



In for a Treat

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Category: Romance

Description: One down-on-her-luck dog walker. One irresistible vet with the perfect job offer. Too bad dating a coworker is so not done. Olive's small-town life is crumbling as fast as an expired dog treat. Her side business is facing some fierce competition from a stuck-up dog walker and her part-time job as a barista hardly pays enough to cover the rent. Moving back home is out of the question, since her parents have turned her old bedroom into an exclusive hamster hotel. For veterinarian Lewis, moving to Old Pine Cove with his dog Archie is the fresh start he's been craving. He's convinced breathing new life into the animal clinic will help him forget the big mess he left behind in Britain. But then an accident lands Olive a job at his clinic, and before long, they're stealing dreamy glances at each other over the treatment table. Too bad true-to-his-word Lewis has sworn never to date an employee again...

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Chapter One

Olive

“Heel, Butterscotch.”

I pulled on the Border terrier’s leash, and the dog joined me at my side again. She looked longingly at the squirrel darting away toward one of the trees on Main Street, then gazed up at me with pleading eyes.

“Fine,” I said with a laugh. “Here’s your reward for not going after that squirrel.”

I got a fish treat out of the ziplock bag in my pocket and fed it to her. Butterscotch wagged her tail in gratitude while we continued our stroll. She was Mrs. Hudson’s dog and cute as a button, but she loved to chase everything from squirrels to rabbits. I often let her do exactly that when we were at the dog park. Unfortunately for Butterscotch, chasing things wasn’t on the itinerary today as I had to be at work in half an hour and still had to drop her off with her owner.

Not everyone in my hometown of Old Pine Cove had time to walk their own dog every day, so they hired me to help with that. In fact, Mrs. Hudson’s Butterscotch had been one of my first furry clients. The older lady couldn’t walk far anymore due to a bad hip. Two years later, her dog was still a regular, and the Border terrier and I went out together at least four days a week.

Yeah, I was catching tail all right, but unfortunately not in the way I wanted to. My obsession with dogs scared most guys off, although I wouldn’t call it an obsession per

se, but rather a fierce passion. That, combined with fact that I lived at home up until last week, even though I was already twenty-five, seemed to repel all the cute guys.

To be honest, I didn't see a problem with living at home until my mid-twenties, but my mom did. She claimed it would be unhealthy for me if I kept living there. She wouldn't stop sending me listings of rentals in the neighborhood, no matter how nice or crappy they were. If the space was for rent – even if said space was nothing more than a creepy attic or a dusty garage box – Mom would state it was the best housing opportunity ever. Every time I told her I didn't feel like living in a garage, she waved my remark away, mumbling something about “kids these days.”

The night I announced I had found an apartment to rent, my dad cracked open a bottle of wine and shoved a tray of appetizers in the oven while Mom called all her friends to share the news. I hadn't seen my parents that cheerful in a long time. Were they bursting with excitement about me starting a new phase in my life, or was it more a case of “thank goodness we finally have the house to ourselves again”? I didn't know and honestly, didn't even want to know.

Butterscotch barked, and I turned to see who or what had caught her attention. Across the street, a slate-gray car with tinted windows rolled into the parking lot of Pine Paw Prints, the animal clinic.

I lowered my sunglasses. Huh. That must be the new vet. Everyone in town had been dying to meet this mystery guy. All we knew was Mr. Kline had sold the clinic to someone who didn't live in Old Pine Cove. No matter how many times I had tempted him with free coffee, Mr. Kline wouldn't budge. He said we'd have to find out for ourselves.

I hoped to catch a glimpse of the newcomer, but the barking next to me made it clear I had to get a move on. The last thing I wanted was the new vet thinking I was a dog-walker who couldn't handle a barking dog. I had a reputation to uphold, and if things

turned out well, I might ask him to drum up some business for my dog walking services. Before retiring, Mr. Kline used to recommend me to all of his patients' owners, and I hoped the new vet would do the same.

I resumed walking in the direction of Mrs. Hudson's house and gently tugged at Butterscotch's leash. She couldn't stop staring at the vet's practice.

"Come on, girl, we need to get you home," I said. "I've got lattes with whipped cream and espresso shots to serve."

The dog's ears perked up at the mention of whipped cream, and I laughed. When she realized I wasn't going to offer her a plate of whipped cream right then and there, she barked in protest.

"I know," I said with a sigh. "It's hard wanting something you can't have. Or, in my case, can't afford."

Living on my own had certainly changed things for me. Where before I bought the newest dog tarot card decks on release day, top-notch salmon dog treats and canine toys without even blinking, I now had to settle for off-brand candy and DIY toys made from old rags. My rent wasn't outrageously high, but neither was my part-time wage at the local coffee shop, Sip'nBean.

"Olive," someone with a syrupy voice called out to me as Butterscotch and I crossed the street.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Melissa making her way over to me. My shoulders tensed. Why, dear mother of salmon dog treats, why?

"Oh, hey, Melissa," I said. The smile that spread across my face was as fake as her eyelashes.

She motioned her head in the direction of Pine Paw Prints. “Did you see the new vet arriving? I tried to catch him to introduce myself, but I was too late. The doors were closed already. I wonder what he looks like. Do you think he’ll be one of those doctors who wears glasses? Because I don’t like that.”

Talking fast without waiting for a reply was Melissa’s usual way of communication, so I waited a beat before answering.

“What’s wrong with wearing glasses?” I asked, pushing mine higher up my nose. “People who wear them only want to be able to see, you know.”

She circled her hand in front of my face. “Oh, I’m not talking about you specifically. Besides, I know you can’t help it, but it’s a well-known fact that glasses make most people unattractive.”

One of my eyebrows shot up in irritation. “I’ve seen you wear glasses. What does that make you?”

Melissa smiled and nodded at me, pointing a finger at her temple. “Smart, that’s what it makes me. Mine are not ordinary glasses, they’re blue-light blocking glasses.”

“Blue light?”

“That’s right, the kind a computer screen emits,” she said with a tone as if talking to a toddler. “I don’t expect you to know this since all you do all day long is pour coffee, but they’re an amazing asset for people like me.”

Arrogant snobs? I wanted to ask but knew better.

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She tapped a finger on her chin. “How can I explain this to you. See, these glasses prolong the health of your eyes, and as a result, you don’t need real glasses.”

“So you wear glasses in order to avoid... wearing glasses?”

She clapped her hands together. “Exactly!”

Butterscotch barked at the sound of clapping hands. Melissa’s gaze traveled downward, and she gave the dog a weak smile. “I’d better let you get to it before things get out of control with all this barking.”

“Great. See you,” I said and walked away.

I didn’t want to spend a second longer chatting with the girl, but unfortunately, the feeling wasn’t mutual.

“Olive, wait.”

She caught up with me and put her hand on my arm. “Just one more thing. I wanted to let you know I’m starting my own business.”

I tried to conjure up another smile. “Good for you.”

She produced a flyer from her cream-colored designer handbag. “It’s a service kind of like yours, only more exclusive and unique.”

I frowned and grabbed the flyer from her hands. Blood left my face as I studied the

text. She was going to offer dog walking services as well? But that was my specialty, and it had been for years. Old Pine Cove was a small town, which meant there was no need for multiple dog walkers.

“You can’t do this,” I said, shoving the flyer into a nearby trash can.

Melissa shrugged in reply. “Why not? We target a different market. You walk mixed breeds and mutts; I’ll only be dealing with purebred dogs. Besides, it’s too late for me to back out now. My shipment of tailor-made dog collars is already on its way. Those rhinestones sure cost me enough, so I plan on using them often.”

I let out a puff of air. “Rhinestones? Look, you can’t just swoop in like this. I’ve been working on this business for years.”

She shook her head and removed some imaginary lint from her cold-pressed blouse. “You know, Olive, if you’re convinced your service is amazing, then you’ve got nothing to worry about. Besides, it’s a free country. I do what I want.”

With those words, she turned on her heel and walked away.

My nostrils flared, and I felt like punching something. Purebred dogs? Butterscotch was as pure as they get, and I walked her, didn’t I? Honestly, what kind of person made that kind of distinction? There was nothing wrong with dogs who weren’t purebred. That was like saying ice cream made from soy milk isn’t real ice cream.

“Come on, girl,” I told Butterscotch. “We’re running late.”

The two of us proceeded toward her owner’s house, the sound of her paws on the pavement setting a steady rhythm. I silently wished Melissa would step in a turd with her clickity-clack heels, preferably a mutt’s turd.

Ever since we were in high school together, she had made my blood boil. Well, mine and most of the other girls in our class. It didn't help that her parents were loaded, which meant Melissa hardly had to lift a finger to make a living. She lived rent-free in a house owned by her parents and worked a part-time job at her father's accounting firm. According to Melissa herself, she was the best thing since sliced bread.

I ran up the steps to Mrs. Hudson's house and rang the doorbell. Butterscotch's tail wagged in delight. I often wondered what it would be like to be a dog. They always seemed so content and happy, their only worry is the timing of the next treat appearing in their lives.

The door slowly opened, and Mrs. Hudson appeared. "Olive, come on in," she said while motioning toward her living room.

I smiled at her and shook my head. "Thank you, but I'm afraid I'm running late for work."

"Oh, what's one cookie and one cup of tea going to do? It'll take five minutes, tops."

Mrs. Hudson was sweet and harmless, but once she lured you inside, it was hard to get out again, kind of like Hotel California.

I handed her Butterscotch's leash. "I have to be at work in ten minutes, but I'll be sure to pop in sometime this week. Maybe Thursday? I don't have to work then."

Mrs. Hudson unclipped the leash, and Butterscotch dashed inside. She went straight for one of those squeaky toys shaped like a squirrel.

"Thursday is great. I'll make those cookies you like," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Then she reached for her purse and pressed a five-dollar bill into my hand. “Don’t spend it all at once.”

“I won’t, thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” I said.

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Five dollars wasn't much for a thirty-minute private walk, but I hadn't found the courage yet to tell her I raised my prices last year. And even then, I charged way below the national average. I guess it felt weird asking lots of money for something I loved so much, even though business-wise, it was a dumb move.

"Have a nice day, Olive," Mrs. Hudson said, giving me a warm smile.

I said goodbye and walked to work. My car was at the shop – again. Honestly, my vehicle got towed so often I wondered if I should just bring it to the scrapyard and be done with it. I could swap the faulty thing for a bike and get around just as easily.

I arrived at Sip'nBean with only two minutes to spare. The scent of fresh coffee and cake wafted to me as soon as I pushed the doors open. I took a deep breath. To me, coffee was one of life's best scents.

I greeted my colleague Juliet with a quick hello and ran into the back room to change into my Sip'nBean T-shirt and navy-blue apron. Both pieces of clothing had a coffee cup embroidered on them, giving the uniform a nice touch.

As soon as I got changed, I headed out front and took my spot behind the counter.

"Anything interesting happen today?" I asked Juliet.

She shook her head while frothing milk. "Not really, just the usual. I did hear a rumor about some property going up for sale and Dave wanting to start a food truck."

She handed a cup of coffee to her customer and wiped her hands clean on her apron

before untying it.

“Well, I’d better go. I’ve got an appointment at the hair salon.”

“Will I be able to recognize you tomorrow?” I jokingly asked. Juliet loved drastically changing her hairdo every six months or so.

She laughed. “Of course. I might come back as a brunette, though. See you tomorrow, Olive.”

I waved at her and arranged some of the supplies behind the counter. We were running low on takeaway cups, so I went to the storage room to get a new load.

When I came back, a dark blond guy was standing in front of the counter, scanning the menu on the wall behind me. I hadn’t seen him before, which could only mean one of three things: either he was new in town, he was here visiting someone, or he had been a recluse up until that moment, and the thought of fresh coffee had finally lured him out of his house.

“Welcome to Sip’nBean,” I said. “How can I help you today?”

The guy pulled his gaze away from the menu and smiled at me, making my heart skip a beat. Recluse or not, he was one gorgeous stranger and one of the most handsome men I’d ever seen in real life. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and his suit pants matched perfectly with his fancy shoes. He looked like an important guy on his way to a meeting, except this wasn’t Wall Street, but downtown Old Pine Cove.

He bit his lip while thinking, then spoke in a British accent. “A cappuccino, please. No sugar and to go.”

I reached for a disposable cup.

“Wait,” he said. “Make it a double shot. I’ve got a busy day ahead.”

“Will do. What’s your name?” I asked, marker in hand.

That was the beauty of working as a barista. I always had the perfect excuse for finding out someone’s name without sounding like a creeper.

“The name’s Lewis,” he said in that adorable accent of his. “Nice to meet you.”

Well, hello, Lewis. If I had a tail like Butterscotch, I would’ve wagged it for sure. I had no clue what this guy was doing in Old Pine Cove, but I hoped he would stay for a long, long time.

Chapter Two

Olive

As I prepared Lewis’s order, I caught him perusing the flyers on the counter. He picked up one of mine, advertising my tarot card readings for dogs, and I broke out in a smile.

“Are you a dog lover?” I asked him, motioning toward the flyer in his hand.

He nodded. “I am, but this is complete rubbish, don’t you think?”

Ouch. He could’ve just as easily put a dagger in my heart and slowly pulled it out. “Excuse me?”

He crinkled his nose while reading the text on the flyer. “Tarot card readings for

dogs? What a money scheme.”

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Okay, now he was just twisting his knife as hard as he could. I placed his order on the counter and straightened my shoulders. “It’s not a money scheme. Tarot readings can be extremely valuable.”

Lewis picked up his coffee cup and shrugged. “Valuable for the person offering them, that’s for sure. You just tell people what they want to hear and take their money.”

The nerve of this guy! Tarot readings were not easy to perform, especially when your clients’ only ways of communicating verbally were barking or whining. It took real skill and patience to decipher their thoughts.

“Don’t judge something before you try it,” I said. “Like handing out tips.” I smiled at him, so I didn’t look completely desperate, begging for his money.

He let out a laugh and produced a dollar bill from his pocket. “You’re right, I keep forgetting to tip. I’m not from around here, as you can probably tell.”

I smiled at him. “Yeah, your accent gave you away. What brings you to Old Pine Cove, Lewis? Apart from dissing a wonderful service performed by one of Old Pine Cove’s favorite people.”

Okay, I might’ve been laying it on way too thick, but I wanted him to know his remarks had hurt me. As I couldn’t jeopardize my job by getting full-on angry at him, the only road to take here was the passive-aggressive one.

He held his hands up. “Look, I’m sure this person reading tarot cards for dogs is wonderful. In fact, if she comes to me with a problem, I promise I won’t talk badly

about the unusual services she offers. Everyone is entitled to their own likes and dislikes.”

It sounded more like Lewis was the one offering unusual services. I frowned. “Why would she come to you with a problem?”

He broke out in a smile, showing his perfect teeth. “I’m the vet who’s taking over the practice on Pinewood Lane.”

Huh. Lewis, the tarot-card-hating hunk, was Old Pine Cove’s new vet. I snickered as I thought back to what Melissa had said earlier about him having glasses or not. He wasn’t wearing a pair, but I did spot a black frame casually dangling from the hem of his shirt’s neckline. I could just imagine him with those glasses on, gently examining someone’s fur baby with those big hands of his. Melissa could say what she wanted, but glasses on this guy would only add to his sexiness level.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, his green eyes full of curiousness.

I rearranged a basket of sugar packets that didn’t need rearranging at all. “Let’s say your arrival has already been discussed by the lovely townspeople here.”

He pulled a face. “Should I be worried?”

“That depends,” I said with a wink. “People here are nice, but rub them the wrong way and... Well, I guess that’s for you to find out.”

He ran a hand through his wavy hair, an expression of uncertainty on his face. “Do you always make customers nervous like this, or is it just me?”

I put my hands palms up and shrugged. “There’s only one way to find out. If you come back tomorrow, you can put your theory to the test.”

“That sounds good. I have a coffee addiction to feed, and I’d love for you to be my dealer,” he said with a grin. “Anyway, I’ve got to run.”

I grabbed a loyalty card from the stack beside the register and waved it in his direction. “Wait. You’ll need this if you’re such an addict. Buy ten coffees, get one free. You know, the usual tricks us dealers use to get you to spend more money and become even more addicted.”

Lewis slid the card in his back pocket. His eyes zoomed in on my chest, and it took me a couple of seconds to realize he wasn’t staring at my boobs, but instead reading my name tag. “Thanks, Olive. I’ll see you around. Oh, and if you ever need a vet, the first consultation is on me. You know, dealers and their tricks.”

The bells at the door jingled as he closed it behind his perfect butt, and I let out a long breath to try and steady my racing heart. For a moment, I considered calling my boss to ask for extra shifts so that I could see Lewis’s face every day, but that would’ve been ridiculous. I didn’t know the guy at all and couldn’t completely overhaul my work-life balance for him just because he was cute and charming.

The rest of the day went by fast. I couldn’t help myself from grinning every time I thought of Lewis and how he wanted me to be his coffee dealer. It was one of the most exciting things to have happened to me over the last few weeks.

I wondered how I could take him up on his offer of a free consultation. I didn’t have any pets of my own. My sweet dog, Tickles, had died last year, and I hadn’t gotten the courage to adopt a new one. Every time I thought about stopping at the shelter, it felt as if I wanted to replace Tickles, and Tickles couldn’t be replaced, ever. I missed her so much.

I blinked away the tears that were threatening to roll down and tried to focus on Lewis again. Maybe I could borrow one of my clients’ dogs for a free checkup. Or

buy a goldfish. They were cheap and low maintenance, but that didn't mean they never got sick, did it?

Right before closing time, Melissa pranced inside. Seeing her twice in one day would've normally irked me to no end, but the memory of Lewis's smile toned down my annoyance with her.

"Hey, Olive, don't mind me. I'm just delivering a bunch of flyers."

I stopped sweeping the floor and leaned my hand on the top of my broom. "Flyers? For your dog walking business?"

"That's riiiiight," she said in a sing-song voice as if she were the lead in a Disney movie.

"You should ask Paulette for permission first," I said.

Melissa smiled at me with faux friendliness. "I already spoke with your boss. She was delighted and hopes my business becomes a big success."

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I rolled my eyes. “Of course.”

She arranged the flyers on the counter while softly humming. “Should I put them next to the cake display or closer to the register?”

“Whatever spot you like.”

Honestly, I didn’t care where she put them. It was rude enough of her to barge in here like that, wanting to promote her rival business on my turf. Helping her succeed was a bridge too far for me. It wasn’t like I owed her anything.

She finally opted for a spot between the cake display and the register. She used a ruler to determine the exact middle, then lined up the edges of the flyers with swift movements.

Then she clapped her hands. “All done. That reminds me, I had an appointment at the doctor’s office earlier and saw they’re looking for a receptionist. Maybe you could apply.”

I let out a sigh. “Why would I apply? I have a job right here.”

She let her gaze wander through the coffee shop and threw me a pained expression. “Yeah, well, I guess it’s better than nothing. Honestly, I admire the way you find the positive in everything, Olive.”

My mouth fell open. Inside my head, all kinds of ugly comebacks were competing to get spoken, but it was no use. Melissa had left the building and was already whizzing

away in her Mercedes.

Without thinking, I walked to the counter, grabbed her stack of stupid flyers, and shoved them in the trash. If she asked about them, I'd say we already ran out of copies because every customer had taken one. She'd believe me, without a doubt.

I swiped up the last cake crumbs, changed back out of my uniform, locked the doors of the coffee shop, and started walking toward my parents' place. I had left some of my things behind after moving out, and, according to my mother, their presence disrupted the house's feng shui. I knew I should've bought her a different book for Christmas last year, but the cute cover and bargain price of *How to Feng Shui Your Beloved Home Like a Pro* had made it hard to resist. Now I was paying the price for that bargain ten times over.

After a fifteen-minute walk, I arrived at my former home. The front yard looked impeccable as always, not a misplaced flower head or patch of weeds in sight.

"Hello?" I called out when entering the house.

Even though I still had a key, it felt weird to use it. It was also weird to be nothing more than a guest in the home where I had spent twenty-five years of my life.

"Are you guys home?" I tried again.

I heard some stumbling and looked up to see my mother leaning over the wooden banister of the first-floor landing. "Over here, honey."

A wave of shock went through me as I took in her appearance. Her normally styled locks had been replaced by a messy excuse of a hairdo, with bits of wood shavings strewn through it. She was wearing a pair of pants with a big gaping hole in them, as well as a faded shirt with the words *Old Pine Cove Bowling Alley Champion* printed

on the front. Paint splatters covered her arms, and a blob of glitter made her cheek sparkle.

“Are you okay?” I asked, making my way to the first floor. “Did you fall into the kids’ crafts corner at the library?”

She waved my concerns away. “Everything’s great. Besides, why would I ever go to the kids’ crafts corner? I don’t even have grandkids.”

“It’s just that you look so... different,” I said, trying to be diplomatic.

She shrugged. “These are my work clothes. Come, your father and I want to show you something I think you’ll be extremely excited about. We’ve been working in your old bedroom non-stop for the last couple of days.”

I followed my mother to my old room. The very same one I had slept in until a few weeks ago and had fond memories of. Maybe my parents missed me so much that they had turned it into a room displaying my favorite childhood things, pictures, trophies... Kind of like an Olive Remembrance Room. I felt flattered and giddy knowing they wanted to honor the memories we had built together by devoting an entire room to my existence.

When I crossed the threshold, however, another feeling swept over me, and it was far from joyful. I froze in place, not knowing how to react.

Dad was on his knees, scooping wood shavings into an enormous cage. Next to him was a pile of work tools, nuts and bolts, and wooden planks.

All of my favorite pictures had been taken down and replaced by dull white paint. The remains of my nineties heartthrob posters were shoved in a carton labeled trash.

“What happened here?” I asked, my eyes wide with disbelief.

Dad turned around. “Oh, hey, Olive, I didn’t hear you come in. So, what do you think?”

“That I don’t know what this is,” I said. The more I looked around my beloved room, the more freaked out I got.

Mom’s eyes sparkled. “This is something I’ve dreamed of for a long time now. We’re opening a themed hamster hotel.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I’m sorry, what?”

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Dad got up and swept some wood shavings from his pants. “A hotel for hamsters. People who go on vacation, often have trouble finding a place for their pets, at least when their pets are not the usual ones like cats and dogs. So we thought, why not open a hamster hotel?”

Why not? I could think of at least ten reasons off the top of my head.

“Why did you choose my room? Benji’s room has been empty for a couple of years.”

Mom and Dad exchanged looks. “We thought about it, but your room has a view of the garden. The hamsters will love that.”

“I don’t think hamsters care about a garden view,” I said.

Dad winked at me. “Maybe not, but their owners will. Just imagine how they’ll feel when they hear their hamster can stay in a themed room with a garden view. Pretty clever, huh?”

I looked in my parents’ eyes to check for any signs of drug use. This had to be a temporary bout of being high as a kite.

“Do you need me to call a doctor?” I asked in a careful tone.

Mom threw me a look that shut me up right away. “Stop it, Olive. This is not a joke. And we know exactly what we’re doing.”

“Why don’t you give her a tour of the room?” Dad asked Mom. “That’ll make her

realize how awesome this is.”

Mom grabbed my arm, and we walked around my old bedroom together. “We’ll have all kinds of themes. This one is the Mermaid Room,” Mom said, pointing at a hamster cage filled with ocean-themed objects like ceramic shells, glass turtles, and paper seaweed. The bedding was purple and blue, and Mom assured me the coloring was safe for animals.

Next stop was the farm-themed cage, which Mom called the Barn Room. It looked like a miniature farm with ceramic cows and pigs, tiny hay bales, fences made of popsicle sticks, and faux vegetables. I had to admit their project looked impressive and unique, despite feeling sad my old room was no more.

“Do you already have guest bookings?” I asked after Mom showed me the cupcake-themed and forest-themed hamster cages.

She picked up a notebook from the windowsill and put it against her chest as if it were her most prized possession. “Hamlet, the hamster, is due to arrive this Sunday. His owners picked out the Barn Room for him. He’s going to have so much fun.”

Honestly, I still wasn’t convinced my parents weren’t tripping on mushrooms. Never in my twenty-five years of living with them had they talked about opening a hamster hotel, but if Mom said it was a life-long dream of hers, who was I to argue with that?

“It does look nice,” I said with a smile.

“That reminds me,” Dad said.

He crouched down on the floor and leafed through an old shoebox filled with envelopes. When he got up again, he handed me a blue one. “We’re having a launch party this Friday. You’ll be there, right?”

I studied the envelope before opening it. “Why does it say Olive and partner? You guys know I’m not seeing anyone at the moment.”

Mom and Dad exchanged a look. “We know,” Mom started. “But it would mean the world to us if you would bring someone along.”

“Who would I bring?”

Mom shrugged. “I don’t know, a nice guy. Someone you can have a good time with, maybe let it grow into something more.”

I slumped my shoulders. “I can’t find an amazing date on such short notice.”

“Aren’t there apps for that these days?” Mom asked. “What’s that popular one called... Finder?”

Dad pulled on her arm and led her away from me. Unfortunately, my old bedroom wasn’t that big, and I could hear every word they were saying.

“Colleen, I told you writing Olive and partner on that envelope was a bad idea.”

Mom glanced over her shoulder at me before returning her attention to Dad. “But she never brings anyone home. Never. We have to try, don’t we? At this rate, we’ll never have grandchildren.”

“Maybe she’s pandasexual,” Dad said with a shrug. “We should respect that.”

Mom shook her head. “It’s called pantssexual, Gary. And so what if she is? She can still have kids, you know.”

Why the obsession with me getting pregnant and producing grandkids?

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I held up my hands. “Guys, please stop.”

Mom and Dad exchanged some more whispers, then turned around to face me.

I rubbed my temples with my fingers. “First of all, the correct term is pansexual. And second, I have brought guys home before.”

“You mean Stefano?” Mom asked with creased brows. “The one who left you to work with rescue chickens in Brazil?”

I nodded. “Yes, him.”

Maybe he wasn’t the best example, but he was the only guy I’d ever brought home with me. Too bad he flew the coop when things started to get serious between us.

“Who else?” Mom asked, one of her eyebrows raised.

“Well, don’t you remember... you know... that one guy...”

Ugh, I came up blank. There had been no other guys apart from Stefano.

Dad hurried closer and put his hands on my shoulders. “Sweetie, we’ll love you just the way you are. Bring someone or don’t. We won’t fret about grandchildren or marriage, right, Colleen?” He threw Mom a pleading look.

She let out a defeated sigh. “Yes, your father is right. Even though I’m dying to have grandchildren, we won’t nag you about it.”

I smiled at both of them. “Thanks, that means a lot to me.”

A look of relief crossed Dad’s face. “Do you want to stay for dinner? We’re having lasagna.”

“I’d love that,” I said, happy I wouldn’t have to eat alone in my tiny apartment.

As I walked to yoga class at the community center later that night, I thought about how my parents’ new beginning put a definite end to the years in my childhood home. I’d always be welcome there, of course, but unless I wanted to sleep in a room filled with hamsters, I could never return.

A feeling of sadness washed over me. What if I ended up all alone, just like my parents clearly feared I would?

I unlocked my phone and opened the LoudAndClear app to continue listening to the audiobook I had borrowed from the library. A good dash of cozy mystery would take my thoughts off the loneliness that was settling in my heart. I was enjoying a series featuring a clever amateur sleuth called Daisy Dollops, and book four had just been released.

At least this way, I could live vicariously through others, even if said people were nothing more than fictional characters.

Chapter Three

Lewis

“Honestly, Lewis, I still don’t understand why you had to cross the pond for a job. There are plenty of veterinary clinics in Britain, you know.”

I balanced my phone between my ear and shoulder as I unlocked the doors to Pine Paw Prints and switched on the lights. My dog Archie dashed inside, excited to explore the place once again. “I know, Mum, but this is a fantastic opportunity. What I can achieve here was out of reach for me at South Devon Vet Care. You know I’m an ambitious guy.”

My mother let out a heavy sigh. I could just picture her sitting in the brown leather armchair near the window, shaking her head. “All I’m asking is for you to make some friends as soon as possible. You don’t know anyone in that small town. I don’t want you to get lonely and work all hours like you did at your previous job.”

Poor Mum. She was still convinced me being lonely was the reason I had worked so much in the past. She also thought I’d willingly left my job at South Devon Pet Care. Maybe one day I’d tell her the truth, but not today. Knowing the facts wouldn’t change a thing.

“I promise. In fact, I’ve already met some people,” I said, thinking back to the barista who had playfully reminded me to tip her. I’d slip an extra dollar bill her way next time I went over to the local coffee shop to get my daily caffeine fix.

“A woman, perhaps?” Mum asked, her voice full of hope.

I rolled my eyes. “I only just arrived here. I’m not interested in meeting anyone.”

“Of course, but it doesn’t hurt to keep your eyes open. You haven’t had a relationship in such a long time now.”

There had been someone, but the way things had gone down, I was relieved that I’d never brought the girl to my mother’s place. Ignorance is bliss and all that.

“Really, stop worrying about me,” I said. “As soon as I’m settled in, I’m sure I’ll go

on plenty of dates.”

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Another lie.

“Yes, you do that,” she said. “I’d love to see you bring someone home next Christmas.”

“We’ll see. Listen, I have to go, but we’ll talk soon, okay?”

I disconnected the call and put my phone on the reception desk. There was no way I’d have a date by Christmas, even though the holidays were still months away. I needed to be single for a while. Hearts didn’t heal themselves fast, or at least mine didn’t seem to. It was more of a longwinded and painful process, like pulling teeth.

Being here eased the pain, though. I walked around, taking in every inch of the exam rooms and the one surgical room, the waiting room with a tiled floor, the reception area with animal-themed posters on the wall... All of it was mine now, or at least it would be after one hundred and twenty-four monthly payments.

I smiled, something I hadn’t been able to do in a long time. At least not in a heartfelt way. But this... this was different.

When I met the previous owner of Pine Paw Prints, Alexander Kline, at a veterinary conference in San Diego two years ago, I never imagined that having a beer with him would result in me taking over his vet clinic. Yet here I was, all the way from a coastal town in England. Alexander’s offer had come at the exact right time in my life, and I’d never been happier to pack my bags and start afresh in a town where no one knew me or my past mistakes for that matter.

My father would scold me if he knew I had bought a vet clinic in a small town without ever visiting the place, but the chances of him finding out were slim. I hadn't seen the man in ten years. Last I heard from him, he'd moved to London with his new family. At least I had dual nationality thanks to him, which meant relocating wasn't the administrative nightmare it could've been.

I grabbed the stack of mail waiting for me at the reception desk and settled myself on the couch in the employees' lounge. The sound of Archie's paws on the floor grew louder, and he jumped on the couch as well.

"How was your inspection round, fella? Do you love it here?" I asked him as I scratched his head. "I'll make a spot especially for you, there in that corner. What do you think, big boy?"

Archie let out a bark in response, then put his head on his paws. I was relieved he clearly felt at ease in here. Uprooting a dog the way I'd done wasn't easy, especially not for an Akita like Archie.

I put my glasses on and went through the mail. There were some utilities invoices, a coupon book that I tossed to the side, and a pink flyer advertising an exclusive dog walking service. I had no idea how a dog walking service could be exclusive, but I called the number anyway. With me most likely working long hours at the clinic, I'd need someone to go on walks with Archie during the day.

"Canines and Cupcakes, this is Melissa speaking," the woman on the other end of the line said.

"Good evening, Melissa. I found your flyer in my mailbox and wanted some more information."

"You did? How lovely. Do you mean about the cupcakes or the dog walking?"

Cupcakes? Just how many different businesses did this woman have? “The dog walking, thanks.”

“Well, I’ve got three different packages you can choose from, but between you and me, I’d opt for the platinum package.”

I furrowed my brows. “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m not the kind of guy who likes frills and thrills.”

Melissa let out a high-pitched laugh. “Oh, don’t worry, it’s nothing over the top. I’m talking glitter poop bags, so your dog feels like a true star. And we offer personalized rhinestone collars as well. They’re only an extra sixty dollars. One time only, no hidden costs.”

I let out a whistle. “Wow. That sounds... nice, but I’m going to decline.”

“But you didn’t even hear about the other packages I have to offer,” she said, her voice laced with disappointment.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, Melissa. Archie isn’t the kind of dog who cares about glitter and rhinestones. Thanks anyway.”

“Call me back if you change your mind. I’ll even give you a discount.”

I put the phone in my lap and looked at Archie. “That was not a success, but don’t worry, pal. We’ll find the perfect dog walker for you.”

At the words “dog walker,” he jumped up and wagged his tail.

“Tell you what,” I said, getting up as well. “I’m going to work for another thirty minutes or so, and then we’ll jog home, okay?”

I wanted the clinic ready to open for business soon, which meant I had to go over a hundred different things first. The painters had already done their bit last week, giving the entire building a much-needed fresh coat of paint.

As soon as I got the clinic up and running again, I'd get a contractor down here to look over the plans I'd made. The vision I had for this place filled me with excitement, and I could hardly wait to make them a reality.

I wanted to add at least two extra examination rooms and one surgical room to the building. Alexander had told me he was at maximum capacity most days, which concerned me. Having no place to treat extra patients meant more sick animals. I was determined to expand the clinic and make sure every animal in my new hometown got the proper care.

Apart from expanding the clinic, I also wanted to offer puppy training classes. Maybe I could even go to local schools to talk about animal care, or get involved with the petting zoo Alexander told me had opened near the Old Pine Cove Inn. The possibilities were endless.

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I strolled into the back where all the supplies were stored to make a list of what I needed to order. Then I unpacked the boxes of pet food that had been delivered that morning and put them on the display rack near the reception desk.

I had scheduled a meeting for tomorrow with Alexander's veterinary technician and receptionist. I had talked to them over Skype a couple of times already but felt it was crucial to meet them before I opened up shop again. I went over the list of things I wanted to discuss with them one last time before calling it a night.

It was dark by the time Archie and I closed up and jogged home. The streets were mostly deserted, but the lights of the community center were still on.

As Archie and I jogged past, I spotted the barista I'd met at the town's coffee shop. She was dressed in yoga pants with her chestnut hair pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head. I looked a little longer than I needed to, but was too busy chatting with some guy to notice me.

Seeing her reminded me of the flyer I'd slipped into my pocket when she was preparing my coffee earlier. I had been reluctant to call the number, as this person not only offered dog walking services but also did something called tarot card readings for dogs.

The thought made me chuckle again. Part of me wanted to sign Archie up for one of those sessions, just to see how ridiculous it would be.

Still, I couldn't imagine the tarot card lady would be weirder than Melissa. It couldn't hurt to see if she sounded at least normal enough to trust her with my dog. If she

didn't, I suppose Archie would have to deal with glitter poop bags, which wasn't the worst thing in the world either.

I fingered the flyer in my pocket and made a mental note to call the number later, hoping for the best.

Chapter Four

Olive

I arrived at the community center ten minutes before my yoga class was due to start. Alex, our teacher, used to offer private sessions in his home, but ever since getting a chef's job at the Old Pine Cove Inn, he'd stopped doing those. He now taught group yoga classes twice a week, and the turnout was always huge. Not because everyone in town was so set on keeping fit, but because Alex looked incredible, especially when he settled into downward dog or balanced his entire weight on one foot when in tree pose. The fact that he was married didn't stop some women from trying to chat him up after class, but Alex only had eyes for his wife, Suzie.

I went into the changing room and pulled my yoga pants out of my bag. After getting changed and tying my hair into a knot, I grabbed a yoga mat from the pile near the door.

There was one empty spot next to Helen, Milly, and Leanne. I unrolled my mat and sat myself down. Stretching my legs and rolling my wrists felt amazing. Since I was on my feet all day every day, sitting down was a true gift. Too bad I had no one to massage my feet at night.

I shook my head to clear that pathetic thought. Feeling sorry for myself wouldn't change things for the better.

Around me, everyone was chatting in excited tones. In all likelihood, a big sale had been announced in Old Pine Cove Weekly, or Dave's Diner was hosting another "buy one, get one free" breakfast deal. It didn't take much to get people buzzing with enthusiasm in this town.

Helen put her hand on my arm. "Did you see him? Did he stop at the coffee shop perhaps?"

"Erm, have I seen who?" I asked as I tried to touch my toes with my fingertips.

Leanne leaned closer. "The new vet. Apparently, he arrived today."

I let go of my toes and got into a crossed-leg position. "Yeah, I've seen him."

"What's he like?" Leanne asked.

"I have no clue. All I did was serve him coffee."

Helen gave me a look. "Come on, Olive, there must be something you know about him. Anything."

Man, these women were hungry for intel.

I shrugged. "His name is Lewis, and he's British. That's all I know."

"He's British?" Milly yelled.

Twenty heads turned in our direction.

"He is," I said. "But that's all I know, sorry."

The last thing I wanted was these women bombarding me with questions about Lewis. Besides, what would I tell them? That he looked smoking hot and loved coffee, and that I couldn't stop thinking about his gorgeous smile even though he had insulted my side business?

“You know, my parrot has been singing slightly off-key these days,” Helen said. “I should probably take him in for an appointment.”

Milly nodded. “Now that you mention it, I think my turtle is getting too sedentary. I should make an appointment as well, to see if he needs to be put on an exercise schedule.”

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I frowned. “Aren’t turtles supposed to be inactive?”

“Better safe than sorry, dear,” Milly said with a smile.

Wow. One mention of a British vet and they’d all lost their minds. I hadn’t seen them this excited since movie star Justin Miller moved back to Old Pine Cove.

Thankfully, Alex took his spot at the front to start the class before anyone could come up with another ridiculous reason to make an appointment at the vet clinic.

The chatting died down, and everyone got lost in their yoga flow. The hour-long session flew by.

Still relaxed thanks to that amazing post-Shavasana bliss, I took my time to gather my things and roll up my yoga mat.

I swung my bag over my shoulder and put a sweater on before heading outside. Even though it was summer, the nights hadn’t been particularly warm.

As I opened the doors of the community center, I spotted Justin Miller at the top of the stairs, waiting for his wife, Addy. She was one lucky lady to have landed a handsome movie star as her husband. Justin stopped by Sip’nBean a couple of times a week, and even though I didn’t really know him that well, he always asked me how I was doing and if my side business was going well. It was nice to have people care.

“Hey Olive,” he said, the dimples in his cheeks deepening with his smile. “Let me guess, Addy is still in there chatting with Suzie?”

I laughed. “As always.”

“They’re on the phone with each other every day, and they still have so much to talk about. It’s unbelievable. Still, it’s good that Addy has a best friend like Suzie,” he said with a warm smile. Every time he talked about his wife, his eyes lit up. It was adorable.

“Looks like they’re here now,” I said, motioning my head toward the doorway of the community center where Suzie, Alex, and Addy had appeared.

“Great. Well, enjoy the rest of your night,” he said.

“Thanks, I will.”

I walked away, breathing in the evening air. There would be no one picking me up from yoga or waiting at home for me. Ever since moving into my own place, I had become lonelier every day. Seeing other people all loved up sure didn’t help with wrangling those feelings of loneliness to the ground. I knew it was silly, though. I was still young and had plenty of time to meet the right person, but somewhere deep down inside of me lingered a feeling of dread. What if Mister Right never came along? I’d have to eat alone for the rest of my life. Not to mention die alone, probably surrounded by a slew of pets who wouldn’t think twice about eating my lifeless body.

I took a couple of deep breaths. I needed to snap out of it already. Self-pity wasn’t going to help me attract some nice guy into my life. What I needed was a positive mindset. I promised myself that I would change things for the better.

I stopped in front of my apartment building at Rainbow Lane and fished my keys out of my bag.

The building was old but housed some beautifully renovated apartments. None of

them were mine, unfortunately. The only one in my price range was a studio that looked as if it had been pasted to the building as an afterthought. It had one window and a small balcony, just big enough to fit two chairs.

Inside, I flicked the lights on, threw my keys in a bowl by the door, and kicked my shoes off. The mail I had plucked out of the mailbox didn't look promising, but there was no point in postponing the inevitable.

I settled myself on the couch and ripped all the envelopes open. One of them contained a coupon book, which I gratefully leafed through before stuffing it in my purse. All the other ones were bills, bills, bills. I groaned as I tallied up the numbers. Two hundred bucks for basic needs like utilities and that wasn't even including the three hundred dollars I owed Gene for my latest car repair.

I took a deep breath. I wasn't going to sit and wallow. All I needed was a plan. Maybe I could ask for extra shifts at the coffee shop after all. Plus, I could finally tell Mrs. Hudson I actually charged ten dollars for half an hour of dog walking, not five. Then again, could I really? She had told me once how small her retirement checks were, and I didn't want to be the one to put her in a bad financial situation.

My phone rang, filling the quiet room with the tones of *Me and You and a Dog Named Boo*. I picked it up from the coffee table and swiped to answer. "Olive speaking."

"Hello, I'm sorry to call this late, but I wanted to enquire about your dog walking services," a guy said in a British accent.

"Lewis?" I asked. "Is that you?"

Apart from him, there was no one in town who had that accent or could pull it off so well.

There was a beat of silence. “Yes, this is Lewis. Are you a psychic as well as a dog walker?”

His question made me laugh. “I thought you didn’t believe in those kinds of things. Didn’t you say tarot card readings were a real money scheme?”

Silence again. Then he said in a cautious tone, “Is this the same Olive who works at that coffee place?”

Ha, he had put the pieces together all on his own. “The one and only.”

He groaned. “Let me guess. You don’t only walk dogs, but also read their cards, which means I completely offended you this afternoon?”

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“Ding, ding, ding. We’ve got a winner,” I said in an over-the-top voice that made me cringe. Why couldn’t I act like my normal self around this guy? I was as bad as Milly and the rest of them.

He let out a whistle. “Well, that’s awkward. I’m sorry about that. I’m sure you do a fine job predicting the future of canines around town. Or the world. I don’t know how far your services reach.”

His words made me break out into a giggle. I loved a guy who was able to acknowledge his mistakes. Besides, he wasn’t the first person to have commented on my “weird” services. He hadn’t offended me that much, but hearing him search for words was fun. At least I wasn’t the only one feeling like a fool.

“Does this mean I blew my chances of hiring you as Archie’s dog walker?” he asked.

I sat up straight. “No, not at all. I am absolutely available to walk your dog. In fact, I’m wide open.”

Wow, that sounded dirtier than I’d intended. I felt my cheeks redden. Thank goodness Lewis couldn’t see my face through the phone.

“As long as you’re sure about that, and you promise not to spit in my coffee next time I visit your place of work?”

“I won’t, I promise,” I said.

He chuckled. “Great, because I had already talked to another dog walker, and she

babbled on about rhinestone collars and glitter poop bags. I hardly got a word in. All I'm looking for is the service without the fluff."

What? Melissa was getting the stink eye from me next time I saw her.

"That's me," I said. "No fluff, no glitter. Just plain old no-nonsense."

"That's good to hear." He sounded genuinely relieved. "How do we proceed? Is there a contract for me to sign?"

A contract? Never in my years of dog walking had I considered drawing up a contract, but I was positive the internet was filled with examples. "Sure, yeah, you get a contract."

"Shall we set a date to meet then?"

My heart picked up a notch. "To meet?"

"So we can discuss the details? Don't you want to meet my dog first?"

Oh, of course. He didn't mean like a date. I slapped my hand against my forehead. I could be so dense sometimes. "Actually, yes, meeting the owner and his dog are part of the process. We'll need to see if there's a click, on both sides. Just let me check my schedule real quick."

I knew my schedule by heart since it hardly contained anything, but Lewis didn't need to know that. It was bad enough that I sounded like a complete doofus on the phone.

I leafed through an old copy of Old Pine Cove Weekly to make my fake calendar check sound more convincing. "Hmm, yes... Maybe... Hmm... Would tomorrow

work for you? I can squeeze you in around ten.”

“Ten works for me. The clinic won’t be open for another couple of days anyway.”

“Just give me your address, and I’ll be there at ten o’clock sharp. It’s best if I can observe the dog on his own turf.”

Holy moly, that must’ve been the most nonsense I’d ever uttered in a span of mere minutes, but I couldn’t help it. There was something about Lewis that made me want to be near him. And when would I ever get another perfect opportunity to see where he lived?

“I live down on Snow Globe Lane – number twenty-two.”

I jotted his address down on the back of Old Pine Cove Weekly. “Great, we’re all set. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait,” he said.

I grinned as I put the phone down. I couldn’t wait either.

Chapter Five

Olive

As soon as sunlight broke through my one and only window, I threw the covers off and headed to the bathroom, where I squeezed myself into the shower. It wasn’t easy, but doable. If I angled my body the right way, I could even shampoo my hair without bumping my elbows against the wall. Of course, I also had to make sure the shower curtain was closed far enough, or the toilet got soaked.

After my shower, I poured cereal into a bowl while the coffee maker sputtered to life. For once, I wasn't concerned about how I would pay my bills. I had my appointment with Lewis to look forward to, and I was positive the experience would brighten my entire day.

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I had spent the rest of the previous evening searching for model contracts, as well as practicing British expressions.

“Everything’s hunky-dory, Lewis,” I rehearsed while scooping up my cereal. “My breakfast was proper tasty.”

I hoped I didn’t sound like an overachiever. Maybe talking British to him wasn’t my best idea after all. I didn’t want him thinking I was making fun of him.

My phone beeped with a message, making my stomach do a double turn. Please don’t let it be Lewis canceling our meeting.

Thankfully, it wasn’t. My mother’s name appeared on the screen, much to my relief, and I swiped the message open.

Don’t forget the party is this Friday. And dress up, please!

I could’ve guessed my parents would turn it into a themed party. A hamster hotel opening called for fun outfits after all. I’d stop by the costume store after my appointment with Lewis. If I didn’t act fast, all the good ones would be gone already. I fired off a quickokay, and put my empty bowl in the sink.

After making sure I had everything I needed for my meeting with Lewis, I went on my way. It was quite a walk to Snow Globe Lane. Thankfully, Gene had told me my car would be ready tomorrow. It would put a serious dent in my finances, but at least I’d get around a lot faster.

Lewis's home was located a few houses down from the local bookstore Got It Covered. I had never paid a lot of attention to the other houses in the street before now. They were all freestanding, and each one had a nice front yard and wraparound porch. All in all, the neighborhood looked like the perfect spot to raise a family, but I could imagine it was also a solid choice for people with dogs who needed lots of space to run around. Lewis had chosen a great place to live.

I came to a standstill in front of number twenty-two and took a deep breath before walking up the steps to the front door. Nerves raced through me as I rang the doorbell. Not only because I'd see Lewis again, but because I really wanted to be his dog walker.

Lewis opened the door and broke out in a smile. "Ah, my coffee dealer. Quick, come in before anyone catches us."

I laughed. "Just so you know, I don't have any coffee on me," I said, following him inside. "You'll have to stop by Sip'nBean this afternoon to get your caffeine treat."

"And I'll reward you generously this time," he said with a wink.

"Oh yeah? You'll leave me a tip? I guess I'll have to wait and see before I believe that."

He locked eyes with me, which caught me off guard and made me grin like a fool. "You're one cheeky dog walker, Olive."

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, I didn't mean to insult you or anything."

I would've punched myself if that wouldn't have looked completely weird. I always did this. Every time someone acted all happy and funny around me, I had to take it a smidge too far.

Lewis smiled at me, his features softening. “It was just a joke. I love cheeky dog walkers.”

My heart fluttered to life again after hearing him say those words, yet I made a deal with myself to try not to come on too strong. I wanted to land Lewis as a client, not repel him after our first meeting.

We stepped into the living room, which was stacked with moving boxes and half-assembled furniture. I didn’t have a lot of time to look around, though, because a dog came running toward me, almost toppling me over.

“This must be Archie,” I said with a laugh. “How are you doing, big boy?”

I rubbed his head, and the dog put his paws on my stomach. His head was incredibly soft and furry, and he looked like a living teddy bear. I knew Akitas weren’t easy to handle, though, and that the teddy-bear look could be deceiving, but Archie seemed to be a relaxed dog.

With one simple command, Lewis got him to back off and sit at our feet. “I’m sorry about that. He just gets really excited when meeting someone new.”

I plucked a couple of stray dog hairs off my pants. “I’m used to dogs jumping on me. I do have to say I’m impressed with how well he listens to you.”

“I suppose I trained him well.” Lewis threw his dog a loving smile and rubbed his head. The two of them made an adorable pair. “Good training is a must with an Akita like Archie. If you don’t train them properly, they can get aggressive.”

“Isn’t proper training expected when you’re a dog owner?” I asked.

He let out a frustrated sigh. “You’d be surprised how many people skip that important

step. And then, they come to my practice, asking me to fix something that can hardly be fixed anymore. By the time people come to me because their dog is out of control, the animal is set in its ways. There should be a test you have to pass before getting a dog. It would solve a lot of heartache.”

The way he talked about his job and the well-being of dogs made me melt. I wondered how he looked in scrubs. I bet the only possible answer to that question was stunning.

“Tell me about it,” I said. “The dogs I get to walk are usually on their best behavior, but there are some that wreak havoc wherever they go.”

“I can imagine.” Lewis shoved three moving boxes out of the way and cleared a toolbox off the couch. “Please, sit. Can I get you something to drink?”

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“A soda sounds good,” I said as I put my bag down.

He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m afraid I only have hot beverages or water. I’m sorry, I should’ve told you before offering. It’s just that these past couple of days have been so busy.”

I waved his apology away. “Don’t worry about it. A cup of tea is just as good.”

Lewis disappeared into the kitchen, and I was left with Archie. The dog lay near the couch, watching my every move.

“I think you and I will become great friends, Archie,” I said.

I could have sworn he smiled at me. I felt the urge to rub his teddy-bear head again but decided not to. He didn’t know me at all, and I didn’t want to take any risks. No matter how sweet he looked, he probably weighed a hundred pounds or more.

Lewis returned with two mugs, a selection of tea bags, spoons, milk, and a kettle filled to the brim with hot water. He put everything down on a chair.

“As you can tell, my coffee table hasn’t arrived yet,” he said with a laugh. “This chair is acting as its stand-in for the time being. Moving is exhausting, let me tell you that.”

I nodded. “I hear ya. I moved to a new apartment not so long ago. There are still some boxes in my living room that need unpacking.”

“A new place, huh. That sounds nice.”

“Yeah, it’s got a great... open floor plan,” I said.

Technically, I didn’t even have a real living room as my apartment only had one enclosed space – the bathroom – but he didn’t need to know that. I deemed it best to come across as an accomplished adult, not someone living in a tiny studio and driving an old clunker for a car.

Lewis handed me one of the mugs, then sat himself down next to me. “I’d normally offer you a biscuit as well, but it won’t come as a surprise that I have none in my cupboards, right?”

The way he referred to a cookie as a biscuit was almost too adorable. I blew on the hot steam coming from my cup and grinned. “It’s okay, really. All this is more than enough.”

No one but Mrs. Hudson had ever welcomed me into their home like this. Normally, I met my clients at the door, took their dog for a walk, then returned said dog without ever stepping foot inside their house.

“Do you happen to know what supermarket in town has the biggest selection of items?” Lewis asked. “I did some shopping when I arrived, but not nearly enough to survive the week.”

I thought for a beat. “You could go to the Pine Mart. It’s not huge, but they have most basics. There’s also Minnie’s Mini Mart, which sells local produce. If you want to shop at a large supermarket, you’ll have to drive a bit. I could write down directions for you if you want.”

Lewis looked at me without saying a word, making me wonder if I had said something wrong. Maybe he thought he was too smart to need directions? He was a vet after all. Then again, who knew what went on in that beautiful head of his.

“You know, you’re the first person I’ve met in Old Pine Cove who hasn’t offered to give me a tour of the town.”

Oh. He felt offended I didn’t offer to be his tour guide. Weird, but okay, I wasn’t opposed to showing him around town. “I guess I could if you wanted to,” I said.

He chuckled. “I didn’t mean it to sound accusatory. I’m actually relieved you didn’t throw yourself at me, pushing me to go on a tour of the town. Is it just me, or can people around here be a bit... full-on?”

“That’s small-town life for you,” I said with a shrug of the shoulder.

“I suppose it’s going to take me a while to get used to. There was one woman in particular who shoved her phone number into my hand when I crossed the street the other day.”

“I think it’s your accent.”

“But we hadn’t even exchanged a friendly hello. How could she know what I sound like?”

Aw, poor thing. He had no clue how fast small-town gossip traveled. He’d find out soon enough, though, so there was no point bursting his bubble for the time being.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Why don’t we get down to business?”

I rummaged through my bag to find a notebook and pen. Unfortunately, I had stuffed it so full it was impossible to find anything in there. I hated how unprofessional I looked trying to retrieve something as simple as a writing device from a normal-sized bag.

“What do you keep in there? Your crystal ball?” Lewis joked.

“Of course. I can’t leave my house without it,” I said with a wink. After twenty or so more excruciating seconds, I finally got a hold of a pen. “Why don’t we start with you telling me how many times Archie needs to be walked?”

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Twenty minutes later, Lewis had signed my contract, agreed on a fantastic rate, and scheduled Archie's first appointment.

After one more cup of tea, he led me to the door.

"I have to say, you don't look like a tarot card reader," he said. "Or at least, you're not what I'd expect one to look like."

"Oh yeah? What does a tarot card reader look like?"

He rubbed his chin with his hand. "Long robes, long hair, long fingernails. Something like that."

I couldn't help but laugh at his cliché description. "So basically, everything needs to be long?"

"Well, I've never met a tarot card reader in real life. All I have to go on are movies," he said with an amused look on his face. "Which, I now realize, are hardly representative of real life."

"I could read Archie's cards and clear some things up for you," I said, hoping he would say yes.

His caramel-colored eyes locked with mine, and I almost tumbled down his porch stairs. "That would be nice, Olive. You can read his cards."

"You know what? I'll even make some predictions for you as well," I said.

“Oh?”

I nodded, pretending to be thinking. “I wouldn’t be surprised if your first appointments at Pine Paw Prints include a parrot singing off-key and a lazy turtle in need of some exercise.”

“Huh, that’s oddly specific,” he said with a surprised look on his face.

“What can I say? I’m good at what I do. Just wait and see.”

He smiled at me. “If the parrot and the turtle do end up at the clinic, I’ll let you know. Oh, and Olive?”

“Yes?”

“Will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Show me around town?”

The corners of my mouth lifted into a smile. “I’d be happy to. Just give me a call to set it up.”

Chapter Six

Lewis

Friday rolled around faster than expected, and everyone was ready to go by eight in the morning. Lori, my receptionist, and Darren, my technical assistant, were happy to see the clinic reopen. They hadn’t technically been unemployed, but the transfer

between Alexander and I had taken up several weeks, meaning both of them were out of work for almost a month.

I had put an ad out for an extra vet on Thursday. With my plans to expand the clinic, I needed additional personnel, and I decided I might as well get a head start on finding suitable candidates.

“All set for today?” I asked Lori, who had offered to come in early to take client calls.

She nodded. “The phone hasn’t stopped ringing for over an hour. I guess three weeks without a vet clinic was hard on some people.”

“Didn’t Dr. Kline advise them to go to a vet in the neighboring town if need be?”

“You know how people are, they don’t like change.”

The phone rang again. “Sorry, Doctor Grant, I’ve got to take that call. Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?”

I shook my head. “I’m all set. Thank you, Lori.”

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She smiled at me while answering the phone and put her thumb in the air. Excitement raced through my body when I thought about this new chapter in my life. Focusing on my job would definitely take my mind off the drama I had left behind in England.

My first patient was set to arrive in fifteen minutes, which gave me a small window of time to grab a coffee from the employees' lounge and look at the records of those with appointments. Alexander had been using paper files up until now, so I'd need to get the clinic a proper computer system soon.

I poured myself a fresh cup of coffee, then sat down at my desk in examination room one. First up was Lulu, a three-month-old Pomeranian puppy who needed her vaccinations.

I scribbled down some notes before moving to the next patient on the list. I almost choked on my coffee when I read the information. Scheduled for an eight-thirty appointment was a turtle. Under reason for visit, Lori had put "owner fears animal doesn't get enough exercise."

How did Olive know? After our extremely pleasant meeting at my house the other day, she'd specifically predicted a turtle and a parrot would come into the clinic. I frowned. Could it be she knew more than others and was, in fact, a psychic?

I chuckled at how gullible that made me sound. There was no such thing as psychic powers. I was positive there had to be another, much more logical explanation.

I sat back in my chair, my thoughts drawn to the enthusiastic and quirky person that was Olive. I couldn't quite pinpoint what it was, but something about her made me

want to spend more time with her. Her beautiful smile had crept into my dreams the other night. The memory made me feel good, even though I knew dreams weren't real. What was real, though, was having someone you love and trust, stab you in the back.

I let out a sigh and warned myself, don't go there. Not right now, anyway.

A knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts.

"Come in," I called out.

Lori peeked her head inside. "Your first patient is ready, Doctor Grant. Shall I send her in?"

"Yes, please."

"Oh, and I've emailed you your schedule for next week. Could you go over it when you have a minute and let me know if it's a schedule you're comfortable with? There are several non-urgent cases on there, so I could switch some things around if need be."

I gave her a warm smile, feeling blessed to have such great employees to work with.

"Great, thanks a lot, Lori."

"I'll just send Lulu and her owner Diane in then."

Lori left the door ajar, and a moment later, an older woman walked in with her dog in her arms.

"Good morning, Mrs. Philips, nice to meet you. Please, take a seat," I said, motioning toward the chairs opposite me.

“Oh, Doctor Grant, please call me Diane,” the lady said. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you already, I just had to be the first person to get an appointment here. Oh, and did someone show you around town already? Because if they haven’t, I’m without a doubt the most suitable candidate for the job. I grew up here and know the town better than anyone.”

Wow, okay. I should’ve felt flattered, but all this talk of people dying to meet me and wanting to take me on a town tour made me feel uncomfortable.

“That’s kind of you, but I’ve already got someone to show me around.”

She furrowed her brows. “Really? Who?”

I cleared my throat, hesitant to share personal information like that with my patients. “Erm, Olive.”

“The barista girl? What an odd choice for a gentleman like yourself.”

I decided to ignore Diane’s obviously underhanded comment. I didn’t have all day, and she was here for her dog after all, not an update on my personal life. I’d learned years ago that boundaries were extremely important in my field of work.

“Why don’t we get Lulu those vaccinations first?” I offered and got up.

While I prepared the shots, Diane traced a finger along the edge of the examination table. Then she looked at her finger and blew some imaginary dust away.

“Did you know I’m the only person in town who offers the best deal on a TurboVac5000 Diamond series?” she asked.

I took Lulu from her and put the Pomeranian on the table. “I didn’t. What is a

TurboVac?”

She shot me a look as if she was about to let me in on a big secret. “A top-notch vacuum cleaner. Surely, this clinic needs to be cleaned daily, with all the animals shedding hair.”

“Of course,” I said while administering the vaccinations.

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“Well, shall I put one aside for you then?”

Diane took Lulu in her arms, and I led them back to my desk. I shot her an apologetic smile. “That’s kind of you, but I’m not looking to buy new cleaning equipment at this moment.”

Her face fell. “If you do change your mind, here’s my number.”

She shoved a business card in my hands, and I had to work extra hard to repress a chuckle. This was what, the fifth woman to give me their contact details since moving here? Too bad I wasn’t in the market for a relationship. Plus, all of them seemed to be at least twenty years my senior.

“I will, thanks,” I said and saw her out without giving her a chance to bring up Olive, town tours, or vacuum cleaners again. Then I updated Lulu’s file and put the chart for my next patient in front of me.

Before calling the turtle and his owner in, however, I sent a text to Olive.

Your “lazy” turtle has arrived. Just how did you do it? And what other things do you see in my future? – Lewis

Almost immediately, she texted back.

A great psychic never sees and tells, you know, but I’m willing to make an exception for you. I’ll tell you all about it during a walk around town.

A smile spread across my face as I put my phone back down. It felt good to have someone to talk to in this town. Heaven knew I could use a friend. I'd send her a reply later today or tomorrow to discuss the specifics of a town tour, but first, I had a turtle to examine.

The rest of the day flew by, and by five o'clock, the last patient was out the door. I wouldn't have to work long hours today, as I didn't have any surgeries planned before Tuesday. As long as there were no emergencies to attend to, I'd be able to enjoy a weekend off.

After finishing some paperwork and sending my staff home, I locked up the clinic.

"Come on, Archie," I said, opening the door of my car for him. "The weekend's here."

The dog jumped in, positioning himself on the fleece blanket that covered the passenger seat. I loved Archie tremendously but didn't want his nails to ruin my leather upholstery.

I slid into my own seat, opened my traffic app, and tapped in the address for Pine Mart, the local supermarket Olive had told me about. The desperate state of my cupboards didn't leave me a lot of choice but to go shopping. It was that or eat dog food.

After only five minutes in the car, I turned into the small car park at Pine Mart. I turned the engine off and rummaged through my glove compartment. As soon as I dangled a leash in front of Archie, he perked up.

Normally I wouldn't take Archie shopping with me, but I didn't want to leave him in the car when he wasn't used to these new surroundings yet. Luckily, Archie had gone through extensive training and shouldn't cause any trouble.

I told him to heel, and we walked to the entrance together. The words “Pine Mart” were painted on a wooden sign, right next to a round logo with a pine tree in the middle. I stopped to study the drawing. The pine tree was pushing a shopping trolley, which seemed odd to me. Then again, I was a vet, not a marketing guru. Maybe trees handling shopping trolleys with their non-existent hands appealed to shoppers? Who knew what made people tick?

A bell jangled when I pushed the doors open. There was one cashier present, who looked up from a magazine and smiled at me. “Welcome to Pine Mart.”

“Thanks,” I said and grabbed one of the shopping baskets, heading straight for the frozen food aisle, but the one freezer I found was nearly empty.

“Excuse me,” I said to an employee walking by.

“How can I help you?” the guy asked.

I pointed at the freezer. “Will there be another restocking today?”

He arched an eyebrow. “You’re not from around here, are you? We close in thirty minutes, so I’m afraid you’ll have to take your pick from what’s still left.”

“Oh, I see. Thanks, mate,” I said.

Archie and I walked back to the freezer, and I pondered my options. There was only one frozen pizza left, but it was a mushroom one. Before I could decide whether or not I’d settle for my not-so-favorite kind of pizza, an older woman came rushing in my direction. When she spotted Archie, she stopped in her tracks.

I held a hand up. “It’s okay, he won’t hurt you.”

Her features relaxed, and she opened the freezer doors, reaching for the pizza.

“Ah, I was just deciding if that pizza would be my dinner or not,” I said. “I guess now it’s settled.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know you wanted it.” She shoved the cold box in my hands. “Take it, please.”

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I smiled at her, shaking my head. “No, no, that’s okay. I can pick out something else.”

She peered into the freezer, scrunching her nose. “Like what? A microwave dinner with Brussels sprouts and mashed potatoes?”

I chuckled. “Maybe I’m a fan of Brussels sprouts, you don’t know that.”

She put a hand on her hip, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “No one loves Brussels sprouts. Look, I don’t want you to starve. The pizza is yours.”

“Really, it’s no problem,” I said.

I extended the pizza box to her, thinking she’d definitely take it, but she didn’t. It fell to the floor with a loud thud, and Archie let out a bark.

We looked at each other, both of us refusing to pick the pizza up. This was turning into an old-fashioned standoff.

She creased her eyebrows and let out a puff of air. “Are you the new vet?” she asked.

Talk about a change of subject. “I am. Did my accent give me away?”

“It did. I’ve heard so much about you already,” she said, bending down to get the pizza off the ground before throwing it into my shopping basket. “I have an excellent idea. The name’s Colleen, by the way.”

“I’m Lewis.”

“Nice to meet you, Lewis, the vet. Look, you’re new in town, right? I’m having a party tonight, and I’d like you to come.”

Uh-uh, not this again. I tried to think of an appropriate response, but nothing came to mind.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing weird,” she said with a laugh. “My husband and I are opening a hamster hotel, and we’re celebrating tonight. That’s why I’m here. They sent me to get more food because, according to my kids, there wasn’t enough. Honestly, do you feel like ten bags of chips, five frozen pizzas, seven kinds of cakes, and fifty hot dogs aren’t enough for a party?”

The beat of silence clued me in to the fact she didn’t mean it in a rhetorical way. “That seems like a proper amount of food if you ask me, but it all depends on how many guests you’re expecting.”

“Quite a few. So, are you coming? There’ll be plenty of animal lovers there, all of them potential patients, am I right?”

Part of me wanted to say no and just go home, eat something, and relax on the couch. But it was Friday, and a party sounded like an excellent way to spend the evening. It would probably be a good thing to meet some of the locals. Plus, I was also curious about the hamster hotel Colleen had mentioned.

“Okay, I’ll come. On one condition.”

“What would that be?”

I grinned. “I’m buying this pizza for you. Consider it a celebratory gift.”

Colleen laughed and patted me on the arm. “I like the way you think, Lewis. Now, let’s get this party started, shall we?”

Chapter Seven

Olive

“Fifty hot dogs and only five pizzas? I have to agree with my brother on this, Mom. It seems off balance.”

“The operative word being seems. If you cut each pizza in eight pieces, you suddenly have forty pieces. No sane person is going to gobble down an entire pizza at a party.”

I put my phone on speaker mode and placed it on the counter so I could apply my makeup. “Unless said person is named Benjamin.”

“Your brother is still growing, Olive. He needs his carbs.”

I rolled my eyes. As if pizza would help my twenty-year-old brother grow. His length was fine. I was more concerned about his mental growth, to be honest. Sometimes it seemed as if he’d stay sixteen forever.

“You could still go to the store and get Benji his own pizza,” I said. “The party’s not for another hour.”

Mom sighed. “I guess. Anyway, enough about the food. You’re dressing up, right?”

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“Of course I am,” I said while putting black mascara on my eyelashes. “I think you’ll love this outfit.”

“Thanks for making the effort, Olive.” She sounded genuinely relieved.

“Duh. Why wouldn’t I? You have nothing to worry about, Mom. I won’t embarrass you by being the odd one out.”

Muffled sounds came through the speaker, and then I heard my mother call out to someone. “I’m sorry, honey, your father and brother need me in the kitchen. Apparently, finding the bowls to put the chips in is a quest too difficult for two grown men to accomplish. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Bye, Mom.” I disconnected the call with my elbow, then dabbed a makeup brush in gold glittery eye shadow.

I had found the perfect fox costume for the party. The brown dress came with a fluffy tail, a hood with fox ears, and pompoms at the end of the hood strings. Two felt boot covers reaching up to my knees made the look complete. I knew the felt would keep me warm, a bit too warm probably, but the costume store had fifty percent off all winter outfits. Considering the sad state of my bank account, it had been a no-brainer.

After finishing my eye makeup, I put dark orange lipstick on and applied a layer of gloss on top. I used the camera on my phone to check out my look, as my bathroom mirror was too small to catch every angle.

Happy with the results, I snapped a couple of pictures. Who knew when I would look

this cute again?

Since I had an hour to kill, I settled in on the couch and spent some time catching up on the articles published on my favorite dog blog. One article in particular drew my attention, and for a moment, I considered sending the link to Lewis.

I didn't, though. He hadn't answered my message about showing him around town yet. He'd most likely been too busy to reply, and I didn't want to scare him off by coming across as too pushy.

At six thirty, I got into my car, which I had gotten back earlier that day. Gene had told me I could drive it for at least another year if I was careful. What a relief it had been to hear him say those words. Handing over three hundred bucks was a bit more painful, but at least I regained the freedom to go wherever I wanted, fast. Of course, I would still walk places whenever I could because gas was expensive.

I positioned my fluffy tail, so it didn't bother me while driving and set course for my parents' house.

When I arrived, I spotted my brother's truck in the driveway. Benjamin was on summer break from college, and last I'd heard from him, he had been traveling with friends. It was nice of him to make an effort to show up.

I parked my car in the street and used my old key to get into the house.

"We're in the kitchen," Mom called out.

The closer I got, the louder their voices grew. As soon as I set foot in the kitchen, though, they stopped talking.

Mom's eyes grew wide, and Benjamin burst out laughing. He smacked his hand on

the table, tears rolling down his cheeks. Dad threw me a panicked look.

“What on earth is going on? Do I have something on my face?” I asked, groping my face to see if I could find anything out of the ordinary.

“On your face?” Benji said in between laughs. “More like on your entire body.”

Mom gave me the once-over, twice. “What are you wearing? And why?”

I frowned, dread filling my veins. “What do you mean why? You told me to dress up.”

Mom waved her hand toward me. “Honey, when I told you to dress up, I meant please wear something fancier than your usual hooded sweater and jeans. Not... this.”

I broke out in a cold sweat as understanding sank in. “Am I the only one who’s wearing a costume?”

Benjamin bobbed his head up and down, still unable to keep from laughing. “Oh, yes.”

“Stop laughing,” I said. “This isn’t funny at all.”

Dad put his hand on my arm. “Why don’t you go and change? No one has seen you yet. No harm, no foul.”

“I don’t have any spare clothes with me. And I don’t have any here either since my bedroom has been turned into a hamster hotel.” I slumped down in a chair at the kitchen table, my head in my hands. “I’ll just stay here all night. No one can see me like this.”

Mom arched an eyebrow. “Don’t be ridiculous, Olive. You can’t hide in here all night.” Then she turned her attention to my brother. “Why don’t you bring these pizzas out back? Everyone is in the garden, and I think we’re already halfway through our supply of hot dogs. I don’t want them to starve. Oh, and make sure the vet gets an extra piece. Such a nice guy.”

I looked up at my mother. “What vet?”

“The one who took over Pine Paw Prints.”

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Another wave of cold sweat went over me. “Lewis? What is he doing here?”

My brother wiggled his eyebrows. “Oooh, you know his name and everything. Someone’s in looove.”

I slapped him as he walked past me with a plate of pizza. “I’m not. And don’t you dare tell him I’m here.”

“Why not?” Mom asked, busy cutting hot dog buns in half.

“Because... I look ridiculous, okay? And he’s a client of mine. I walk his dog, Archie. Him seeing me like this would be unprofessional.”

Mom shrugged. “When I met him, he seemed like a nice guy. He’s not going to think less of you because of this extremely unfortunate outfit.”

“Where did you meet him anyway?” I asked.

A smile spread on Mom’s face, almost as if she was in love with Lewis. “In the frozen food aisle at Pine Mart. We were reaching for the same box of frozen pizza.”

“Dad, are you okay with this?”

Dad shrugged, and my mother pointed a hot dog bun at me. “Don’t be ridiculous, Olive. The man is new in town and was going to spend the evening alone. Inviting him was an act of kindness. Besides, you needed a date.”

I let out an annoyed breath. “Excuse me?”

My father took a step forward, but Mom stopped him in his tracks by holding her knife in the air. “The invitation was for you and a partner, but I had a feeling you wouldn’t bring anyone along, so I helped.”

“No, you meddled. You told me the other day that you’d stop harassing me about being single. And now you bring a man home, hoping we’ll get it on?”

She scrunched her nose. “Who said anything about getting it on?”

“Fine, no one, at least not today,” I said with a mumble.

Mom put the knife down and arranged the hot dog buns on a plate. “Your father and I dated for a whole year before we started getting it on. You and Lewis have plenty of time.”

“Ew, stop it, Mom. And we’re not even a couple.”

“Colleen, let the girl be,” Dad whispered. “I’ve told you putting pressure on her is not going to work. In fact, what if she brings home some loser like Stefano, out of sheer desperation?”

I got up. “You guys, I might not have a boyfriend, but I do have functioning ears. Will you please stop talking behind my back when I’m in the same room?”

Mom turned around and smiled at me. “You’re right. It’s easier to talk about you when you’re not around. Will you take this cake out back, please? I have to keep an eye on the oven so the pizzas don’t burn.”

She handed me a glass plate with a cake on it. The top was filled with marzipan

hamsters who were bathing in pink frosting.

I knew Mom wouldn't back off, so I kept my mouth shut. There was nothing left for me to do but go into the backyard dressed like a fox, offering a piece of hamster cake to everyone who wanted one.

As I approached the door to the yard, I ran through possible options for disappearing. I could start a new life in Europe, where no one knew me, except that would cost money I didn't have. I could pray for a sinkhole to appear. Maybe I could tell people that wearing this outfit had been part of a bet. Another option was—

“Wow, careful,” a familiar British voice said. “Eyes on the ground is never a good idea, you know.”

A set of strong hands grabbed my arms, steadying me, but it was too late for the cake. I looked up in terror to see marzipan hamsters and frosting smashed all over Lewis's shirt and tie.

“Olive?” he asked, locking eyes with me.

I smiled sheepishly. “That's me. I'm so sorry about your suit.”

“That's okay. Are you, though? Okay? You look a bit pale.”

I nodded. “I was so caught up in my thoughts, I didn't see you open the door. I didn't mean to throw a cake at you.”

Lewis let out a warm laugh. “Forget about it. Do you happen to know where the bathroom is so I can get cleaned up a bit?”

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“I do. This is my parents’ place,” I said. “Follow me.”

I put the half-ruined cake on the living room table and pointed to the staircase. “Second door on the left, upstairs. Towels should be in the cabinet right next to the double sink.”

Lewis ran a hand through his hair. “Would you mind coming with me? I feel weird opening drawers and cabinets in other people’s homes.”

“Sure, let’s go.”

Once in the bathroom, I grabbed a couple of towels and positioned myself on the edge of the tub, watching Lewis undo his tie. He ran hot water over it before scrubbing the frosting with a towel.

He looked over his shoulder at me. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but why are you dressed like that?”

“Like a sad fox, you mean?”

He bit his lip, and his eyes sparkled. “More like a sexy fox, but yeah.”

I felt my cheeks warm at his comment. “There was a miscommunication about tonight’s dress code. I feel like a fool now.”

“Don’t. I like it.” He held the tie in the air. “What do you think?”

“That I should buy you a new tie. I don’t think this frosting is going to come off,” I said, taking the tie from him. I hoped it wasn’t one of those ties that cost a gazillion dollars and was crafted by blind nuns in Tuscany.

“Don’t be silly, I’ve got plenty of ties. Besides, these pink smudges make it look...”

“Horrible?”

“I was going to say unique,” he said with a grin. “But horrible works too.”

I hung the tie on a hook next to the tub. “I’ll get this horribly unique tie dry for you. We can assess the damage later.”

When I turned around, he was unbuttoning his black shirt. One by one, the buttons popped open, revealing an extra inch of skin with every move of his hands. I watched with a half-open mouth as he took the shirt off to rinse it in the sink. My mouth suddenly felt dry as a desert at noon. Seeing his bare skin set mine on fire. I had to get out of there before I burst into flames.

“I’ll go see if my brother has a clean shirt for you to wear. I hope you’re a fan of nineties rock bands.” I dashed out of the bathroom and ran into Benji’s room.

I needed a serious breather.

Chapter Eight

Lewis

It had been a while since Olive ran out of Colleen and Gary’s bathroom to find me a clean, dry shirt, and I was starting to worry I’d scared her off by calling her a sexy fox. The words had tumbled out of my mouth before I could think them through. I

now regretted not biting my tongue.

They were true, though. Olive might not realize it, but holy guacamole, she was one gorgeous girl. That fox dress she was wearing showed off her beautiful legs, and the hood with fox ears made her look even cuter.

I took a deep breath. I needed to get her out of my head. This wasn't the time or place to focus my thoughts on a sweet, gorgeous girl with adorable quirks. I had a clinic to run, a past to forget, and a heart to heal.

"Sorry it took so long." Olive popped back in, closing the door behind her. She held out a black shirt, which I gratefully accepted. "I hope you like Foo Fighters."

"Are you kidding me?" I pulled the shirt over my head. "I love them."

I then plucked the tie from its hook and put it on. It was damp, but wearable.

"What are you doing?" Olive asked, the pompoms on her drawstrings bobbing up and down as she laughed.

"Some may call this tie ruined, but I still call it unique. Why should you be the only one to look out of the ordinary tonight?"

She threw me a smile that made my heart do a double take. "It does fit with that Foo Fighters shirt well. The pink gives it a soft touch."

We looked at each other for a beat, neither of us speaking.

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Then Olive cleared her throat. “Do you want to check out the hamster hotel? The official tour won’t start for another half hour, but I figured it would be better to see the finished room without all those people around.”

I nodded. “That’s one of the reasons I agreed to come tonight. I must admit I’ve never seen a hamster hotel before.”

She drew in a breath of air. “Neither have I, believe me. It’s not what I imagined would happen to my old room when I moved out.”

I followed her to a rainbow-colored door. She glanced at me. “You’re probably thinking my parents were the best to give their daughter a rainbow door, right?”

“Of course. My sister would’ve gone crazy for something like this.”

She smiled, running a hand over the woodwork. “Me too, except this door has always been a dull brown. I did beg them to add some more color to it when I was little, but I guess my pleas weren’t as convincing as those of a couple of hamsters.”

I smiled. “Hamsters are known for having exceptional persuasion skills. They’d outsmart a little girl any time.”

“Oh, really? You don’t happen to know if one of them is hosting a course on the topic, do you? I mean, you’re a vet after all. You probably have the inside scoop on everything hamster.”

I tapped my chin with my finger. “Nothing comes to mind, but I’ll keep you updated.

Sorry, I'm acting silly," I added.

She locked eyes with me. "I like silly. I love silly, even. The world's too serious for my taste."

"Couldn't agree more," I said, not wanting to break eye contact with her.

She put her hand on the doorknob and pushed the door open so we could both step inside the hamster hotel. The room smelled like fresh paint and wood shavings, with themed hamster cages lined up against three of the walls. A dresser and an open shelf unit were pushed against the fourth wall, containing supplies and food.

"Welcome to my old bedroom, now hamster hotel. With a garden view," Olive added.

I chuckled. "Do hamsters care about garden views?"

She shrugged. "My parents seem to think so."

I walked around the room, checking out every cage. There was a barn theme, an underwater theme, and a forest one. "I'm impressed. Your parents put a lot of thought into this."

"You should tell them. I'm sure my mother would be delighted to hear that, especially coming from you."

"Because I'm a vet?"

She took one of her pompoms in her hand and rolled it around. "And because Mom thinks you're the perfect son-in-law."

My eyebrows shot up. “She said that?”

Olive put her face in her hands and moaned. “Ugh, I shouldn’t have mentioned it. Now you’re going to think I told her about you, but I didn’t, I swear. And I also don’t want to marry you or anything. Not that you’re bad marriage material.”

“Olive,” I said, stepping closer. I gently pulled her hands away from her face. “Stop overthinking everything you say. My mother tries to set me up with everyone she meets as well. She even talked about me bringing a girl home this Christmas. That’s what mothers do.”

She pulled a face. “Tell me about it. Ever since Stefano, she thinks I’ll end up old and alone.”

“Who’s Stefano?”

“Some guy I used to date. He left me to go work with rescue chickens.”

“There were no chickens to rescue right here?”

She bit her lip. “The ones in Brazil were more important to him. That, or he couldn’t think of any other way to end our relationship.”

I swallowed. I knew all too well what it was like to get dumped like that. “I’m one hundred percent certain you won’t end up old and alone.”

She tapped a finger on her lips. “Hmm. So you’re psychic as well, are you?”

“Maybe I am. I could be carrying a crystal ball or two in my trouser pockets for all you know.”

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It was only after I'd spoken those words out loud that I realized the other, completely wrong way they could be interpreted.

Olive burst out laughing and slapped her hand over her mouth. "Keep those balls in your pants, though, or my mother is going to kill you."

A burst of laughter ripped through me as well, and before long, we were both in stitches. It wasn't so much the lame joke that had me cracking up. It was more the exhilarating realization that I could still laugh like that after all that had happened to me back in England. And I had Olive to thank for that newfound freedom.

"I didn't know hamster hotels were so funny," someone said.

I wiped tears from my eyes with the back of my hand and turned around. A guy with the same chestnut hair and hazel eyes as Olive stood in the doorway. He looked younger than her, but they were unmistakably siblings.

"This is Benjamin, my brother," Olive said, confirming my guess about their relationship. "Benji, this is Lewis. He took over Pine Paw Prints."

"Ah, the vet everyone keeps talking about. Nice to meet you, dude." He cocked his head sideways. "Is that my T-shirt you're wearing, or do you happen to be a Foo Fighters fan as well?"

"Olive gave it to me after she smeared cake on my shirt and ruined it."

My words elicited a slap on the arm from her. "By accident. You make it sound as if I

did it on purpose.”

“That’s your word against mine. For all I know, you just couldn’t wait to get me naked.”

Her eyes grew wide, and her cheeks darkened until they were beetroot. I wasn’t known as a tease, but making Olive sweat was actually kind of fun.

Benji’s eyebrow shot up, and he alternated his gaze between the two of us. A wide grin spread across his face as if he had cracked an important code. “Okay, you two, I don’t know what’s going on here, but you’ll have to stop for a moment. Mom wants everyone in the backyard for a toast. After that… well, you can go back to shamelessly flirting.”

Olive shook her head and shot her brother a look. “We’re not flirting. Find someone else to annoy, B.”

He laughed. “Oh, little O, you forget I can see right through you. I lived with you for eighteen years, remember? I know when you’re into a guy or not.”

Benjamin walked away, leaving Olive and me alone in the hamster hotel. Through the window, I saw more and more people gathering in the backyard. “We should probably go as well before everyone thinks there’s something going on between us,” I said.

Olive nodded, still looking flustered. “Yeah, we don’t want that to happen.”

I followed her down the stairs. Right before we got to the backyard, she turned around. “Please ignore my brother. He loves getting on my nerves, and I always fall for it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

We joined the other guests in the yard, and a couple of minutes later, Colleen got on a chair, starting her toast.

I stood right behind Olive, the perfect position to study her without her noticing. She kept playing with one of the pompoms attached to her hoodie’s drawstrings. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was thinking about what had happened between us in that room. Not that something crazy happened, but I was positive she’d felt the charged air between us too. She must have.

Colleen ended her speech, and Olive turned around, showing me a heart-stopping smile. “Want to grab a drink?”

She led me to a folding table decked out with cups and a variety of beverages. I uncapped a beer bottle and took a sip.

“Don’t look now,” Olive said, “but this girl who is trying to steal my clients is walking toward us.”

Of course, I looked. I had to know who would do something like that.

The girl in question made a beeline for the table. I expected her to greet Olive, but instead, she extended her hand to me, completely ignoring Olive. “Lewis, right? I’m Melissa. We talked on the phone about your dog walking needs. You look... amazing, by the way. I love the tie. It’s truly special.”

Oh, everything clicked now. “You’re the girl offering glitter poop bags and rhinestone collars?”

“I am.” She beamed at me. “If you’re still looking for a respectable dog walker, I’d

be happy to go over my packages with you. In private,” she added, shooting Olive what was definitely a fake smile.

“I admire your determination, Melissa,” I said. “But I’ve already found a dog walker.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Let me guess – her?” She motioned her head to Olive. Then she leaned closer and whispered in my ear. “You’re new in town, so there’s no way you could’ve known, but Olive here is a bit... weird. I mean, look at her outfit. Don’t you think that costume is something a six-year-old would wear? Plus, she claims to be a tarot card reader. Are you sure you trust a hippie like that with your dog?”

Ouch, Melissa clearly wasn’t the subtle type. I wanted to set her straight, but I didn’t. If there was one thing I’d learned about bickering women, it was not to get involved.

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“Archie loves her, so yes, she’s going to walk him. I’m sure you’ll find plenty of other clients,” I said.

An awkward silence filled the air between us. I looked around for Olive, but she had disappeared. Great. I took a long sip of my beer to occupy myself. Melissa rummaged through her handbag and shoved a stack of flyers in my hands.

“Would it be a problem for you to hand these out at Pine Paw Prints? Only to clients with purebred dogs, of course.”

“Purebred dogs only? Why?”

She put her hand on my arm. “Because they’re my target audience. I did a marketing course online, and I know for a fact it’s crucial to niche down. I can’t possibly walk everyone’s dog, so I chose purebred dogs. It was an easy decision, really.”

Her hand was still resting on my arm, drawing both our attention toward it.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lewis. You don’t mind a bit of physical contact, do you?” she asked in a syrupy-sweet voice, still not letting go. Now she was rubbing my arm as if we were best friends or more. I was starting to see why Olive wasn’t fond of her. Melissa didn’t exactly come across as genuine or kind.

Kind of like Sue.

No, I couldn’t let thoughts like that get to me. Not anymore.

Just when I was about to think of an excuse to leave, Colleen came rushing toward me, her face radiating joy. “There’s my handsome vet. Do you have a minute? There are some people here I want you to meet.”

“Anything for you, Colleen,” I said with a smile.

I excused myself, leaving a pouting Melissa behind.

“So, who did you want to introduce me to?” I asked when we were out of earshot from Melissa.

Colleen grinned at me. “No one. I just thought I’d rescue you. That looked like an uncomfortable situation. Melissa’s not a bad person, but she can be full-on for sure. Now, do you want a private tour of the hamster hotel? It’s themed and has excellent feng shui.”

Her question sounded so full of expectation that I didn’t have the heart to tell her I’d already seen the room. “I’d love that, Colleen. Lead the way.”

Chapter Nine

Olive

As Melissa tightened her grip on Lewis, I snuck away and took refuge in the kitchen. I positioned myself at the sink so I could push the curtain aside and catch a glimpse of what was going on outside. Lewis owed me nothing, but I enjoyed talking to him. I should’ve known Melissa would show up and ruin it for me.

“What are you doing in here?” my father asked, making me jump. “The party’s outside, and in full swing, might I add. The hot dogs are all gone, several people have already subscribed to our newsletter, and Charlie from the pet store, told me he can

get us a deal for hamster food if we buy ten dozen bags at once.”

I let go of the curtain and sat down at the table. “If you must know, I’m hiding.”

“From whom?”

I sighed. “Do you have an hour? Because I have a whole list of people I don’t want to see right now.”

Dad put down the empty tray he was carrying and sat down beside me. “Oh, sweetie, tell me what happened.”

I let out a frustrated groan. “My life is a mess. Melissa is out there stealing my clients, my car repairs cost me more than I could afford, and Benjamin made a fool out of me in front of the new vet.”

Dad got up again, grabbed a tin of cookies out of the cupboard, and sat back down. “Sounds like you need one of these. Or several.”

I grabbed a couple of cookies from the tin. “Do I ever. Are you sure this is okay with Mom? She’ll notice if her cookies are missing.”

He harrumphed. “What, I can’t console my daughter with a sugar overload?”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said while stuffing two cookies in my mouth. Very unladylike, but so yummy. “Don’t feel obliged to sit here with me. This is your party after all.”

Leaning back in his chair, he said, “I don’t mind. It’s mainly your mother’s party.”

“I thought this hamster hotel was your dream too?” I asked, studying his face.

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He folded his hands and shrugged. “Sometimes, kiddo, you do something that you know will make the other one happy. And that, in turn, makes you happy too.”

“That’s sweet, Dad.”

We sat in silence for a while, which was oddly soothing. I thought of Stefano and his rescue chickens. In hindsight, I had to admit our relationship had been a joke. To him, anyway. All those months I spent trying to get him to like me as much as I liked him, only to be dumped for the lure of a chicken coop... I had been such a fool.

Why did I even torture myself by still following him online, or hoping he’d send me a message telling me how sorry he was for hurting me? I didn’t need him to get back together with me, but a simple acknowledgment of his wrongdoings would’ve been nice.

I got my phone out of my bag and deleted his contact information. Then I unfollowed him everywhere I could. I felt lighter, almost instantly.

“What did you mean when you said that Melissa girl is stealing your clients?” Dad asked, breaking the silence. “Do I have to talk to her? Teach her a lesson about respect and professionalism?”

I let out a chuckle. “That won’t be necessary, but thank you, Dad. She started a new business. A dog walking business.”

“So what? People love you, Olive. I don’t think someone like Melissa poses a threat.”

“That’s the thing, she does. She’s got two things I don’t have. Lots of money to get the word out, and the balls to go up to people and convince them to try out her services. I don’t know, maybe I should just give up.”

Dad frowned. “Give up? The Olive I know isn’t a quitter.”

“Maybe I’m changing.”

He cocked his head and looked me in the eye. “Remember when you were twelve and wanted nothing more than to get a horse? You were so determined, but we couldn’t afford one. You didn’t give up on that dream, did you now?”

I shook my head, smiling. “I washed cars, took babysitting jobs, and mowed lawns for a whole year.”

“Exactly. You worked hard for it, and even though things turned out a bit differently than you wanted, your dream came true. That money enabled you to take an entire year of riding lessons. Don’t quit your business, Olive. I know it may seem hard now, but I know you’ll make it.”

I got up and gave him a hug. “You’re right, I’ll find a way.”

He held me at arm’s length and smiled. “And you’ll find a way with love too. I promise you everything will work out fine.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’m going to dash out again and see if anyone needs anything,” I said, pushing my chair back.

“Great, I’ll shove another pizza in the oven.”

I reached for the doorknob, but before I could grab it, the door swung open and hit

me right on the nose.

“And this is our kitchen,” I heard Mom say.

I let out a cry of pain while reaching for my nose. When I looked at my shaking hands, I spotted blood. Blood!

“Olive?” Mom asked, looking genuinely confused. “What happened to you?”

“You shoved a door in my face, Mom!”

She furrowed her brows. “Why were you standing behind it then? Such a dumb move.”

“I was about to leave the room,” I said, stamping my foot on the floor. “What was I supposed to do? Have Scottie beam me up?”

“Who’s Scottie?” she asked.

“Ugh, never mind.”

That was when I spotted Lewis standing behind my mother. Of course. Just when I thought I’d been embarrassed more than enough for one evening, Lewis had to witness me turning into a bloody fox, arguing with my mother.

“Your mother was giving me a house tour,” he said, gently pushing her aside. “Let me look at your nose.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

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“You’re not fine, you’re bleeding.”

“Seriously, it’s okay,” I said, still clutching my nose. “You don’t have to help me.”

“I’m a doctor, remember? It’s what I do.”

“Technically, you’re a vet.”

“Technically, you’re a fox. Now sit down.”

Touché, Lewis. Touché.

I sat back down at the table, the crumbs of my cookie fest from earlier still present. Using one hand, Lewis swept them out of the way. Then he requested the first aid kit from my parents, who, thankfully, headed back to the yard after dropping off the bandages in the kitchen.

Lewis took my head in his hands and turned it sideways a couple of times. “Are you having trouble breathing?” he asked.

I was, but not for the reason he would assume. His firm hands gently touching my face made me lightheaded, to be honest. Still, I shook my head no.

“It doesn’t seem to be broken, but take it easy just in case. I’ll clean up the blood, get you some ice to put on your nose, and drive you home.”

“Home?”

He nodded. “It’s best you lie down for a bit. Party’s over, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, okay. You don’t have to drive me, though. I only need my eyes and limbs for that, and they seem to be working just fine. See?” I asked and flexed my hands.

He let out a laugh. “You can be stubborn, you know that? I’m driving you – doctor’s orders.”

Ten minutes later, I left the party with a bag of frozen peas on my face. It wasn’t exactly the gracious exit I’d dreamed of, but it was better than walking around with a bloody, swollen nose.

When Lewis and I passed my car, I gasped. Lewis followed my appalled gaze and sucked in a breath.

“Ouch. That’s brutal.”

“That car is mine.”

I walked closer to inspect the damage better. The taillight was smashed, and a giant dent in the door made my old car look even more like a sad piece of junk. Lewis walked around the car to check for a note from the offender, but there wasn’t one. A hit-and-run. Just what I needed.

I closed my eyes and tried to think of things I enjoyed, all so I wouldn’t start crying in front of Lewis.

I knew my car was dead. There was no use having it fixed, not to mention that I wouldn’t be able to pay for repairs even if I wanted to.

“Shall I call a tow truck?”

“Let’s just go home,” I said, not wanting to bum Lewis out with the details of my crumbling life. “I’ll have it towed tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? Shouldn’t we at least call the police?” he asked with a concerned look.

“No, I just want to crawl into bed. Is that your car?” I asked, pointing to the gray vehicle I had seen him arrive in the other day.

He nodded and put a hand on my back to lead me to his car. It was a smart move. After everything that had happened, I’d probably fall and break a limb without him. Before I got in, I threw the bag of frozen peas in a nearby trash can. I didn’t want it melting and dripping in the car.

“Are you okay?” he asked again as we clicked our seat belts into place.

I smiled and gave him a thumbs up. I was afraid talking would lead to crying, and I didn’t know Lewis well enough to turn into a sobbing mess in his vicinity. Besides, I looked ridiculous enough as it was. There was no need to make it worse.

He maneuvered the car out of its parking spot. “Where do you live?”

“Over at Rainbow Lane,” I said, my voice still trembling with emotion.

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Lewis bit his lip as if he wanted to speak but didn't know how to begin.

"Is everything okay with you?" I asked, eyeing him. "You look a bit tormented."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Melissa tried to change my mind about hiring her, but I told her I had already hired you," he said. "I want you to know, I never break a promise. The job is yours, and I truly want you to walk Archie. You disappeared all of a sudden, and I didn't know whether it was because of Melissa or not."

"It wasn't," I lied. "Dad needed me in the kitchen."

To eat a lot of cookies.

A look of relief crossed his face. "That's good to hear. I was worried I had done something wrong. I don't want to come across as impetuous."

"You did everything right," I said. "I don't even know how to thank you for helping me out. With the nose and the car ride."

"That's okay, it's my pleasure."

I glanced at his hands. "I could offer you a palm reading?"

His eyes lit up as he laughed. "That doesn't even sound so bad. I'm curious to hear what you have to say."

"Don't expect too much," I said. "It's just a bit of fun."

As we covered the distance to my apartment, I thought about holding his hand in mine. It was almost as if his body was made of honey, and I was a hungry bear. I just had to touch it.

He pulled up at my apartment and turned off the engine. He flipped on the light above us, then extended his hand out to me, palm facing up.

“You want that reading now?” I asked, my heart skipping a beat.

“Why not? There’s no time like the present.”

I grinned. “Okay, why not.”

I took his hand in mine and traced his palm with my fingertip. “This is your dominant hand, right?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “My hand can be quite dominant if you know what I mean.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “That’s intel I don’t need for this.”

“What? I’m talking about the hand I operate with. Stop with the naughty thoughts,” he said with faux shock.

“I’m not thinking anything weird,” I said, even though that was a big fat lie. All this talk of his hands and how dominant they were made me fantasize about what it would feel like to have them touch me.

Our eyes locked for a moment, and I hoped my swollen nose would mask the heat building in my cheeks.

“So, erm, yes... your palm,” I said, breaking eye contact.

I studied his palm, tracing the head line, the heart line, and the life line. His hands were big but soft as a peach. I wanted to ask him what moisturizer he used. I wanted hands as soft as his. Or his soft hands on my...Focus, Olive.

“Do you see anything interesting?” Lewis asked, peering down at his palm as well.

“I do. These lines tell me a bit about your personality. This one here indicates you’re open to new ideas. And this one gives me reason to think your heart has been through quite the battle.”

A weak smile crossed his features. “That all sounds spot on. What about my love life? Will it recover from the blow it received recently?”

Him referring to it as a blow made it clear that whatever had happened to him hadn’t been easy. I felt compelled to ask him but decided it was best to let him initiate that conversation if he wanted to.

“Of course, it will recover,” I said instead.

“You can see that in my palm?”

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I gave his hand a squeeze. “I can’t, but a man like yourself won’t stay single for long.”

“Do you really think so?”

I smiled at him. “Come on. A man with hands as soft as yours? Women will be all over you, Lewis. Not to mention the biscuits you offer and the cute dog you have. Or the crystal balls in your pants,” I added with a wink.

He laughed. “Thanks, Olive.”

“What for?”

He closed his fingers around mine. “For knowing exactly what to say to make me feel better. I realize we’ve only just met, but somehow it doesn’t feel like it. You’re making this whole move across the pond a lot easier for me.”

His sweet words made a broken nose, a nonexistent love life, and a totaled car seem insignificant all of a sudden. Lewis might’ve caught the eye of every woman in town, but I was the one who made him laugh, and that was an awesome feeling.

Chapter Ten

Olive

After a tantalizing dream involving Lewis, I woke up to the scent of roasted coffee beans. For a moment, I thought someone was making me a fresh cup, but then I

remembered I lived alone. Unless one of the bugs living in my outside trash can was brewing the dark liquid, there was no one around to serve me coffee in bed.

When I stepped into the kitchen and cracked the window open, the scent seemed to grow stronger. Someone in town must be brewing a giant pot of coffee for their Saturday morning breakfast.

I scooped some of my own coffee into the machine and turned it on before heading to the bathroom to shower and assess the damage to my nose.

The swelling seemed to have stayed the same, but purple bruises had popped up around my nose. I looked horrible like I'd been in a massive monster fight. Of course, the makeup from the day before only made my appearance worse. Black mascara smudges reached all the way to my cheeks, and the gold glittery eye shadow had crept up to my hairline. Dear mother of dog collars, my eyes hurt just looking at myself. I silently prayed the transformation had happened overnight, not while Lewis was giving me a ride home.

The corners of my mouth lifted up at the thought of him. After our impromptu palm reading, we'd chatted for a bit longer in the car until he drove off to check on Archie. Inviting him in would've been the friendly thing to do, but there was no way I was going to let him see the sorry state of my living quarters. I deemed it best he stays oblivious to the fact I lived in a shoebox.

After a hot shower and a cup of coffee, I felt human again. I grabbed my phone and scrolled through messages from my mother asking me if I was doing okay. It was sweet of her to check on the state of my swollen nose, even though sending fifteen messages about it seemed a bit over the top. I told her I was doing fine, threw my stuff into my bag, and headed out. I had promised the Spaldings, who lived down the street from me, I would take their dark-haired dog Ginger for a walk. The bearded collie had lots of energy and needed daily walks, but the Spaldings manned a food

stand they took to neighboring towns on the weekends. When I didn't have a Saturday shift at Sip'nBean, I took Ginger to the dog park.

At ten on the dot, the Spaldings stopped their food truck in front of my apartment building.

"Thanks so much for this, Olive. It's good to know we can always count on you," Mrs. Spalding said as she handed me her dog's leash. "The key to let Ginger back into our house is under the same terracotta pot as last time."

"Got it," I said.

Mrs. Spalding gave Ginger one last hug before hopping back into the vehicle. They whizzed away, and it was just the dog and me.

"What do you say, Ginger? Good day to hit the dog park?"

The bearded collie barked in response, and we went on our merry way. I was silently hoping Lewis would be at the dog park too. He'd told me he usually took Archie for long morning walks over the weekend, so maybe I could not-so-accidentally run into him.

As we made our way to the town center, dark smoke clouds circled overhead. The scent of burnt coffee beans grew stronger, almost unbearable even. The streets were bustling with people, all of them chattering in excited tones.

An uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. This wasn't what a typical Saturday morning in Old Pine Cove looked like. Something must've happened. Something out of the ordinary. Maybe even... something bad.

I settled into a light jog. Ginger eagerly followed my example. We made it to Main

Street where police cars and fire trucks blocked the road.

I pushed through the crowd and gasped at the sight in front of me. The façade of Sip'nBean was as black as coffee. At least, what remained of it was.

“What happened here?” I asked someone at the front of the crowd.

“The coffee shop burned down last night. There's talk of the place being completely ruined, and by the look of it, those rumors are true.”

I tugged on Ginger's collar, and we crossed the street to the town square. I scanned the groups of people huddled together until I saw Juliet. With quick steps, I made it over to her.

“Oh, Olive,” she said, sobbing. She pulled me into a hug. “The place is completely ruined. We're out of a job!”

The blood left my face, and I had to steady myself to prevent my knees from giving out. Juliet was right. Without a place to serve coffee, there was no need for a barista. I had become redundant overnight.

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“Is everyone okay?” I asked in a shaky voice. “What exactly happened?”

“A fire broke out around six this morning. No one got hurt. That’s all I know, really.” She shook her head and grabbed my arm. “What are we going to do? I have bills to pay.”

Next to me, Ginger was growing anxious. The noises and stressed out people were probably getting too much for her. I had to get her out of there before she ran away.

“Will you call me if you have news? I want to stay, but Ginger here doesn’t.”

Juliet wiped the tears under her eyes away with her fingers and nodded. “Of course.”

Still dazed and confused, I walked to the dog park. I unclipped Ginger’s leash from her collar, and the dog happily dashed around on the grass, playing fetch with an old tennis ball I always carried with me whenever I walked a dog.

I slumped down on one of the wrought iron benches and tallied up the facts. I was carless, jobless, and soon probably homeless. Despite the sorry state of my tiny apartment, I had actually grown to love it and didn’t want to say goodbye so soon after moving in. But crying or complaining about my situation wasn’t going to change a single thing. All I could do was take action.

Ginger came running back with the tennis ball, and I absentmindedly threw it away again.

“Hey, watch out,” someone shouted.

I looked up to see Lewis a couple of feet away from me, rubbing his head. When he turned around and our eyes met, his annoyed expression morphed into a surprised one. He walked over to me, Archie in tow.

“I think this is yours,” he said, placing the tennis ball in my hand.

“Gosh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you on the head. I’m here with Ginger.”

He frowned. “A friend of yours?”

“No, silly, Ginger’s a dog. Why on earth would I take a friend to the dog park and throw a ball at them?”

He sat down next to me and grinned. “I was teasing you, Olive.” He unclipped Archie’s leash to let the dog roam free. “How are you feeling? Your nose looks like it still hurts a lot. And I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but you look a bit out of it,” he said, studying my face.

I bit my lip. “The coffee shop burned down this morning. No one got hurt, thank goodness, but I’m out of a job now. I’m sorry, Lewis, I can’t be your coffee dealer anymore.”

His eyes grew wide. “Wow, what a nightmare. So that’s where that coffee scent came from.” He threw me a worried look. “What are you going to do now?”

I gave him a weak smile. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Is your car still at your parents’?”

I nodded.

“Let me get it towed for you. Consider it one less thing to worry about.”

I wanted to protest, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get it towed myself now that I had to live off my almost nonexistent savings. His small and kind gesture would help me out a lot. “That would be awesome, actually. Thank you.”

“I wish I could do more.” He grew silent for a beat as if he needed to pick out the right words to say next. “You know,” he started. “I was hoping I'd run into you here.”

Oh, man, my imaginary tail started wagging again. He did this on purpose. He wanted to see me, just like I wanted to see him. I felt like screaming, what does it mean?!

“You did?” I asked instead, keeping my cool.

He grinned at me. “I had a lot of fun with you last night. You're basically the only friend I have around here.”

I looked him straight in the eye. “I love that we're friends.”

A small voice in the back of my head pushed to the forefront, making me question if being friends was all I wanted. I quickly pushed the thought back. Lewis was sweet, charming, and hot, but that didn't mean I had to fall for him, did it? Given the current state of my life, I didn't think adding a crush to my pile of problems would help me. Besides, my imagination was stretching it too far. Lewis had said he was happy to be my friend. It's not like he had told me he harbored intense feelings for me and wanted to make me his wife.

He cleared his throat. “So, I wanted to ask if I could cook for you sometime. If you'd like me to, of course.”

“Well, I love to eat, and you're great company. Consider it a big fat yes,” I said,

unable to refrain from smiling.

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A look of relief crossed his face. “Are you free this Friday?”

“I am,” I said. To be honest, I’d have canceled any plans just to be able to eat at Lewis’s place.

“Great, I’ll see you around seven then?” he asked.

“I’ll be there.”

He got up and called Archie. “I have to get going. Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“I will. See you later, Lewis.”

He walked away, giving me ample opportunity to check him out without him noticing. His well-formed back, his strong hands, his legs... Plus, his hair looked like something I’d love to get my fingers lost in. Stefano didn’t have any of those things. Not that I cared about looks that much, but still, I’d never been as attracted to him as I was to Lewis now. And Stefano had never cooked for me unless you consider ordering a pizza and shoving a piece on a plastic plate cooking.

I blew out a breath. Why was I comparing Lewis to Stefano? It was no use. The more I focused on all the qualities Lewis possessed, the more obsessed I’d get, and the more likely it was I’d get my heart broken again. A successful guy like him was never going to fall for a girl like me.

I called Ginger and clipped her leash back on. “We have to head home,” I told the

dog. “We might make a detour to the supermarket, though.”

My thoughts wandered back to the burnt-down coffee shop, making me crave something sweet like chocolate chip cookies. It was a universal fact that chocolate never failed to help anyone who felt bad.

The dog and I crossed the street, but we didn’t make it far. Gaby, who owned Wondrous Hair Affair, waved at me from behind her giant window, motioning for me to come in.

I popped my head in, thinking I’d be in and out in a jiffy. I hadn’t counted on Mom being there, though.

“Your mother wanted to talk to you,” Gaby confided in me. “She told me to keep an eye out for you, and then you passed by. What a fantastic coincidence.”

Oh, great. Everyone seemed to have eyes everywhere in this town.

“Take a seat,” Mom said, pointing to a chair close to her as if she owned the place. “I’m getting my hair colored. Honestly, all this stress is turning my hair gray.”

“What stress?” I asked.

“You,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “What else?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Sip’nBean. I heard what happened.”

“And your hair has turned gray in the two hours you’ve known about the fire?”

She pressed a finger against her temple. “You know how sensitive I am, honey. Now, what are you going to do without a job?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I only found out this morning. I haven’t even had time to see who’s hiring.”

Gaby’s gaze went from me to Mom, almost as if she was watching an enthralling Ping-Pong contest. I felt awkward talking about personal stuff while she was busy flipping my mother’s hair around and smearing coloring paste on it.

“I should really get going,” I said. “Ginger is growing restless.”

Gaby and Mom turned toward the dog, who had lain down and was snoring lightly. “She seems to be doing fine to me,” Gaby said.

Mom nodded in agreement. “She’s obviously comfortable. It would be a shame to leave now.”

I rolled my eyes.

“What if you don’t find a good job?” Mom asked, a concerned look on her face. “You’re not moving back home, are you?”

I lifted an eyebrow. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

She laughed nervously. “No, of course not. It’s just that you’re finally on your own now, and the hamster hotel is doing great. It’s just not convenient, that’s all.”

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“If you’re looking for a job, I’m hiring,” Gaby chimed in. “I could really use a shampoo assistant.”

I creased my nose. Shampooing people’s hair? I knew someone had to do it, and that it was as good a job as any, but touching dirty hair wasn’t exactly something that made me jump for joy. “Erm, I don’t know,” I said.

My mothertskedat me. “Olive, don’t be rude.”

“I’m not being rude, Mom.” I turned my attention to Gaby. “I really appreciate the offer. I just don’t know if being a shampoo girl is the right job for me.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Mom said.

The pair of them looked at me expectantly. Seriously, were they trying to make me feel like dog poop on purpose?

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. “I’m not a beggar. I’m just unemployed.”

Mom leveled me with a stare. “You might not be a beggar now, but if you don’t get a job soon, you will be. And then what will you do?”

Ginger woke up from her slumber and let out a bark. I grabbed it thankfully as an opportunity to get out of there. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got to get this one home. I’ll definitely think about the job offer,” I told Gaby.

Before anyone could reply or make me feel worse than I was already feeling, I left.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” I mimicked Mom under my breath.

Ugh. Not even awe’ll help you, or don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll find a new job. It was hard enough to see my place of work burned to the ground. I didn’t need anyone making me feel guilty for not wanting to put my fingers in other people’s dirty hair.

I was old enough to take care of myself, or so I hoped. All I had to do was find myself a new job, one that didn’t involve touching people whatsoever, and I’d be set. Surely that wouldn’t be so hard to do?

Chapter Eleven

Lewis

Monday finally rolled around, and excitement rushed through me. Today would be the first full day of surgery at Pine Paw Prints. I knew operating on an animal wasn’t something to get excited about as it meant the animal was sick, but I loved helping them heal. Saving a life meant giving a family more time with their furry and not-so-furry friends, and I felt honored to be able to do just that.

I looked over the records for my next patient again. I’d studied my cases for today all weekend, but I wanted to be absolutely sure I didn’t miss any crucial details.

“Caramel is ready, Doctor Grant,” Darren said.

I creased my brow. “The rabbit? But I thought Snuckles the cat was first. Says so right here on the schedule.”

Darren ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, we used to do this with Doctor Kline every so often. He said it kept him sharp. He was always concerned he’d operate on the wrong animal.”

I let out a breath of relief. “It’s good to know I’m not going crazy. I do like the idea of keeping me sharp, though.”

“Does that mean I can keep doing it?”

“Sure, why not,” I said with a smile. “I’ll scrub in, and then we can get started.”

Spaying Snuckles took me about twenty minutes, from the first incision to the closing stitches. Caramel’s case was a tad more challenging than Snuckles’s routine surgery. The poor rabbit had a fracture of the distal femur, which meant I had to place a pin down the shaft of the bone and use tiny screws without damaging said bone. Considering the size of an animal as small as a rabbit, I needed to work as meticulously as I could. Thankfully, the surgery went as smoothly as possible.

“Could you call Caramel’s owners to let them know the surgery went well?” I asked Darren as I tossed my scrub mask in the bin.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll clean up in here and then call. Did Lori say when she’d be back?”

I shook my head. “She’s going to call me this afternoon with an update. The doctor thinks she might have mono. They’re waiting for a blood sample before they can confirm anything.”

Darren whistled between his teeth. “That sucks. Mono can knock you out real good.”

“I might have to draw up a job listing, just in case,” I said. “We can’t run this place without a good receptionist.”

I walked back to my office and shut the door behind me. If Lori had mono as the doctor suspected, I would have to find someone else to fill in for her. Someone with

experience working in a vet clinic. Someone who could start right away. Where on earth was I going to find a qualified person like that?

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My thoughts kept pushing me toward Olive. I knew she was out of a job and desperately wanted to find something new, but she didn't have the necessary experience. Then again, she did walk dogs for a living and seemed to know a thing or two about other animals as well.

I leaned back in my chair and put my feet on my desk. Deep down, I knew why I didn't want to offer her the job. I'd become her boss, which meant there was only one feasible path for us to take, and that was the friend zone. Not that I assumed we would start dating, but the possibility was at least there as long as she didn't work for me.

Experience had taught me workplace romance could result in a true disaster. One that left you with a broken heart or professional humiliation. Both, even. It was hardly a choice anyone would make voluntarily.

The smart thing to do was follow common sense. Don't hire Olive.

Too bad my heart kept screaming to be heard as well. The bloody thing might've been broken, but it wasn't ruined completely. It still worked. It jumped in my chest every time Olive treated me to one of her knee-buckling smiles. It popped out sparks whenever she studied my face as if she was dying to know what I was thinking.

I groaned. I had to stop this. I left England because of a woman ruining me, and I wasn't planning on getting involved with someone again any time soon.

My computer screen buzzed to life when I touched the keyboard. I opened the folder containing all the job applications the clinic had received over the past year and went

through them. I'd make some calls as soon as I heard back from Lori and hire someone, anyone, who wasn't Olive.

The rest of the day went by fast, thanks to back-to-back surgeries. After I updated all the necessary paperwork, Lori's husband called to tell me she did indeed have mono and wouldn't be able to return to work for quite some time.

I went back through the applications and printed off the best ones. I'd sift through them again when I wasn't feeling so tired.

At six thirty, there was a knock on the door. Even though a big sign told whoever was out there that the clinic was closed, that clearly didn't deter them from knocking again and again.

I pushed my chair back and headed through the reception area and waiting room to open the door. The clinic might've been closed, but that didn't mean I should turn away someone with a potential emergency.

I unbolted the door and was greeted by Colleen, much to my surprise.

"Hi, Colleen," I said. "Do you have a hamster-related problem?"

She waved my remark away with a flick of her hand. "Not at all. I brought you a casserole."

"Oh, really?" I didn't recall making food arrangements with her.

She smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to intrude or anything. It's just that you're a man alone, and I always make way too much for Gary and me anyway. I'd rather feed you with it than throw it out."

I opened the door further and motioned for Colleen to come in. “That’s okay. I must say it does smell delicious.”

Right on cue, my stomach growled, and we both laughed. “Sorry, I’ve been working all day and hardly took a break to eat.”

Colleen leveled me with a stern look. “You’re supposed to eat, Lewis, even when you’ve got a lot of work. It’s important to take care of that body of yours, especially yours specifically.”

“Mine specifically?”

“You know, the strong, handsome type.” She cleared her throat and glanced at her watch. “Not that I’ve noticed, but my daughter might have mentioned it.”

Huh. Olive had been talking to Colleen about me. Again.

I motioned my head toward the casserole in my hands. “I think there are some clean plates in the employees’ lounge. Will you join me?”

“Oh, I’ve already eaten.” She fiddled with her watch again. “I must get going. Gary and I are heading to the bowling alley. Have you been?”

I shook my head. “Can’t say that I have.”

“Well, you should come sometime. I’m sure the ladies of the bowling club would love to have you there. If you go on a Thursday, though, make sure to arrive on time. That’s when you get free chicken wings if you buy two drinks. The place is always packed to the rafters.”

“Free chicken wings, huh?” I said.

She slapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh dear, you’re one of those vegetarians, aren’t you? Being a vet and all.”

I chuckled and gave her a reassuring look. “I don’t eat a lot of meat, no, but I do love chicken wings.”

She beamed at me. “Great. I hope to see you there one of these days.”

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Outside, someone honked their car horn. Colleen put her head out the door and waved to Gary, who was behind the wheel of their car.

“I really have to go now,” she said. “Manic Monday is always a ton of fun. Anyway, enjoy your dinner.”

“Thanks a lot, Colleen. Have fun at the bowling alley.”

She waved goodbye and got back into the car.

I put the casserole on the Formica table in the employees’ lounge. At the sound of me grabbing plates and cutlery, Archie came dashing inside.

“Let’s get you something as well, right, big fella?” I measured a portion of dog food for him and put the bowl on the ground. “Enjoy, Archie. Looks like it’s just you and me tonight.”

Again.

Eating alone was one of those things that made me feel even more lonely. At least back in England, I had my friends and family. And Sue, before she went all backstabbing crazy on me.

The microwave dinged, and I took a seat at the table. I scooped up some food with my spoon, blowing the steam away before I took a bite. The casserole tasted delicious. It had the perfect amount of seasoning and sauce.

I was about to relish another bite when the doorbell rang, followed by a couple of bangs on the door. I threw my spoon down and rushed to the front. I was sure that this time, there would be an actual emergency.

“Lewis,” the woman with the Pomeranian said. I thought I remembered her name was Diane.

“Hi there. I’m so sorry, but the clinic is closed. Is there a problem with your dog?” I asked, glancing at her dog, Lulu, its ears sticking out of Diane’s oversized handbag like a cute teddy bear. The canine looked as healthy as the last time I’d seen her, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Diane walked over the threshold without waiting for me to invite her in. “Lulu’s doing fine. I had something I wanted to discuss with you.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. I couldn’t imagine what could be so pressing that she’d have to barge in here like that, though. “We’d better make an appointment then. I was just sitting down to eat.”

I walked over to the reception desk to check the calendar for free appointment slots, but Diane walked right past me. “I’d love to eat, Lewis. So kind of you.”

What the... I ran behind her to the employees’ lounge.

“I’ve never been back here,” she said, soaking up the room as if it was a Hollywood backlot. “So, this is where you guys spend your time in between appointments, huh?”

Archie let out a growl when he spotted her. Diane did a small jump, her hand flying to her heart. “Oh, my, that’s a giant dog. Or is it a bear?”

I gave Archie a pat on the head and told him there was nothing to be afraid of. I

didn't know if that was true, considering the liberties Diane took around here, but I had to make sure Archie didn't feel threatened by anything or anyone.

"This is Archie, my dog, not my bear."

Diane's eyebrow shot up. "Huh. Well, could've fooled me. What brand is he?"

"Do you mean what breed?"

She lifted her shoulders. "Brand, breed. It's all the same."

"Archie here is an Akita. Look, Diane—" I started, but the doorbell rang again. "Excuse me, I've got to see who's there. Please don't... touch anything," I said, turning around reluctantly.

Archie got up and followed me, clearly not planning to stay in the room alone with Diane.

I opened the door to find the lady who'd come to me last week about her turtle not being active enough.

"Good evening, Doctor Grant," she said, her eyes twinkling with delight. "I can't believe how fine you're still looking after a hard day of work."

"Erm, thanks? Your turtle is doing great, am I right?"

She nodded. "He's doing amazing thanks to your tips."

Behind me, Diane appeared. "Oh, hello, Milly. Did you have an appointment?"

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“No, do you?”

She smiled. “Well, I don’t need one. I’m having dinner with Lewis here.”

The two ladies started chatting animatedly and walked to the employees’ lounge as if I wasn’t even there. I got my phone out of my pocket and texted Olive.

I need your help. There’s an invasion of women at the clinic. None of them with a problem I can fix.

Seconds later, I got a reply.

I’m already on my way. Psychic powers and all, remember?

I grinned as I tucked my phone back in my pocket and walked to the employees’ lounge. Milly and Diane were chatting about an upcoming fundraiser for Sip’nBean while eating Colleen’s casserole.

“How’s the food?” I asked.

Diane gave me a thumbs-up, oblivious to my sarcasm. “Marvelous.”

“It’s delicious,” Milly said, scooping another portion onto her plate.

I shook my head. These ladies were innocent and meant well, but they were crossing a major boundary. “I’ll tell Colleen. She made it for me,” I said, emphasizing the last word.

“Oh, dear, you don’t know how to cook?” Milly asked, wide-eyed. Then she turned to Diane. “We could set up a system so that Lewis has a home-cooked meal every day. Do you think Leanne would want to get involved?”

“Ladies, stop, please,” I said. “I’m more than capable of taking care of myself. I appreciate the effort, but there’s no need to bring me food every day.”

Diane shrugged. “Fair enough. Now, we need to know what you will do for the fundraiser. Perhaps teach a class on training dogs?”

“Or,” Milly said, “You could be a part of the silent auction. The highest bidder will win a date with you.”

I looked at the clock above the microwave. What was taking Olive so long? The minutes seemed to drag on and on.

“I’m flattered, but I don’t think I can do that.”

Milly shook her head and smiled. “It’s just a bit of fun. Nothing serious. And you’ll help rebuild the town’s beloved coffee place. All the business owners here are contributing.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

Honestly, I was just being polite. There was no way I’d let them sell me for a date. Who knew what kind of lunatic would win the auction?

Another knock on the door clued me in to the fact that Olive had arrived. At least, I hoped it was her and not another person invading my place of work or eating my food without permission.

“Your savior has arrived,” Olive said with a bow as I opened the door.

“Thank goodness,” I said, letting her in. “I don’t know how to get these women out of here.”

Olive followed me to the kitchen. She greeted Diane and Milly, then went over to rub Archie’s head. The dog was wagging his tail, happy to see her.

“What brings you here?” Diane asked, giving Olive the once-over.

“I’ve got a problem with my pet rat,” she said.

Wow, she was quick on her feet.

I nodded. “Yes, Olive here has a medical emergency. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you ladies to leave so I can take a look at this rat.”

Diane narrowed her eyes. “Where is this rat of yours?”

“Hiding. In my sweatshirt. Nibbles is afraid of strangers.”

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Diane got up and held her finger in the air. “I’ll have to give your landlord a call. Pets aren’t allowed at your building.”

A panicked look crossed Olive’s face, and I stepped forward. “Ladies, there’s no need for that. You see, Olive works here now, and she just found Nibbles. I promise you the animal is not living at her apartment, so she isn’t breaking any rules.”

“She’s working here? What about Lori?” Diane demanded to know.

“I can’t discuss the details without Lori being here, but rest assured, it has nothing to do with her skills,” I said. “She has a problem with her health.”

“I see. Milly, let’s go to the bowling alley. We might find out what’s wrong with Lori,” Diane said, picking up her belongings. “It’s Manic Monday after all. I’m sure Lori’s neighbors will be there to spill the beans.”

Milly threw her cutlery down, an excited look on her face. “You’re right. Let’s go. Thanks for the food, Lewis.”

Five minutes later, they were out the door. I found Olive playing with Archie in the waiting room and threw her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry about all that.”

“That’s okay. Just to be clear, I work here now? I get to operate on animals?” she asked jokingly.

I needed to tell her no. There was no way I could really hire Olive. The stack of job applications was waiting for me near the printer, and I was going to hire one of those

candidates.

“Not operate, run the front desk. If you want to? I could definitely use your help,” I blurted out. “Lori has mono. Her husband notified me about her condition just an hour ago.”

Her face lit up, and she pulled me into a hug. “Really? That would be so good! You know, I was seriously considering being the shampoo girl at Wondrous Hair Affair. You’re a lifesaver.”

I put my arms around her as well and got a whiff of her. She smelled like chocolate cookies, and I loved it. Still, this was all completely wrong.

Why did I even offer her the job? Why did my mouth refuse to listen to my head? I had a feeling hiring Olive would lead to nothing but trouble.

Chapter Twelve

Olive

I still couldn’t believe Lewis had offered me a job. Before his question came my way, I’d seriously considered taking the shampoo job. The job at the vet clinic was only part-time, but it paid better than what I’d made as a barista. And I’d have enough time to keep working on my own business. The whole thing felt like a dream. Not to mention working for Lewis and seeing him every day. I had only been at the clinic for two days, but every time he came out of the examination room, he floored me with that dazzling smile of his. When he was wearing his scrubs, well... I was this close to needing a doctor to help me with my heart palpitations. I wondered if looking that good in the workplace could be considered a violation. If it wasn’t, the government should make it so to protect innocent employees like myself.

“Can you hand me the files for the patients this afternoon?” Lewis’s voice pulled me out of my daydreaming.

“Of course,” I said, grabbing a stack of folders from my desk. “Here they are. I’ve put them in the right order and have also color-coded the files by animal type.”

He let out a whistle while leafing through the paperwork. “I’m impressed. This makes my life so much easier.”

“Thanks, Doctor Grant,” I said, making him laugh.

“Please, you only have to call me that in front of patients. When we’re alone, it’s Lewis.”

I knew he preferred to be called by his first name, but I couldn’t help myself. Doctor Grant had such a nice ring to it.

“What does this red Post-it mean? An appointment for a dragon?” He threw me a puzzled look. “You do know dragons don’t exist, right?”

I frowned. “What are you talking about? Have you never seen Dragonheart? And what about that dragon in The Hobbit... Smeagol?”

“No, that’s Gollum, the ugly guy who steals the ring. You’re talking about Smaug.”

“Exactly! Smaug the dragon. He’s as real as you and me.”

A silence fell between us. Lewis looked genuinely shocked and unsure of how to react. I burst out laughing. “Oh man, I was kidding. You should’ve seen the look on your face.”

His eyes sparkled, causing sparks to pop in my chest. If he was going to keep smiling at me like that, there would be a full-fledged fireworks show by the time the day was over.

“I can’t believe I fell for that. Should I toss this fake file then?” he asked.

“No, no, don’t do that. The owner is only seven and convinced she’s got a pet dragon. Her father kept calling me about an appointment, and I caved. The girl has been living in her own world since her mother died last year.”

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Lewis's eyebrows shot up. "There's a girl coming in with an invisible dragon?"

"You could just pretend to examine the animal. Honestly, Lily is harmless. If you want to, I could cancel the appointment."

Now that I thought about it more and had spoken the words out loud, it seemed ludicrous to let someone take up Lewis's valuable time with their fake animal, but this was an innocent little girl we were talking about.

He didn't speak, just leafed through the notes Alexander Kline had made in the girl's file. She had brought her imaginary dragon to the clinic three times already in the past.

Lewis closed the manila folder. "I'll give Doctor Kline a call and see what approach he suggests."

I pushed my glasses further up my nose. "I could assist you if you want. I know I don't have any medical experience, but I could pretend to offer supplies. And I'll offer you support for dealing with this awkward situation."

"Doesn't your shift end in ten minutes?"

I smiled. "I don't mind staying. I'll rearrange my schedule."

My schedule was already as clear as could be, but Lewis didn't have to know that.

"That's kind of you, but I don't want you to go out of your way to help me. I could

ask Darren to assist me.”

“It’s not a problem, really. I’d be happy to do it,” I said.

Man, I must’ve sounded desperate. Please, Doctor Grant, let me spend my free afternoon with you. Ugh, I was so obvious.

He threw me a long look. “Only if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” I said. Then I added, “You’re the one playing hard to get.”

“Hard to get?” he repeated with a grin.

“Professionally, I mean. I know you want to take me into that examination room.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, and his grin widened. “Do I now? Why would I play games with you when I could just straight out ask you?”

He had backed me into a corner now. Why did I have to blurt out those stupid-sounding things anyway? “Well, you know...” I started, but no sensible words came out.

“I do admit it would be nice to have you there,” he said in a soft voice. “Don’t tell Darren, though, or he’ll get jealous.”

Lewis winked at me and disappeared back into his office before I could think of a cheeky reply. I leaned back in my chair. Had Lewis been flirting with me? Or was it just some innocent banter? Did I want him to flirt with me? Gosh, so many questions came bubbling up.

I peeled open a banana and took a bite. Maybe I did want him to flirt with me. It

didn't have to mean anything. Any healthy woman would love to flirt with a handsome veterinarian like Lewis Grant. Didn't Milly and Diane show up here the other night for that exact same reason?

"No eating in the workplace," a stern voice yelled, and I almost jumped out of my skin. The banana broke in two and fell out my hand, leaving sticky stains on the printed-out appointment schedule in front of me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," Darren said with a laugh. He tapped on the reception desk with his fingers. "I'm going to run out and grab some lunch from Dave's Diner. Lewis said you two are going to handle the fake dragon together, which means I get an extra-long break. Do you want me to bring you back anything?"

"Maybe a fresh banana? This one's ruined after you scared me."

Darren rubbed his chin. "Hmm, I could do that. Or, here's another idea... Ask Lewis if you can have one of his."

"Excuse me?"

"From the bunch in his drawer."

"He's got a bunch of bananas in his office? Why?"

He shrugged. "The guy goes jogging so much, I swear he keeps at least ten bananas in his desk drawer at all times. I'm sure he'll give you one if you ask him nicely."

He sauntered outside, chuckling to himself, and I was left with no way of knowing whether or not he would bring me a fresh piece of fruit.

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I liked Darren, though. I had seen him around town before, but we'd never really talked or anything. Still, he'd welcomed me at Pine Paw Prints with open arms. It felt good to work in such a friendly environment.

My job at Sip'nBean hadn't been a bad experience, but my boss had a knack for making me feel like I didn't do enough, despite the fact I could serve ten different types of coffee to ten different people in record time. She also hated that I walked dogs, afraid I'd get dog hair in my customers' coffee. As if that would ever happen, except for that one unfortunate time when it did. Everyone makes mistakes, right?

All things considered, Pine Paw Prints was a much better match for me. Lori would be at home with mono for several weeks, and Lewis had told me I might be able to stay on part-time after she returned. He planned on expanding the clinic, which meant he would need more personnel anyway.

At twelve thirty on the dot, Lily walked in with her father. I greeted them and gently knocked on Lewis's door before letting the pair of them in.

"Thanks so much for doing this," her father said in hushed tones. "We could try and argue with her about the existence of Drake, but that only increases her anxiety."

"Of course," I replied with a smile. "It's our pleasure to take care of Drake."

The girl and her dad took a seat in the chairs at the other end of Lewis's desk. I stood to the side, not wanting to draw too much attention to myself. I'd hand Lewis some equipment when he examined the imaginary dragon, but apart from that, I didn't want to meddle.

“Welcome, Lily,” Lewis said. “I’m Doctor Grant, the new vet here at Pine Paw Prints.”

The girl dangled her feet. “My name is Lily. And this is my dad, James. He drove me and Drake here.”

Without missing a beat, Lewis folded his hands and leaned forward. “Tell me, Lily, what seems to be the matter with Drake?”

“He got into a fight with the neighbor’s cat, and now he’s limping. It’s so sad to see him like this. Can you make the pain go away for him?”

The girl looked so sad, she tugged on my heartstrings.

Lewis nodded and gave her a big smile. “A fight with the cat, huh. Why don’t you put Drake on the examination table so I can get a good look at him?”

Lily got up and leaped to the table while James looked at her with a mixture of relief and concern. The girl placed a patch of air down, and Lewis took his spot at the side of the table, pretending to examine the injured leg.

Lily cocked her head sideways. “Why are you holding his head?”

“I just want to get a complete picture of his health,” Lewis said, without so much as flinching. Then he turned to me. “Olive, could you hand me the Ladricon spray, please?”

I grabbed the bottle for him. When our hands touched, the hairs on my arm shot straight up. Lewis met my eye for only a second and smiled at me.

“Shouldn’t you take an X-ray first?” Lily asked.

Lewis shook his head. “It’s just a small sprain. Nothing a bit of Ladricon spray won’t fix.”

There was no such thing as Ladricon spray, but Lily didn’t need to know that. Lewis had put some saline solution into an empty spray bottle and printed out a fake label. When he showed me before, my heart had melted. Not many guys would do such a sweet thing, especially not for an animal that didn’t exist. He had even told me not to charge James for the visit.

He handed the bottle to James. “If you use this spray twice a day, the injury should be completely healed by the weekend.”

“Does that mean he’s going to be okay?” the little girl asked.

Lewis knelt down in front of her and took her hands in his. “He is going to be so healthy, he’ll never lose another fight again.”

Lily threw her hands around his neck. “Thank you, Doctor. I love you very much.”

He laughed. “Aw, that’s sweet. Why don’t you go with Olive and grab a lollipop from the candy jar while I talk to your dad?”

The girl’s eyes sparkled. “Can I, Daddy?”

James nodded. “Of course. I’ll be right out.”

Lily followed me to the reception area and chose a red lollipop from the jar. I took the plastic wrapper off for her, and she popped it in her mouth. “My mom used to say I couldn’t eat too many of these. She said candy isn’t healthy. Is that true?”

“It is,” I said. “Too much sugar is not a good idea.”

“Oh, okay. I guess I didn’t know if she had lied about it or not. My mom once told me a big lie.”

“She did?”

Lily pulled the lollipop out of her mouth. “She told me she’d be eighty years old one day. But daddy says she only got to be thirty.”

I swallowed. No wonder this sweet little girl had conjured up an imaginary dragon. It was probably her way of dealing with the death of her mom.

“Well, I don’t think your mother lied, sweetie. I’m absolutely sure she wanted to grow really old and wrinkled. But sometimes, things don’t go the way we want them to.”

“Like when Santa doesn’t bring you the toy you were hoping for?”

I smiled at her. “Kind of like that, yes.”

James came out of the examination room and shook Lewis’s hand. “Thanks again. I really appreciate it. You too,” he said to me. He then turned to Lily. “Are you ready to go, sweetie? I’ve got Drake right here with me. Let’s go home and get him tucked in, okay?”

The girl ran to her father. “I’ll hold him, Daddy, if you hold my lollipop for me.”

She pretended to take the dragon from her father’s arms and smiled at me. “Thank you for the candy.”

The two of them left, and the clinic grew silent. Lewis looked as emotional as I felt.

We walked to the employees' lounge without speaking and shared a pot of fresh coffee. The next patient wasn't due to arrive for another half hour, so we had time to sit in silence together.

"What did you tell him?" I asked when both our cups were empty. "It's all just so heartbreaking. I could hardly keep it together."

Lewis nodded. "I told James he's doing an amazing job and asked him if he needs someone to talk to. Being a widower at this age can't be easy."

I put my hand on his. "That's really sweet of you."

He turned his hand around and gave mine a squeeze. His eyes searched mine, making my heart race. I was positive he was going to say or do something romantic. Heck, I wanted him to, there was no more denying it.

His thumb caressed my skin. I leaned closer, ready for whatever was coming next.

"Do you want to have dinner tonight?" he blurted out. "I know you were supposed to come over tomorrow, but I just can't wait to cook for you."

My smile grew, reaching all the way to my eyes. I intertwined my fingers with his, my heart almost exploding. "Like a dinner date?"

The anticipation of the answer sent shivers down my spine. Lewis smiled at me, opening his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, the phone rang.

We both immediately went back to professional mode – me answering the phone and communicating to Lewis that there was an emergency at the Old Pine Cove Inn, him gathering his things to drive down there right away.

And just like that, poof, the magic moment between us was gone.

Chapter Thirteen

Lewis

As I sped away to attend to an emergency at the local inn, I couldn't help wondering if hiring Olive had been such a good idea after all.

I loved having her around, and she did an amazing job – especially considering she had no experience as a receptionist for a medical facility – but things were getting too intense between us. When she put her hand on mine, stirring up feelings that weren't work-appropriate, I found myself asking her out on a date before I knew what I was saying. But there wasn't any way out of this. I was stuck. I couldn't exactly fire her, and I also couldn't date her now that she was my employee. Unless...

No. I shook the thought away. I had promised myself I wouldn't get tangled up in something like that ever again, and I never broke a promise. Sue had been my employee as well. We'd been so happy together until she backstabbed me, snatched up my position as chief vet, and left me feeling horrible about myself. Not to mention the lies she'd spread about me. Thinking about it made me boil with rage. I couldn't let myself go there again. I'd just tell Olive that me asking her to dinner had nothing to do with romantic feelings. We both lived alone, and eating together was nothing more than a fun way of beating the loneliness. Right?

Even that lie couldn't get Olive out of my head. Judging by the way I'd seen her look at me in between surgeries, the feeling was mutual.

My phone rang, and I picked up it through the hands-free car set, glad for the distraction. "Doctor Grant speaking."

“Hi, Lewis.” Olive’s warm voice filled the car. “I was able to reschedule all non-urgent appointments. Darren is going to help the ones who only need blood samples taken, and the rest of your patients have been pushed back a few hours. There was one person I couldn’t reach, but I’ll deal with her when she shows up. Anyway, just wanted to let you know I’ll hold down the fort for you.”

“Thanks for that, Olive. I know you were supposed to have the afternoon off.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll take Archie out for a walk after you get back.” I heard the sound of ruffling papers and barking. “Sorry, I’ve gotta go. I think Darren might need my help with a puppy.”

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I disconnected the call and continued my drive. Ten minutes later, I parked my car in front of the Old Pine Cove Inn, where a woman with a worried look on her face stood waiting, right next to a guy I recognized from the movies. I squinted my eyes to get a better look. Was that Crocodile Man?

I got out of the car, and the guy hurried toward me. “Doctor Grant? I’m Justin, and this is my wife, Addy. Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

“Of course,” I said. “It’s all part of the job. Why don’t you show me the way?”

I didn’t want to waste any time. Every minute counted when an animal’s life was at stake.

“It’s Beau, our dog,” Justin said, hurrying me inside. “Normally, he hangs out over at the petting zoo and loves to play with Kermit, our alpaca. But this morning, he’s hardly moved from his spot. Addy kept an eye on him while manning the reception desk, but about half an hour ago, he started panting and heaving.”

I kneeled down next to the chocolate Labrador and immediately spotted his bloated abdomen. That, together with the lethargy, panting and heaving, made me suspect the worst. I lifted the dog’s mouth to look at his gums, which unfortunately were pale.

“I’m going to take Beau with me to the clinic. I don’t want you to panic, but I suspect he’s got a twisted stomach, which we call gastric dilatation-volvulus. If I don’t treat him right away, he’ll die.”

Addy gasped. Justin put his arm around her. “Don’t worry, babe, I’ll drive to the

clinic with Doctor Grant.” He looked at me. “If that’s okay?”

“Of course. Let’s get your buddy into the car.”

We secured a spot for Beau in the backseat. Justin sat next to the animal and talked soothingly to him while I gunned it back to the clinic. I knew I needed to stabilize Beau as soon as possible and as fast as possible. Every second counted.

As I drove, I called Olive at the clinic. She picked up after one ring. “Pine Paw Prints, this is Olive speaking, how may I help you?” she asked in a chipper voice.

“Olive, it’s Lewis. I need Darren to prepare the operating room right away. Tell him I’ve got a dog with GDV coming in.”

She disconnected the call to get Darren to prep. We were five minutes out, tops, and I hoped the dog would survive.

“Are you okay back there?” I asked Justin.

“Yeah, I’m hanging in there,” he said. “Thanks again for showing up so fast. My wife and I got this dog right after our daughter was born, and we can’t imagine life without him. He’s such a big part of our family.”

I looked at him through the rearview mirror. “I’m going to do everything in my power to save him.”

“Thanks, man,” he said. Then he leaned back in his seat. “I wish we’d met under more relaxing circumstances, by the way. Judging from your accent, you’re not from around here originally?”

“That’s right. I made the move from England a few weeks ago.”

He whistled between his teeth. “That sounds like a challenging endeavor. How are you liking Old Pine Cove so far? You don’t have to answer, but this talking is helping me cope with the anxiety about Beau’s condition.”

“No worries,” I said. “This town is starting to grow on me. I’m not used to the side effects of such a small community, though, like everyone knowing everything. I’m sure it’ll feel normal soon enough.”

He laughed. “Definitely. When I moved back here, I had quite some adjusting to do.”

“You’re an actor, is that right? I feel like I know you from somewhere, and I think it’s from the movies.”

“Yup, I am.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I traveled the entire world for my job, only to discover the love of my life was right here in the Cove.”

The traffic light we’d been waiting at turned to green, and I took the last turn I needed to before finally arriving at Pine Paw Prints, where Darren and Olive were waiting for us in the car park. I rushed Beau inside, Darren following on my heels, and we got to work. First, we placed intravenous catheters and administered fluids as well as antibiotics. Moving the dog from the inn to the clinic had been risky, but I couldn’t work on him without my equipment.

Luckily, he seemed to stabilize so we could do an X-ray. That confirmed my suspicions with one hundred percent certainty.

“It’s GDV, no doubt about it,” said Darren, who had just finished getting blood samples.

I put on scrubs, and Darren followed suit. Despite the fact that we’d only been working together for a short period of time, we were like a well-oiled machine.

I opened up the dog, wanting to decompress his stomach right away to lower the risk of complications. I carefully inserted a large needle into the stomach cavity to get the fluid out. After moving the stomach back to its normal location, I inspected the organ and surrounding tissue for damage. It seemed we were lucky, as the damage was minimal. The spleen could be saved, something that was not always that easy with GDV cases.

After suturing the animal, we transferred him to the recovery room. He would have to stay at the clinic and be monitored constantly for at least twenty-four hours. Dinner with Olive was out of the question entirely now. Part of me felt bad about it, but there was also a feeling of relief. At least now I wouldn't cross any lines with her.

I threw my scrub mask away and helped Darren clean the OR. I knew I had to get a move on with hiring extra veterinarians. We had our hands full with one operation, not to mention the patients we had to reschedule because of it. What if another emergency occurred? I couldn't stomach the thought of having an animal die because we didn't have a big enough facility to treat it. I really needed to look at the applications I'd received for the job I posted earlier. I'd be stuck at the clinic overnight anyway, so I might as well make good use of my downtime.

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After leaving Beau with Darren, I got to speak to Justin, who was still sitting in the waiting area. He jumped up as soon as he saw me. “How is Beau? Did he survive the surgery?” His eyes were full of fear.

I sat myself down next to him. “The surgery was successful, and Beau’s stable now. We’re going to keep him overnight, though. He needs medication and constant monitoring.”

Justin let out a sigh. “What a relief. I’m going to call Addy right away and let her know Beau’s stable. Honestly, she’s so stressed about him, I’m worried. She’s pregnant again,” he said in a low voice. “But please don’t tell anyone. It’s early days yet.”

I patted Justin on the shoulder. “Congratulations, man. And don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me. Patient-doctor confidentiality, remember?”

“Thanks. It’s not easy being in the spotlight sometimes. Everyone wants to know everything about you. Secrets tend to find a way to get out, so I learned to keep my mouth shut instead.” He let out a yawn. “Sorry about that.”

“That’s okay. You’ve been here for quite some time. It’s best you go home. I’ll call you in the morning to give you an update on Beau’s condition.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, man. You saved his life,” Justin said.

I shook my head. “No need. Saving lives is part of my job.”

“I’ll buy you a beer soon. Are you coming to the fundraiser?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Milly asked me to be part of the auction, but I don’t know if I want people to bid on me, to have dinner with me. It feels weird.”

“I know, but it’s all harmless,” he said with a laugh. “Whether you get auctioned off or not, come and find me that night for a beer, okay?”

“Definitely.”

He left Pine Paw Prints, and I retreated to my office. A pink Post-it note had been attached to my computer screen. I peeled it off. “Archie and I are out for a walk,” the note read. “Be back soon. P.S. Look in your drawer.”

I slid open the top drawer of my desk, wondering what I’d discover there. A small package lay atop my patient files, wrapped in yesterday’s newspaper. Whatever was inside felt small, but heavy. I carefully removed the wrapping. As I uncovered the gift, I realized it was a crystal ball. Another small note was attached to the bottom.

At least now, you can carry a crystal ball with you in your pants at all times and find guidance when you need it. Olive.

I laughed, shaking my head. I tossed the ball in the air and caught it in my palm. Keeping my distance from Olive was getting harder and harder with each unexpected gesture of hers.

Chapter Fourteen

Olive

“Come on, Archie,” I said, getting a bit desperate. “Just do your business for me,

please?”

The Akita looked at me as if I had uttered an insane request. Or I could have been imagining it, of course. Did dogs have thoughts like that about humans, or were their facial expressions misleading us? It was quite possible that Archie was thinking about the dog treats I kept in my pocket, or the squirrel he'd like to chase. I had no clue. All I knew for sure was that time was ticking away, and I wanted to return to Pine Paw Prints as soon as possible. Lewis would probably be exhausted after that emergency surgery and all the patients he still had to see before dinner, but I couldn't go back before Archie finally chose a spot to relieve himself.

We walked a bit further, passing several trees until lo and behold, Archie squatted down. I turned my head to give the dog a little privacy. He probably didn't care, but it felt like the right thing to do.

Across the street, a group of women stood huddled together. I squinted my eyes. As far as I could tell, Milly and Leanne were chatting with Melissa, who had promoted herself to dog whisperer now. Honestly, sometimes all I wanted to do was grab her by the shoulders and shake some sense into her. That, and some humbleness. I was pretty sure she'd never even heard of arrogance being a despicable characteristic.

Milly spotted me and waved me over. I peeked over my shoulder to check on Archie's progress. He was all done. I squatted down myself and produced a bag from my pocket to scoop his poop up. I threw the bag into a nearby trash can and crossed the street.

“Hi, ladies,” I said, trying to avoid eye contact with Melissa.

“Is that Lewis's dog? He looks so fierce and big,” Milly said, her expression full of awe.

Leanne nodded approvingly. “He kind of looks like a bear, don’t you think? All big and cuddly.”

“Kind of like his owner,” Melissa said. She talked as if she had experienced firsthand how big and cuddly Lewis was. It took everything I had not to roll my eyes at her.

She tapped a finger to her chin while studying Archie. “You know, you should tell Lewis to book a session with me. I sense his dog has an identity crisis.”

One of my eyebrows shot up. “You can sense that? And you believe dogs can have an identity crisis?”

“Look at him,” she said, motioning toward the dog. “Like Leanne said, he looks like a bear. What do you think goes through his head when he sees himself in the mirror? Is he a dog? Is he a bear? Is he some sort of crossover? The poor thing is probably confused beyond measure.”

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I looked down at Archie, who quietly sat beside me, oblivious to all that was being said and going on around him. He didn't appear to be doubting anything about himself.

"Honestly, all Archie cares about is running around, playing, sleeping, and eating. His identity is not a problem."

She shrugged. "That's what you say, but a dog whisperer like me knows the truth. I'll call Lewis myself then."

"Speaking of Lewis, has he decided about entering the auction?" Milly asked. "If not, I should swing by and talk to him again. It would be such a fantastic opportunity for the town if he entered."

I held up a hand. "I don't know, but please don't swing by right now. Lewis has been dealing with an emergency and still needs to see a lot of patients before dinner. He won't have time to talk about the auction."

"Really? What happened?" Leanne asked.

All three women stared at me expectantly, their looks urging me to spill the beans, but I knew better. Anything you said around here could be used against you.

"I can't talk about that, sorry."

Melissa winked at me. "Patient confidentiality, right? I know what you mean. I deal with that all the time with my new business. The things I have heard..."

Unbelievable.”

How was that even possible? She walked dogs. And whispered at them, apparently. It wasn't as if they were going to spill their greatest secrets to her at the dog park or confide in her that they'd seen their owners naked while showering and how weird that was for them.

“Will you ask Lewis to call me then?” Milly asked.

“And if he can't be convinced, let him call me,” Melissa said. “I'm certain I can make him change his mind, if you know what I mean.” She slapped her hand in front of her face and giggled, making me almost vomit in my mouth.

“How are things going with the fundraiser anyway?” I asked, trying to subtly change the subject.

“Suzie's going to sell the bestselling books of the moment at a big discount, and she's going to donate all profits she makes off of her own books as well. Oh, and Alex is going to make snacks,” Leanne said. “Dave will be serving hamburgers, of course, and Justin Miller will have a booth where you can get a selfie with him dressed as Crocodile Man.”

“And your tarot readings will probably draw a crowd as well,” Milly said, smiling at me.

Melissa threw her a closemouthed smile. “Don't forget about me. I'm gifting a few of my rhinestone collars to the silent auction. They should raise quite some dollars.”

“That all sounds good,” I said. “It's nice to see the community come together like this.”

“What about you? Will you go back to Sip’nBean if and when we get the place up and running again?” Milly asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, working at the clinic is turning out to be great.”

“But Lori will return at some point, won’t she?” Melissa asked. “Her husband told me she’ll be out for a few weeks, but after that, I’m sure she’ll want her job back.”

What had I ever done to Melissa for her to treat me like this? She never directly insulted me, but all her comments were always underhanded.

Next to me, Archie was getting restless. “I don’t know what to tell you except we’ll see what happens. And frankly, it’s none of your business,” I told Melissa.

She gasped and looked genuinely shocked. Leanne and Milly shared a look. My comment would be the talk of the town now, no doubt about it.

“Well, I’ve got to head back to the clinic,” I said and waved the three of them goodbye.

Archie was happy to be moving again, and so was I. I didn’t know why it bothered me so much that Melissa clearly had a thing for Lewis. Maybe the fact that she thought she could snatch him up without effort? Or even that he was hers to snatch up as if Lewis didn’t have a say in the matter at all.

I decided to pick up a pizza from Pete’s Slices. Lewis must be starving after such a long day. I placed my order and waited at one of the outside tables as dogs weren’t allowed inside. Archie lay down at my feet after lapping up fresh water from a bowl one of the waiters had brought out for him.

The tables were decorated with small vases filled with fake flowers. The napkin

holders all featured a stack of flyers. I fished them out and went through them. Most were for local businesses, offering a ten percent discount when showing the flyer. I wondered if it would be considered appropriate or not to shove the entire stack in my handbag.

I chuckled as I came across a flyer for my parents' hamster hotel. Mom had clearly drawn up the entire thing with one of those free online tools. The tagline was pretty clever, though. It read: "Let your hamster unwind while you are too. Full hamster hotel with exclusive perks and a stunning garden view."

I wouldn't exactly call the view of Mom and Dad's garden stunning, but that was marketing, right? You just had to word it in a way that piqued people's interest. I made a mental note to call my parents later and ask about their new business. It had been a while since we'd sat down and talked like a family. Living on my own was becoming easier every day, but I still missed having them around despite the fact they could annoy me to no end sometimes.

Fifteen minutes later, the pizzas were ready, and Archie and I made our way back to the clinic. I balanced the hot food in one hand while keeping a strong grip on Archie's leash with the other. No matter how sweet he was, he weighed one hundred and ten pounds and could easily pull me to the ground if I wasn't careful.

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I stepped inside of Pine Paw Prints and headed straight for the kitchen to grab some plates. I filled a bowl of water for Archie, then went to look for Lewis. He was checking Beau's stats in the recovery room and jumped when he saw me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," I said.

His face lit up as his gaze traveled to the pizza boxes I was holding. "You brought food."

"I did. I figured you'd be hungry."

He smiled. "Starved, actually."

I put the boxes down on the desk in the corner and put a slice on each plate. We sat down on a couple of plastic chairs.

"This is probably not what you had in mind when I mentioned having dinner together," he said in between bites.

"What do you mean? I love pizza," I said with a wink. "This is perfect."

"Just like my ball," he said. "I mean, the one you gave me. Made out of crystal. Anyway, I wanted to thank you for that gift."

I laughed, almost choking on a piece of pizza. Classy. "I'm happy you love your crystal ball. I love playing with mine when I'm feeling stressed."

Lewis's eyes grew wide, and then he started laughing uncontrollably. He slapped his piece of pizza down and bent over, holding his shaking stomach.

I shook my head and rolled my eyes, but still, I was amused. "Oh, come on, Lewis. It wasn't that funny."

Tears streamed down his face, and I couldn't help but join in. For an entire minute, we cracked up laughing. Every time I thought I'd regained my composure, he looked at me, and we started all over again.

"No more talk of crystal balls, okay?" I said.

He bobbed his head up and down. "It's been a long time since I've had someone to laugh with like this."

"I'm sure that's not true," I said.

"It is."

"Come on, a guy like you?"

He wiped away a few tears with his fingers. "I never told you why I left England, did I?"

"You did," I said. "Alexander Kline was ready to sell, and it was the perfect opportunity for you to run your own clinic."

He folded his hands. "That part is true, but there's more to it."

"Oh?"

His eyes searched my face. “Are you sure you want to hear about this?”

“Of course I do,” I said, throwing him a warm smile. “I want to know everything there is to know about you, Lewis.”

Chapter Fifteen

Lewis

I took another bite of the pizza Olive had brought with her and munched it slowly before speaking. “My big move was not just for professional reasons,” I started. “There was a woman involved as well.”

Olive’s soft gaze found my eyes and made my insides burn with desire. “I figured as much. She must’ve hurt you pretty bad to push you across the ocean.”

I flinched, thinking about Sue. “She did. You see, we worked at the same vet clinic. We often worked on cases together and performed surgeries side by side. Basically, we were spending lots of time together, sometimes even weekends and overnight. We grew to like each other, but I knew dating a coworker was unacceptable. I mean, I was her supervisor. It seemed unprofessional to me. Sue, however, was always pushing me to take it further. She convinced me to start a secret relationship.”

Olive drew in a breath. “She must’ve been madly in love with you.”

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I shook my head. “That’s what I thought. I believed she wanted to be together so badly that she’d do anything, even hide our relationship and spend important occasions like Christmas and birthdays alone. But it turned out I was wrong.”

“She dumped you?”

“Worse,” I said. “I knew she was ambitious and wanted to be chief vet like I did, but I never realized she’d go to such great lengths to achieve that goal. After we had been together for five months, she went to my boss and told him I had sexually harassed her. That I had pushed her into a relationship, and that she’d agreed out of fear of repercussions. Bollocks, of course.”

Olive threw me a sympathetic look. “That’s horrible.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I know. I lost my job. I lost the woman I loved and who I thought loved me back. I lost credibility in our community because who’s going to believe a hotshot vet over a female vet in training? I figured moving as far away as possible would be best. You know, clean slate and all that.”

Olive looked shocked by my revelation. “Well, couldn’t you tell them it was nothing but lies? Show them messages, emails, anything that could serve as proof?”

“I tried, but no one wanted to listen to me.” I hesitated for a moment before continuing to speak. “I just wanted to forget the whole thing as fast as possible anyway, so I didn’t push it any further. I didn’t even tell my mum because I felt so ashamed.”

Olive scooted closer and put her hand on my arm. The hairs on my neck shot straight up. I wished my body would stop reacting to her like that. It was no use anyway. We could never act upon any feelings between us if there was even such a thing as true feelings between us.

“Sue should be the one feeling ashamed, not you. Seriously, what kind of a person does something like that? It’s so unfair and horrible. Not only to you but also to everyone who has really been harassed.” She paused for a moment. “I can’t believe someone would do that. It’s just wrong on so many levels.”

“I know. After it happened and the dust had settled, I promised myself I’d never get emotionally involved with a coworker ever again. Nothing good can come of such a thing.”

Olive creased her brows, and a look of disappointment ran over her face, only briefly, but still noticeable. She licked her lips, playing with her hair before answering. “Never say never, right? Not everyone is as evil as Sue. There are still good women in the world.”

Like you? I wanted to ask but bit my tongue.

“There’s one thing I’m happy about, though. She didn’t put up a fight for Archie. It pains me to know she never truly loved him, but at least she didn’t try to steal him from me. He’s more important than any job.”

Olive wiped her mouth clean with a paper napkin. “Archie’s the best. I would put up a fight for him, no doubt about it.”

I laughed. “You’re not getting your hands on him, lady.”

“Who says I’d leave you and him if you guys were mine?”

Uh-oh, where did that come from? Was she being serious or still joking? Trying to make me feel better, maybe?

She ducked her chin and laughed. “Sorry, I have this problem where I just blurt out stuff without thinking about it first. You probably think I’m a desperate creep.”

“Quite the opposite actually,” I admitted.

“Really?” Her soft-looking mouth lifted up into a smile. Clearly, my answer made her feel happy.

Our eyes locked, and it was like I forgot everything I’d told myself, everything that had happened and could still happen. There was only now. And Olive. Olive’s lips, looking so inviting, begging me to kiss them.

We drew closer until our faces were only inches apart. Her fingers intertwined with mine, and my breath caught in my throat. I knew where this was going if I didn’t stop it. I had to stop.

“I can’t do this,” I said with a hoarse voice, yet ran my hand up her arm. “You’re my employee, this isn’t right.”

“I know,” she said, putting her hand on my neck. “It’s so wrong.”

“We should stop.”

“Definitely.”

I gently pulled her onto my lap, and fire spread through me. I lost the ability to think. Reason had made way for a hunger I didn’t know I had in me.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” I said again. “I promised myself I wouldn’t go there again.”

“No, we should be sensible adults and stop.”

Her gaze traveled to my mouth, and she bit on her lower lip, a soft gasp escaping her mouth. If she really wanted me to stop, she’d push me away. Instead, she leaned into me.

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I pulled her closer, and our lips finally met. The soft touch of her mouth made me delirious. I ran my hands all over her back, and she tousled my hair, gently tugging on the strands. Her hands then traveled over my scrub shirt, tracing the outline of my back through the fabric. She was killing me softly, slowly.

“Olive,” I murmured in between kisses.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered. “Please, never stop kissing me like this.”

My heart was about to explode. I looked into her eyes, and she giggled. I smiled back at her, then went for another taste of her lips.

This felt so wrong and yet so good at the same time. I’d never felt this with Sue. I’d never felt this with anyone, for that matter.

I let my hands travel up her arms. She let out a soft moan, and her voice only spurred me on. But then the sound of a phone call filling the clinic begged for our attention.

She pulled back, looking all startled and flushed.

“Leave it,” I said. “Let it ring.”

She shook her head. “It could be important.”

She was right. I was still on call, which meant I couldn’t exactly ignore the phone. We let go of each other, both looking like we’d just come back to Earth after a long voyage out in space.

“I’ll be right back,” Olive said in a husky voice. She blushed and tried to smooth her hair before disappearing into the hallway. She was so adorable, it almost hurt.

I took a few deep breaths and tried to come back to my senses. I walked over to the sink in the recovery room and splashed cold water in my face. I needed to get a grip. What had I done? Why had I let myself get carried away like that?

Olive popped her head back inside. “It’s Justin. He wants to know if he can get an update on Beau’s condition. His wife is worried sick as well. Apparently, she’s pregnant, and he’s afraid the stress will harm the baby.”

I nodded. “Of course, I understand. I’ll take the call in my office. Do you mind staying here and keeping an eye on Beau? I know he’s sleeping, but I don’t want to take any chances.”

She nodded before heading back to the reception desk to transfer the call.

I had taken enough risks already today. I just hoped neither of us would regret it later. I sure didn’t, even though I had no clue what to do or expect next.

Chapter Sixteen

Olive

Lewis shut his office door behind him, and I slid myself onto a chair. Archie stirred in his sleep, his paws twitching.

I smiled as I touched my lips with my fingers. The same lips Lewis had just kissed. Gah, it had been so amazing. But now what?

That’s the thing with crossing a line with your boss. It probably gets awkward after

the fact, and you still have to work together. I couldn't even blame him if he told me it was all a big mistake because he had told me to stop. He had told me he didn't want to date a coworker.

But if all of that was true, then why did those kisses feel so good? There had been a passion in the room that I'd never experienced before. Stefano had definitely never managed to stir those feelings up inside of me. The chemistry we used to share didn't come close to what I had just experienced. Heck, even calling it chemistry with my ex-boyfriend stretched it too far.

Stefano was like a dry sandwich, and Lewis a giant cinnamon roll. Stefano was like a salad, and Lewis a complete meal with extra fries on the side. Yeah, that was it. Lewis was exciting and fresh, whereas Stefano was bland and safe. Not to mention the lame move he'd pulled with chickening out on our relationship.

A feeling of dread crept over me. What if Lewis flaked out as well? I didn't feel like finding out. Maybe it would be better to ignore everything that had happened between us.

I sighed. As if. I had fallen under the same 'Lewis effect' the rest of the town's women had seemed to succumb to.

With one difference. He had kissed none of them, and all of me. I grinned, thinking back to how his hands had caressed me. Could a guy like Lewis truly like someone like me? Someone with weird passions like tarot card readings for dogs? Or had it been nothing but a temporary bout of lust?

I decided to remain professional and not talk about it for the rest of the night. I'd pretend to catch up on some paperwork, then go home and obsess about what this all meant without Lewis around. That sounded fair, no? He had Beau to focus on after all. The last thing I wanted was to jeopardize his patient's health.

Five minutes later, Lewis appeared at my desk.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. I told Justin Beau is doing well, considering the circumstances.”

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“Do you want me to stay and keep you company overnight?”

A part of me hoped he'd say yes, but he shook his head. “That's okay. At least one of us should get some sleep. Will you get home okay?”

“Yeah, I could use a walk,” I said, trying not to show how disappointed I was that we weren't going to continue our make-out session, or at least talk about it.

“Oh, and Olive?”

“Yes?”

“We should talk about what happened,” he said as if reading my mind. “This weekend, perhaps?”

I smiled at him and grabbed my handbag. “Sounds good.”

“Well, good night then,” he said.

I didn't know whether to pull him into a hug and give him a goodnight kiss or be professional and do nothing. I squeezed past him, throwing him a quick smile. The look on his face let me know he was facing the same internal dilemma as me.

He grinned and waved his hand at me. It was awkward, but not because we regretted what had happened. At least, not where I was concerned. For me, it was more the thought of how I'd let my hands run all over his scrub shirt as if it were the normal thing to do.

As I left the clinic, breathing in the fresh evening air, I let out a big sigh. I needed it. This entire night had been so confusing, so enthralling... I needed something to take my mind off it all.

I rummaged around in my bag until I found my headphones. The walk home was the perfect opportunity to continue listening to my Daisy Dollops audiobook. She was the kind of amateur sleuth I looked up to. Daisy was courageous, bold, and sweet as a cookie.

I crossed the street and started my walk home, completely intrigued by the story. As I passed the community garden to my left, a dark shape startled me. A set of piercing eyes stared at me, making me jump. I froze for a moment, then decided I should at least investigate. I paused the audiobook and let my headphones dangle from my neck.

With one hand on my phone, I opened the gate to the community garden, ready to dial the cops if needed. I might have looked up to Daisy, who went into every situation without an ounce of fear, but I myself wasn't that brave.

The dark figure jumped up from between the rhubarb patches, making me shriek. The creature threw me a curious look, and I laughed.

"Hey there, buddy. Are you lost?" I asked when I realized I was dealing with a dog and not some ancient monster.

The furry animal let out a bark in response.

I gently stepped closer with my hand extended. Thank goodness I carried my small bag of dog treats everywhere. The dog approached me and eagerly swallowed the treat down. My heart skipped a beat when I looked at his adorable face. He, or she, was still a puppy, and I wondered who would leave such a sweet-looking dog to its

own devices.

“Wow, you’re hungry. Don’t you have an owner?” I asked.

I looked at his neck but didn’t spot a name tag. He had mats and tangles in his red-colored fur, making me doubt he had a place to live. A quick gender check revealed the puppy was a she, not a he.

“Poor thing,” I said in a soothing voice. “Why don’t you come home with me, and we’ll see if we can find out more about you tomorrow?”

All it took for the dog to follow me was another treat.

“What should I call you?” I asked as she trotted next to me. “How about Rhubarb? Seems appropriate if you think about where I found you.”

Rhubarb barked in response, although it was probably nothing but a plea for more treats. I bent down and rubbed her small head. “I’m sorry, honey. Too many treats are bad for you.”

Before I walked into my street, I picked Rhubarb up and held her in my arms. I tried to shield her from being seen by placing my handbag in front of her. I knew pets weren’t allowed in the building, but come on, it was only for one night. What harm could a small fluffy animal like her do?

I put the dog on the floor in my living room. She immediately started exploring every corner of the room. It was adorable to see her running around, her little tail wiggling with delight.

Rhubarb stopped next to the couch and whined, looking at me with pleading eyes. Aw. My heart melted instantly.

“You want to go on the couch?” I asked, gently picking her up.

The dog snuggled herself against my favorite pillow. The poor thing must’ve been exhausted. Who knew how long she’d been roaming the streets without someone to turn to for safety and comfort?

I got a bowl out of my cupboards and filled it with water. Then I put a portion of dog food in another bowl. I always kept a small bag around to bring with me whenever I attended a fair or event where people had to wait in line to have their dog’s cards read. It sure came in handy now.

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The bowl had only just touched the ground when a knock landed on the door. Rhubarb jumped up, equally curious about who would drop by unannounced at this hour.

I peered through the peephole in the front door, and my heart did a double take. “Just a minute,” I called out. “I’m, uh, naked.”

I looked at Rhubarb, praying she wouldn’t start barking. The knocker had turned out to be Jim, my landlord. If he knew I had a dog in there, he would freak out. No matter how tiny and impractical my shoebox of an apartment was, I liked living there.

“Come here, girl,” I whispered.

I scooped the dog up in my arms and frantically turned around a couple of times. Where was I going to put her?

There was another knock on the door. “Is everything okay in there?”

“Just fine, I’m still getting dressed.”

Okay, this was getting ridiculous. The time I was taking made it look as if I was putting on a skiing outfit when it was summer already and some light clothing would suffice.

I pushed the bowl of dog food into the bathroom, flipped on the light, and put Rhubarb down in front of the bowl.

“I’ll be right back. Enjoy,” I said before shutting the door. I then rushed to open the door for Jim. “Good evening, Jim. How can I help you?”

“Do you mind if I come in?” he asked, his eyebrows raised.

I blew out a breath of air. “Yeah, of course, come on in.”

I didn’t offer him a seat or a drink. I wasn’t normally this rude, but I hoped making him stand would also make him leave faster.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

He scratched his head. “Well, Diane told me you have an animal in here. A rat or something? Anyway, pets are not allowed in the building.”

I nodded. “I know, but I think Diane must’ve been mistaken.”

“Really? Because she sounded pretty convinced to me,” he said while peeking over my shoulder to scan the room for illegal residents.

He was looking straight at the bathroom. I didn’t want him to become suspicious, so I grabbed his arm and twirled him around. “Ooooh,” I sang. “She was wrooong.”

I came across as crazy, but at least now, Jim was facing my couch and not my bathroom.

“Olive, are you okay?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes, sorry, I’m taking singing lessons, and I’m practicing every opportunity I get.”

He frowned. "You're acting suspicious. Like a tenant who has something to hide." His tone came out all accusatory.

"Okay, so here's the deal," I said. "I work at the vet clinic now, and Diane saw me there with a patient. I swear the animal didn't belong to me."

"What's that bag of dog food doing there?" he asked with a triumphant look, pointing at the table where the opened bag stood. He acted like the thing was a murder weapon, and he was the proud detective to have caught it. "Maybe you don't have a rat in here, but a dog."

"Oh, that's just testing material from the clinic."

He put a hand on his hip. "Who's testing it then?"

I swallowed. Any minute now and Rhubarb would start scratching the bathroom door to be let out, or worse, bark. I had to think of something.

"Me," I said. "That's right, I'm testing it."

"You?" he asked, clearly disgusted.

I nodded. "Totally. So now that you know the truth, I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go. My stomach isn't reacting so well to this dog food. The experiment has failed for sure."

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I clutched my belly with both hands for emphasis. If things didn't work out at the clinic, I could definitely become an actress.

Jim walked to the front door, his forehead creased with concern. "Do you need me to call someone?"

I could hear a soft whimper coming from the bathroom. My time to improvise was up.

"No," I said, then leaned forward and let out an imaginary cry of pain. "Ouch, it hurts. I'm sorry, the toilet is calling me."

Those words seemed to do the trick. Jim ran out with a look of horror on his face, and I closed the door behind him. I could hear his footsteps echoing on the stairs. He was clearly in a hurry to get away from me.

As soon as the sound of his footsteps had died away, I rushed to the bathroom to let Rhubarb out. The dog had eaten a small portion of the food, but apparently, the other things in there had seemed more appealing to her.

A complete roll of toilet paper lay unrolled on my floor, and one of my slippers had been chewed on. The bathroom towel I kept on a hook next to the sink was draped on the floor and seemed to be wet. Did she pee on it, or was it just saliva? Either way, I'd need to get that towel washed.

Rhubarb looked up at me with her innocent puppy eyes. How could I get mad at her now? I scooped her up in my arms and cuddled her.

“Aren’t you the cutest? Don’t trash my bathroom again, though,” I said.

She licked my face, making me laugh.

I could hardly believe how amazing it was to have a living creature around again. The loneliness of living on my own had impacted me more than I had cared to admit to myself. Letting go of Rhubarb to find a suitable home for her was going to be hard, despite the fact she’d only been in my life for an hour.

Sometimes it takes a lifetime to connect with a person or animal you meet. Sometimes that connection never even comes. And sometimes, you meet another soul, and you instantly click with them.

Like little Rhubarb.

And Lewis. Most definitely Lewis.

Chapter Seventeen

Lewis

After spending the entire night with Beau at the clinic, I was pleased to call Justin and tell him their dog was doing much better. Addy and Justin picked him up looking all happy and excited.

I, on the other hand, was a mess. The exhaustion was something I had become accustomed to over the years, so that was a minor inconvenience. What really bothered me was the way I had left things with Olive.

I had driven straight home after releasing Beau. My scrubs were now in the laundry basket, and hot water ran over my tired body as I enjoyed a much-needed shower.

That kiss with Olive had been magical, even though it was wrong on so many levels. I normally wasn't the kind of guy who broke his promises that easily, especially not a promise I had made to myself in order to protect my heart. But wow, I just had to kiss her.

I grinned as I thought about her sweet laugh, her cute smile, her perfect curves. At any other time in my life, I would have chosen to go all-in and start a relationship with her. If she wanted to, of course. But now, so soon after getting my heart and trust broken... Doubts filled my head.

But as I soaped up my body, it clicked. Sue had taken so much from me already. She'd broken my heart, tainted my professional career. Heck, she even sent me running across the pond. Why would I be stupid enough to let her ruin a new chance at love? I couldn't let one mistake hold me back from moving on. Letting Sue have this kind of power over my love life was ridiculous. It had to stop.

The realization that I could do as I pleased felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Yes, Olive could potentially break my heart, but I'd be better off losing again than never trying.

That still didn't solve the biggest problem of all, though.

Olive was still my employee. I didn't want to mix business and pleasure. That was something Sue had taught me. Where would I run off to if things with Olive took a nasty turn, professionally speaking? The north pole? Or, if I stayed and something went wrong, I'd have to fire her.

I balled my hands into fists. Why couldn't I be attracted to someone else? Someone not working for me? Why did I have to offer her the receptionist job?

Because I was smitten, that's why.

I knew I had to talk to her before the clinic opened again on Monday. This was an issue too serious to ignore.

I decided to take Archie out for a short walk, have a rest, and then drop by Olive's place.

Scratch that. I'd ask her to meet me someplace neutral, or I probably wouldn't be able to contain myself from kissing her soft lips again.

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I fired off a text to Olive, asking her to meet me later at the local diner. Then I put Archie's leash on and went out. Some fresh summer air would do me good.

Archie kept pulling at the leash, his big eyes begging me to go faster, but I wasn't in the mood for jogging. Not after a night without any sleep.

"Not now, boy," I said. "Later, when we get to the dog park, okay? Now heel, Archie."

The dog did as I asked. It wasn't that I wanted to be extra strict with him, but a dog his size out on the street needed to listen to his owner, or he'd wreak havoc all over town.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket and slid my finger across the screen to read the incoming text message. It was Olive telling me she was free to meet me, and that she was bringing a cute lady with her.

I frowned. How odd of her to bring someone to a private conversation. I slid the phone back into my pocket, wondering who she'd bring. Her mother, maybe? A friend? But why? Sometimes I feared I'd never understand women. They were such complicated beings.

When we arrived at the dog park, Archie was ecstatic and ran from one corner to another. I slid down on one of the benches.

Not even five minutes later, Diane came into sight, heading straight for me. I was starting to suspect this town had cameras everywhere to track everyone's moves or

something. How did these people manage to find me wherever I was?

Diane's dog, Lulu, was dressed in a pink sweater, the same color as Diane's blouse. The poor dog must be sweating, dressed like that in this heat.

The woman perched herself down next to me, pulling Lulu onto her lap. Not only did the dog have to endure being dressed up, but she also wasn't allowed to go and play with the other canines. I truly felt sorry for her.

"Hi, Diane," I said.

She looked me up and down. "Is something wrong? You have stubble, and there are bags under your eyes."

I shook my head. "Just a long night at the clinic. How can I help you?"

"You know what this is about, Doctor Grant."

"Ah, the fundraiser."

She looked at me expectantly. "We need you."

I blew out a breath. "I know."

I felt far too tired to argue with her over this fundraiser thing again. "You know what? I'll do it, but only if I can have a table set up with information about neutering and spaying. There are too many animals out on the streets, left to suffer. I'd like to educate the people of Old Pine Cove about taking responsibility for their pets."

She mulled it over for a couple of seconds. "Hmm, yes, I can agree to that. But how about instead of doing it at the fundraiser, you do a workshop at the community

center next weekend? I'm sure there'll be a great turnout. Separating the events will have people more focused."

"That's a great idea, Diane," I said.

She gave me a curt nod. "You've got yourself a deal, Doctor Grant." Then she got up and brushed some imaginary dust from her blouse. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to check on my gardener. I instructed him to trim the grass in my backyard, but he's always at least half an inch off." She pressed her fingers against her forehead. "Honestly, it's tiring to check on everyone all the time. Is it so hard to trim a yard to exactly seven-eighths of an inch?"

Her questioning gaze let me know she expected a reply, but there were no words for this kind of nitpicking, so I just shrugged and smiled.

"I hope it all works out for you," I said, although the one I was keeping my fingers crossed for wasn't Diane but her poor gardener.

She sighed dramatically. "Me too, Doctor Grant."

Lulu landed back in her oversized purse. The dog hadn't even set foot on the ground yet. I'd probably have to talk to Diane about it when she came back to the clinic for Lulu's next vaccinations. Gently, of course. But she had to know dogs needed exercise. They weren't some fancy accessory you carried around in your bag all day long.

Archie and I made our way back to the house. I'd take a nap and then shave before heading to Dave's Diner to meet Olive. I didn't want her to see me this tired or with an unshaven jawline.

At home, I let myself fall back on my bed. It felt so good to finally be horizontal. My

muscles relaxed almost immediately, and my eyes fell shut within seconds. I sighed. Sleep was all I craved.

I drifted off into a deep slumber. Olive was there, and she was laughing nonstop. We were having so much fun, my muscles hurt from smiling. It was only when I woke up to the sound of my phone ringing that I realized none of it had been real.

My phone rang again, and I stumbled out of bed, tripping over a box I still hadn't unpacked yet.

I slid my finger over the screen while rubbing my head with my other hand. Luckily the impact had been lessened by the carpet next to my bed.

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“Hello?” I said in a croaky voice.

“Okay. You’re alive,” Olive said. “That’s all I needed to know.”

The call got disconnected, and I frowned. What was that all about?

I stumbled into the living room. The sun was way lower than it should be at this time of day.

I looked at my phone again. It was almost six p.m. Great. I was supposed to be at Dave’s Diner over two hours ago.

Olive had sounded mad, and I couldn’t blame her. I had unwittingly stood her up. Who knew how long she’d waited for me at Dave’s Diner.

I hopped into my pants, grabbed a clean shirt from the closet, and bolted out of the door. I drove by Dave’s Diner, but she had already left. After a couple of wrong turns, I ended up on her street. I slowed the car until I spotted Olive’s apartment building and parked in front.

It was a plain and simple one, housing only five units. Olive’s name was written in purple Sharpie next to the top call button. I pressed it, hoping she’d be home.

No answer.

I tried my luck with the front door. To my relief, it wasn’t locked. I pushed it open and knocked on the first door I came across.

“Yes?” an older woman answered, her gaze full of suspicion.

“I’m looking for Olive,” I said. “She lives in this building.”

“Top floor,” the woman said before slamming the door in my face.

Wow. Friendly neighbors. At least she had a nice apartment with one of those open-plan kitchens. I was pretty sure that’s what she told me about her living quarters, anyway.

I ascended the narrow spiral stairs. They gave way to a small landing with just enough room for one person to stand.

I knocked on the door. Even though I heard someone stumbling inside, she didn’t answer.

“Olive?” I called out. “It’s me, Lewis.”

Crickets.

I rested my palm against her door. “Look, I know you’re in there. Please let me in so I can explain.”

Still nothing.

“Olive, come on, we need to talk. Please.”

After ten long seconds, I finally heard her unbolt the door, and I let out a relieved sigh. I couldn’t wait to get inside.

Chapter Eighteen

Olive

No, no, no, no. Why was Lewis standing outside my front door? I couldn't possibly let him in. First of all, I'd been crying for an hour and looked horrible. Second of all, he'd discover I had lied about the coolness factor of my apartment. I had to get rid of him somehow. Maybe I could crawl out the window?

But the guy wouldn't stop knocking and begging me to please let him in.

"What shall we do?" I asked Rhubarb, who was too busy chewing on a rubber duck to pay me any attention.

After going back and forth in my mind, I decided to let him in. He had some explaining to do after all. I still couldn't believe he'd stood me up, especially not after that passionate kiss we'd shared.

I unbolted the door and cracked it open. Lewis looked at me with those adorable eyes of his. I wondered if he did it on purpose, or if he was actually oblivious to the impact he had on women.

"I'm surprised you found the way to my apartment," I said, opening the door farther and walking away before he could say anything.

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I flopped down on the couch and crossed my arms. He stood in the doorway, looking confused.

“Yeah, yeah, I know what you’re thinking. This isn’t at all what you imagined it would be,” I said, gesturing at the apartment.

“Huh?”

I rolled my eyes. Men could be clueless creatures. “Whatever.”

He closed the door and perched himself on the edge of the couch. “Have you been crying?” he asked, squinting at me.

I shook my head and quickly shoved an empty box of chocolate chip cookies under a pillow. It was one thing if he’d noticed my puffy red eyes, but I didn’t need him to know I had been eating my sorrows away as well.

“Olive.” He scooted closer, then reached for my face and gently turned it toward his. “I’m so sorry about missing our meeting at Dave’s Diner. I fell asleep. Spending so much time at the clinic with Beau exhausted me. I swear all that happened was me taking a nap that lasted way too long.”

Now I felt even worse. I had been mad at him for nothing. Of course he’d be exhausted. He basically ran the clinic all by himself. I couldn’t possibly stay mad at him, except maybe for the fact that he’d called our little rendezvous “a meeting” and not a date.

I wondered whether or not I should ask him about his choice of words, but he had other questions himself.

“Is that a dog?” he asked as Rhubarb came running toward the couch, the rubber duck still in her mouth.

“Oh, yeah, but don’t tell anyone.” I threw him a pleading look. “Yesterday my landlord stopped by because Diane had blabbed to him about me having pets. I had to sing and dance before he would leave.”

Lewis’s eyes grew big. “You sang and danced for him?”

I laughed at his perplexed expression. “Not in a weird way. I wanted to get rid of him as soon as possible.”

“And you sing so off-key that he ran away?”

“Hey, watch it,” I said, slapping his arm. “There’s nothing wrong with my musical abilities.”

He smirked. “Will you dance for me if I refuse to leave later?”

“Oh, stop it.” I looked away, feeling my cheeks heat up.

“So, the dog,” he said, not pushing the whole dance issue any further. “How did he or she end up here?”

“I found her at the community garden. Her name is Rhubarb, by the way.”

He smiled. “Is she the lady you were bringing to the diner?”

“Gotcha. Would you mind giving her a checkup one of these days?”

“Of course. Bring her with you to the clinic first thing Monday morning.”

I threw him what I hoped was my most adorable look. “And perhaps she could stay at your place for a while?”

I might’ve been pushing my luck, but I was growing desperate. It was only a matter of time before Rhubarb’s barking would alert the neighbors about me secretly hiding a pet.

Lewis rubbed his unshaven jaw. “I don’t know. Archie’s used to being alone. He might act up with another dog there.”

“Isn’t there another solution we can think of? I’d hate to lose this place, but I don’t want to lose little Rhubarb either. She at least deserves a warm home.”

“Did you already put up posters? Her owner might be looking for her.”

I shrugged. “I don’t think she has one.”

“So, you haven’t even tried to find out if she does?”

He was making total sense, and I didn’t like it one bit. I preferred to believe she was wild and free, a gift to me from the dog gods.

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He leaned closer and spoke in a soft voice. “Olive, what if some little girl is in bed right now, crying because her dog ran away?”

I laughed. “As if. Come on, Lewis, what kind of cliché is that? When I found her, she had tangles and mats in her fur, no name tag... I doubt she has a place to call home.”

He held his hands up. “I know, it seems like she’s all alone, but we might be wrong about that. Unfortunately, some people don’t treat their dogs that well.”

“If that’s the case, wouldn’t you want her to have a better home?”

He raised an eyebrow, and I sighed in defeat. “Fine. You can scan and see if she has a microchip.”

I looked at Rhubarb, who had abandoned her toy and was dozing off on the carpet. I’d hate to give her up, but Lewis was right. If she had an owner, I couldn’t keep her.

“With all this dog talk, I almost forgot why I came here tonight,” Lewis said.

“To apologize for standing me up?” I said with a wink.

He smiled. “That too, but we’ve got some other stuff to discuss as well, don’t you think?”

Oh man, he was talking about the kiss. Did I even want to go there now? I was afraid he’d burst our bubble by telling me it had all been a big mistake. My heart picked up speed, and my hands grew sweaty.

“Yeah, we should talk,” I said, but only because it was the sensible thing to say, not because I wanted to hear him turn me down.

Lewis sucked in a breath of air, then released it again slowly. He looked as nervous as I was feeling.

“That kiss we shared,” he started, unable to keep himself from smiling at the memory, “it was magical.”

“But?” I asked.

He ran his hand through his hair. “But we’re working together. Dating a coworker is a no-go.”

“Aren’t you the boss?”

“I am.”

“Then, you make the rules, right?”

He shook his head. “It’s not that simple. If we started dating, it would be weird for everyone. The patients would notice for sure, and I don’t want things to become awkward. I mean, I just arrived here and reopened the clinic.”

I shrugged. “We could keep our distance when we’re at work.”

“As if you’d be able to keep your hands to yourself,” he said with a grin.

I laughed. “Speak for yourself, Doctor Grant. Besides, who says I even want to date you?”

He locked eyes with me. “You don’t?”

“Why does it even matter? You already said we can’t date.”

“I like you, Olive.”

“Then what’s the problem? Lots of people date their boss or their employee.”

Why was he making such a big deal out of this? We were both adults, and despite what Lewis wished to believe, I was able to restrain myself. I’d never do something that would make his patients or other employees uncomfortable. Perhaps that Sue woman had hurt him more than I’d realized. Then again, we had only shared one kiss. Well, more than one, but they were all in one session. It wasn’t like we were about to get married next week.

“Maybe we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” I said. “We haven’t even been on a proper date yet.”

“You’re right, we’re making something out of nothing.” He cleared his throat. “Not that I regret anything. That kiss was...”

“Good,” I whispered. “Heavenly.”

Lewis swallowed. “Yes. It was.”

I grabbed the pillow that was blocking the spot between us on the couch and scooted closer. “It won’t happen again, though. Not while we’re working together, right?”

He nodded. “Absolutely. We need to be sensible about this. Maybe go out on a date first, if you want to.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, not-so-accidentally brushing my hand against his arm.

“But no more kissing,” he said in a husky voice.

I shook my head. “Definitely not.”

I had ended up so close to him, I got a close-up of his beautifully colored eyes. The only sounds in the apartment were Rhubarb snoring, my downstairs neighbor scraping a chair across the floor, and us breathing. He could say whatever he wanted, but he couldn’t deny this electricity between us.

I grabbed his hand and kissed him. He didn’t protest one bit, which proved he wanted this to happen too.

So what if we weren’t supposed to rush into this? Our kiss felt way too good to be wrong. We’d tackle tomorrow once the day dawned, but for now, all I wanted was to kiss Lewis on the couch in my tiny apartment.

Lewis

A week later, I couldn't believe what I had gotten myself into. When Diane told me I could use the community center to educate the town on spaying and neutering cats and dogs, I had thought only a handful of people would show up. Clearly, I couldn't have been more wrong. The room was packed. Diane even had to run off and arrange some extra chairs. Who knew this was considered such a hot topic in a small town like Old Pine Cove? Back in England, I always had to move heaven and earth to get more than fifteen pet owners attending.

"Is this kind of turnout normal here?" I asked Olive, who was folding flyers to hand out later. On the front was a picture of a family with a cat and a dog.

She grinned as I closed the curtain separating the stage from the audience. "It is when they know a hot vet is doing the presentation."

I laughed. "I doubt my looks are enough of an incentive for people to show up."

"Clearly you haven't seen yourself in the mirror yet," she said with a cocked eyebrow. "You do know you're the talk of the town, right?"

"I am?"

"Everywhere I go, the ladies are talking about you. At Alex's yoga class, at the diner, at the bookstore..."

I held my hands in the air. "Okay, okay, I get it. Still, I hope people here will want to learn as well."

Olive stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on my lips. "The fact that you don't realize how gorgeous you are is nothing short of adorable."

I glanced over my shoulder. “Didn’t we agree we would keep the attraction between us private? At least until we’ve finally been on a proper date.”

“It’s your fault,” she said, one hand on her hip.

“How’s that?”

“You’re way too irresistible.”

She grabbed the end of my tie and pulled me closer. I took her hand in mine, ready to kiss her, when the door opened. Olive jumped in surprise. I quickly let go of her hand, and she busied herself picking up the stack of flyers she’d dropped.

“How are you doing, Doctor Grant?” Diane asked. “I think we’re about ready to start.”

I straightened my tie. It seemed like she hadn’t noticed what Olive and I were doing a few seconds earlier, and I was glad about that. I didn’t want her sticking her nose where it didn’t belong.

“I’m good to go.”

Diane smiled. “Good. Can I offer you something to eat or drink during your presentation? The ladies brought all kinds of cake, pies, and cookies, and there’s also jugs of homemade lemonade and cucumber water.”

“Wow, this is turning into quite a party,” I said. “Just some water will do, thanks.”

“Perfect,” she said before heading back out.

Olive threw me a look.

“What?” I asked.

“Seriously, Lewis? There’s cake and cookies out there, made by the ladies. They love you.”

I pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. “Maybe you’re right, but you’re the one I want to go on a date with.”

“I can’t wait,” she said with a grin.

I had promised Olive I’d take her out on a real date tomorrow night. We had been chatting every evening since I dropped by her apartment the day after she found Rhubarb, but it was always over the phone. Of course, we also saw a lot of each other at the clinic, but I was still adamant about not mixing work stuff with my budding feelings for her. I wouldn’t want to be caught smooching while I had patients in the waiting room.

In fact, we had only shared a handful of kisses so far. It took a lot of self-control, but I needed to do this right. And that meant dating this amazing girl like she deserved.

At the back of my mind, there was still this tiny voice that kept nagging me about not dating a coworker, but I couldn’t let my past mistakes stand in the way of my happiness anymore. So I had made an exception and hoped from the bottom of my

heart that things would work out perfectly.

“Well, go break a leg,” Olive said as she handed me the stack of flyers. “Not that you’re going to do a play, but you know what I mean.”

I grinned at her. “That would be more your thing, right? Singing and dancing.”

She gave me a playful slap on the arm. “Aren’t you funny, Doctor Grant. Besides, I’d never sing or dance in front of people, unless I wanted to scare them away. Now go before the crowd goes wild out there.”

I laughed. The way Olive spoke made it seem as if I was a rock star with a stadium full of fans waiting for me.

I straightened my tie and made my way to the rows of people waiting for my talk on neutering and spaying. Diane had let me use the biggest room available in the community center, the same one where the fundraiser would take place next week. Judging by the size of the audience, you’d think I was doing a talk on how to become a millionaire or something. Still, whatever the reason was for people to show up, they were here, and that was all that mattered. Animal health and wellbeing was a topic close to my heart, and I loved sharing tips and tricks.

Olive took her seat at the front, in a chair that had a handwritten note attached to it reading Reserved. I positioned myself behind the microphone on the small stage and opened my digital presentation. People always paid more attention when I showed visuals, so that was exactly what I had planned for today as well.

The front row was filled with familiar faces like Milly, Leanne, Melissa, and some other people who I’d come to know through my work at the clinic.

“Thank you so much for coming today,” I started. “It’s nice to see how much you all

care about this topic.”

“We love you, Lewis,” someone from the crowd shouted.

I cleared my throat. “Um, thank you. Why don’t we dive right into it?”

The room grew silent after a round of unnecessary applause, and I started talking. First, I tackled the reasons to spay or neuter a pet, since experience had taught me this was something not a lot of people knew about. Everyone’s eyes were on me, and not a word was whispered amongst the crowd.

“Uterine infections and breast cancer have a high mortality rate, especially for cats. Spaying your pet helps prevent these diseases.”

Melissa’s hand shot up. “I have a question.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Does that mean pets who are spayed will live longer?”

I nodded. “Yes, longer and healthier. That’s all we want for our beloved pets, right?”

“Certainly.” She threw me a dreamy smile. “Thanks so much for answering, Doctor Grant.”

“Of course.”

Seven other hands shot up.

“How about you all hold on to your questions until after the presentation?” I suggested. At this rate, we’d still be here next week. I loved the fact that people had

questions and wanted to know more, but I was afraid of losing my train of thought when dealing with constant interruptions.

I went on to talk about how neutered cats and dogs behaved better, how male dogs wouldn't want to roam away from home anymore, and how it helped prevent unnecessary suffering as pets found out on the street often got euthanized.

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While I was talking, I couldn't help but steal glances at Olive. She didn't have to sacrifice her free Saturday to be here, yet she was.

Sometimes I feared all of it was too good to be true. I didn't have time to think about that, though, as it was time to let everyone finally unleash their questions.

"Does anyone have any questions?" I asked.

This time, almost everyone's hand shot up. Wow. Either I hadn't been coherent with my presentation, or they all really wanted to go deeper into the subject.

I pointed at Milly. "What would you like to know, Milly?"

She stood up and ran her hands over her flower-patterned skirt to take out the creases. "I'm wondering whether this information is true for other animals as well? As you know, I don't have a cat or a dog, but I do have a turtle."

I cocked an eyebrow. This was a first. Never in my years of talking about this topic had anyone ever asked me this. "Your turtle is all set. Nothing about what I just said applies to him, so no need to worry or take action."

Milly nodded. "Oh, okay. I'll be making another appointment soon, though. I'm afraid he's got some problems with the hardness of his shell."

Melissa jumped up next, not even bothering to wait for Milly to sit down.

"Lewis," she started, then giggled. "I mean, Doctor Grant. Gosh, I've gotten so used

to calling you by your first name.” She paused for a moment as if waiting for some kind of reaction. “Anyway, as you might have heard already, I’m a dog whisperer. Do you think neutering and spaying would have an effect on the way pets communicate with me?”

Another question that no one had ever asked me before. And honestly, one I’d never even thought about. Did Melissa truly believe she could communicate with dogs? I mean, of course you could have a wonderful connection with a dog if you knew the animal well, but picking up on their exact thoughts seemed a bit far-fetched. Then again, Olive read tarot cards for dogs, and I supported her in that, didn’t I? I had a feeling Olive was more relaxed about it, though, and saw it more as a bit of fun instead of an exact science.

“To be honest, I have no clue, Melissa,” I answered truthfully.

Diane let out a sigh that could probably be heard all the way across town.

Melissa flicked her hair over her shoulder and turned to Diane. “Is everything okay?”

The older lady sighed again. “I respect your commitment and dedication to your new... skill set, dear, but have you ever listened to yourself? Talking with dogs! What’s next, teaching cats how to speak in full sentences?”

Melissa’s mouth dropped open. She wasn’t the only one to be surprised by Diane’s comment. People started speaking in hushed tones to each other.

“Ladies,” I said, trying to stop this from getting out of hand. “Let’s just stick to asking questions, not attacking each other.”

“I’m not attacking anyone, Doctor Grant,” Diane said. “All I’m doing is stating the facts. Besides, I’m not the only one who feels Melissa is selling nonsense.”

“What?” Melissa cried out, then turned to face the crowd. “Who else thinks I’m not a real dog whisperer?”

Olive got up, a nervous look on her face. “Everyone, please calm down.”

“Oh, shut it, you,” Melissa said. “As if tarot card reading for dogs is a real thing.”

Leanne got up. “If it’s any help, Olive did a reading for Patches last week, and most of her predictions were true.”

Melissa balled her fists. “It’s not any help!”

“Well, you did help Patches as well,” Leanne said. “I never understood why she kept howling like a werewolf when she went into the garden. It turned out she’s afraid of our gnomes.”

Diane rolled her eyes. “Anyone could tell you that, Leanne. Those gnomes are shabby and need a fresh layer of paint.”

“I’ll have you know those gnomes used to belong to my mother. No one gets to insult them.”

“Stop it,” Olive said loudly. “You’re upsetting people with your arguing and shouting. I mean, look.” She turned to Addy, who was looking rather pale. “Are you okay? Should I call someone for you?” She kneeled down beside Addy.

“I’ve got to throw up,” Addy said and ran out.

Olive’s eyes shot daggers at Diane and the other bickering ladies. “See what you did? And to a pregnant woman. You should be ashamed of yourselves.” She started in the direction of the bathrooms. “I’m going to check on Addy.”

A silence fell over the group for a couple of seconds, but then everyone started talking excitedly about Addy's pregnancy. Phones were whipped out of bags and pockets, and the news began to make its way outside of the community center walls.

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It then dawned on me that no one was supposed to know about Addy's condition. I had to do something to contain the situation before the entire world knew about it. Not to mention the fact that Justin had told us both in private conversations, and I had promised him my integrity.

"Everyone," I said in a loud voice. "Please, stop and listen to me. I don't want anyone to share the news about Addy."

One of the ladies slumped her shoulders. "But, I already sent an email to Hugo at Old Pine Cove Weekly."

"Why? Isn't that a bit disrespectful to your fellow townspeople? It's not up to us to share private news that belongs to someone else."

Milly shook her head. "I'm afraid the damage is done, Doctor Grant. I already told my cousin who told her friends at the sewing circle in the neighboring town. This news can't be stopped now."

I felt the color leave my cheeks. Justin was going to sue me. I'd have to leave this place and find another town to call my home. Again.

And Olive. I knew she didn't mean any harm, but I couldn't trust her with patient information anymore. I'd have to fire her. My insides twisted at the thought.

I was such a fool for believing this time things would be different.

Chapter Twenty

Olive

By the time I helped Addy get home okay, everyone had left. The community center was quiet, apart from Lewis cleaning up the place. He was stacking chairs with an angry expression and attitude. I wondered what those chairs had done to him to deserve this kind of treatment.

“Everything okay?” I asked, picking up a chair myself.

“How’s Addy?” Lewis replied, skillfully ignoring my question.

“She’s okay. I sat with her for a while and then had her call Justin. I didn’t know morning sickness wasn’t restricted to the morning. I guess I never thought about those things before.”

Lewis grunted. “Sometimes it doesn’t hurt to think long and hard about things.”

“Excuse me?”

He put down the chair he was carrying and leaned his arms on the back. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. What is your problem?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why did you have to blab about Addy being pregnant? Justin told us that in a private conversation.”

Oh. “So no one knows about it yet?”

He scoffed. “They do now.”

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking,” I said. “The bickering got on my nerves, and I saw how unwell Addy was feeling. I needed to do something.”

Lewis let out a heavy sigh. “Look, I know you didn’t do it on purpose, but the damage is done now, and I’m the one who has to repair it, not you.”

“I know you’re mad, but please let me help you set things straight.”

He moved closer to me until we were at arm’s length from each other. “I’m not mad.” He paused for a moment. “I’m disappointed.”

There he went again, throwing a knife straight into my chest. Mad I could live with, but disappointed... What a slap in the face.

“I promise it won’t happen again,” I said, even though I knew it wouldn’t change what I did.

Lewis ran a hand through his gorgeous hair. “I don’t know if I can trust you again with patient information, Olive.”

I felt like someone had just shoved me under an ice-cold shower. “Well, I guess that’s clear. I should go.”

He grabbed my hand. His features softened, and he spoke in a warm voice. “I should’ve listened to my gut and not made the same mistake twice. Mixing business and pleasure was wrong.”

“Clearly.”

“I’d still like us to go on that date, though.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Let me get this straight. You want to fire me first and then expect me to go on a romantic date with you?”

“I don’t want you to lose your job, Olive. It’s just... If we want to date, we can’t be boss and employee. It’s too weird, don’t you think?”

“You could’ve said something about that before kissing me. Multiple times.”

He frowned. “I did. I told you it was wrong to cross that line.”

I stamped my foot on the floor. “And yet you did kiss me, didn’t you? You asked me out on a date. You told me you wanted to give this a shot. Don’t put this on me, Lewis. You wanted those kisses as much as I did.”

“I know,” he said, looking lost. “I guess I need some time to figure this out. It’s all so confusing.”

Why did it feel like he was breaking up with me when we weren’t even together to start with? I hated this.

“One professional mistake shouldn’t change our feelings for each other,” I said. “You’re acting as if I killed someone.”

His eyes dipped to the floor. “I wasn’t ready for any of this. I thought I was, but clearly, I was wrong.”

I took a deep breath. “Where does that leave us then?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Like I said, I need some time to think. I need to know I can trust you.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I jerked my hand free from his. “I said I’m sorry, and I meant it. There isn’t anything else I can do except invent a time travel machine to prevent myself from disclosing Addy’s secret, okay? Making one mistake doesn’t mean I can’t be trusted.”

I turned around and ran away, half expecting Lewis to follow me, but he didn’t move. At least now I knew where I stood.

Nowhere, that’s where.

I had done my very best to perform my new job at the clinic in the best way possible. Clearly, I had failed, in Lewis’s eyes anyway.

A mixture of anger, hurt, and confusion filled my chest. When Lewis hired me, I never claimed I was perfect. I mean, who was? I had yet to meet someone who never ever once made a mistake in their lives. The person I probably did owe an apology was Addy, though. I’d drop by the inn later and talk to her, but for now, all I needed was a good old ugly cry and a pillow to punch.

With angry steps, I strode away from the community center. I was almost home when my phone pinged with a message from Mom, asking if I wanted to come over and have dinner with them. Socializing was the last thing I felt like, but she’d made her meatloaf with glazed carrots and mashed potatoes on the side. Who could say no to

their mother's signature dish? It was almost as if she'd sensed I needed comfort food.

I turned on my heel and made my way over to my parents' place. I was sure they'd have a couple of pillows for me to punch as well. Besides, Rhubarb was living at their place for the moment, and I couldn't wait to cuddle her. She'd be able to bring a smile to my face for sure. When Lewis had told me the dog didn't have a microchip and no one claimed her after I had put posters up around town, I was relieved. She was mine now, and I loved her heaps already.

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"I'm done with men. Over and out," I said, shoving a giant scoop of mashed potatoes in my mouth.

Mom raised an eyebrow and exchanged a look with Dad.

"Don't worry, I'm not moving back home," I said. "If I can't stay at the clinic, I'm sure the shampoo job at the salon is still available."

Mom sighed. "We're not afraid you're going to move back in with us. We love you, and we just want to see you happy. Besides, one small argument is not worth crying over. You will both have forgotten this whole thing in the morning."

"I doubt that." I showed her my phone. "See this? Pictures of Addy and Justin all over the internet. The news is out there, and Lewis hates me for it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Olive," Mom said, putting an extra portion of carrots on my plate. "Justin's a movie star. If he can't handle his private life being broadcast to the world, he should've chosen a different job. Right, Gary?"

My father nodded, making agreeing noises, but I doubt he had heard a word we were

saying. He was far too busy concentrating on his meatloaf to listen to me whine about guy trouble.

“Lewis is right, Mom. I can’t be trusted. I need to find a different place to work, preferably a place where I have zero responsibility.”

Mom stared me down. “Like shampooing people’s hair?”

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“That can’t be hard to mess up, right? Plus, that kind of job requires you to blab people’s secrets all over town. Now that I come to think of it, being a shampoo girl is the perfect job for me.”

“Stop it,” Mom said, pointing the gravy ladle at me. “Listen to yourself. You’re not some untrustworthy ditz who’s not capable of dealing with responsibility, okay. How many times have you messed up walking someone’s dog?”

I shrugged. “Never.”

“And how many people are happy with your tarot card readings?”

“Almost every single one of them,” I said. Where was she going with this?

Mom gave me a satisfied look. “Ha, you see? You are trustworthy, and people love you. Don’t let some guy tell you you’re not, no matter how hot he is. Come Monday, you’re going to go to the clinic, do your job, and show Lewis he’d be a fool to let you go. Both professionally and romantically.”

Dad looked up from his now near-empty plate. “Ladies, it’s obvious what’s going on. The guy has trust issues. How would you feel about trusting someone again after being backstabbed like he has been?”

Mom and I both stared at him.

“What?” he asked. “I get haircuts too, you know. I might look like I’m never paying attention, but I always am,” he said with a sparkle in his eye.

“Fine, so the boy has issues,” Mom said. “That doesn’t mean he should treat our Olive like this. She apologized. It was an honest mistake.” She turned to me. “If he doesn’t come to his senses, I’m going to have a little chat with him.”

“Please don’t, Mom. For the love of all that’s good in this world, please don’t.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

Oh man. As if I didn’t feel bad enough already, now my mother was going to meddle again. Things between Lewis and me were most definitely lost forever.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lewis

I might have overreacted a bit, but by the time I realized that, it was too late.

Yes, Olive shouldn’t have told the whole town about Addy’s pregnancy, but I shouldn’t have been so harsh on her. The entire ordeal had brought up painful memories of what had happened with Sue, and I got into fight or flight mode.

The one I should’ve fought for was Olive. It was useless to do so now, though.

It had been four days since our argument, and she was acting as cold as ice. On Monday, she showed up at the clinic like nothing had happened, except she wasn’t her usual cheerful self but a stiff version of the Olive I had come to know. Every time I tried to break the iceberg standing between us, she conveniently slipped away, telling me she had some important phone call to make.

So yeah, I gave up trying. It was probably for the best anyway. This way, no one could get hurt, and Olive could keep her job.

I should've felt proud of myself for doing the sensible thing, yet my heart felt like it was being ripped apart. I tried to distract myself by working late hours and taking on extra patients, but still, my thoughts kept circling back to her.

By the time Friday rolled around, my heart ached so badly, it made me queasy. I couldn't give up on whatever had blossomed between us, no matter how short-lived it had been. Doesn't a seed deserve to grow into something beautiful? Even if it failed down the line, at least we would have tried.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked Olive after seeing my last patient of the morning out the door.

"Is it work-related?" she asked.

I bit my lip and sighed. "It's not, but it is important."

She hesitated for a moment, and relief washed through me. Then she grabbed her bag from behind the reception desk and strode past me, head held high in the air. "I'm sorry, Lewis, but if this isn't about work, then I can't talk right now. I've got so much to do before the fundraiser kicks off tomorrow."

"Wait," I said, gently grabbing her arm. The sensation of her skin on mine sent shivers from my head to my toes. "We need to talk."

"Later."

She hurried away, and the door fell shut behind her.

Why was she so afraid of talking to me about anything other than blood samples, canceled appointments, and medication prescriptions? Did she fear I might fire her after all? Was she still mad at me?

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I couldn't blame her if she was, but a conversation would've been nice. Maybe it was a sign for me to stop asking her to talk and just give up like I had intended to before my stubborn heart got in the way. She was my employee, and I was her boss. There was no need whatsoever for us to talk outside of work. Not anymore, anyway.

I spent the evening on the couch with Archie, watching some award-winning science fiction film, but by the time I got to bed, I couldn't even remember the plot. I had made such a mess of everything. If only I knew how to put the pieces of my life back together.

After a restless night of sleep, I woke up feeling nervous about the fundraiser. I'd see Olive today, as I had every day over the past week, only this time there wouldn't be a treatment table or reception desk between us.

I clipped Archie's leash on to go for a run. Out on the street, the thudding sound of my feet hitting the concrete made me relax. I ran two miles, then stopped for a quick break to catch my breath and hydrate myself and Archie.

"Yoo-hoo," someone called out. "Doctor Grant!"

Melissa waved at me as she ran toward me. She was wearing a pink jogging outfit with a matching headband. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail, and her sneakers looked brand new out of the box.

"Hi, Melissa."

"What's up, Doc?" she asked before breaking out in laughter. "Get it? Because

you're running and you're a doctor?"

I managed a weak smile. "I'm good, thanks. Archie and I were just about to continue our run, but I'll probably see you at the fundraiser?"

"Wait." She started running in place, pushing out her breath in short intervals. "Mind if I join you? Jogging together is so much more fun than alone."

I shrugged. "Sure."

Maybe Melissa's constant stream of words would distract me from thinking about Olive and our missed chance at something more.

"Did you have a rough night?" she asked as we started jogging. "I mean, you're hot as a burning stove, but you look kind of terrible. Exhausted, maybe? Oh, I know, you had another emergency at the clinic, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, something like that."

Melissa started a spiel about hardworking people, and I felt thankful for her enthusiasm. The less I had to talk, the better.

About one mile into our run, she stopped and put her hands on her knees.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She smiled. "I need to catch my breath." She panted loudly. "I'll be fine."

"If this pace is too much for you, please don't push yourself to keep up with it."

She waved my remark away, still panting like crazy. "I can keep up with your pace,

Doctor Grant. I have, uh, arrived where I wanted to be.”

I looked around the area we had stopped in. There was nothing but green hills around us. No houses, no shops, no nothing.

“Are you sure?”

She stuck her thumb in the air. “Absolutely.”

I glanced at my Fitbit. “I should get back. The fundraiser starts in a couple of hours, and I need to shower first.”

She shot me a dreamy look. “And then we can finally go on a date.”

“Excuse me?”

She smiled at me. “You know, after I win a date with you in the silent auction.”

“You’re confident about winning,” I said with a laugh.

Melissa stepped closer, her eyelashes fluttering. “Let’s say I’m used to getting what tickles my fancy.”

Oh, wow. Was she trying to flirt with me?

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“You’re single,” she said, stating the obvious. “And so am I. Plus, we both love dogs. It would be crazy for us not to date, right?”

“I don’t know if having similar interests is reason enough to go out with someone,” I said.

She winked at me. “Oh, I see. You’re one of those guys who loves playing hard to get.”

The girl had a knack for making someone feel uncomfortable. She was cute, yes, but I had no desire to date her.

“I really should get going,” I said. “Archie’s getting hungry, right boy?”

“He’s not the only one who’s hungry, if you know what I mean,” she said with a blush. “I could use a candlelight dinner for sure.”

I let out a cough and waved at her. “Bye, Melissa.”

Then I ran off before she could say or do something else that was way out of my comfort zone.

Not the only one who’s hungry? Phew. She was a bit too full-on for my taste.

After a refreshing shower, I fed Archie, who then settled down for a nap on the couch.

I put on a suit, as instructed by Diane, and chose a matching tie. I would focus on the fundraiser, getting as many people as possible to bid to win a date with me, and completely avoid coming into Olive's vicinity. Surely that wouldn't be too hard to pull off.

Yeah, right. I should've known avoiding someone in this small town was nearly impossible.

"You're sharing a table with Olive," Milly said, leading me through the community center. "Since you two are colleagues, that shouldn't be a problem, right?"

I hurriedly walked behind her, trying to catch up. "Do I really need a table? Doesn't it make more sense for me to walk around or something?"

She tutted and shook her head. "All candidates for the silent auction should remain seated and available to talk to. Anyone who's donating should be able to first check you out, right?"

I raised an eyebrow and tried to remember why I had agreed to do this in the first place.

"Here you go," Milly said, stopping at a long white table where Olive was spreading out tarot card decks and crystals. "If you'll excuse me, I'm needed at the food table. I heard someone made blueberry and cherry donuts, and I haven't done a quality check yet."

She rushed off, leaving me alone with Olive.

"Hi," I said with a sheepish smile.

"Oh, hello." She looked as shocked and nervous as I was feeling. "I'm just preparing

my table.”

“Okay.”

I sat down and swiped my phone open. I had to keep busy, or I’d be tempted to stare at Olive the entire time. I couldn’t resist stealing glances at her, though. The way she swiftly shuffled her cards was enthralling.

A man who looked to be in his fifties approached our table. I was happy for the distraction.

“Hello, Hugo,” Olive said, giving him a warm smile.

“Hi there, Olive. Do you mind if I take some pictures? I’m doing an extended article for Old Pine Cove Weekly.”

“Go ahead.”

They chatted for a while about the fundraiser before Hugo moved on to the next table. She caught me watching her, and one of her eyebrows shot up. “I’m sorry, wasn’t I allowed to speak to him, in case I disclosed some secret information?”

“Are you making fun of me?”

She crossed her arms. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“This is no joke, you know.”

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“I know. That’s why I went to talk to Addy, and you know what? Justin’s publicist shared the news with the world hours before it accidentally slipped out of my mouth. So, yeah, I shouldn’t have done that, but the news spreading wasn’t technically my fault.”

“Oh.”

“Yes,oh.”

A lady with a dog in her arms approached our table, putting down a stack of dollar bills. Olive took one of her card decks and started doing her magic while I was left feeling as confused as a cat in a dog costume.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Olive

Why did Lewis have to show up at my table dressed in a suit that made him look smoking hot? Someone needed to crack open a window already, or I’d faint.

I tried to concentrate on the tarot card reading I was doing for Elena and her dog Fluffer, but with Lewis glancing at me the whole time, it proved difficult. I’m sure he thought I didn’t notice. Think again, Doctor Grant.

Part of me wanted to grab him by his tie and kiss him, and part of me wanted to slap him in the face. The past week had been one awkward ordeal. I had tried to avoid him as much as possible while he tried to talk to me. What about? I had no clue. He’d

made it very clear that he doubted my professional abilities, and that he only wanted to date me if I didn't work at Pine Paw Prints.

Elena and Fluffer left after their session, leaving Lewis and me alone again. The community center was starting to fill up with enthusiastic people who all wanted to partake in the activities, and Milly opened the silent auction.

I did my best to look straight ahead so I didn't have to make eye contact with Lewis. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him loosening his tie a bit. Now, I definitely wouldn't be able to look at his sexy appearance without fanning myself. Ugh.

"How long are you going to stay mad at me for?" he asked while scooting his chair closer.

I shrugged. "I'm not mad. I'm disappointed."

He let out a puff of air. "Fine. I see what you're doing."

I swiveled my head toward him, looking straight into his dreamy eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You're trying to make me pay for what I did and said, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

What a lie. I just wanted him to feel as bad as he had made me feel the last time we were here at the community center.

"Lewis," a girl shouted excitedly, marking the end of our conversation.

I rolled my eyes. I'd recognize that cackle anywhere.

“Oh, hi, Melissa,” Lewis said.

I busied myself lining up my cards so I wouldn't have to talk to her. That didn't mean I couldn't eavesdrop on their conversation, though.

“I just wanted to let you know I made a generous bid to win a date with you. I'm one hundred percent certain I'll be the highest bidder. Have you thought about where you want to take me?”

My eyes rolled as if it were an automatic reaction to hearing Melissa talk. “Someone else might win, you know,” I muttered under my breath.

“Excuse me, did you say something?” she asked.

“It's not important.”

She put her hand on her hip and leveled me with a stare. “If you have something to say, you can say it to my face.”

I held my hands up. “I just said someone else might win. Don't count your chickens before they hatch and all that.”

“Do I sense some jealousy here?” she asked with a laugh.

Lewis fiddled with his tie again. “Ladies, there's no need to start bickering.”

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Melissa flicked her hair over her shoulder and smiled. “We’re not bickering.” Then she leaned closer to him and said, “I think your receptionist has a crush on you. I can’t blame her, but I just don’t want her to get her hopes up.”

I shoved my chair back and got up. “That’s enough, okay. Listen to yourself! Making fun of me while I’m right here? I don’t know what I ever did to you to deserve this kind of treatment. And just so you know, Doctor Grant is all yours. Beware, though, one mistake, and you’ll be out of his life without so much as a flinch from him.”

I ran away and pushed through the crowd. My breath came in rapid pulses as I tried to stop my eyes from watering. I might’ve felt like I was ready to explode with emotion, but I wasn’t going to break down in public.

Right before I got to the exit, I bumped into my mother.

“Olive?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, afraid the tears would come if I spoke.

“Is it Lewis? Are you guys still fighting?”

I nodded again.

She gently took a hold of my arm. “It’s good that I ran into you because you’re needed backstage.”

“What?”

Mom weaved through the crowd without letting go of me. She opened the door to the backstage, as she had called it, and led me inside. It was really just an area where supplies for the fundraiser were stocked, like extra servings of pie and pots of homemade jam. Then she opened another door that led to the stage.

“Wait here,” she said, leaving me alone at the back of the wooden stage. The red curtain was closed, blocking most of the sounds from inside.

I blew out a big breath and slumped down. I didn’t know why my mother had claimed she needed me here, but what I did know was that crying never felt so good.

All the hurt and doubt that was bundled up inside of me flew out in a steady stream of tears. I hated the fact that Lewis had told me we couldn’t date after all. I might’ve acted as if I was mad at him earlier, but the truth was that I was mad at myself for having feelings that would never be reciprocated.

Sure, he’d told me he wanted to date me, but then he changed his mind, going on and on about how confused he was. If you truly wanted to be with someone, there was no room for doubts. The fact that he needed time to think told me more than enough.

The door to the stage swung open again, and I shrieked. I got up and swiveled around, only to see Lewis standing in the doorway. My mother pushed him inside.

“Olive?” he asked.

“Mom? What’s going on?”

“You two are going to figure this out.”

“Colleen, what do you mean?” Lewis asked, a look of terror in his eyes.

She cocked her head sideways. “As if I need to explain. The entire town can see you two are perfect for each other. It’s time you put your silly differences aside.”

“Please don’t meddle, Mom,” I pleaded.

She shook her head. “If I don’t meddle, you both lose because the two of you are as stubborn as a dog with a fresh bone.” Mom turned to me. “Honey, you’ve got to face the fact that blabbing about Addy’s pregnancy was unprofessional. It’s only natural Lewis got upset about it. It shows he’s got integrity, and I can only applaud that.”

“But—” I started, but Mom shushed me.

“And you,” she said to Lewis with a shake of her head. “I know you’ve had a horrible experience with one of your colleagues back in England, but you’ve got to learn to trust again. Do you want to end up old and alone?”

“No,” he replied hesitantly.

“Good. Now you two don’t come out of here before you’ve patched things up.” Mom turned around and went out, locking the door behind her.

I ran to the door and turned the knob, but it wouldn’t budge. She had actually locked us in here. I pounded on the door, feeling like I was a princess being locked in a tower by some evil witch.

“Olive,” Lewis said in a soft voice.

I heard him walk toward me. He put his palm on my hand and led me away from the door. My heart was beating in my chest so loud that I was certain he could hear it.

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Too bad my mother didn't think about the curtain on the stage. It would be easy to escape through there, but Lewis stopped me in my tracks before I could get out.

"Look at me," he said. "Please."

I swallowed.

"I'm sorry, Olive. About everything."

His words made me drag my gaze away from the floor. As our eyes locked, my breath caught in my throat. He looked so pure, so honest, so vulnerable.

"I shouldn't have said any of those things to you about not wanting to date you while working together, or you not being trustworthy. I realized that way before your mother dragged me in here, talking about some hamster problem she was having."

"You did?" I asked.

He nodded. "The day after that argument, I felt so bad, but also extremely afraid." He paused, searching for words. "I thought I was heading down the same road again. You know, falling in love with someone who couldn't be trusted."

"You... you were falling in love with me?"

He took both my hands in his and gave them a squeeze. "No. I have fallen in love with you. I still am. I want to be with you, Olive. That date I asked you on? That's been on my mind ever since the moment I laid eyes on you. But I will understand if it's too

late now. If you feel I messed up too badly, then I will respect that and leave you be.”

I couldn't help but grin. Once again, tears made my vision blurry, only this time, they were happy tears. “It's not too late. I'm falling in love with you too,” I said with a blush. “If you think you can get rid of me that easily, you're in for a treat, Doctor Grant.”

“Wow. You have no idea how happy I am to hear you say that,” he said with a laugh.

Then he caressed my cheek with one hand while he put the other on the small of my back, pulling me closer to him until our lips met.

His kiss felt amazing. His soft mouth belonged on mine, almost as if it was made only for me. I deepened our kiss as butterflies raced through me, lighting my entire body on fire.

On the other side of the curtain, the fundraiser was in full swing. The laughing, cheerful music and excited chattering clued me in to the fact that everyone in Old Pine Cove was having an amazing time, but I knew with absolute certainty that none of them could be as happy as I felt in that perfect moment. I let my hand roam through Lewis's thick hair.

But our kiss ended abruptly when I heard people cheering us on. How was that even possible?

I glanced sideways. The curtain had opened without either of us noticing. Milly stood on the stage, clapping her hands, and everyone was looking at Lewis and me.

“We were just about to announce the silent auction winners,” Milly said with a laugh.

Lewis cleared his throat and tried fruitlessly to get his hair looking smooth again.

Milly winked at us. “I promise you this whole win a date with Doctor Grant thing won’t be awkward for you two lovebirds. In fact,” she said, turning to face the crowd. “A very special lady has won this auction, thanks to some sweet people sponsoring her entry.”

Oh, no. Melissa had rounded up sponsors to ensure she won? The last thing I felt like doing was handing Lewis over to her now.

“Please welcome our winner to the stage,” Milly said.

I held my breath, nervous for her next words.

“Congratulations, Lily! You won a date with Doctor Grant.”

James helped his daughter walk up onto the stage. The girl was holding what I could only assume was her imaginary dragon friend in her arms.

Lewis’s face lit up. We shared a look, and I knew he was just as moved by this as I was. I couldn’t have thought of a better person to win a date with him.

Milly knelt down next to Lily. “Where do you want Doctor Grant to take you, honey?”

“I’d like him to come to the playground with me and Dad to look for special rocks. Drake, my dragon, loves those.” She looked up at the two of us. “And I want his friend to come with us. They both helped Drake when he was hurt, with their special Ladricon spray. My dad said they are both sweethearts and that we can all have a picnic together.”

The crowd applauded as Lily walked off the stage. Lewis and I followed suit, and I spotted my mother smiling at us with tears in her eyes.

Lewis grabbed my hand and pulled me close while he was being greeted by several women I recognized from yoga class.

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I didn't hear a word they were saying, though. All I could focus on was his sweet smile, and the fact that he was just as crazy about me as I was about him. I slipped my arm around his waist, releasing a sigh of contentment. He smiled at me and planted a kiss on the top of my head.

All of it was more than I had ever dared to dream. I might've been clueless about a lot of things in life, but one thing was certain... I was never ever going to let Lewis go.

Epilogue

Lewis

Two years later

The doors to the backyard were wide open. The sun illuminated the hardwood floors inside, turning the entire space into a welcoming haven of light.

I put my medical bag on one of the barstools at the kitchen counter and rolled my neck from side to side. Delivering a baby alpaca over at Addy and Justin's petting zoo had been a long, but rewarding process. I was glad to be home, though. The clinic was in good hands with my colleagues. Right after Olive and I moved in together, I had hired two vets and a veterinary assistant.

I stepped outside into the warm sunshine and held a hand above my eyes to shield them from the sun.

Where were they?

A bark followed by laughter led me in the direction of the garden shed. The eaves provided much-needed shade, which made the shed the coolest place in the yard. Olive was standing in the shade, playing with our dogs. She looked as beautiful as the day I met her. In fact, she looked even more beautiful these days.

“There you are,” I said.

She turned around and greeted me with a smile while I slipped my arms around her. “How is my favorite girl doing?”

“Good,” she said before planting her lips on mine. “Great now that you’re home.”

“Have these two behaved while I was out?” I asked, motioning my head at Rhubarb and Archie.

Olive laughed. “These two rascals, you mean? Yes, they’ve been amazing. We only lost one shoe today.”

I bent down to pat them both on the head. They wagged their tails and threw me an expectant look.

“It looks like they want a treat,” Olive said.

I shook my head. “Too many treats are not healthy for them. You know that.”

Olive waved my remark away with a dazzling smile. “Oh, come on. They haven’t had one all day. One treat won’t hurt them, right guys?”

She pulled her treat bag out of the pocket of her dress.

“Is this how you’re going to be with our kids? Spoil them rotten?” I asked, pulling her close and kissing her.

Her eyes sparkled. “Well, they are twins. Double the fun, double the treats.”

“I still can’t believe we’ll have two dogs and two kids six months from now,” I said. “But I also can’t wait.”

“Me neither.” She kissed me again. “Oh, and neither can our parents.”

I groaned. “Did Mum call with another piece of well-intended advice?”

“This time, it was my parents. They wanted to know what color to paint Benji’s room. Mom said they’re turning it into a kids’ paradise.”

My eyes grew wide. “Your parents are going to repurpose your brother’s room? Wow, I never in a million years thought that would ever happen.”

Olive shrugged. “Well, they can’t exactly let the babies sleep in the hamster room, now can they? Dad said nothing’s too much for his grandkids. If Benjamin wants to come over, he’ll have to sleep on the couch.”

“So, what color did you tell them it should be?” I asked.

“I didn’t spill any secrets, don’t you worry. You and I are the only ones who know we’re having a girl and a boy.”

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I grinned. “Good. I love that we have these secrets.”

“Me too. And I love you,” she said, putting her head on my shoulder.

“I love you more.”

“No, Doctor Grant, I love you more.”

“Do you want to watch the sunset together later, Mrs. Grant?” I asked.

She turned her head toward me. “Weren’t you going to watch that soccer game with Justin? England versus I can’t remember who?”

I shook my head. “I changed my mind. England will play another game on another day. There’s no place I’d rather be than right here in Old Pine Cove with my wife nestled in my arms.”

She squeezed me tight against her, and I closed my eyes while a tear of happiness made its way down my cheek.

It was a dream come true that I got to spend the rest of my life with this amazing woman who was now lovingly carrying our children. Having her in my life was a real treat.

I smiled, a feeling of pure joy rushing through me. I was, without a doubt, the luckiest man alive.

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