass. He didn't stick around long enough to even meet his own kid.

But I'm through making those kinds of mistakes—I can't afford them with a daughter to raise and bills to pay. The bakery makes okay money through our tiny storefront and the local businesses carrying my products, but the bulk of my income comes from online sales. I swear people spend more money on their dogs than they do their kids. Which is fine with me.

I've had a couple relapses, giving in to temptation in the form of hot men whose looks are the only decent thing about them. Old habits die hard. But it's been over six months since I've even been on a date, much less had the opportunity to make bad choices. And I've been doing just fine without a man—better, in fact. The only men I need in my life are Wiener and Spaghetti. And Michael B. Jordan, of course.

And if Hugo Gamble is looking for companionship, I suppose Brooke and I can help him find a pet while my sister runs my booth for a few minutes.

"I can smell the ferret from here." Hugo wrinkles his nose at Brooke.

“That’s what baths are for,” my kid informs him matter-of-factly.
Hugo turns to me for back-up. “Don’t they have fish or something?”
I cock my head. “Rescue fish?” Is he serious?

“This was a mistake.” He starts backing away from the crates and Brooke, a look of panic rising across his face.

This guy rescues people from dangerous situations on the daily, and he’s afraid of a smelly ferret? To keep from rolling my eyes, I glance around for a volunteer to help. Hollis is wrangling puppies, but I see the shelter director, Devon, heading our way, so I flag her down.

“Hey, Devon, this is Hugo. He needs to hold an animal STAT.”

Devon grins, not blinking an eye before popping open a carrier and pulling out a black and white tuxedo cat who meows loudly at being disturbed. Devon moves so deftly that Hugo has no choice but to support the cat in both hands as she deposits it in his arms.

“Her name is Dizzy. She’s about two years old. She enjoys heavy metal music and is scared of cheese.”

I stifle a laugh at the look on Hugo’s face. He’s holding Dizzy away from his body by her armpits as she hangs limply in the air like a Salvador Dali painting titled “Melted Perturbed Cat.”

“Just hold her. She won’t bite you,” I assure him before sneaking a sideways glance at Devon to confirm. She shoots me a subtle nod.

“Snuggle her,” Brooke encourages.

Maybe it’s the fragile male ego needing to prove bravery on par with a five-year-old child that makes him do it, but Hugo finally brings the cat into his chest and readjusts his grip to hold her more comfortably. She rewards him with an immediate purr and a nuzzle of his short beard. Hugo’s responding smile zaps me right in the chest, proving I might just be the sucker I claim not to be. Dammit.

The effect is ruined, however, when Hugo lets out a sudden sneeze followed in quick succession by two more. Dizzy is less than pleased at the disturbance and attempts to wrestle herself out of Hugo’s grip. This not being Devon’s first day, she easily catches Dizzy and deposits her back in her carrier before declaring, “Cat allergy. No can do,” and pulling a lint roller from her back pocket. She de-hairs Hugo’s shirt in two seconds flat before returning the roller to her pocket and moving on to help a couple a few feet away.

“Have you seriously never had a pet?” I ask him.

The guy must be in his forties, and it honestly makes me a little sad if he's lived this long without the whole pet experience.

"My ex had a chihuahua."

"Oh." I'm ignoring the part of me that liked hearing the "ex" part.

"Named Princess Baby," he finishes.

"Oh." My tone is much different this time, and it's possible my lip even curls. No wonder this guy doesn't think he likes animals.

Even Brooke laughs at this. "Princess Baby? What kind of name is that for a dog? You should have named her Peanut Butter."

Hugo looks down at Brooke. "That name is a hundred times better. Maybe even a thousand." Brooke smiles up at him adoringly. Uh oh. It's like this guy is a pro at disarming women, and that's not going to work for me. I've had enough slick characters slide in and out of my life. No way am I even entertaining the thought of letting this guy charm me through my kid. Time to put a stop to this and get back to work.

"Well, Hugo, I'm sorry about the allergies. It may not be adoption, but the pet store carries goldfish." I take Brooke's hand and draw her to my side while I offer him a polite smile.

He appears to get my message because he straightens and nods, his responding smile just as polite as mine. "Right. Okay, well, it was nice seeing you again under more favorable circumstances."

I nod. "You as well." As well? Who talks like that? I gotta get out of here. I turn to steer us back to my booth and back to some good sense.

"It was nice meeting you, Brooke!" Hugo calls after us.

My kid sends him a wave, and I get us out of there just in the nick of time. Brooke is my kryptonite, and the last thing I need is to have my weakness tested. That's exactly how I ended up a single mom in the first place, and I'm way too responsible now to pay any mind to the devil that tries making itself at home on my shoulder.

CHAPTER 6

HUGO

I should take this as a sign that not only am I not meant to have a pet, but I shouldn't let myself get ideas like I was allowing a few minutes ago. Ten minutes with this woman and her daughter, and I was entertaining the notion that maybe Ashley and Nicole were right and I should ask Mindy out. What's wrong with trying?

But you don't experiment with single moms. I'm old and wise enough to know better—and Mindy is obviously wiser still because she spotted the word “fiasco” written all over my misguided ideas before I even acknowledged them myself. And I called *her* irresponsible yesterday? No wonder she lit into me by the river.

I shake my head at myself and start for the sidewalk. It was a mistake stopping here. Did I really think my girls would be appeased by me adopting a pet? It was a foolish notion. I'll go home and register for one of those awful dating sites. Then I'll go on a couple dates to dip my toe back into the dating pool. I can practice my rusty skills on a stranger or two until I'm confident I won't be a disaster.

“Hey!” I hear someone yell and reflexively turn, even though I doubt they're talking to me. But I see the Devon woman from a few minutes ago with the cat. She stops a few feet from me. “I'm glad I caught you. I want to get you signed up for notifications. You never know.” She shrugs and smiles at me, and while she's nice and obviously a good person, I can't help but notice her smile isn't half as alluring as Mindy's.

But I realize I was so distracted by Mindy and my dating woes that I neglected to so much as donate to the cause, so I follow Devon back to the tent even though I have no interest in receiving emails. I fish a twenty out of

my wallet and drop it in their bucket after filling out her form, then head back out.

The last thing I expect is to find myself face-to-face with Mindy again, but there she is. The sight of her brings an automatic smile to my face. “Hi.”

“Hey, did you see Brooke? I turned around, and she ran off to see the dogs again.”

Shielding my eyes from the winter sun, I glance around but don’t glimpse the little girl. I shake my head. “Not since you took her with you. I’m sure she’s here somewhere, though,” I reassure her.

“Yeah, I’ll find her. Thanks anyway.” She nods and turns, but I stop her with a hand on her arm.

“I’m not leaving.” Is she crazy? “I’ll help you look.”

Her expression is one part surprised and two parts relieved. “Thanks. She’s wearing—”

“A green t-shirt, blue shorts, white sneakers, and a pink bow in her ponytail. I know.” I nod. “I’ve been doing emergency response in one form or another for twenty-five years. I’m observant by habit.”

She nods back, and we pick up our pace as we circle the tent looking for her daughter. After one full round, I can see the panic rise to the surface in Mindy’s expression and posture, but I need to keep her calm. So I take her hand in mine and lead her to the volunteer table, where a blonde woman who knows Mindy quickly gets up to speed.

When I ask Mindy to message her friend a recent photo of Brooke, she does so in a flash without question. I introduce myself to the volunteer, Hollis, and ask for her iPhone, which I use to set her AirDrop option to Everyone. This way, she can share the photo with any nearby Apple phone. Then I instruct her to make an announcement on the PA system and start sending Brooke’s photo to every phone that pops up. She finishes jotting Brooke’s clothing description down and gives Mindy a reassuring hug before heading for the other side of the tent.

We do another circle while the announcement is being made, running into Mindy’s sister this time as she conducts her own search. As soon as Mindy sees her sister empty-handed, she chokes on a sob but otherwise keeps her composure. I’m finding this little girl if it kills me.

“Mindy, just as a precaution, I’m calling 9-1-1, but this is no reflection on my confidence that we’ll find her any minute now. I’m just being thorough.” I wait for her nod before I step to the side and put in the call. Dispatch says

they'll send a car right over, so I hang up and rejoin Mindy and her sister.

"You know she's curious. And we've got everybody in the park looking for her now with that announcement. It'll be okay, I promise," her sister reassures, but Mindy has lost all her color even as she fidgets nervously and swivels her head in search of her daughter.

"Did she say anything between the time you left me to the time you noticed her missing?"

Mindy shakes her head firmly. "No. Just the same thing about wanting to adopt another dog. That's why I assumed she was back at the pens."

"Okay, let's fan out. Mindy, do another sweep of the fundraiser tent and the terrace. The cops are on their way and will want to talk to you, so stay close. Daphne, take the stage and pergola area on that end. I'll take the square and the monument." I glance at my watch and see it's ten forty, ten minutes since Mindy first stopped me. "Keep an ear out for the PA, and we'll meet back at the tent at ten fifty."

Daphne dashes off, and I'm about to do the same when Mindy grips my forearm. The look on her face would have me pulling her in for a rib-crushing hug if I weren't laser-focused in rescue mode. "Please, Hugo, we *have* to find her."

"We will." I infuse my words with as much confidence as I can before reluctantly pulling free of her grip and taking off for the other end of the park. Time is of the essence here—something I'm well-attuned to with my years of experience.

I cross Market Street and traverse the other end of the park, checking the fountain, the bronze pig statues, and the Vance Memorial, all while keeping an eye on the surrounding sidewalks and streets. Having accepted Hollis's AirDrop photo minutes earlier, I show it to just about everyone I pass, but no one has seen the girl.

Until a teenager on a skateboard finally nods. "Yeah—I think I just saw her a few minutes ago when I was coming up Broadway."

"Was she alone?" Please say yes.

"I think so." Thank God. "She was chasing a dog."

Of course she was. I could tell from the second I met that child that she's no pushover—just like her mom.

I thank the teenager and ask him to stop by the tent to talk to the police. Then I take off down Broadway, phone to my ear.

CHAPTER 7

MINDY

“S omebody saw her chasing a dog south on Broadway,” Hugo says from his end of the phone as he breathes heavily into it. The man is running after my child, bless his freaking heart!

I pull the phone from my mouth to tell Daphne and the cops who arrived a couple minutes ago, “Hugo says someone saw her running south on Broadway chasing a dog. He’s running that way now!” The officers head for their car parked a few feet away along Spruce Street, and I bring the phone back up. “Where are you now? Do you see her?” I start running to the other end of the park, Daphne trailing behind me as I cross Market Street without even checking for traffic. I can’t deal with traffic at a time like this!

“Not yet. I’m hanging up so I can go faster and focus my attention, though. I’m sorry.” The man hangs up on me before I can protest.

“He hung up on me!” I shout as Daphne catches up with me. I’m really wishing right now that I’d kept my New Year’s resolution to go to the gym more regularly.

“Now is not the time, Mindy!” Daphne scolds, and of course she’s right. My brain hasn’t been functioning properly since the moment I realized Brooke wasn’t by the dog pens anymore.

When we get to the memorial, we dodge traffic to cross the street and hit the sidewalk on Broadway just as the police car passes us, sirens wailing. This is the third time in two days the Taylor family has made our tax dollars work for us. First Water Rescue, then EMTs, and now the police! And I, for one, am ready for a little peace and quiet—some boring couch time safe at home with my kiddo and dogs. I won’t let myself even contemplate that this may not work out. It just *has* to. *It has to*. And then I’m not letting my little

girl out of my sight even for a second. Ever again.

When we've gotten down another block, my phone rings, and I almost drop it, I'm so anxious to answer it. Before I can even say hello, Hugo's voice rings loud and clear.

"I've got her!"

My legs give out the second I hear his words, and I crash on my knees onto the sidewalk, the phone bouncing off the cement and my wrist catching my fall. Pain shoots up my arm, and my kneecaps scream in agony, but I don't care about any of it. My little girl is okay. She's okay.

"Mindy!" Daphne grasps my arm and tries to pull me up, but I'm crying and laughing, and I don't care that I'm on my face on the sidewalk.

"Hugo's got her. She's okay!"

"Oh my god!" Daphne stops trying to pull me up and, instead, joins me on the ground, throwing her arms around me. We are a sight to see, I'm sure, and I don't give one flying fork who's looking.

Five minutes later, I'm limping down the sidewalk, Daphne at my side lecturing me as only a big sister can do. "Don't be too hard on her. I'm sure she already knows she's in trouble, so berating her in front of strangers won't do anything productive."

My phone is destroyed, so I haven't been able to reach Hugo again, but I know they must be down here somewhere, so we keep walking.

And then I see them. My little girl in the arms of this amazing, wonderful, opposite-of-an-asshat guy. My baby looks just as perfect as she did forty minutes ago, and the two of them walking toward me are a balm to my soul. I pick up my pace, ignoring the pain in my knees and wrist and not stopping until I'm holding my baby girl in my arms.

"Brookie, thank God you're all right." I kiss her downy head a dozen times while she grips me around the neck.

"I'm sorry, Momma."

I kiss her a dozen more times and murmur reassuring words while I hold my kid close, my eyes squeezed shut as I revel in this perfect moment.

A bark breaks through my little bubble, and I open my eyes to see Hugo standing by Daphne, a tiny white dog cradled in the crook of his arm. "Uh, it turns out Cupcake wasn't adopted. She ran away."

Brooke pulls back and looks up at me with her big caramel doe eyes. "Cupcake escaped. That's why she wasn't there when I came to get you. I saw her by the trees, so I *had* to go rescue her."

“We’ll talk about what you should have done later. For now, I’m just happy you’re safe.”

“And you’re happy Cupcake is safe too, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

Brooke wiggles, and I let her down. She immediately goes to take the little dog from Hugo, and I follow her, walking right up into that man’s space and hugging the snot out of him.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” I’m smiling so hard my cheeks hurt as I pull back and then impulsively lay a giant smooch on his surprised lips.

Daphne laughs from beside me, and Hugo looks like he’s been blindsided by an NFL linebacker when I settle back on my heels again. I suppose I sometimes have that effect.

“You are my absolute hero, Hugo Gamble.”

He clears his throat and glances around, clearly a little embarrassed, but I don’t care. Everybody should know what a hero this guy is. I’ll shout it from the rooftops if I can find a ladder.

But I realize he’s frowning down at me now, and it’s the same frown from yesterday—the one that preceded his accusations about me being reckless and irresponsible. Because of course. This man has had to rescue me and my inept ass twice now. Of course he’s annoyed. And he has every right to be.

I take a step back, my own smile fading, and when I turn to Daphne, she reads my silent communication and quickly interjects, bundling Brooke and me to the side. “Okay, let’s get this wrapped up and let everyone get on with their day.”

I don’t look at Hugo again, telling myself I’ll write him a sincere thank-you note and drop it in the mail. He’s more than earned a respite from the Taylor family tornado of chaos.

CHAPTER 8

HUGO

I haven't the vaguest idea of what just happened. One minute, Mindy was kissing me, and the next, she was running away as if I burned her, leaving me at a loss on the sidewalk. I thought about chasing after the trio as they accompanied the police to the squad car—at the very least, to make sure someone assessed Mindy's wounds. I hadn't noticed them until she was standing in front of me, but blood seeped through her jeans at both knees, and her wrist didn't look right. I'd been about to ask her about them when she shifted gears and took off.

It's best to leave the family to themselves, though. My job is done, and I accomplished what I set out to do, which is always the perfect outcome. The girl is safe and no worse for wear, the cops are taking care of the report, and it's time for me to go home.

So that's what I do.

The only problem with this plan is that by the next morning, after an endless night of tossing and turning, I can't get Mindy off my mind. I didn't like the look on her face before she turned away—it was some combination of hurt and maybe shame. A far cry from the confident and sometimes defiant person I'd been introduced to.

Since I can do nothing about it, though, I instead try distracting myself—first by practicing my Taekwondo and then taking a trip to the hardware store because everyone knows that's the place to go when you're not sure what you need, but you're confident you'll know it when you see it.

But for some reason, my car steers itself to the animal shelter instead. Shaking my head at myself, I venture inside to find a familiar face at the front desk.

“Hello, Devon.”

She smiles in greeting when she sees me. “Hey! Quite the drama yesterday, huh? I heard you tracked the little Taylor girl down. I was so happy to hear it.”

“Yeah. It was a group effort, really.”

“So, have you decided to take another look at Dizzy? Some people do great on daily allergy pills.”

“I’m not sure I’m a cat person. Maybe I’ll just take a look around.”

Devon nods and stands from the desk. “Sure thing. Let me show you the place.”

An hour later, I’m back in my car questioning my own sanity.

“Don’t get too excited, okay? I’m new at this,” I tell my passenger. She only stares at me and pants in response. “You have to promise you’ll charm the hell out of my girls so they stop nagging me, though.” When I look over this time, Cupcake’s tongue is hanging out the side of her mouth, and I swear the dog is smiling at me. What have I gotten myself into?

Devon’s parting words ring in my ears the whole way home, and I hope to God she’s right.

When I pull into my driveway and see the woman standing on my front porch, I wonder if God is playing tricks on me. I put my truck in park, and Cupcake vaults over the console and onto my lap, so I have no choice but to pick her up and carry her with me to greet Mindy Taylor in my driveway.

As soon as she sees the dog in my arms, her jaw drops and then she doubles over in laughter. It looks way too good on her and has my mind going too fast for my own good. Until I see the cast on her arm.

“I knew it,” I say as I hurry to her. “You ran away too fast yesterday for me to check, but I could tell that wrist didn’t look right.”

She straightens again before shrugging and lifting her casted arm. “I didn’t so much hang up on you yesterday than faceplant and break my wrist *and* my phone in one efficient move.”

I wince and unconsciously move closer as if I’m going to comfort her. But I remember myself before I can cross any lines.

“I can’t believe you have that dog,” she says, unable to keep her amusement in check.

It’s my turn to shrug. “What can I say? She made an impression.” I have no valid explanation, so I don’t even try.

Mindy pets Cupcake, who laps up the attention, and then sobers a bit

before speaking again. “I was going to call you, but since I have no phone, I figured I’d hunt you down like a real old-fashioned weirdo.” Her laugh is self-deprecating this time.

I want to tell her she can hunt me down any time she likes, and I’ll welcome it. Instead, I go with, “Do you want to come in?” as I gesture to my front door.

She shakes her head. “No, I just needed to come and apologize face-to-face.”

“Apologize for what?”

“Are you serious?”

All I can do is shake my head because I have no idea what she’s talking about.

She attempts to clear things up for me. “For dragging you away from minding your own business to save me two days in a row! I should have kept a better eye on Brooke. If I had, none of this would have happened.” She runs her good hand through her blond hair. “I mean, who knows what could have happened to her if you hadn’t been so on top of everything. The AirDrop thing and the announcement, not to mention calling the cops and chasing after her yourself like some—”

I stop her right there. “I lost one of my daughters at an amusement park when she was six. When we finally found her, she was puking from all the ice cream she’d conned off the concession worker who found her.”

“Wait, what?” Her brow knits.

“Every parent has these moments. We’re all just doing the best we can, and sometimes we need a helping hand. It’s that simple.” I shrug, but she’s still looking at me like I’ve got something growing from the middle of my forehead.

“So, you don’t think I’m a terrible parent?”

“What? Why would I think that?”

She throws her arms out. “Because you had to chase my kid down Broadway Street, where she could have been snatched by any creeper out there!”

Damn.

“This is because of what I said on Friday by the river, isn’t it?”

She inhales through her nose. “I don’t know.” She’s hemming.

“I was an ass. Sometimes I get so caught up in my job that I forget that life doesn’t always allow for things to go by the book. I don’t think you’re

irresponsible at all. In fact, I think Brooke is damn lucky to have you for a mom.”

“Really?” She looks down at her shoes. “I mean, not that I need your approval or anything.”

Ha! There’s that defiant streak again. It has me smiling.

“Yes. And no, you sure don’t.”

She smiles up at me, and something shifts in my chest.

“Well then, I guess I’m glad I stopped by.” Her whiskey eyes sparkle at me.

Cupcake tries to lick my beard, so I scratch her behind the ears, but my eyes never leave Mindy. “Speaking of that, how did you find me anyway? Not that I’m not happy to see you.”

“You know, it was the weirdest thing. Devon from the shelter called my business line about a half hour ago and left your address on my voice mail.”

This has me throwing my head back and laughing. Devon is so full of it. Here I was thinking her parting words to me were some kind of philosophical message, but no. She was just being straight up with me about her plans to meddle.

“What?” Mindy asks.

“Nothing.” I take a total chance and pull Mindy into me while I shift a wiggling Cupcake to the side. Mindy’s smile is nothing less than dazzling as she looks up at me, so I dip my head and kiss her.

Now I know what Devon meant when she handed Cupcake to me and said, “Sometimes the right one finds you instead of the other way around.”

Her words prove even more true a week later when I introduce Mindy, Brooke, and Cupcake to Ashley and Nicole, and my daughters both lose their ever-loving minds.

~ THE END ~

ABOUT SYLVIE STEWART

USA Today bestselling author Sylvie Stewart loves dad jokes, dirty rom-coms, country music, and baby skunks—preferably all at the same time. Most of her steamy romantic comedies are set in her favorite state of North Carolina, and she never lets her characters run out of snarky banter or snacks. If you love smart Southern gals, hot blue-collar guys, and snort-laughing with characters who feel like your best friends, Sylvie's your gal. Find out more about Sylvie [here](#).

Sign up for Sylvie's newsletter [here](#) and join her Facebook reader group [here](#).

[Carolina Connections series](#)

[Love on Tap series](#)

[Carolina Kisses series](#)

[Kings of Carolina series](#)

[Novellas and Shorts](#)

[Poppy & the Beast](#)

[Then Again](#)



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the fourth year the Chicks for Charity have come together to write and raise money for a good cause, and it's just as amazing this year as it was the first time. True, every year throws up fun new challenges but we're an amazingly cohesive team after all this time and we kick goals every year.

No matter how much effort we put in, though, we know that our success sits firmly at the feet of you, our precious readers, who are the reason this project is such a success year after year. We are so grateful to you for helping us raise thousands of dollars for charity and we thank you for allowing us this year to support the Valley Humane Society.

Special thanks in particular to Give Me Books PR, Cravebooks, BookSpry and Read Me Romance for advertising help this year.

Melonie Johnson
Kameron Claire
Tracey Pedersen

The organizers of Chasing Holiday Tail