



The Billionaire's Pawfect Match

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Description: He always expected he would inherit his father's company,

He just didn't expect to inherit his dog, too!

And for this unruly pup, he'll need some help...

Isaac Lennox has been waiting a long time to take over the family company. He's still in the thick of grief when lawyers inform him that in order to become CEO, he'll have to adopt his father's beloved golden retriever. It feels like a joke from beyond the grave, but Isaac isn't laughing...

Immediately, Baxter bounces his way into his well-ordered life, leaving chaos everywhere, and Isaac needs to find a dog whisperer, stat.

Emily Ashcroft has handled her fair share of challenging cases, but this one is a real puzzle. A rambunctious pup, and a handsome billionaire who definitely isn't a dog person, and something tells her the man is a much more complex case than his pet...

Working side by side, it's not long before the enigmatic billionaire's walls begin to come down, but Emily wrestles with whether they should give in to temptation. Mixing business with pleasure could hurt all of them. And she's been hurt enough for one lifetime.

Dogs, you can depend on. Humans, not so much...

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CHAPTER 1

ISAAC

I push open the glass door to Lennox Realty, the polished brass plaque on the front of the twenty-story building still boasting my father's name. Robert Lennox, it reads, that name etched into every corner of Portland, and now, hauntingly absent from the world.

The lobby is quiet, the usual hum of activity dulled to hushed murmurs and the soft clicking of keyboards. It's as if the building itself is in mourning.

Or perhaps quiet celebration. Surely I wasn't the only person who had a, uh...complicated relationship with my father. Just how many toes he stepped on during his climb to the top I have no idea, but I guarantee it was more than a few.

"Morning, Isaac," Carol says.

I stop short at the sound of her voice, surprised to discover that I somehow made it all the way to my floor without realizing it. Carol smiles gently, like she's not sure how to act. She's been more than an assistant over the years, often a confidant, sometimes the bridge between me and my father when the waters got too rough. A couple of decades older than me, sometimes she feels like the mother I don't have, a person I can go to with any sort of problem.

That is, if I were the type to share my problems openly. Typically, I keep them to myself. It's better that way.

“Good morning, Carol.” For some reason, my voice doesn’t sound like my own.

I glance around at the familiar walls, at the framed successes on display — each one a notch on the belt of my father’s legacy. Each one a reminder of the approval I chased, the dreams we were supposed to realize together.

“Are you holding up okay?” she asks, leaning forward, her hands clasped together on the desk.

I can feel the weight of her concern, the unspoken acknowledgment of the gaping hole that has opened up in my life. But the words, the truth of how I’m not okay, that I’m adrift in a sea of half-felt grief, they cling stubbornly to the back of my throat.

My father and I didn’t have the best relationship, but he was the only family I had. And losing someone so suddenly... the heart attack taking him within minutes... Even a week later, it’s still hard to believe.

“Have we heard back from the Henderson proposal?” I ask, well aware that I’m deflecting. It’s easier than acknowledging the chair that will remain empty, the approving nod that will never come again.

Carol nods, picking up the cue as she always does. “Yes, they’re considering our final offer. Should hear by end of day.”

“Good, good.” I nod back, the businessman façade sliding comfortably into place, shielding me from the raw edges of my reality.

In this role, I am untouchable, undistracted by the phantom pain of my father’s absence. In this role, I am what he shaped me to be — to the point; productive.

As I make my way to my desk, the acting CEO’s lair, every step is an echo in the

cavern left behind by him. This was supposed to be our empire, a dynasty of steel and ambition, but now, I walk these halls alone, haunted by the ghosts of expectations and the silent pressure of a complicated love.

And so the day begins, just as yesterday did, with the somber rhythm of loss and the unyielding march of business. The world spins on, indifferent to the man who once commanded this corner of it, and I, his living legacy, must find a way to spin with it.

At least there is some comfort in all of this. With my father passed, the company is now mine. I will have even more tasks to occupy my hours, even greater heights to reach. The only shame I feel is that my father will not be here to see me achieve them.

It's partly hurt driving that thought. I've always wanted to rub my success in the old man's face, and death has not changed that. Even though he gave me a position in this company, I had to work my way up just like everyone else — oftentimes, more than everyone else. It was as if being his son meant that I needed to prove myself to a degree that others didn't need to. It's why, at thirty-two, I have no partner, no family. No close friends — unless you count my assistant, which is kind of sad. My whole life has been this company.

And today that will pay off. Today I'm meeting with the staff lawyers to go over my father's will, and despite his shortcomings, at least my father always made it clear that he would leave the company to me. He knew that I deserved at least that much.

Carol is ready to go when I emerge from my office, her laptop in hand. Without a word, we set off for the boardroom, our steps carrying us into a promising future.

The legal team is already here, sitting around the table sipping coffee and speaking in quiet tones. I let myself and Carol in, and the collective attention snaps our way.

“Mr. Lennox, thank you for coming.” Mr. Harrington, my father’s head lawyer, comes around the table. He reaches his hand out, but the shake lacks the warmth human touch should carry.

“Thank you for being here.” I nod once, ready to jump in.

He gestures to the gleaming table. “Please, take a seat.”

The leather chair creaks beneath me, a familiar sound in an unfamiliar context. It’s the head of the table now, a throne I always coveted and that is now finally mine. Carol settles into the chair next to me, her presence a silent anchor.

“Isaac, as you know...” Mr. Harrington pauses. Clears his throat. I feel my eyes narrow slightly at his use of my first name. What is he buttering me up for? “Your father was a man of clear intentions. His will reflects his desire for Lennox Realty to remain in the family.”

I nod, my throat tight, fingers laced together to hide their tremor. This is supposed to be a victory, the culmination of every late night and sacrificed weekend. But now that I’m here, about to receive my trophy, the prize feels hollow without the one person whose approval mattered most.

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“However,” he continues, “there is a condition attached to your inheritance.”

A pause, and then the absurdity hits: “In order to fully assume control of the company, you are required to take care of Baxter, your father’s golden retriever.”

The words hang between us, a cruel joke masquerading as a legal stipulation. My jaw clenches, eyes narrowing. That dog, the favored “son,” the recipient of all the affection and pride I spent a lifetime chasing. It’s a final test, a challenge from the grave. Dad always said Baxter had a knack for spotting character. What does it say about mine that I don’t like that dog one bit — that I would drop him off at an animal shelter before I so much as patted him on the head?

“Take care of him?” I repeat, the question a bitter echo. Carol’s hand finds my arm under the table, a silent reminder for me to control my temper.

My exhale burns my nostrils, and I do my best to keep my cool. Yelling at the lawyer will do no good. In fact, it might only delay this meeting — one which has suddenly and disappointingly turned on its head.

“Indeed,” Mr. Harrington confirms, either oblivious or indifferent to the turmoil churned up by the clause. “It was your father’s belief that Baxter’s companionship would be... beneficial for you.”

Beneficial. As if the void left by a titan can be filled by a creature whose greatest concern is the next belly rub or tossed ball. Yet there it is, the absurd gauntlet thrown down by a man who no longer breathes yet still commands obedience.

“May I have a moment?” The words are icy as they slip from my lips.

There’s a collective inhale from the lawyers, as if my request is unreasonable and they can’t believe I would dare steal precious time from them. I know they would much rather get this meeting over with, but unfortunately for them they have no other choice.

“Of course.” Mr. Harrington’s eyebrows rise just slightly, revealing his surprise. I’m sure he’s thinking I must be crazy to not immediately agree to the terms laid forth.

But, despite being a lot of things, I am not my father’s puppet. Not since I was ten and learned that I could never truly count on him. I am my own person, my own man, and I will not be yanked around. I stand, nodding at Carol, silently asking her to join me.

We step out into the adjoining antechamber, the heavy door muffling the murmurs we leave behind. I pace the carpet, my hands balling into fists.

“Isaac...” Her brow furrows in concern. “It is a strange ask; I understand...”

I face the window, the city skyline blurring as I blink rapidly. “He’s doing it again,” I murmur, more to myself than to her. “Dangling what I want most with strings attached.”

“Strings?” she questions softly.

“Chains,” I correct, my reflection’s eyes darkening. “He knew how much I wanted... no, needed this.” My hand flattens against the cool glass, the city sprawling beyond; so close, yet now gated by an unforeseen keeper. “It’s Baxter or nothing.”

Carol shifts closer. “It’s just a dog, Isaac. And isn’t this — running Lennox Realty —

what you've been working toward your entire life?"

She's right, of course. It's only Baxter. A golden retriever with no concept of the empire he's now entwined with. How difficult could it be to fulfill this one last request? Yet, it feels like a leash around my neck, a reminder of every hoop jumped, every approval never quite caught, regardless of my leaps.

"Fine," I exhale, turning from the cold pane. I need to get it together. "Let's go back in."

Together, we reenter the boardroom where the lawyers wait with grumpy expressions.

"I'll do it," I say, and it's as if I can hear the chain links rattle.

My father's final test, perhaps, or his ultimate lesson. Even in death, Robert Lennox is able to remind me that all things come at a price. Baxter's care is mine to shoulder now, along with the colossal responsibility of an empire.

"Very well, then," Mr. Harrington says as I take the pen, its touch cold against my skin. "Taking care of a dog can't be too burdensome, surely."

The statement hangs in the air — a question, a challenge, a taunt — and as I scrawl my name across the document's line, I have to wonder just how heavy this new collar will feel.

CHAPTER 2

EMILY

Crouching down, my knees pressed into the cool concrete floor of the shelter, I reach

out slowly toward Finn. The pit bull mix gazes back at me with eyes filled with worry, his body tense as a wound spring. He's come a long way since he first arrived here — skinny, skittish, and scarred not just on the surface.

“Easy, Finn,” I murmur, my voice as soft as the late afternoon light spilling through the high windows. “You’re doing so good, buddy.”

A small wag teases the end of his tail, a hopeful flicker that tells me he's starting to trust this place — and maybe even me.

As I run my hand over his sleek brindle coat, I feel the ripple of muscles under my fingers, the quiet strength in him waiting to emerge. But it's like there's a shadow over him that dims the brightness of his intelligence — the anxiety that makes everything harder than it should be.

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“Ricki?” I call out, not wanting to take my eyes off Finn. The sound of my voice bounces off the kennel walls, mingling with the chorus of barks and whines from the other dogs.

“Yeah, Em?” Ricki’s voice comes from somewhere behind me, where she’s been busy cleaning out the empty kennel.

I straighten up, keeping one hand on Finn’s head. “Could we maybe get one of the volunteer vets to take a look at Finn? I’m thinking he might benefit from anti-anxiety meds.”

There’s a pause where I can almost hear her weighing the request against the shelter’s ever-tight budget. “Sure, we can do that. Dr. Sarah is coming in tomorrow; I’ll ask her to check him out.”

“Thanks.” Relief washes over me, but it’s tempered by the knowledge that pills are only a patch on a larger problem.

Still, if they could smooth out some of the edges for Finn, give him the chance to let go of his fears, even just a little — it’s worth a shot. I’ve trained a lot of dogs that have come through this shelter, and Finn is smart. One of the smartest dogs I’ve met.

But even the smartest dogs, just like the smartest people, are only as good as their limits. There are hellish beasts yapping at this pup’s heels, and I suspect they’re the source of why he wound up on the streets in the first place. He’s a beautiful dog, but my guess is whoever had him couldn’t control him, and they ended up turning him out.

I look into Finn's eyes again, promising silently that I won't give up on him. Because someone has to believe in second chances, especially for the ones who have been dealt the harshest firsts.

He starts to get up, but I give him the command to sit. Since he listens right away, I reward him with a treat and a hearty rub on his side. His tail wags so hard it slaps him on either side of his back, making me laugh.

"Good boy, Finn. You did so good today." I lead him back to his kennel, hating to put him in there. If only I didn't need to get to my shift at the coffee shop, I would stay around longer and take him and some of the other dogs for walks.

Ricki's voice breaks through the rhythm of my thoughts, a note of apology in her tone. "Em, before you go... I've got some bad news."

"What is it?" My heart picks up speed, an uncomfortable tightness wrapping around my chest.

She looks at me with those sympathetic eyes that have seen too much surrender and not enough salvation. "The county's cutting funding for the training program," she says, the words landing like punches. "We can't afford to pay as many trainers anymore. We're gonna keep you on, but the hours will be reduced... about half. I'm sorry."

A cold wave crashes over me, the implications of her statement chilling me to the bone. Fewer hours, less help for dogs like Finn, less hope. Part-time work here never lined my pockets, but it filled my soul in ways that steaming milk and pouring coffee never could.

"Can they do that?" I ask, though I know the answer. Money talks louder than need — always has.

“They can, and they are.” Ricki’s hand finds my shoulder, a silent show of support.
“I’m sorry, Em.”

“Thanks,” I say, but the word feels hollow. This job, this place — it’s my lifeline as much as I am theirs. It gives me some meaning in a world that so often feels empty and dark.

“I still want to volunteer my time to training,” I say through the lump in my throat.
“I’ll come in for the same hours, even the ones I’m not paid for.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“I want to.” I nail her with a hard look, and she knows I’m doing this more for the dogs than anything else. Just like her and everyone else here.

She nods, a smile slipping across her face. “I know. We’re lucky to have you. Hey, I heard Sunshine is doing great in her new home. She’s even started playing fetch.”

“That’s great!” It’s exactly what I need to hear. Another shelter dog whose life we turned around.

We head out of the kennel area and into the main lobby. The front door opens, and another dog — a trembling terrier mix — gets carried in by a volunteer. Its eyes dart around in fear, confusion knotting its brow, and something inside me cracks. One more dog.

One last dog.

We’re at capacity now, bursting at the seams with stories untold, futures uncertain. If anyone brings in another dog before one gets adopted, we’ll have to turn them away. Tell them to put the dog back where they found it.

That sounds cruel, but the only other option is that they take it to one of the kill shelters... where its likelihood of coming out is low. Here, we have a no-kill policy, but that can only be maintained by not overcrowding.

“Another one,” I whisper, more to myself than to Ricki. The shelter feels smaller somehow, every inch of space precious, and every wagging tail a reminder of what we stand to lose.

“Yep,” Ricki replies, her gaze following mine. “And we’ll take care of them, same as always. Somehow.”

“Right. Somehow.” I force the words out, knowing she’s also thinking about all the dogs we won’t be able to take.

I think of Finn, of the tentative trust he’s built with me, and wonder how many more setbacks he can withstand before hope becomes just another empty promise.

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“See you tomorrow, Ricki,” I say, more out of habit than certainty.

Will I even get paid for tomorrow’s hours?

It doesn’t matter, I decide. I need the money — Portland isn’t cheap — but I’ll show up regardless of whether the sessions are padding my paycheck or not.

“See you, Em.” She offers a small smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

I step outside, taking a deep breath, looking up at the sky as if searching for an answer. But all I find there are fluffy clouds and silence.

The engine hums a low, monotonous song as I drive away from the shelter, my hands tight on the steering wheel. The image of the full kennels lingers in my mind, haunting me with the ghosts of wagging tails and hopeful eyes. I pull into the coffee-shop parking lot, the neon “Open” sign buzzing like an impatient reminder of reality.

I clock in for the closing shift, the familiar scent of roasted beans bitter in my nostrils. The whirr of espresso machines is usually comforting, but this afternoon it’s just noise distracting me from figuring out some way to get more funding for the shelter.

“Emily! Table four needs a latte!” My coworker’s voice snaps me back, her words sharp against my fog of worry.

I nod, setting to work, my movements mechanical. Milk froths, the steam wand hissing like a tired sigh. But my mind isn’t here — it’s pacing alongside Finn, trying to reassure him that tomorrow will be better, even if I don’t believe it myself.

In my distraction, the cup tilts, and before I can steady it, hot coffee cascades over the counter, a waterfall of wasted warmth. It pools around a woman's designer bag, the dark liquid seeping into the expensive leather.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath. "I'm so sorry!"

I grab towels, dabbing frantically at the mess, my cheeks burning. The woman's eyes are cool saucers of displeasure, and I can feel her judgment soaking into me like the latte into her bag.

"Watch what you're doing next time," she says, her voice clipped and cold.

Embarrassment clings to me. I'm tired of this — of mopping up messes, both literal and metaphorical. I'm tired of the smell of coffee clinging to my skin long after my shift ends, of counting tips that barely cover bills, of feeling like I'm always one step behind where I need to be. Tired of squeezing the thing that really matters — helping dogs — into the hours in between.

As the last customers trickle out and the chairs are lifted onto tables, I lean against the counter, allowing myself a moment to breathe. What am I going to do now? The thought circles in my head, a vulture waiting for resolve to die. My heart still aches for the shelter, for the dogs whose names I know as well as my own.

If only I could find more private clients for my training business, then I could give at least a bit of the money to the shelter. Afford things here and there like medicine and foods for the animals who need special diets. But how? How do I reach out, make connections when every hour seems spoken for? Especially now that I'll need to find a way to make up the difference I'm losing thanks to the county's cut in funding.

I'll think of something. I have to. That — or there will be a miracle, maybe; a stroke of luck or a chance meeting that could change everything.

I glance through the window at the starless sky, looking for a sign, a sliver of hope — for me, for Finn, for all the dogs who deserve more than what fate has dealt them.

“Please,” I say, my reflection gazing back at me, eyes full of silent pleas. “We just need a little help.”

CHAPTER 3

ISAAC

Following the meeting, the day passes in a weird fugue state. When I’m not at my desk, I walk around, finding myself at the coffee machine or in a supplies room without even remembering how I got there. I’ve accepted what my father has done, but I still don’t like it.

For some reason I still don’t understand, that man never liked me. Perhaps he even had it out for me.

Me, his son. His only child.

And what did I ever do? Absolutely nothing. In fact, I went above and beyond, constantly trying to gain his favor.

With the last task for the day finished, I close my laptop with a sigh, say goodbye to Carol, and head out. It’s nearly eight p.m. when I finally pull up to the Holt family residence, a cheerful two-story home that’s seen more laughter and life than my penthouse ever will.

I turn off the ignition and sit for a moment, staring at the quaint front porch. Baxter has been here since Dad passed away, my father’s friends caring for him. And now I’m about to walk through that door... and make that dog mine.

I can feel the reluctance coil around my spine, heavy as lead. I'm not looking forward to this one bit.

With a sigh, I push the car door open and step into the cool night air. The crunch of gravel underfoot feels loud, almost intrusive. Before I can even reach the front steps, the door swings open and there he is — Baxter, a ball of energy wrapped in golden fur, bounding toward me with oblivious joy.

“Hey, hey, Baxter, easy—” His paws hit my chest before I can brace myself, and I stagger back a step.

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Mud. Of course it had to rain today. Muddy paw prints stamp my suit, and I wince as each new mark feels like an accusation, a reminder of how ill-equipped I am for what comes next.

“Damn it, Baxter.” But there’s no heat in my words, only a tired resignation.

He sits, tail wagging a hundred miles an hour, not caring one bit about what he just did.

“Guess you’re ready to go home, huh?” I try to brush off some mud, but it does no good.

“Oh, sorry, Isaac!” Trudy bustles out the door. “Baxter, inside! Come!”

The dog listens to her, and I trail behind the two of them. Trudy’s husband William is in the foyer, putting together a pile of things: dog bed, food, toys.

I arch an eyebrow. All of that is for the dog? It might not even fit in my car.

“Isaac.” William reaches out to shake my head. “How are you holding up?”

“Good.” I withdraw my hand, not wanting to have this conversation about grief, about missing someone. Not here, not now.

Not ever.

“Where’s his leash?” I ask, looking around for it.

William hands it over, but there's some hesitance there. Trudy's eyes are pools of worry as she looks from Baxter to me. William stands beside her with creased brows. There's an unspoken question there, an uncertainty that seems ludicrous considering the circumstances.

"I'll take good care of him," I assure them, injecting a confidence into my voice that I scarcely feel. "He was Dad's dog. He's all I have left of him now."

Their concern doesn't wane, but they nod, and we begin the solemn ritual of transferring Baxter's life into the back of my car. His bed, a tattered thing that smells of comfort and memories, his food — a reminder that responsibility doesn't clock out — and his toys, squeaky symbols of simpler joys. They fill the space behind the seats, turning my vehicle into a makeshift kennel.

God, it's gonna smell in here.

"Drive safe, Isaac," Trudy says, her hand lingering on the door before she closes it. "And remember, he's had a rough time too."

I bite my tongue. Seriously? Now we're supposed to worry about the dog's mental health?

"Thanks," I tell them again.

The ride home is anything but smooth. Baxter is a flurry of fur and restless energy, bounding from seat to seat as if chasing ghosts. At one point, he vaults into the front, his paws landing heavily on my lap, nearly sending us swerving into the next lane.

"Damn it, Baxter!" My heart jackhammers against my rib cage, adrenaline pumping as I shove him off of me and into the passenger's seat. "Stay, okay? Just... stay."

But Baxter is deaf to my pleas, his nose pressed against the window one second, his tail sweeping across the dashboard the next. It's like watching a living storm, and I'm out at sea without a compass.

The city lights blur by, and with each erratic movement from Baxter, I'm reminded how out of my depth I am. Once upon a time, Dad would have known how to calm him, would have whispered words that made sense to a canine. But here I am, floundering, trying to steady a ship that was never mine to captain.

We survive the drive with no further scares, and as I pull into the underground parking of my building, Baxter finally settles — a warm, panting presence beside me. Putting his leash on, I grab his bed and bag of food. I'll come back for the toys tomorrow.

At least I'm home. After this rough day, I have my own bed to look forward to. Baxter's nails click on the marble floor as we cross the lobby, his body hunched, tail tucked.

We approach the elevator, and he hesitates at the threshold, a whine trembling from his throat. I can almost feel the electric hum of his nervous energy transferring to my skin. And then, as the doors close, trapping us in the mirrored box ascending to my penthouse, he lets out a distressed bark before squatting. The warm scent of dog urine cuts through the air.

"Damn it, Baxter." Frustration knots in my chest — at him, at my dad, at this whole situation. Kneeling, I mop at the mess with disposable wipes I've pulled from my pocket, the ones meant for polishing shoes, not cleaning accidents.

While I'm crouched, focused on erasing traces of imperfection from the polished floor, the elevator doors open and Baxter sees an opportunity. He darts into the hallway, leash trailing after him, running like he's being chased by a predator. I curse

under my breath, abandoning the soiled wipes, and chase after his retreating form.

“Come back here!” It’s laughable, really, how quickly control slips through my fingers these days.

I round the corner just in time to see Baxter paused and sniffing at a neighbor’s door. Taking advantage, I scoop him up, his body heavy against my chest. He licks my face, and for a brief moment, I consider just leaving him here. Someone will find him and give him a good home, and then I’ll never have to worry about him again.

But I can’t do that. My father’s lawyers are watching, and if I break the terms of the clause, the company will be ripped from my fingers.

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“Let’s try this again,” I say through gritted teeth as we enter the penthouse.

It’s a space designed for luxury, not for a rambunctious dog. Baxter scurries off, nose to the ground, and I tense, prepared to have to intervene again.

He sniffs at the books on the coffee table, the leather couch, the curtains that frame the cityscape beyond the windows. He’s not peeing on anything, though, and that’s a good start.

Realizing I left his stuff in the elevator, I leave with a groan, call the elevator, and retrieve the bed and food. When I return, Baxter has pulled the cushions off the couch.

“No,” I tell him, putting the cushions back where they go. He responds by shoving his wet nose in my face.

“Here. Drink some water.” Filling a bowl, I put it on the floor for him, then just stand there in the kitchen.

Scrubbing my face, I remind myself of the simple routine. Open the fridge. Pull out a dinner.

It’s a minimal plate — grilled salmon with a side of asparagus — meal prep from a chef who knows my palate better than I do myself. The digital numbers on the microwave count down, and a soft ding signifies it’s time to eat alone again.

This time, though, I have an audience. A golden head tilted to the side, tongue rolling

out of the gaping mouth.

“I don’t think so.” Tearing into his food bag, I pour Baxter a full bowl. He sniffs at it, unimpressed, then turns his attention to the couch.

“Hey, buddy,” I say, trying to keep my voice light. “Your bed, remember?”

I point to the plush dog bed nestled in the corner, an offering to make this place feel more like home for him. For twenty seconds, he complies, burrowing into the fabric, a temporary truce between us.

But Baxter is a creature of comfort, and the allure of the couch beckons. Before I can finish my first bite, he’s back up there, claiming it as his own. I sigh, the sound heavy.

Fine. Whatever. What’s one more thing out of place? The couch will smell like dog, but my car already does.

With the day pressing down on my shoulders, I finish my food then rinse my plate and leave it in the sink. Tomorrow is another day. Another day that will take me a little bit further from my dad’s death. From my dad’s life.

My chest tightens, but I ignore it, stripping my clothes as I walk to the bathroom. The hot water of the shower cascades over me, but it does little to wash away the weariness. Droplets mix with the grief that clings to my skin, a reminder of how everything has changed. I stand there until the steam blurs my reflection in the glass and I’m not sure what I feel the most.

Is it sadness over losing my dad? Anger at him for burdening me with Baxter? Frustration at myself for being so easily affected?

Bed calls to me like a siren's song, the sheets cool and inviting. As I crawl under them, I allow myself a sliver of hope. At least Baxter is quiet. Maybe he won't be so hard to take care of after all.

Sighing, I close my eyes and start to drift off to sleep — until a crash splits through the air, quickly followed by the sound of paws scampering across the hardwood floor.

Cursing, I squeeze my eyes shut. That was definitely glass. Which means it was definitely my artisan vase that cost nearly ten thousand dollars.

Tossing the covers off, I trudge into the living room to clean up the latest mess. “Welcome to your new life,” I mutter to myself.

Hope you're happy, Dad.

CHAPTER 4

ISAAC

I wake to the acrid stench of destruction. My eyes snap open, and the sight that greets me is nothing short of a war zone. Baxter, my inheritance in canine form, has turned the living room into his personal battlefield.

The couch, once a pristine piece of designer furniture, now lies in tatters, its innards spilling out like the aftermath of a plush massacre. And there, nestled among the chaos, is a pile of dog poop.

“Damn it, Baxter,” I mutter, but the fury brewing inside me isn't solely reserved for the dog.

It's my father's last laugh from beyond the grave. And how often do dogs even need

to go out, anyway? I realize I have no clue, and the magnitude of my ignorance presses down on me. I'm as much to blame for this situation as my dad is.

With a sigh, I clean up the mess. Baxter sits there and watches, panting, not showing one bit of remorse.

“That couch was custom-made,” I tell him.

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He barks and launches himself at me, paws landing on my shoulders. I push him off before he scratches my face.

After feeding us both a quick breakfast, I clip his leash to his collar. “Come on, you beast.”

The car ride to work isn’t any easier than the car ride home was. It’s not until I see another dog hanging its head out a window that I remember that’s something dogs like.

“There you go.” I roll the passenger’s window halfway down for him, and he shoves his head out of it. For the rest of the ride, he manages to stay out of my life. It’s a win. A small one, but a win nonetheless.

“Hey, Baxter.” The security guard greets him with a pat on the head, seeming genuinely happy to see the fluffy monster. “Morning, Mr. Lennox.”

“Morning,” I say, wondering if he’s seeing the same dog I am. How can anyone get along with this animal?

Baxter gets more and more excited the closer we get to my office. He doesn’t walk so much as he careens, his size a liability I hadn’t considered until now.

“Easy, boy.” I do my best to get him under control by tugging on the leash, but not only is he strong; he’s unpredictable.

He dives under the first desk he sees, and I hear the unmistakable sound of

disconnecting cables. Monitors flicker and die, and the collective groan of my team fills the space.

“Sorry!” I call out, my face flushing with embarrassment.

This wasn’t how my father did it. Even though he brought Baxter to his office every day, you’d hardly know the dog was there. He usually chilled in his bed or gnawed on a bone.

My dad, as much as I hate to admit it sometimes, had an aura that even animals seemed to respect. Now here I am, chasing after a dog who’s systematically dismantling my credibility.

“Want some help?” Oliver, one of my team members, asks, his concern laced with a hint of amusement.

“Fine, just fine,” I lie through gritted teeth, diving under the desk to retrieve Baxter.

He looks up at me, tongue lolling out, and for a moment I wonder if he’s doing this on purpose. To annoy me, to challenge me, to remind me that I’m not the man my father was.

“Baxter!” It’s Carol calling, and the dog listens, going right to her.

She rewards him with one of the treats she keeps in her desk before handing him a fresh bone. Thrilled, he settles down with it between his paws and starts chewing away.

“I have someone for you to call,” Carol says, turning to me.

“Who?” I mutter, raking my fingers through my hair, realizing I haven’t looked in a

mirror once this morning.

Did I even brush my teeth? I don't know. All I remember is Baxter. Cleaning up after Baxter. Feeding Baxter. Yelling at Baxter.

"Emily. She's a dog trainer — some say whisperer," Carol explains, pressing the paper into my hand. "She worked miracles with my mother's terrier — a real terror before Emily stepped in."

"Sounds too good to be true." Skepticism is my knee-jerk reaction, a shield against hope that can so easily morph into disappointment. But desperation has a way of wearing down even the thickest armor, and so I take the number.

Alone at my desk, Baxter still working on his bone next to Carol, I dial the number. Best to get this out of the way so I can get to work. The phone rings, once, twice, then a voice on the other end, light and airy, answers.

"This is Emily."

"Hi, Emily, I'm Isaac. Isaac Lennox. I have a... situation with a dog," I start, choking on the understatement. "Baxter. He's a bit of a handful. Carol, my assistant, said you might be able to help. You worked with her mom's terrier."

There's a short pause, and I wonder if it's because of my name. Lennox Realty is a worldwide company, with our headquarters here in Portland. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who has never heard of us.

"I'd love to help," she says. "How about the dog park on Fifth around four this afternoon? No obligations. We'll just see what we're dealing with and go from there."

Straight to the point. I like it. Even more than I like her musical voice.

“Four works. Thank you,” I reply, a flicker of relief igniting within me.

“Great. See you then, Isaac.” Her voice is warm, reassuring, and I allow myself a sliver of hope that maybe this will be the turning point.

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“See you,” I echo, ending the call.

I stare at the wall, still thinking about her voice. She’s probably used to calming more than just unruly dogs with that tone.

Curiosity piques, and without much thought, I find myself typing her name into the search bar. LinkedIn profiles load, a digital procession of faces, until hers appears. It’s like a punch of reality, or maybe beauty — she’s gorgeous. About thirty, if I had to guess, with black hair that falls in waves over petite shoulders and skin like porcelain. Her eyes, even in the pixelated image, hold galaxies of brown, deep and enigmatic.

A professional connection — that’s all this is, I remind myself sternly. Today’s meeting isn’t about chatting up a pretty girl. It’s about Baxter, about regaining some semblance of order in the chaos he brings — chaos I’m not equipped to handle alone.

I’m supposed to lead, to know what I’m doing, but every chewed cable and misplaced dog poop is a reminder of how far from this company’s legacy I’ve strayed.

I don’t have time to pursue women anyway, no matter how intriguing they seem. There’s too much at stake, too many eyes on me, waiting for me to slip.

And yet, there’s a part of me that wonders what it would be like to meet someone who isn’t part of this gilded world, someone who doesn’t see me just as the heir to an American throne.

That’s always been the problem when I do date. Women see dollar signs, social

connections, photos with me that they can use to boost their visibility online.

Getting a hold of myself, I close the browser tab before I'm tempted to look at anything else. I jot down the meeting details on a sticky note, pressing it onto the edge of my monitor —Four p.m., dog park on Fifth.

With a deep breath, I turn back to the documents that need to be read, the endless decisions that need to be made, the silent weight of expectation. There's work to be done, and at the end of the day that's all that matters.

CHAPTER 5

EMILY

Well, I got it. My miracle. A blessing falling out of the sky. That is, if I don't screw up this first meeting.

And what a first meeting it is. This is Isaac Lennox on the other end of this drive — billionaire heir to Lennox Realty and notoriously attractive by any standard. My hands suddenly feel slippery on the steering wheel, and I swallow the fluttering nerves that seem to fill the car like uninvited butterflies.

I realized who he was the second he told me his name on the phone. The knowledge left a strange impression within me, part excitement for my fledgling business and part trepidation because, well, he's hot and stupidly rich. And not just any kind of hot, but the kind that makes any person with a pulse stop and turn their head.

The park looms into view, a happy place where I often bring the shelter dogs to do some work. I park and spot him immediately: Isaac Lennox standing in a pool of sunlight that seems to adore him just as much as the cameras do. His hair glints with hints of gold, and his posture is relaxed, yet there's an undeniable authority in the

way he occupies space.

Next to him, Baxter, a golden retriever, tugs on his leash. My pulse stutters, skips a beat, then resumes at double pace. I can't afford to stumble today, not when each new connection means the difference between helping the dogs I love and having to stand by helpless.

I step out of the car, smoothing down my shirt as if to iron out my own insecurities. Drawing a deep breath, I try to anchor myself in the present moment, banishing thoughts of past failures and future worries. Business. This is business, Emily. And you've got this.

"Isaac?" I call out tentatively as I approach.

He turns, and for a moment, it's as if everything else fades into soft focus. The park, the sounds of distant laughter, even Baxter — all inconsequential. Up close, Isaac's eyes are a startling shade of blue, like the ocean on a clear day, and they fix on me with an intensity that sends an unexpected shiver down my spine. The corners of his mouth lift in a brief, polite smile that doesn't quite reach those striking eyes.

"Emily," he acknowledges, his voice more resonant in person.

"Nice to meet you," I manage, though it sounds more like a question than a statement.

And just like that, the spell is broken. Baxter whines, tugging at the leash, and Isaac's attention shifts back to him, his lips turning into a frown.

"Thanks for coming," Isaac says. "Baxter... uh, he's a lot. A lot to handle."

"He looks friendly, though."

Baxter seems to know I'm talking about him, because he starts barking and pulls even harder. The sudden burst of energy catches both me and Isaac off guard. The leash slips from Isaac's grasp, and the golden retriever bolts across the grass with a joyful abandon that only a dog at a park on a sunny day can possess.

"Baxter!" Isaac shouts in fury. The dog just keeps running.

Isaac drops his arms, red blooming across his face. "I'm sorry."

Instead of answering, I take off after the dog, my feet pounding against the earth, heartbeat syncing with each stride. It's not the first time I've chased after a runaway pup, but it never fails to spike my adrenaline.

"Come on, Baxter! Good boy!" My voice is bright, encouraging, designed to capture his attention without scolding.

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He slows, then turns toward me with a look that says this is all just a grand game. Tail wagging, he trots back in my direction, allowing me to scoop up the leash once more. “Gotcha.”

I call his name again and pull a tug toy out of my bag. It catches his attention right away, and he grabs hold of one end while I shake the other.

“Sorry about that,” Isaac says as he walks up to us. “As I said, he’s a lot.”

“It’s okay.” I smile. “It’s not abnormal at all. Has he had any training before?”

“Uh, I don’t think so. He was... I didn’t expect to adopt him. He belonged to my dad. Baxter just came to live with me yesterday.”

Belonged? Where is Isaac’s dad now? There’s a hint of something else in his voice now, a depth that wasn’t there a moment ago.

“That’s a big change,” I say, handing Baxter’s leash back to him. “Stressful. Dogs need time to adjust, just like we do.”

Isaac studies me for a moment, then nods. “You have a real knack for this,” he says, and there’s a glint of respect in his eyes that wasn’t present when I arrived. “Would you consider taking the job right away? I can pay extra to cover it being last-minute. And I know you’re probably booked for the week, but if you could fit me in, I would really appreciate it.”

The offer hangs in the air, heavy with opportunity. It’s nice of him to assume that I’m

booked with clients, when really it's anything but the case. And the promise of extra money is so tempting. I need it, and the shelter dogs need it.

And yet... I hesitate. Not because I doubt my ability, but because I'm unsure of him. Something tells me the dog will be the easy challenge, but the man... the man is infinitely more complicated, probably in need of more teaching than Baxter when it comes to coexisting with another species. The way he reacted when Baxter ran off, you'd think he had been personally victimized.

Yet, the promise of financial stability tugs at me more strongly than any misgiving. This could be the break I've been hoping for, the chance to grow my business and, in turn, help more animals in need.

"I'd love to," I tell him. "Count me in."

"Great," he says, a genuine smile appearing for the first time. "Baxter seems to like you already."

Isaac checks his watch, the lines on his forehead deepening with urgency. "I'm sorry this was short, but I need to get back to the office. Can we schedule our first session? Tomorrow morning work for you? And where is best?"

"Your home would be great... It helps to see how the dogs respond to their living situation," I quickly add, before he thinks that I want to come over to his house for some other reason.

Which, I then realize, is silly. My crushing on this man doesn't mean he would even give me so much as a second glance.

"I'll text you the address. Eight a.m.?"

“Sure,” I respond, tucking a stray hair behind my ear as I try to ignore the quickening of my pulse. “Bright and early, then?”

“Perfect.” He seems to want to say something else, but the pause is quickly replaced by another smile. “Baxter will be waiting.”

I watch Isaac walk away, his silhouette shrinking in the distance, Baxter trotting beside him until they turn a corner and disappear from view, and then I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding and make my way to the car.

Slipping behind the wheel, I pause, my hand hovering over the ignition. A sudden urge to understand this man who has come into my life so unexpectedly prompts me to pull out my phone instead. With a few taps, Isaac Lennox’s world unfolds before me. The articles paint a picture of a man both revered and scrutinized, a son of a tycoon who commands with a sharp mind and an even sharper tongue.

And then, I see it — a headline that stops my heart for a moment:

Real Estate Mogul Robert Lennox Passes Away Unexpectedly.

The date stamps the news at less than two weeks ago. The article says little about the cause, but the impact is clear — Isaac has recently lost his father, the anchor of Lennox Realty, the empire now resting on his lone shoulders.

A pang of sorrow grips me, mingling with a familiar ache. It’s an echo of the void that’s been part of my own life for years, ever since I stepped away from my parents’ volatile shadows. Even though not talking to my parents on the regular is a choice, not having a loving presence in my life feels like a curse.

I wonder about the last time Isaac saw his father. Did they part on good terms, or was their last conversation a disagreement about something trivial? Did they even say

goodbye to each other?

Sympathy warms the edges of my initial impression of Isaac. Maybe his brusqueness wasn't entitlement, but a shield against a loss too fresh to touch.

Either way, he's not my assignment. Baxter is.

At least, that's what I tell myself. I already know, though, that it's not enough to teach a dog. You have to teach the human too. And I suspect that Isaac Lennox could be carrying even more baggage than Baxter and Finn combined, and sooner or later, in one way or another, it will become my problem.

CHAPTER 6

EMILY

The key turns in the lock with a soft click, and I push the door open to the familiar scent of cinnamon candles and our lavender laundry detergent. The hum of the city below our fifth-floor window fades as I step inside, letting the quiet sanctuary of our little apartment envelop me. Jenn sits cross-legged on the couch, her laptop balanced on her knees and a bowl of half-eaten pasta on the coffee table.

“Hey,” she greets me without looking up, her fingers flying over the keys.

She’s got another editing deadline to get through, and I don’t mind. Even though we’re the closest of friends and living together means we get to have extra fun, I’m in a strange mood and could use a little time to myself.

As I walk by, though, headed to the kitchen and the frozen dinners in the freezer, she closes her laptop. “What’s new?”

“Well...” I pivot to face her. “I do have a new client.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah... He’s kind of a big deal. Isaac Lennox. From Lennox Realty?”

Her eyes grow to the size of saucers. “No way.”

I nod, a small smile tugging at my lips. “Yeah. Apparently my last client was his assistant’s mom. I had no idea.”

“Emily, that’s amazing!” She sets her laptop aside and stands, rushing over to wrap me in an impromptu hug. “You’ve worked so hard for this.”

I hug her back, the warmth from her enthusiasm seeping into me. Still, I’m full of nerves, the kind that make me feel like I might vomit at any moment. Pulling away, I lean against the kitchen counter, trying to mirror her excitement. “Yeah, it is pretty cool.”

“More than cool. You’re going to be amazing.” I know she believes in me, but her voice seems to come from far away as I trace the wood grain of the cabinet with my finger.

“Thanks. I hope so.”

Jenn’s brow furrows, and she studies me, concern etching her features. “You okay? You seem... off.”

I force a laugh, too sharp, too quick. “Just tired, I guess. It’s been a long day.”

“Go get some rest, then,” she urges, gesturing towards my bedroom with a tilt of her head.

“I will soon. I gotta eat something first.”

She gets back to work as I toss a frozen dinner in the microwave and then do some light kitchen cleaning while I wait for it to finish. After scarfing down the food, I take a quick shower and step into my bathrobe.

My bedroom is dim, the only light a soft glow from the streetlights outside. Even here in my private sanctuary, I can’t shake the heaviness that has settled over me, a blanket woven of anticipation and dread.

This is what I asked for, isn't it? To prove myself — to take on clients who could make or break my career with a single review?

That's it, though. The reason behind my dread. If Isaac doesn't like what I do with Baxter, if I fall short in any way, he could destroy my reputation. He has that sort of power.

And if the opposite happens, if he's blown away by my skills, then I could be catapulted to another level. I could become a trainer to celebrities and rich people galore. Their names could help me grow my name, and consequently the more good I could do.

So here I am, teetering on the edge of a massive shakeup. It's exactly what I wanted; I just didn't expect it to be so terrifying.

Climbing into bed, I pull the covers up to my chin and exhale slowly, trying to steady the flutter in my chest. I play today's meetup over and over, clocking what I suspect are Baxter's motivations. He has triggers, too, I'm sure. I just need to find out what they are.

My mind races through potential scenarios, each one ending with a mistake I can't afford to make. A man like Isaac has little patience — he showed that with his reaction to his dog running off — so there will be a small window for me to make an impression.

Because the meetup today wasn't enough, even though Isaac was pleased. Now comes the hard work. I need to keep that momentum going.

I close my eyes, trying to catch my shuteye, but it doesn't come easily. Instead I find myself reaching for my laptop, charging on the floor next to my bed.

Opening it up, I nestle against the pillows, the keyboard warm under my fingertips as I type in Isaac Lennox's name, driven by an odd compulsion to know more about him.

As pages of search results populate with a click, I learn that his wealth is even more staggering than I imagined. Figures sprawl across the articles like the most audacious of skyscrapers, each zero piling upon the last until they reach the stratosphere — tens of billions. A breath I didn't realize I was holding escapes me, and it feels like I'm trying to comprehend the vastness of the universe from my tiny, earthbound vantage point.

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Clicking through the links, I read a little bit about his father's death, but there isn't much out yet. Just that it was a heart attack, very sudden. Then again, what else is there to say about something like that?

Here one moment... gone the next.

I chew on my lip, hating the reminder that life is so fragile and doesn't really belong to any of us. Rather, we're borrowing it, and the universe can take it back anytime it pleases.

Poor Isaac. He's carrying this grief, alone in its sharp newness, and never once today did he let it slip through the façade he presented to the world — or to me.

I wonder how someone bears such a loss so silently, so stoically. Why hadn't he mentioned it? Does the pain carve out hollows too vast for words?

But the question dissipates as quickly as it forms; it's none of my business. People get to grieve in their own ways, on their own time. I am here to train a dog, not excavate the hidden sorrows of a man who is practically a stranger.

And yet, as I scroll past condolences and statements, it becomes clear that Isaac's world is one I can't fully understand, distant and fuzzy. The realization casts a shadow over the attraction I've been harboring.

Especially when I discover another piece of him tucked away in an interview, a throwaway comment about pets being a nuisance, a liability for those with ambitions. My heart sinks. Isaac is not a dog person. Worse, the disdain in his voice when he

speaks of them seems to suggest he actually despises them. How did I not see this before?

And if he doesn't like animals, why would he take Baxter? Why not give him to a human who is happy to have him?

The truth chills the small flame of allure that flickered to life upon our meeting — how could it not? To love dogs is to understand a part of my own soul. Anyone who doesn't even like them... well, I don't understand those sorts of people one bit.

With a sigh, I close the laptop and put it away. There's a job to do, training sessions to plan — and personal feelings have no place in the equation.

It's probably for the best anyway, that I found this out about him now. It nips any of my burgeoning fantasies in the bud, knocks me back down to reality. Isaac and I are from different worlds; we have different mindsets, different values. We could never be an item or anything close to it.

I'm doing this for the dogs. The creatures who will never turn on me, never let me down. Unlike humans, they're dependable. Trustworthy. Men, you never know when they'll bite, when they'll turn tail and run only for you to never see them again.

Sure, devoting my life to animals and not getting close to any humans other than my roommate is lonely sometimes, but it's safe. Predictable.

In this scary world, that amounts to something.

CHAPTER 7

ISAAC

Another morning. Another war zone.

I don't even know what to be angry about first. There's the gnawed windowsill, splinters of wood strewn across the polished floor like the aftermath of a tiny, localized storm. Then there's my once-favorite pair of leather shoes, now marked with a stain that reeks of betrayal.

"Damn it, Baxter," I mutter.

He has his toys! Why can't he chew on them instead of everything that matters to me?

"Why?" I ask the dog.

In response, he knocks over a stool in the kitchen, freaks out at the sound, backs up, hits his rump against a side table, consequently turning that over as well. I roll my eyes.

"You would calm down for Emily, wouldn't you?" I say. "Well, good news. She's on her way here now."

Emily. She handled Baxter with such ease yesterday, her voice and touch gentle yet firm. And those eyes, bright with intelligence and warmth... I shake my head, trying to scatter the image.

But then there's a knock at the door, three raps that sound like hope, and my pulse quickens. That must be her — I already told the doorman to expect her and let her up.

Smoothing my hair, I open the door and there she stands. Even though she's only one person, her presence fills the space, pushing out the shadows that linger in every corner. She smiles, and suddenly, the air is sweeter, the light is brighter.

“Good morning,” she says in that voice that washes away every worry that I thought I owned.

“Morning, Emily,” I reply, stepping aside to let her in.

I catch myself lingering a moment too long on the way her jeans conform to her curves, the way her shiny hair hangs down her back. For someone who’s always prided himself on self-control, I’m embarrassingly aware of how hard it is to maintain it around her.

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Baxter bounds forward, his tail a furious pendulum, exuberance personified as he reaches Emily. She laughs and bends to greet him with a scratch of his ears.

“Hey there, troublemaker.”

Watching them, a kernel of hope takes root within me. If anyone can turn this unruly beast into a semblance of a civilized companion, it’s her. Carol did me a solid by giving me Emily’s number. I’ll have to remember that when I’m writing holiday bonuses.

I clear my throat, which feels oddly thick. “I really appreciate you spending so much time on training this week.”

“Of course.” She straightens up from petting Baxter. “Are you ready to get started?”

“Yes.” I glance at the clock on the wall. “I’ll just be in my office.” I nod at the door to my home office, on the other side of the living room.

Her eyebrows rise, and instantly I know I’ve said something wrong.

“Is there a problem?” I ask.

“It’s not just about training him,” she says gently. “You need to be involved too. Dogs and their owners need to learn together.”

A flush of irritation warms my neck. The implication that I am part of the problem prickles at my ego.

“I’m not the one who needs to learn,” I say. “It’s him.”

“Baxter can listen to me all night and day, but what happens once I’m gone?” she presses. “He needs to know that you’re the one in charge, and he needs to know that he can trust you. Count on you.”

I look down at the slobbering beast. Count on me? No way does this animal want any sort of bond with me. Based on the way he’s half-destroyed my home, he dislikes me even more than I do him.

“Fine,” I say, the word clipped and reluctant.

It’s not as if I have a choice. The terms are clear: care for Baxter, take over Lennox Realty. And I can’t focus on work when Baxter is taking all my time and energy. So, here I am.

“Good.” She nods with approval and turns her attention to Baxter, who is already attempting to scale her like a mountain. She steps back each time he jumps, denying him the foothold he seeks.

“Ah-ah, Baxter. Down,” she instructs, her voice firm but calm.

Every rejection from Emily teaches him restraint, and when his paws finally stay planted on the ground, she rewards him with a treat. A simple lesson in boundaries, yet it works.

“Your turn,” she prompts, handing me the bag of treats.

I kneel before Baxter, assuming that if we’re eye to eye it will make this easier.

“You stand,” Emily says. “So he remembers that you’re in charge.”

“I won’t say I dislike that,” I mutter, standing.

She doesn’t react, and I wonder if I’ve said something to offend her. Or maybe I’m too in my head when she’s around.

“Sit,” I command Baxter, fumbling with the unfamiliar use of authority — at least with an animal.

Baxter stares up at me, those brown eyes wide and questioning. For a moment, there’s a stillness, a silent understanding between man and beast. Then, as if conceding to this new dynamic, he sits. His tail sweeps the floor, cautious but friendly.

“Wait,” I add, testing the waters of our newfound rapport.

Baxter’s muscles tense, ready to spring into chaos, but he holds.

“Good boy,” I say softly, surprised at how happy this makes me.

He waits for the treat, and I reward his patience. In that exchange, something shifts. It’s more than just Baxter learning — I’m learning too.

Damn it, but Emily was right.

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And of course she was. She's the professional here. I'm the bumbling moron with a dog basically running his whole life.

A soft smile plays on Emily's lips, and I feel seen in a way that's both unnerving and comforting. There's warmth in her gaze that thaws a corner of my heart.

"Nice job," she says, still grinning.

"Maybe," I concede, allowing myself a small sliver of hope.

I hand another treat to Baxter, his eyes flickering with understanding and eagerness. It's a small moment of success, but still a great one... until Emily speaks.

"I heard about your father," she says gently. "I'm sorry for your loss. I didn't realize that he had passed so suddenly."

"Thank you," I mumble, the words feeling like pebbles in my mouth.

My gaze drops to the floor, tracing the grain of the wood rather than meeting her concern. The walls of my heart throb, still too raw, too tender from the grief and resentment that cling like ivy. It's such a complicated thing, relationships. My father was my hero while at the same time my greatest enemy.

How do I make peace with that truth — especially now that he's gone?

"Did you plan on taking Baxter after your dad passed?" Her voice is soft, probing the edges of my private world.

“No,” I admit, the truth heavy on my tongue.

I don’t want to tell her any more. To reveal the condition of my inheritance, to lay bare the nature of my bonds with both my dad and Baxter feels like undressing a wound. I can’t have her see me as anything less than what I project — a man who means business, always in control and unflinching.

But as I watch her kneel beside Baxter, offering both discipline and affection with such ease, a strange sensation unfurls within me. Why does her opinion matter? Since when do I care about being seen as callous or ambitious?

“So, why did you take him?” She tilts her head, locking eyes with me. She’s waiting for more, a glimpse into my fortress.

But I deflect, sealing the gates. “He’s... he’s good company,” I finish lamely.

She blinks, and I can tell she doesn’t believe me. She’s seen the way I am with Baxter, knows there’s more to the story.

“Let’s do some leash training next,” she says, leaving me relieved that the conversation is ending.

The session continues, our time together passing in the blink of an eye. As Emily packs up her things, I feel a sense of both relief and regret. I need to get to work — I’ve lost so much time to dog training already — but I don’t want her to go.

“Good job today. See you next time.” She shoulders her bag.

“Yes. See you. Thank you again.” It’s all I manage before she slips out the door. I watch it close behind her, my breath caught somewhere between longing and relief.

I am getting soft, aren't I? A whimsical thought, one that would've made my father chuckle, no doubt.

"Come on, Baxter," I sigh, putting his leash on and leading him to the car.

As Baxter settles into the passenger seat, I glance around the parking garage, knowing Emily probably already left but also hoping for one more glimpse of her.

"I'm acting like a teenager," I tell Baxter.

He licks the window.

"And I'm talking to a dog," I mutter. "What the hell is happening to me? I don't even recognize myself anymore."

The more important question is, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

CHAPTER 8

EMILY

"I just don't get Isaac," I murmur to Jenn, who sits across from me on the couch, sipping her coffee slowly.

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She shakes her head, strands of chestnut hair falling into her face. “Some people shouldn’t have pets,” she says.

“That’s the weird thing. I feel like he doesn’t want to have Baxter and yet... he does.”

“Or he does want the dog, but at this point he’s more frustrated with him than anything else.”

“Maybe...” I trail off, still sure that’s part of the story but not the whole one. “He treats Baxter like a piece of furniture. An accessory to his perfect, polished life. Baxter is smart... He wants to learn. I think he wants to get along with Isaac — but what can I really do if the human doesn’t care?”

“Emily, you’re doing your best,” Jenn says, reaching over to give my hand a reassuring squeeze.

I nod, but doubt clings to me like the early morning mist outside. It’s only been a few days since our last training session, and the thought of facing Isaac again stirs an uncomfortable flutter in my chest. I hate it, this involuntary response to a man who couldn’t be more detached from the things I hold dear.

Pushing myself up from the couch, I take a deep breath and glance at the clock. Time to go. I can already feel Baxter, can sense his energy and eagerness to live in peace with those around him.

Like every other animal, I want to give him the best the world has to offer. That’s not realistic, though. He’s not my dog — as much as I would love a dog, any dog, the

problem being how small my apartment is and all the time I spend out of it working.

I wish I could promise Baxter a loving home, but instead I'll need to make do with what I can do for him, and that's train him so that he can exist more peacefully in a human's world. It will do no good if Isaac isn't also on board, though. Right now, it seems like he's one foot in, one foot out, and that just won't do.

The drive to the park is short but heavy with reflection. When I see Isaac waiting by the wrought-iron gates, something in me tightens. There he stands, immaculate in his designer clothing, exuding wealth and success. And yet, all I can see is how out of place he looks beside the eager, bounding form of Baxter. How unnatural he seems.

"Ready for another round?" Isaac calls out as I approach, and he looks as tense as I feel. Does he also have a problem with me?

Probably. When I told him the other day that he couldn't hide away in his office, he'd looked like I'd insulted his very sense of self. Heck, maybe that's exactly what I did.

"Absolutely," I reply, hating the way my heart rate continues to pick up.

I force my attention to Baxter, to the reason I'm here. This isn't about Isaac — not about what he does or says, or the way he makes my legs feel like they're made of jelly. It's about helping a dog find his place in a world where he's merely an afterthought to his owner. My only concern for Isaac should involve how committed he is to Baxter's training. Beyond that, there's no reason for me to think of him twice.

We start with the basics: sit and wait. It's a dance of patience, guiding Baxter with gentle commands, rewarding his obedience with treats and praise. Isaac follows suit, a bit awkwardly, but it's progress. The sight of man and dog working together is a patchwork of possibility, stitching together fragments of what could be.

Slowly, steadily, my hopes rise. Isaac is focused. In tune with his dog. Could it be that he's done some reflecting since our last training session and he's finally decided to fully commit?

"Sit, Baxter. Wait for it..." My words are soft but firm, and I make sure to always use the hand gesture for "sit." Baxter's keen eyes lock onto mine, and I can see the understanding begin to crystallize.

Then, suddenly, Isaac's phone shatters the moment. He pulls it from his pocket and steps away.

"Sorry, I have to take this," he says over his shoulder, his attention doing a one-eighty just like that.

Frustration prickles at the edges of my composure. The connection we were building splinters, leaving me to gather the pieces alone. Baxter watches Isaac walk away, his furry brow creased in confusion. That invisible thread pulling them together stretches thin, and I know without looking that Baxter's interest in our session is waning. His human isn't here, and without that there's nothing.

"Come on, Baxter," I coax, but my voice lacks conviction.

Even as I speak, I watch Baxter's gaze follow Isaac, loyalty tied to the man who doesn't understand the gift of unconditional love sitting patiently at his feet. The dog is taking his human's lead, slinking away from the lesson and towards distraction. He's already watching some kids across the park, his ears pricking up and his tail wagging.

Two minutes pass, then five. I keep working with Baxter, even though it feels futile.

Finally, after ten minutes, Isaac strides back, phone now silent and tucked away. I've

been thinking about what to say to him, planning how to politely express — yet again — how important it is he participates fully in the training sessions. But before I know it, I'm snapping.

“We can't have disruptions like that. I already told you; Baxter?—”

“Look, Emily, it was important,” he retorts, the lines of his face growing sharp with annoyance.

“Surely you understand that training requires consistency, Isaac. Baxter needs your full attention if this is going to work.”

He bristles, the corporate titan probably unaccustomed to being chastised — at least by people like me. “And what about my business? Should I just ignore a potential multimillion-dollar deal for adog?”

“Is the deal more important than Baxter?” I challenge, my resolve hardening despite the quiver in my gut.

His narrowed eyes meet mine, and I see something there. A crack in his hard façade.

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“Of course not,” he says at last, though his tone doesn’t quite convince me.

“Then please, for Baxter’s sake, prioritize these few minutes we have.”

The air between us is thick with tension, and I don’t know if he’ll agree or if he’ll take Baxter’s leash and walk away. Heck, I don’t even know if I’ll stay.

The urge to walk away from all this — to abandon the struggle, even though it means abandoning the money — presses against my ribs. But then Baxter nudges my palm with his nose, and the touch anchors me. I stay for him.

“Fine,” Isaac concedes after a moment that stretches too long. “Let’s get on with it.”

We resume the training, our movements mechanical — the sit, the wait, the quiet praise. Isaac participates, but there’s a new distance in his mannerisms, a careful neutrality. We speak sparingly, functional words that bridge the gap without really connecting. I miss the man who surprised me earlier, who seemed like he might care after all.

Maybe that man was only a mask, one that Isaac couldn’t keep on for more than thirty minutes.

By the end of the session, Baxter is sitting on command, and it’s a small victory in a rough morning. I hand Isaac the treat to give Baxter, our fingers brushing in a fleeting, accidental touch that feels like an apology neither of us has the courage to voice out loud.

“Good job today,” Isaac says, and there’s an attempt at warmth there, a feeble bridge over the divide that has opened between us.

“Thank you,” I reply, tucking a stray hair behind my ear.

I’m left with a hollow feeling, and it’s because I know Isaac giving good face for half an hour probably doesn’t mean anything. I’ll leave, and then what? Will he even practice training with Baxter like I’ve requested him to? Will he give the dog all the exercise he needs? All the attention?

I already know the answer, and it makes my heart sink.

“See you next time,” I tell Isaac.

As I walk away, there’s a heaviness in my chest that makes me want to fold in on myself. I can feel Isaac and Baxter watching me walk off, both for separate reasons, and it takes all my strength to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

CHAPTER 9

ISAAC

I gather the cotton fluff scattered across the polished hardwood floor, remnants of a pillow Baxter decided couldn’t survive another day. This time, I’m not furious. I’m defeated.

It’s quiet today, the kind of quiet that makes you think too much, the kind that’s been wrapping around me since Emily dressed me down at the park yesterday.

I toss the last handful into the trash bin and glance at the clock. She’ll be here any minute for today’s scheduled session. The thought sends a twinge of something like

dread through my chest.

As I go around the apartment straightening up, I replay the confrontation in my head. I was so sure of myself, my way of doing things. But now, the echo of Emily's stern voice clings to the recesses of my mind, her words cutting through my stubbornness. Sitting on the edge of the newly reupholstered couch — thanks again, Baxter! — I rub at the growing stubble on my chin, a newfound humility settling in. I hate to admit it, but she was right; my focus during these training sessions has been lacking.

Baxter whines from his spot by the window, probably sensing my unrest. At least someone does. I've felt so alone lately, and I'm not even sure why. It's not like my dad and I ever spent any quality time together. It was all business between the two of us.

And I've never been one to hang out with the guys. All of my friends have slowly drifted away over the years, which I figured was fine. I get more than enough human interaction from work.

I kneel beside the dog, ruffling his golden fur, trying to find solace in the simplicity of his world.

"Sorry, buddy," I murmur, my voice barely a whisper. "I screwed up. We've both got some learning to do."

Emily doesn't know about what's at stake for me, but she doesn't need to. She's right. You can't half commit to a task and expect to reap the full rewards. I should know better than that.

I stand as there's a knock on the door. My heart hammers away, and Baxter perks up, tail wagging with an enthusiasm I wish I could match.

Swallowing hard, I open the door. “Hello.”

“Hi.” Emily steps through, her posture rigid, her smile a thin veneer of professionalism. I catch a whiff of something fruity on her — apple, pear? — and it stirs something bittersweet within me. “I thought we would start with some leash training today. Take Baxter on a walk around the block.”

I clear my throat, reaching for Baxter’s leash. “Sounds good.”

She nods, and I clip the leash onto Baxter’s collar, careful to avoid his eager nipping. He’s ready for the world outside these walls, his excitement palpable. I make a show of patting my pockets, then deliberately place my phone on the kitchen counter. Her eyes follow the action, and the corners of her mouth lift ever so slightly in approval.

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“Ready?” she asks, a hint of warmth breaking through.

“Lead the way.”

We step out into the day, the city sounds wrapping around us like a familiar melody. I let her set the pace, and we fall into a rhythm, Baxter trotting alongside us. Under Emily’s watchful eye, I stop when he pulls, and feed him treats when he stays next to me.

“Good boy, Baxter,” she praises, and there’s a lightness in her tone that wasn’t there before — a glimmer of camaraderie, perhaps?

“Seems like he’s really taking to the training,” I say, trying to keep my voice casual while my insides knot with hope. “You’ve done a great job with him.”

“Yeah, he is. And you’re not doing too bad yourself,” she replies, her gaze meeting mine.

Her smile hits me — a sunrise after a long, dark night — and I feel buoyed by its glow. That emptiness I felt earlier? It’s gone, blasted away by her mere presence.

“Thank you,” I manage, the words heavy with more than just gratitude for her comment. It’s an acknowledgment of the shift inside me, the tectonic plates of my life rearranging themselves in the wake of her influence.

“Keep it up,” she encourages, and I think — no, I know — that I might just be able to do this. To change. To manage Baxter. To lead the company.

With each treat, each command he obeys, I sense the weight of yesterday's errors lifting, replaced by today's achievements. Emily's presence, once a storm cloud, now feels like shelter.

And is it just me, or does Baxter sense it too? He seems happier, his steps lighter than they were earlier.

Too soon, we're home. The cool metal of the apartment door handle chills my palm as we step back into the quiet sanctuary I call home. Baxter's leash hangs loose in my fingers, a reminder of the progress we've made today — progress Emily has coaxed from us both with patience I didn't deserve.

"Good job today." She lingers by the door, hands folded primly in front of her.

"Thank you," I reply, my throat tightening with a mixture of pride and regret. "I owe you an apology for how I was yesterday. You were right about everything."

She blushes — a soft bloom of color on her cheeks that makes her seem more real than she's ever been. "Thank you. That means a lot."

I watch her, the way her hair tumbles over her shoulders, framing the gentle curve of her jaw. The urge to ask her out for coffee — perhaps even a drink later tonight — gnaws at me, a hunger for connection that goes beyond Baxter's training sessions. For years it's been just me; the thought of it remaining that way stirs a restlessness deep within.

It's unexpected, but I think my dad's death is shifting things. Making me think about life in a new way, making me really look ahead and consider what's down the line. My dad never remarried after my mom died, and I could always tell he was lonely. It made him bitter. Made him mean.

Do I really want to be the same way?

Even though I want to ask Emily for more time, I hold back, the reality of our professional relationship anchoring me down. Asking her out now could trap her in a predicament she doesn't deserve. She might feel compelled to say yes, not out of desire, but out of fear for her job. I can't do that to her — to us.

Baxter needs her. I need her. She's a miracle worker, and the truth is that the dog training is more important than anything else right now.

"Anyway, I'll see you next time," she says, turning around, oblivious to the internal battle raging inside me.

"See you," I murmur, and she gives me one last smile before slipping through the door.

As soon as the latch clicks behind her, chaos erupts. Baxter launches into a frenzied dash around the room, paws skidding across the polished floor. He bounds onto tables and chairs, upturning anything in his path. My commands fall on deaf ears — the structured harmony we had under Emily's gaze disintegrating without her here.

"Baxter! Stop!" I reach out to grasp his collar, but he dodges me.

Desperation claws at my chest. What is it about me that makes him act up? With Emily, he's an angel — a poster dog for obedience. With me, he's a whirlwind of destruction.

"Enough, Baxter," I command. But it's no use; he's a blur of fur, unheeding.

Sinking onto a chair, pieces of yet another mutilated pillow at my feet, I face the stark truth: Baxter doesn't hate me — he's indifferent. That, somehow, is so much worse.

He doesn't want to please me. He doesn't even want to hurt me. He just wants to be himself. And in that indifference lies a reflection of the isolation that permeates my life.

No wonder my father didn't want to automatically turn the company over to me. He wanted me to prove myself first — which I am failing at.

He saw the truth. The truth I could never face. For whatever reason, I am the problem.

CHAPTER 10

EMILY

Letting out an exasperated sigh, I undo another stitch on the scarf I've been working on. I'm not much of a knitter — most of what I make ends up still vaguely resembling the skein — but I do find the process soothing.

And right now there's a lot on my mind that needs soothing. Isaac. Baxter. The shelter dogs.

Isaac.

Seeing him really making an effort today had my heart tap-dancing, and the whole training session keeps replaying in my mind; his smile was like a break in the clouds on a dreary day. It's silly, maybe, to think of him now, but something about the way he looked at me, eager yet vulnerable, lingers in the corners of my thoughts.

It's quiet in the apartment, with Jenn on a date and nothing on my schedule tonight. I can't even go into the shelter to volunteer some hours because it's already shut down for the day. So here I am. Alone.

Thinking.

Perhaps way too much.

My phone interrupts the silence with a loud ring, and even though I jump, I'm happy

for the distraction. Isaac's name flashes across the screen, unexpected and jarring. I hesitate for only a fraction of a second before answering.

"Hey." I sit forward on the edge of the couch, my breath lingering in my throat. Why is he calling me? Is something wrong with Baxter?

A second later, I realize it's a stupid thought to have. I'm hardly the first person Isaac would call if he were having an emergency.

"Emily," he breathes out, voice tinged with desperation, "Baxter... he's just not listening. I don't know what to do anymore. The second you left, he just went crazy, and he's been this way for hours."

"Do you want me to come over?" I offer, setting aside the scarf and already trying to remember where I last placed my keys.

There's a pause, filled with the sound of wind rushing through the line. "No, it's fine. We're driving around right now. Baxter seems to enjoy having his head out the window. It gives him something to do, at least."

"Driving around? Where are you?"

It's a good short-term fix, but it probably won't tire Baxter out. As soon as he gets out of the car, he'll reload his energy and be right back at it.

"Actually... I'm probably not too far from your place," he admits, and I have a flashback of him asking where I lived and me telling him the exact block.

And he remembered.

Am I reading too much into that?

“Come over, then,” I find myself saying, more quickly than I should. The invitation hangs between us, fragile and awkward.

I want to scoop the words back up, swallow them down before he can process them. Is it weird for me to invite them over? Does Isaac think I’m inviting him over on a, ah, personal level?

“We can do some training here,” I quickly add. “It will help get his energy out, too.”

“Are you sure?” He sounds relieved, like this is what he’d been hoping for and he’s glad that I’m the one who brought it up.

“Positive.” The word is a leap of faith. “I’ll text you the address. See you soon.”

I hang up and pace the small living room, my hands fluttering from one surface to another, picking things up and putting them away. The apartment isn’t really messy, but knowing someone is coming over makes me suddenly notice every little thing out of place.

Isaac’s never seen my home before. The realization sends a tingle of anxiety through me, making me wonder if he’ll find the scatter of knitting projects, books, and puzzles charming or chaotic. Glancing at the clock, seeing it’s been five minutes since we ended the call, I quickly wipe down the kitchen counter.

Suddenly, the doorbell chimes, the sound making me drop the dish towel. For a moment, I stand frozen, caught between eagerness and apprehension. Then I’m moving, steps light across the hardwood floor, breath catching as I open the door.

“Hey,” I greet, the word almost just a breath.

Isaac towers in the doorway, his silhouette nearly filling it up. Baxter is at his side, all

energy and unruliness, pulling at the leash, eager to get into my apartment and explore it.

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“Hi,” Isaac replies, his voice tight. He looks uncomfortable, as if he’s wandered into a world where he doesn’t belong.

Does he regret calling me?

“I’m glad you came,” I say.

“Are you sure?” He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t want to bother you.”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t really doing anything. Now is perfect, actually. Want to let him off the leash?”

“Uh... okay.” He complies, and Baxter shoots into the apartment.

There’s very little he can destroy here, though, and he’s mostly just bouncing off cushions and the wall. I grab some treats from the cabinet and hold them out so that he can see.

“Sit,” I command, but Baxter’s brown eyes are wild, ignoring me completely.

“Come on, Baxter.” Isaac sounds like he’s on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“Listen to her.”

But the dog is heedless, and I sense Isaac’s impatience growing with each failed attempt. It’s like watching hope fray, thread by thread.

“Isaac, you need to be present for him,” I urge gently, trying to bridge the distance

between man and dog. “You were so good with him this morning. He can feel what you’re feeling. If you’re angry or anxious, that’ll put him on edge.”

He looks at me then, and there’s a storm in his eyes — a cloudburst of emotions I can’t quite read. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

I press my lips together hard and try not to take his snapping personally. “Being physically here isn’t enough. He needs to feel your connection, just like earlier today.”

“Maybe this was a mistake,” he mutters.

I twist my lips. Does he mean training? Hiring me? Adopting Baxter?

Or all of the above?

Baxter finds one of my shoes and settles down to chew on it. Taking it from him, I give him a dog chew instead. Even though I don’t have a dog of my own, I make sure to buy training supplies in bulk so that I never run out.

The silence grows heavy, and Isaac’s shoulders tense. I search for something to say, something to ease the tension in the room, but I’ve already said everything I can, already done what I can. The next move is Isaac’s, and I can’t force him to take it.

“He was so good for my dad,” he finally sighs.

“Your dad really loved him, huh?”

Isaac smirks. “More than anything.”

Including his own son?

The look on Isaac's face says he believes exactly that. It's an arrow through my heart, and an urge to pull Isaac into a hugsweeps through me, but I hold on to decorum and stay where I am.

Hearing him talk more about his dad gives me some insight, though. I can work with this.

"Here's the thing," I say softly. "Baxter just lost the person who loved him the most — your dad. That's got to be hard on him. He doesn't know who to turn to, who to trust. His whole world has been turned upside down."

The words hang in the air between us, heavy with unspoken emotion. Isaac's jaw clenches, a subtle but telltale sign that I've struck a nerve. The dog, sensing the shift, whines softly at his feet, the sound a plaintive echo of the heartache filling the room.

"Lost?" Isaac's voice is low, laced with an edge that cuts through the stillness. "Is that what you think happened?"

I falter, taken aback by the raw pain in his tone. A pang of regret stabs at me; it's clear I've ventured into territory marked with hidden landmines. There's so much I don't know about him, about the intricacies of his past.

"Isaac, I didn't mean—" I begin, but my words crumble as he fixes me with a look that's both wounded and accusatory.

"Never mind," he says, his voice brittle. His hands are fists at his sides now.

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“I know you lost your dad too?—”

“It’s okay. Just forget it.”

But how can I forget? How can I ignore the glimpse of sorrow that flitted across his face, or the way his voice broke on the last word?

“Isaac,” I try again, but he’s already moving, sweeping up Baxter’s leash with a swift motion that leaves no room for protest.

“Thanks for your help, Emily. But we’ll manage on our own.” Each word is another step back, another wall he’s building between us.

“Isaac, please—” My plea is cut off as he opens the door, letting in a gust of cool evening air. It swirls around us, a tangible reminder of the distance that has suddenly appeared.

He doesn’t look back as he steps outside, Baxter trailing behind him. The door closes with a soft click, sealing off the warmth of my home, leaving me alone with the lingering scent of his cologne and the ghostly impression of his presence.

I sink onto the couch, sitting on my knitting and not caring. I don’t think I crossed a line — I was only pointing out that Baxter is grieving too and we need to take that into account — but Isaac acted like I’d slapped him.

Now he and Baxter are gone, and I probably won’t see them again. My heart throbs at the thought — for myself, for Isaac, for Baxter. We were a good team, really building

something there.

And now we're just lonely ships in the night once more.

CHAPTER 11

ISAAC

"Come on," I mutter to Baxter. "Get in the car."

It's early morning, the fresh air cold and judgmental. I'm not stopping to think about what I'm doing, and it's better that way. If I do stop, I'll come up with all these reasons why I need to turn around and go back into the apartment.

Baxter jumps in the car, excited for the ride, and I start the engine with a grimace on my face. I'm running on only a few hours of sleep, and not because Baxter chewed anything up — I at least had the sense to get him a crate, so that wasn't possible last night.

All night long, this whole mess has been running on replay in my head. Dad always knew how to push my buttons, how to make me jump through hoops just to get a cookie. And this dog — this whirlwind of chaos with fur — is his final masterstroke. To think I'm surrendering, letting go of the company, just to rid myself of this last tether to him... it's galling.

Everyone will smirk and roll their eyes. Talk about how I don't measure up to my father. Right now, though, I don't give a shit. I just want this disaster to be over.

We pull into the shelter parking lot, and the sign looms overhead. Second Chances Animal Shelter. My grip tightens on the steering wheel, knuckles bleaching with the force of it.

Is this what giving up feels like? Just another thing Dad was right about — I never see anything through.

“Okay, Baxter. This is it,” I say, reaching for the door handle. “I’d say it was nice knowing you, but it wasn’t. You’re someone else’s problem now.”

But then, there’s a weight on my arm, gentle but insistent. I glance down, and there’s Baxter, suddenly still, his brown eyes holding mine, paw resting over my wrist.

Is this a plea or an apology? Or maybe both?

“Damn it, Baxter.” My voice is rough, grating against the silence between us.

I try to summon the resolve to shake him off, to reclaim that righteous indignation, but it fizzles out, replaced by an unfamiliar ache. What I’m doing isn’t right... and I know it.

I’m also more than this.

I sit still, locked in this moment of hesitation, until the seconds stretch into minutes. It’s not just about the inheritance, not really. It’s also about commitment, about following through. And it’s about this dog — who somehow, despite the shredded pillows and the sleepless nights, has burrowed his way into the reluctant shelter of my responsibility.

“Fine,” I exhale, my breath fogging up the window. “You win, you stubborn mutt.”

With a resigned sigh, I start the car and peel out of the parking lot. Baxter shifts in his seat, settling down with a contented huff, as if he knew all along that this was how our morning would end.

“If you’re gonna stay with me, though, we need to get you some more toys. You need something to do instead of destroy everything I own.”

I get GPS directions to the closest pet store, where Baxter’s ears perk up in excitement when he realizes we’re going somewhere new.

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“Come on, bud,” I murmur to him, putting his leash on and leading him out of the car.

It’s my penance, this shopping spree — a small act of contrition for the betrayal that didn’t quite happen. Baxter’s tail wags, his nose sniffing at all the toys and chew treats. I toss a bone into the cart, then a plush toy, a rope tug-of-war, anything to maybe ease the sting of guilt.

“Sorry, pal,” I tell Baxter as we stand in line.

He doesn’t understand my words, but his brown eyes seem forgiving. Or maybe they’re just hopeful.

He’s not the only one I need to apologize to. I owe Emily a “sorry” as well. That is, if she’ll eventalkto me after the way I left her place last night.

God, I really wasn’t thinking straight, was I? I was ready to throw everything away — the company, Baxter, Emily — and why? Because I can’t get my dog under control?

Maybe I need more training than Baxter does.

At home, Baxter settles down with his new bone, gnawing contentedly. There’s a relief in seeing him like this — calm, occupied, happy. It’s the kind of peace I haven’t felt in a long time.

Maybe I’ll work from home today. I don’t have any in-person meetings scheduled,

and Baxter is content here. Why risk taking him to the office only to have him destroy something?

But first... there's something else I need to do.

I sink into the couch, the leather cool beneath me, and pull out my phone. My thumb hovers over Emily's number, the significance of last night's argument sitting heavy in my chest. The dial tone rings, a countdown to the unknown.

"Hello," she answers, slowly, with hesitation.

"Emily, hey." I clear my throat. "I... I'm sorry about storming out like that."

There's a pause, and I can picture her, weighing my words, deciding whether they're enough.

"You were right," I go on. "Baxter is mourning, and I haven't taken that into consideration. He needs more attention and... time."

"Everyone does when someone dies."

I grimace at that. I'm not Baxter. I've pulled myself together. I'm moving forward. Her intention is good, though, and I've done enough arguing as it is.

"Will you give me another chance?" I ask. "Will you give ~~us~~ another chance? If not for me, then for Baxter? He says he misses you."

That gets a laugh out of her — which makes me smile.

"He does, does he?" She chuckles again. "Yes, I'll give you another chance."

“Thanks, Em.” I mean it more than she knows. Her support is a lifeline I was too stupid to realize I need.

“Can we still do tomorrow?” I ask.

“Yes. Let’s do it. How is Baxter, by the way?”

“He’s great. I just got him a new bone and some toys. He’s on the floor right now munching on the bone.”

She’s probably being careful to not ask about me following the blowup last night, and I feel terrible about that. I don’t have much experience talking about myself, though — not when it comes to personal matters. Besides, I’m fine. I’ve accepted my father’s death, and I’ve moved on.

“I also want to talk to you about crate training,” she starts.

“I got him a crate.” I grin, satisfied with myself.

“Oh. Wow. That’s good.”

“See you tomorrow?” I say, hating that I have to get to work but all too aware of the to-do list that won’t tackle itself.

“I look forward to it. Bye.”

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I end the call and glance over at Baxter, who has stopped chewing to look at me.

“What?” I ask. “So what? I like her a little bit. Don’t worry. It won’t get in the way of your training.”

He cocks his head in confusion.

“Also, I’m gonna do better,” I say with a sigh. “I promise.”

Can I keep that promise, though? I don’t know, but up till now I believed my dad gave me Baxter because he wanted to serve me another opportunity to screw up. The truth I’ve been glossing over, though, is that he cherished Baxter. He wouldn’t turn his dog over to someone who would harm him.

Maybe, just maybe, my dad actually believed in me. And it’s time I started doing the same.

CHAPTER 12

EMILY

The chime of the coffee-shop door signals the start of another monotonous afternoon shift. I clock in and get to work on stocking and cleaning; it’s always best to not let it wait until the hour before closing.

I’ve done all this a hundred times before, and my movements are mechanical, thoughts of Isaac’s unexpected apology lingering. He seemed sincere enough, his

eyes searching for forgiveness I'm not sure I have the right to withhold. But Baxter... poor, misunderstood Baxter. Can Isaac truly commit to what that dog needs?

This isn't the first time Isaac has promised he would do better, and I shouldn't care. After all, I'm getting paid very well to show up, and at least I can help Baxter a tiny bit, even if his human isn't on board.

So why does Isaac's behavior get to me so? Why does it feel like I'm holding my breath, lingering on his promises, praying that he'll follow through? Praying that he might even fall in love with Baxter and end up being a dog person after all?

That's the missing piece, isn't it? The one thing that stops him from being a perfect man.

"Emily!" My coworker, Dante, snaps me from my reverie with a wave of his hand. "Your phone's buzzing like crazy."

"Oh. It is?" I blink at the counter, where I didn't even realize I'd put my phone. Usually, I stashed it in my purse in the office desk.

I reach for it, meaning to silence it and put it away, then pause when I see it's Isaac sending multiple texts. What now?

"Check it," Dante says.

"You sure?" I bite my lip.

"Do we look busy?" He grins at the counter, where not a single person waits.

"Thanks. I'll be quick. It's one of my clients."

I step into the tiny office and unlock the phone to find multiple messages from him — photos, actually. Each snapshot showcases Baxter in a different setup: tongue lolling happily as he sprawls across a sunlit floor, ears perked in curiosity at a bird outside the window, paws tangled in a colorful heap of chew toys.

Each picture makes me smile, sends my heart fluttering. The images portray a side of Baxter that's all too easy to love, and these aren't pictures taken by someone who hates this dog. If I didn't know better, I would think that the photographer had ten thousand other dog photos on his phone.

Maybe Isaac isn't just another rich guy who thinks he can buy his way out of responsibility. Maybe he finally understands that Baxter isn't just a pet, but a commitment — one that requires patience, consistency, and a whole lot of love.

“Ooh, that's a big smile,” Dante comments, coming into the office for a Sharpie.

I roll my eyes. “It's a client.”

“A special client?”

I turn the phone so he can see the picture of Baxter.

“I like blondes too.” He winks as he leaves the office.

I laugh, shocked at how light and joyous I feel. I also know that I can deny it all I want, but it's getting harder every day to fight my feelings for Isaac. Especially when he's sending me adorable dog photos, which are the key to my heart.

Putting the phone away, I straighten my apron and head back to the front. It sounds like Dante has customers, and I can't — and don't want to — hide back here all day thinking about Isaac.

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It seems I don't have much of a choice, though. He's on my mind all afternoon, and I'm left constantly wondering what he's doing now. Did he take Baxter with him to work today?

By the end of my shift, I've managed to mostly shake Isaac free. There are a few hours of daylight left, which means I can get some time in at the shelter. Whether or not I'll go isn't even a question. The dogs there need me, and it feels good to be needed, to be wanted.

At the shelter, I duck into the bathroom to freshen up then head to the back of the building, where the dogs are kept. The stench of disinfectant and the underlying musk of dog fur, which some people would hate, is oddly comforting. This is my place, my home away from home.

"Finn," I call out, rounding the corner to the kennels, "you ready to do some work today, buddy?"

"Emily." It's Ricki, waving me down.

"Hey," I smile. "How's it going?"

"Good. Finn got adopted this morning."

"Oh." My jaw drops. I'm so happy for Finn, but I'll miss him something awful.

"That's great."

Ricki grins, her own eyes bright. "Yeah, he's going to a great family. They have a big

backyard and two kids who fell in love with him at first sight. And he did everything you taught him while in the meet-and-greet. Showed off how he can sit, stay, give his paw.”

“Good for Finn.” I smile through a watery veil, imagining him romping around, his tail a blur of excitement. It’s moments like these that remind me why I do what I do — why the long hours and emotional toll are worth it.

“Hey, there’s a new guy you should take a look at,” Ricki suggests, motioning me to follow. “He could use some of your magic.”

“Lead the way,” I say, wiping away the last trace of bittersweet tears.

We walk in silence to the newest arrival’s kennel, a gangly shepherd mix. His coat is a patchwork of tan and black, and his ears stand at attention as we approach. But it’s his eyes, wide and uncertain, that draw me in. He’s still unnamed, a blank slate waiting for love to write upon him.

“Here he is,” Ricki says, unlatching the kennel door. “Just came in yesterday. Found wandering near the highway.”

“Hey there, buddy.” I crouch down, offering my hand for him to sniff. He hesitates, nostrils flaring as he takes in my scent. Then, cautiously, he steps forward, his nose brushing against my skin.

“Let’s see what we can do with you, huh?” I murmur, already thinking of training exercises, of ways to build his confidence.

Out in the fenced-in yard, we start out with some play. Balls. Tug toys. It breaks the ice for him, and he’s definitely play-motivated.

“What do you know?” I ask.

His head cocks as he tries to understand what I’m saying to him.

“Sit,” I command softly, and the shepherd obeys, his haunches meeting the ground with an unsteady thud.

He looks up at me, seeking approval, and I give it freely with a gentle pat on his head. “Good boy. So, someone already gave you some training. Smart boy.”

Training the dog anchors me, his needs a good distraction from my own. I’ve been alone for so long, dating only here and there, Jenn my only close friend.

Even my childhood was mostly spent alone, my parents coming and going as they wished, occasionally leaving me on my own for a few days at a time. I learned early on how to fend for myself, how to fake it in the world and pretend everything was fine. I packed my own lunches — even when there was next to nothing in the kitchen — and washed my own clothes.

I did fine.

Yes, fine. But I never thrived, did I?

Have I ever really thrived, in my whole life? Or have I only been surviving? Surviving and keeping people at arm’s length so that they don’t betray me like my parents did?

And now here comes Isaac, and something is different. I want to open up. I want to bare parts of myself I’ve never shown to anyone, and it’s terrifying. Especially because he probably doesn’t even think about me unless I’m standing right in front of him. I’m probably nothing like the women he’s used to — supermodels and heiresses,

I'm sure.

Me? I'm just Emily. A dog trainer and barista. A thirty-year-old who has a roommate and is nowhere close to owning her own home. I'm hardly successful by anyone's standards.

I should stop thinking about Isaac, should stop imagining how it would feel to be the one he comes home to — a warm cup of coffee waiting and a shared, comfortable silence filling the room. To be the one he wraps his strong arms around, his lips grazing my forehead in a kiss.

"Stop," I mutter to myself, rubbing my temples as though that could erase the images in my head. "Isaac is out of your league."

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The shepherd inches closer, pressing his wet nose against my hand as if sensing my internal turmoil. I scratch behind his ears, earning a delighted thump of his tail.

“I’ll be okay, boy,” I tell him. “I will be.”

Right. Because I always have been. No matter what life throws my way, I make it through. Somehow. Someway.

CHAPTER 13

ISAAC

“When’s the last time you went on a hike?” Emily asks.

She’s waiting for me and Baxter at the trail head, dressed in a pair of well-worn jeans and a flannel jacket, her hair pulled back in a high ponytail. A picture of simplicity. My heart thuds in my chest, the sight of her driving a sharp pang through me.

She’s so beautiful it hurts.

“I don’t remember,” I confess with an apologetic smile. “It’s been years.”

Baxter is beyond thrilled, tugging at the leash and gasping in excitement. It was Emily’s idea to bring him here today. She said that it will be good for him to get some new smells and meet other dogs.

It’s not long before we come upon the first dog. Rounding the trail, we spot a little

white dog on a leash. It starts barking and snapping, yanking at its leash in raucous excitement. Baxter remains quiet, his eyes intense but his tail wagging cautiously. Emily steps forward, kneeling beside him with a reassuring hand on his back.

“Good boy, Baxter,” she praises quietly, her voice warm and patient.

She has an instinctual way with dogs, calming even the most excitable of them. I watch her as she coaxes Baxter closer to the other dog, her gaze steady and voice firm yet gentle.

It’s not just dogs she has this effect on.

As we continue down the trail, I find myself stealing glances at her — her eyes squinting against the sun’s glare or her quick smile when Baxter successfully interacts with another dog.

There’s an understated beauty to Emily that’s wholly captivating. She doesn’t need designer dresses or diamond earrings — she just is. And that’s more than enough for me.

The silence between us is easy as we walk side by side, only the occasional crunch of twigs and rustle of leaves disrupting it. I keep Baxter at my side like Emily has taught us, and he actually does pretty well. When someone comments that he’s a beautiful dog, pride — unexpected and bright — fills my chest.

Baxter is mine. Not just a responsibility, not just a project, but a companion — and a good dog at that.

“Thank you,” I tell Emily.

She glances at me. “For what?”

I gesture at Baxter. “For training him... for trainingme.”

She bites into her smile, and she doesn’t have to say the “I told you so,” because I can feel it. I also don’t mind it. She was right; I was wrong, and I’m not too proud to admit it.

“I needed training more than him,” I say. “I needed to change some things.”

“Change can be good,” she says with a reassuring nod, and I believe her.

Change can be good, I repeat silently, watching Baxter race towards the next bend in the trail. And perhaps change is exactly what I need.

In more than one area.

“Did you grow up around here?” I ask, suddenly compelled to know more about her.

She glances at me, then back at the trail. “No,” she says. “I moved away from my hometown as soon as I could.”

There’s a tinge of something unspoken in her tone, a shadow across her otherwise open face, and I sense this isn’t territory she wishes to explore further. I respect that — after all, everyone has chapters they’d rather keep closed.

“Sorry for prying,” I say, easing back on the subject.

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She shakes her head, dismissing my concern. “It’s okay. We all have our pasts, right?”

“Right,” I agree, feeling the tug of my own history. “I lost my mom when I was pretty young. It... well, it shaped a lot of who I am today.”

“Isaac...” Her voice softens with empathy, and she reaches out briefly, her hand brushing against mine. It’s a fleeting touch, but it soothes me, pulls me back from the precipice of old sorrows.

“Thanks.” I manage a smile, focusing on the present — the crunch of leaves underfoot, the rustle of the wind through the trees, the steady rhythm of Baxter’s panting.

“Hey, tell me about how you got into dog training,” I prompt, eager to steer our conversation toward lighter subjects. “Was it always your plan?”

“Actually, no.” She chuckles lightly, and the sound is like sunlight piercing through the canopy. “It happened during college. I started volunteering at a shelter, and something just clicked. I realized I loved working with dogs — helping them, understanding them. It became my passion.”

“Sounds fulfilling.” I nod, genuinely impressed. “I can’t say I’m that passionate about real estate. It’s exciting, high-stakes, sure, but what drives me is being good at something. I guess excellence is its own kind of passion.”

“Definitely,” she agrees, her gaze meeting mine. “Passion can be found in many

forms — even in the pursuit of excellence.”

The trail narrows, forcing us into a single file with Baxter leading the way, his tail wagging like a metronome keeping time. I can’t remember the last time I let myself just breathe in the essence of life around me. The fresh, earthy scent of the woods fills my lungs, and a laugh escapes me, unbidden. It feels foreign, yet familiar.

The trail dips down a hill, taking us alongside a creek. Baxter sniffs the edge of the water, his paws getting wet. I briefly think about my car, about how dirty it will be after this excursion, then realize it doesn’t really matter — because it will be worth it.

“Careful,” Emily warns as Baxter darts into the creek, but her warning comes too late.

The leash wraps around our legs — an unintentional trap. My foot slips on a moss-slickened rock, and gravity takes hold, pulling Emily and me down toward the shallow water.

Emily shrieks, and I try to grab her to save her from getting wet, but it’s too late. We’re both sitting on the creek bed, covered in water, Baxter next to us snapping at bubbles.

For a moment, irritation flares within me — my clothes are soaked, the cold water seeping into my skin. But then, Emily’s laughter rings out, pure and unrestrained, echoing off the trees.

I look at her, really look, and see the sparkle in her eyes, the way her head tilts back in abandon. And something in me shifts. How easily she finds joy in the unexpected, in the mishaps. I join her in laughter, and it’s like shedding a layer of armor I didn’t realize I was wearing.

As our laughter subsides, there's a moment — a fleeting pause where her gaze lingers on mine. I notice the way she bites her lip, the slight tilt of her head. It's a look that speaks volumes, suggesting desires unspoken, and for a second, I'm convinced she's considering kissing me.

Should I do it? Make a move?

It's too late. The moment is gone. She's standing up, unwinding the leash from around us. We head back to the car, shivering a bit from the water. A silence falls between us — not uncomfortable, but thoughtful, as if we're both processing the day.

I find myself once more mulling over the possibility of asking Emily out. There's an ease between us, a connection that seems to go beyond trainer and client.

But there's also the professional boundary, the unspoken rule about mixing business with pleasure. I don't want to jeopardize what we have, this fledgling friendship — and Baxter's progress — for the sake of a potential date.

My thoughts whirl as we reach the car, and I'm no closer to a decision. I open the door for Baxter, who jumps in, tired but happy.

Turning to Emily, I offer a smile, a silent thank-you for today. "He did great, didn't he?" I say.

"Yeah, he did." She smiles back, her eyes softening. "And so did you."

As we get into our cars and wave goodbye, her words linger in my mind. Maybe, just maybe, I'll ask her out. But not today. Today, I'll savor the warmth of a smile that might mean more.

CHAPTER 14

EMILY

Terry's four little legs pump along, a final burst of energy before he flops onto the park's soft grass, where he then pants with satisfaction. His human, Monique, beams at me.

"You're a miracle worker, Emily," she says, gathering Terry into her arms. I can't stop the swell of pride in my chest, warm like a summer sunrise.

"Thank you. It's just the start now. Remember to practice those commands every day," I remind her as she clips Terry's leash back on.

"I will. Promise." She waves goodbye, and they head off, a pair transformed by patience and trust.

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I smile to myself, drinking in the amazing day. Monique is my newest client — thanks to Isaac, who knows her from his country club. And she's already promised to pass my number on to her friends as well.

It's just like I hoped for. One client is turning into another... which will hopefully turn into more and more. Fingers crossed it just keeps on snowballing to the point where my every working hour is booked.

And Monique didn't even blink when I gave her my rate — which is fifty percent higher than what I used to charge. Apparently she feels that I'm worth every cent. And you know what? I'm starting to think I am too. My way with dogs, it's a special thing, a skill that I'm using to bring a little bit more peace to the world.

Including to the dogs without homes. I'm already looking forward to sending a check to the shelter later this month.

I gather my things — the clicker, the treats, and the worn leash — and make my way to the car. It's nearing dinnertime, the sky painted in strokes of orange and purple. My dinner will have to wait, though. Isaac wasn't able to carve out time earlier today for a training session, so we're starting at six p.m.

My heart stirs, restless as I walk. It's been a few weeks since our first training session, and yet I'm more nervous at each one. It's different now, though. I'm not afraid that I'll fail, and Isaac has proven how committed he now is. Things are going great, overall.

It's just... seeing him... hearing his voice... it all has this way of making me come

completely undone.

It's a crush that I had hoped would eventually fade, but Issac warming up to Baxter has only made it stronger. Add that day when we fell in the creek, where for a second he looked at me like I was the only thing in the world, and I've been a goner ever since. He's the number one thing on my mind lately.

I slide into the driver's seat, my fingertips grazing the steering wheel. The phone buzzes — a text from Isaac. Our messages have become a thread weaving through my days, unexpected and colorful. Sometimes flirty.

A smile tugs at my lips; it's silly how such a small thing can send warmth cascading through me.

See you soon. Drive safe :)

Does he add those extra characters, that smiley face, for anyone else? Or is it just for me? I shake the thought away, but it lingers like smoke that can't be blown away. I start the engine and pull out onto the road, reminding myself to keep my head in the game.

He's still my client. This is still a professional relationship. I need to get myself under control.

Heck, for all I know, I've been imagining the flirtatious tone in his texts. That could be me projecting or whatever.

The city blurs past, streaks of light against the deepening twilight. My fingers grip the wheel lightly, the hum of the engine a steady beat beneath the rush of my thoughts. Isaac's building looms ahead, a beacon in the gathering dusk. I park and kill the engine, nerves dancing like live wires under my skin.

I take the elevator up to the penthouse, the soft music playing incongruent to the tempo of my heartbeat. Smoothing my hair, I stand a little taller, knock, and then try to get my breathing under control.

The door glides open, and there he is. Isaac, in a simple tee that clings just right, jeans that seem tailored for him alone. He smiles, that effortless curve that sets my pulse racing.

“Hey.” His voice is the warm embrace I didn’t know I craved.

“Hi,” I manage, hoping my voice doesn’t betray the flutter in my chest. “How, um, how are you?”

His smile softens as he steps aside, inviting me in. “Better now,” he says, his voice just above a whisper. It sends a shiver down my spine. I follow him inside, the door closing behind us like the ending of some unknown chapter.

The penthouse smells like him — citrus and fresh linen — and there’s something so rich about the fragrance that it sends my mind spiraling back to the first time I walked in here. It wasn’t even a month ago, but it already feels like another lifetime.

“Where’s Baxter?” Usually, the dog comes running to the door.

Isaac’s brow creases. “Uh... good question.”

“Baxter?” I call.

“Baxter?” Isaac goes down the hallway, looking in rooms until he reaches the last one. A smile breaks across his face.

“What?” I join him in the doorway, only to find Baxter fast asleep in the laundry

room on a pile of towels.

“Aw.” I press my hands to my chest.

Isaac lingers in the doorway, arms crossing over his chest, a soft chuckle rumbling from his throat. “Yeah,” he says, “that is pretty adorable.”

Hearing us, Baxter opens his eyes and lifts his head. A low, delighted bark fills the room as he bounds over to us, tail wagging furiously.

“There he is!” Isaac says, crouching down to scratch behind Baxter’s ears. His jeans stretch taut, highlighting the strength of his thighs, and I can’t help but watch, caught by him all over again.

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“Is this his spot now?” I ask, forcing my eyes back to Baxter.

“Sometimes. He just loves the warmth from the dryer.” Isaac shrugs, grinning when Baxter begins to lick his hand.

The moment seems so tender and raw; it knocks the breath from my lungs. The man of high towers and stronger walls is transformed into a soft-hearted man who kisses his dog’s head.

“What?” he asks, noticing my gaze.

I shake my head slowly. “It’s just... you seem to actually like him now.”

Isaac looks sheepish. “He’s grown on me. You were right. He is a good dog. I was the one who was doing things wrong.”

“I don’t think I put it that way...”

“But I am.” He stands and leads us into the living room. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’m okay, thanks. You ready to get started?”

Am I imagining his disappointment? If it’s real, what is it over? I’m here to train the dog, not do anything else... right?

Turning away under the guise of digging out treats from my bag, I hide my pink face. I really need to get myself together.

We jump into the familiar routine, going through all the standard commands. They're a team now, Isaac and Baxter. In sync. It's beautiful to watch. Isaac gives a command, Baxter obeys. Seamless.

"Good boy!" Isaac praises, and Baxter beams up at him with all the love in the world.

"Looks like you won't need me much longer," I say, half-joking, but the words tumble into the room heavy with truth.

"Emily, don't say that," Isaac replies, but he knows it too.

There's a tightness in my throat. This is why I do this — to see human and dog grow, bond. Yet, each success is a goodbye waiting to happen. Sooner or later, Isaac and Baxter won't need me anymore, and there will be no reason for me to see them. Our time together will be over.

I look away, watching the city lights flicker alive outside the window, feeling the weight of every ending nestled in my chest. A lump forms in my throat, but I push it away. Later, alone in my bedroom, I'll let the feelings rise up. But not here. Not now.

"Let's try something new," I suggest, clinging to the moment, desperate to stretch the seconds into hours.

I reach down, fingers grazing the soft fabric of the treat bag. Isaac's hand is there too, skin against mine in an electric slide of contact. My breath hitches. I look up, meet his eyes. Blue swirled into green like deep ocean waters, they hold a question I'm not ready to answer.

"Sorry," we both mutter.

"Hey..." He clears his throat.

“Yes?” My breathing hitches.

“I want to?—”

The room plunges into darkness, and I gasp in shock at just how dark it is. It’s not just Isaac’s apartment or building, though. Thanks to the huge living-room windows, we can clearly see that it’s the whole city.

“A blackout,” Isaac says.

“Yeah.” How is that for timing?

I bite my lip, wishing I could ask him what he’d been about to say, but knowing that I don’t have the courage. Baxter presses his side against me, and I reach down to burrow my fingers into his thick fur.

“Let me find some light,” Isaac says, voice close but moving away.

I nod before remembering he can’t see it. “Okay.”

We shuffle, fumble. A dance of two people and one dog lost in a space they thought they knew. My arm brushes Isaac’s chest, solid and warm. My heart races — too fast, too loud. Can he hear it? Feel it?

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“Sorry,” he says as our knees bump.

“Same,” I whisper back, the word barely escaping.

This crush, this foolish, impossible thing, it swells in the dark. Grows teeth and claws. Wants more than I should give. He’s a client. Just a client.

But, oh, how the shadows make us bold. What would happen if I were to reach out and touch him? How would he respond? Would he push me away or draw me close — press his lips to mine and...

“Got them,” Isaac announces, a small triumph as matches strike and candles flicker to life, pushing away the gloom.

Baxter’s eyes glow in the candlelight, watching us. He seems cautious, like he doesn’t know what to make of this weird change.

The light from the candles casts Isaac’s face in a soft glow. Shadows play on his jaw, a dance of warm and dark. “I guess we should call it a night for training.”

“Yeah... kind of hard to get much done in the dark.”

“Maybe we can just... order some takeout?” His question hangs between us, an invitation I hadn’t expected.

I blink, unsure if I heard him right. I had been about to pack up my things and pet Baxter goodbye, and now he’s asking me to stay. Even though we’ve been texting

here and there, we haven't hung out together. Any time spent in person has revolved around training Baxter.

"Takeout?" I repeat, my voice betraying my surprise.

"Yeah." He smiles, and it's disarmingly genuine. "Why not? Assuming anyone is open. I can call around and see."

My heart stutters. Takeout could mean nothing; it could just be an invitation to share a meal, to keep me a little longer so I don't need to drive home without working streetlights. But the flicker in his eyes, the way he doesn't look away, suggest it might be something more.

"Is this a date?" The question slips out before I can catch it. It's a stupid thing to ask, so inappropriate, but it's too late to take back, and now it's floating in the candlelit space.

"Only if you want it to be," he answers, his tone a gentle tease that doesn't match the intensity in his gaze. "I would like that very much."

A date. With Isaac. It's a thought that sends a thrill through me. Maybe our time together doesn't need to come to an end when the dog training does.

It feels unreal, though. Isaac... wanting to have a date withme? We're from two different worlds.

And yet that doesn't matter. Job titles, money, who we know, where we come from. None of that is really important. I know it, and I think he feels the same way, because if he didn't, we wouldn't be here right now.

"Okay," I say at last, giving in to the moment, to the possibility. "Takeout sounds

nice.”

His smile widens, and I realize that endings aren’t always bad, because when one thing closes, it leaves space in the world for something else to start.

CHAPTER 15

ISAAC

It turns out that the whole city isn’t blacked out. Just some areas are out of power, which is good news for us. It takes a little calling around, but I eventually find an Indian restaurant that will deliver to my building.

“Is there anything I can do?” Emily asks as I hang up the phone.

“No. Make yourself comfortable. You’re my guest.”

She’s more than that. She’s my date.

I did it; I finally said what I wanted. I made my move, and she didn’t leave the apartment or tell me I was being unprofessional. I’m still worried that this new territory will get us into trouble somehow, but I’m doing my best to be positive.

And, since my father died, it’s surprisingly easy.

“I’m sorry I used the word date,” I say, before I can decide whether it’s a good idea to bring it up or not. “There’s no pressure, really. I’m interested in you. I am. And I understand if the feeling isn’t mutual, and there’s no pressure. I don’t want to ruin our working relationship, so even if you feel differently, we can still go about things as usual. You’re the best trainer?—”

“I feel the same.”

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The words, exactly what I wanted to hear and yet shocking all the same, take the wind out of me. For a long moment, I just stare at Emily, the candles casting dancing shapes across her face.

“Oh,” is all I can seem to manage.

She bites her lip and looks down at the floor, sheepish. “I want to be here tonight. With you... with Baxter. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Her words heat me up from the inside out, a bubbling ball of lava that could melt ice. The moment is so perfect, I don’t even want to respond. Why end something so pristine?

But then Baxter whines and paws at my leg.

“He has to go out.” I try not to sigh in disappointment. It’s not the dog’s fault that he has to pee right now. “Be right back.”

I clip Baxter’s leash on and take him down the stairs and to the green space alongside the building. He quickly pees then goes about sniffing. I let him have a couple more minutes before whistling him back.

To my surprise, he comes right away. It used to be I’d have to go over to him and clip his leash back on.

“Good boy.” I rub his head excitedly, loving how much Emily’s positive influence is impacting our lives. If only my dad could see me now.

Back upstairs, I'm shocked to find a flannel blanket from the closet spread across the living-room floor, candles arranged around its perimeter. Emily has been busy.

"I hope that's okay," she says. "I thought it might be fun?—"

"It's perfect," I respond, hoping she can tell that I'm not blowing smoke.

The doorbell rings, breaking the moment. "Wow," I comment, going to the buzzer. "That was fast."

The delivery person comes right up to the front door, the bag of food still hot and steaming. After tipping him, I head into the living room, thinking I'll put the food down then grab some plates, but once again Emily is one step ahead of me. She has plates, forks, and napkins set on the blanket, as well as two glasses of water.

"You move fast," I comment.

She shrugs in an adorable way. "I just wanted to be helpful."

"You're more than helpful," I say, wanting to tell her just how much she already means to me but holding back.

We take our seats, surrounded by dancing lights and the hum of an imperfect city, finding perfection in the simplicity of a delivery dinner on a blanket. It's nothing like the galas and networking events I'm often at, but it feels truer, somehow. Real.

Baxter lies on the floor, watching as we eat, conversation ebbing and flowing naturally. There's laughter, too. It's the sound of walls coming down, of distances closing.

It's been so long since I let myself get close to someone like this. It's been... since

never.

“Isaac?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” she says, her gaze holding mine.

“Anytime, Em.” And I mean it — every single word.

The candles burn lower, wax pooling at their bases. I want to freeze tonight, keep it safe in the hollow of my chest. At least I can comfort myself with the possibility that this might not be our last evening together. If I don’t find a way to blow tonight, hopefully this will be the first date of many.

Baxter inches closer to the blanket, giving us his best puppy-dog eyes.

I slap my forehead. “It’s his dinnertime. Sorry, one second.”

I scramble to my feet, retrieving Baxter’s food from the kitchen. The pup follows closely, wagging his tail excitedly. Emily merely watches, a soft smile dancing on her lips. Home never felt this warm before, and even though I know she has to leave eventually, I really wish she wouldn’t.

As I feed Baxter, Emily tidies up our impromptu dining spot, stacking plates and collecting the leftover cartons. Her actions are gentle, her movements clean and assertive. I jump in, folding the blanket and grabbing the broom from the closet.

“No need to clean everything right now,” she says, a small smile playing on her lips. Her eyes shine even under the dim light.

I chuckle. “You sound like my mom.”

“Your mom was pretty chill?”

“The most.” I pause. Think about it. “In a good way.”

She leans against the kitchen counter. It’s darker in here, with fewer candles, and that makes it feel more intimate. “Were you close?”

“Up until she passed, yeah. What about...” I trail off.

She shakes her head. “I haven’t really talked to my parents in years.”

“That’s right.” I want to kick myself for not remembering. She already told me she’s not close with her parents — but she didn’t tell me why.

“They’re both alcoholics,” she supplies, much to my surprise. “They were more interested in themselves than raising me, so...” She rakes her fingers through her loose hair.

“I’m sorry,” I breathe.

“It’s okay, but thank you. I appreciate it.”

“What about siblings?” I ask, changing the subject from her parents.

She shakes her head. “Only child, much to my dismay.”

“I get it,” I say, quietly reminiscing my childhood years without a sibling. “Growing up, I wished for a younger brother.”

Emily laughs softly, the corners of her eyes crinkling beautifully. “Did you?”

“Yeah,” I retort with a smirk playing on my lips. “Someone to take the blame and do all my chores.”

She throws me an amused look. “You’re terrible!”

Our laughter reverberates in the half-lit room and sends Baxter into a frenzy of barking.

“Seriously, though.” I wipe down the counter, merely looking for something to do with my nervous energy. “I hate that you had to grow up that way, but I hope you don’t mind my saying that you seem wonderfully well-adjusted.”

She blinks slowly, absorbing my words. A soft sigh escapes her lips before she responds, fingers tracing patterns on the marble counter. “You’d be surprised what someone can adjust to, when it’s all they’ve ever known.”

There’s a depth of sadness in her eyes that steals away my breath. The moment stretches out, heavy and somber. I wish to lift it, but don’t know how.

“I wish things were different for you,” I say sincerely.

Emily smiles, and there’s a strange warmth in it. “They are. They’re very different now.”

I raise an eyebrow, curiosity digging into my heart. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” she says, her fingers absentmindedly reaching out to pet Baxter, who has settled at our feet. “Then, I didn’t really have much to look forward to. Now I do. Things are going really well. In big part thanks to you.”

My chest swells at her words. I open my mouth to respond, but words evade me. I simply look at her, her hands wandering on Baxter’s fur, the dim light painting ethereal shadows on her face. I’ve known loss, experienced it in a way that forever altered the course of my life, but Emily’s resilience is something of an enigma.

“You’re strong, Emily,” I hesitantly say. She stops petting Baxter and looks up at me, eyes reflecting the half-light of the room.

“Not really,” she shrugs, an odd smile playing on her lips.

I shake my head adamantly. “No, you are.”

She holds my gaze, and for a moment I think she might step forward and kiss me — until she abruptly looks away. “Anyway, dogs have helped me a lot. They’re easier than humans. Easier to read. So giving in their love. Forgiving.”

“Hmm.” I look at my dog, the one I never asked for but that I’ve come to accept. Emily’s perspective is one I never considered.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:05 am

Ever since my dad got Baxter, I've mostly seen him as a pain in the butt. Thanks to Emily, he's changed into another creature entirely. Hell, I think I might even love the dog.

"Would you like—" Before I can finish with a drink, the lights flicker on.

The blackout is over.

Unfortunately.

I was really enjoying the cozy intimacy of it all, the bubble we had been in. Baxter's tail thumps on the wooden floor, breaking the silence after the emergence of light. Emily shifts, looking awkward, like she's been caught revealing too much about herself.

"I guess I should head home," she says with a small sigh.

As she speaks, I can't help but feel a tug in my heart. It's selfish — I know it is, but I want more time with her. I want the lights to flicker back off. I crave the intimacy we'd been sharing, conversations shrouded in shadows giving way to soul-baring honesty.

"Yeah, of course," I reply with a forced nonchalance, afraid my voice might betray the yearning gnawing at my insides.

Emily shoulders her bag and gives Baxter one last pat. The dog whines, wagging his tail and nudging her hand for more attention. She laughs softly, a sound that makes

my heart skip a beat.

“Good night, Baxter,” she murmurs.

“And good night, Isaac,” she says to me, her tone lower — making it feel like a secret.

“Good night, Emily,” I breathe.

Her eyes flit to mine for one more lingering moment before she turns towards the door. The latch clicks behind her, and Baxter whimpers, missing her already.

“I know, boy,” I tell him. “I know exactly how you feel.”

CHAPTER 16

EMILY

The whole drive back to my apartment, I’m shaking. Smiling. Feeling nauseous. It’s this whole mess of emotions that I just don’t understand.

Parking on the street, I grab my things and hustle upstairs. The lights are on in my neighborhood, but I’m still feeling too twisted up to be thankful. I slide inside the apartment, closing the door to the world behind me, to the night that’s still painted in my mind with broad, Isaac-colored strokes.

I lean against the wood, steady myself. My heart flutters — a caged bird against my ribs. Why does it feel like I’ve left something behind? No, not something. Someone.

Isaac.

Our dinner, our conversation, lingers on my tongue. The taste of the food we shared, the sound of his laughter, low and resonant in the candlelit hush of his vast living room — it was intimate, unexpected, disarming.

He had been so at ease, even as the city around us descended into temporary chaos. It was... perfect. But when the conversation drifted too close to what simmered between us, I felt the walls closing in. His place suddenly felt too small, like I needed to come up for air and didn't know which direction to head in.

I had to leave. I couldn't tell him why. Couldn't explain the panic that seized me, the need for air, for space, for the quiet hum of my own four walls where the only expectations I had to meet were my own.

My phone buzzes, a soft intrusion. Isaac's name lights up the screen, and my breath catches. I can't bring myself to pick it up. Can't bear to read the words he's sent after I practically fled from his place.

Instead I put the phone on the kitchen counter. Pour myself a glass of juice. Take my shoes off. Think about a shower.

Yet the text is still on my mind, and I find myself picking the phone up almost reflexively.

Thank you for the lovely evening, the message reads. It's so simple, but it puts me into a tailspin.

I'm partly giddy, partly terrified.

This is Isaac we're talking about. Isaac, who grew up a world away from me and has seen things I probably can't even conceptualize. He's rubbed elbows with the one percent, probably even met royalty.

And me? I'm Emily. Just Emily. The girl who works with dogs and thrifts all her clothes. How could this man be interested in someone like me?

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Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:05 am

I put the phone down, my hands shaking slightly. Something changed between us tonight, and it's so obvious. We agreed — it was a date. This isn't just about business anymore, and we both know it. But admitting that feels like stepping off a cliff. A leap into the unknown.

I move across the room, collapse on the sofa, and draw my knees to my chest. "Emily," I say to myself. "What are you doing?"

But there's no answer in the silence of my apartment, just the ghosts of laughter and the touch of a hand that isn't mine. Isaac's presence is a phantom here, in the place where I am supposed to be alone, safe from complications of the heart.

This thing that's growing between us... it's too risky. Because that's what it would be, wouldn't it? Risky to let down these walls I've built so diligently. Risky to trust someone who stands on a pedestal so high that the fall could break me.

I've seen it before. The way people change when they hold power over you. Like my parents, always too far away to see the cracks forming in their daughter as they chased their own addictions. Always expecting me to be strong, to cope, to understand.

"Stop it," I chide myself, a whisper-shout in the emptiness. "Stop comparing him to them."

But it's hard. The fear of being let down again clings to me, a second skin I can't shed. It's safer this way, to keep things professional, to keep my heart out of transactions and contracts.

But even now, with the turmoil and the doubt, there's a part of me that yearns to text him back, to dive headfirst into whatever this is.

There's a sound at the door, and Jenn comes in with a tired smile. Relief washes over me, a gentle tide I didn't realize I was waiting for.

"Hey." Her voice is cheerful, even though I can hear the long day in it.

"Hey." I sit up straighter. My fingers still itch to reach for my phone. To text him back. But they stay curled into my palm, holding on to nothing.

She hangs her bag up on one of the hooks by the door and takes off her shoes. Once she gets a better look at me, though, her smile falters. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." The words come out too quick, too sharp. I soften them with a shrug. "Just thinking."

She doesn't buy it, of course. She never does. She crosses the room and sinks onto the couch next to me. Close, but not crowding. Always giving space when it's needed.

"Talk to me," she prompts, patient as ever.

I hesitate, gathering the jumble of thoughts like stray papers in a breeze. Then, it all pours out. "I had dinner with Isaac tonight."

"Like... a business dinner?" Jenn's head tilts, birdlike, curious.

"He called it a date." Saying it aloud sends a shiver through me. A date.

"Wow." Her eyebrows shoot up. "That's... Emily, that's amazing!"

“Is it?” Doubt laces my words, heavy and binding.

“Of course! You haven’t dated in... a while.”

“It’s not a priority,” I point out.

“And that’s okay.” She bites her lip. “Isaac, though, he’s quite the catch. Except for the whole dog thing.”

“Actually, he seems to really love Baxter now.” I can’t keep back my ear-to-ear grin.

“Oh.” She laughs. “Then he’s perfect.”

Her enthusiasm is a warm blanket, but it can’t quite smother the chill of my fears.

“Jenn, he’s a client.” I press my hands against my knees, needing the pressure, the grounding. “It’s too risky.”

“Risky how?” There’s a challenge in her gaze now, pushing me to confront what I’m really saying.

“Mixing business with... whatever this is. It could complicate things.” My voice shakes, and I hate how vulnerable I’m feeling.

“Or it could make things incredible,” she counters, relentless in her optimism. “You’re allowed to be happy, you know.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:05 am

“Happy?” The word feels foreign on my tongue. “What if he lets me down? What if he’s just like?—”

“Like your parents?” Jenn finishes softly, her hand finding mine.

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

“A lot of people have that fear, whether they’re aware of it or not. But here’s the thing. Emily, you’re not your parents. And Isaac isn’t either.” She squeezes my hand, grounding me again. “You’re pushing him away because you’re scared.”

“Isn’t that... smart?” The question is a whisper, a plea for validation.

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s just safe.” Her voice is gentle, but her words cut deep. “But since when has playing it safe gotten you what you want?”

I want to argue, to tell her she’s wrong. That I’m fine with my life as it is, that all I need is friends and dogs. But the flutter in my heart at the thought of Isaac, the ache in my chest when I think about pushing him away; they betray me.

“Your parents let you down,” Jenn says, her voice a lifeline. “But that doesn’t mean everyone will. Don’t let their mistakes define your chances at happiness.”

Happiness, huh? It’s a slippery thing, hard to catch. Harder to hold.

“Take a chance, Em.” Her eyes hold a fierce kind of hope. “Don’t let fear decide your future.”

That fear wraps around me, a familiar cloak. But it's threadbare now, worn thin by years of clinging to it. Maybe it's time to shed it. To step out into the uncertainty, where possibilities can breathe.

"Maybe I'm tired of being afraid," I admit, the words barely more than a breath.

"Then do something about it." Her encouragement is a nudge, a call to action. "Text him back. See where it goes."

The phone lies on the kitchen table, inert and unassuming. A bridge to something new, something terrifying and wonderful all at once. I stare at it, hesitant. Then, with a resolve that feels like the first step off a cliff, I get off the couch and grab it.

Tomorrow, I had said. But tomorrow is an excuse, a way to delay the inevitable.

"Tonight," I decide, my thumbs moving over the keyboard with a tremor. "Tonight, I take the chance."

Thank you, I type to Isaac, the words simple and true. Dinner was lovely.

I press send.

My heart races, but there's a newfound lightness in my chest. A flutter of wings against the walls I've built so high. For the first time in a long while, I allow myself to hope. To dream of the joy that might be waiting on the other side of fear.

"Good?" Jenn asks, her smile infectious.

"Good," I confirm, a matching smile breaking through.

"See?" She leans back, satisfied. "Not so scary."

“Yeah,” I agree, though my racing heart might not.

CHAPTER 17

EMILY

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, a soft vibration that pulls me from the warmth of sleep. I reach for it, my heart still nestled in the quiet comfort of dawn.

It’s a text from Isaac. A response to my message last night?

Either way, my heart is already racing, and I hurry up and swipe the text open before the doubts can creep in. I’m doing what Jenn said — I’m jumping in, going for this. No matter how scary it is.

A picture pops up on the screen: Baxter, curled like a comma in a sea of white sheets, his furry body surrendered to slumber. Guess he wore me down, the message reads.

A smile tugs at my lips. This dog, with his stubborn streak and relentless charm, has managed to conquer the bed of the most disciplined man I know. It’s endearing, this small victory of my four-legged friend. And it’s stirring something within me — something warm, something hopeful.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:05 am

What did Isaac think about sending me a picture of his bed? Did he hesitate? Did he overthink it? Was he nervous?

Or did it mean nothing at all, other than he just wanted to share a picture of the dog?

Look at me, overthinking this whole thing. Jenn's words echo in the back of my mind, her gentle nudge toward the precipice of love. She's right. Maybe it's time. Time to let go of past hurts, to embrace the possibility of something new, something good.

Isaac... could he be the one to walk this path with me?

The thought lingers as I dress, pulling on jeans and a comfortable sweater, the image of Baxter still etched in my thoughts. Isaac's kindness of late, his unexpected gestures — they carve out a space in my cautious heart. It seems that Baxter isn't the only one who has been growing and changing. Isaac and I have also been discovering new parts of ourselves.

I shake off the remaining threads of sleep, my mood buoyant despite the burden of yesterday's worries. I don't have a shift at the coffee shop today, or any appointments with my few clients. Which means I get to do whatever I please.

Which means I'm heading to the shelter.

Today, I make a difference, however small.

The shelter greets me with its familiar smells and sounds — the tang of disinfectant,

the babble of barks and whines. My steps carry me forward, and even though there's so much to repair and heal here, the problems don't feel as big as they once did.

Taco waits for me, his small frame quivering with energy. The chihuahua mix is a bundle of nerves, quick movements and darting eyes, but beneath the surface lies a heart in need of understanding.

"Hey, little guy," I murmur, kneeling before his kennel.

He hesitates, his gaze flickering between me and the safety of his bed. Patience is a language all its own, and I speak it fluently. Slowly, gently, I extend my hand, a silent offering.

Minutes pass, an eternity in the currency of trust. Then, a step — a tentative paw reaching out. His nose twitches, exploring the scent of me, the promise of kindness without harm. Another step, and then he's there, his tiny body pressed against my palm. Connection, fragile as spider silk, weaves its magic.

"Good boy, Taco," I say softly, my voice barely audible over the barking from the other enclosures.

I put a lead on him and take him into the yard, away from the distraction of the other dogs. We work together, him learning the cues, me reveling in every small triumph. Sit. Stay. Come. Simple commands that build bridges between us.

They're the commands that he can use when prospective families come in for meet-and-greets. They will show that he is a good dog, eager to bond and please. They will, fingers crossed, help to get him adopted.

Taco's tail wags, a metronome of growing confidence, and my heart swells with pride. These moments matter. They're the reason I'm here, why I pour my soul into

these creatures others have discarded.

By the time our session ends, Taco is a different dog. While he is still grasping the commands, his spunk is back. I can feel the joy and love emanating from him.

He's still cautious, yes, but he's also braver than before. It's a transformation that never ceases to amaze me, the resilience of these animals, their capacity to heal and to love again.

"See you tomorrow, buddy," I promise as I put him back in his kennel, though the ache of uncertainty clings to the words. Tomorrow is never guaranteed, not here, not in this life of transience and fleeting connections.

But today, today is good. Today, I've made a difference, and that has to be enough.

Checking my phone, I see that it isn't even ten a.m. yet. With nothing on my schedule, the day stretches on, feeling weirdly empty and hollow. I would love to see Isaac again, but he's at work, probably with a thousand other things to do that are way more pressing than seeing me.

It's good, though, I remind myself. I can use this time to work with some more dogs here. Smiling to myself, I head to the office to talk to Ricki about it.

The second I see her, though, the grin drops right off my face. The fluorescent lights hum overhead, casting a stark glare over the cluttered desk where Ricki sits, her face etched with lines of worry.

More bad news?

I almost don't want to ask, and yet I also can't stand the anticipation of not knowing what's going on.

“Hey,” I begin, voice softening as I step closer. “Any updates on the funding?”

Ricki looks up, her eyes reflecting the burden of bad news before her lips even part.

“It’s not good, Em.” She shuffles papers, none of which hold the answers we need.

My chest tightens, air thinning in my lungs. I swallow hard, bracing for the rest.

“And?”

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She sighs, the sound heavy and tired. “Donations are nearly at zero. Flatlined. If things don’t pick up...” Her voice trails off, but the unfinished sentence hangs thick between us.

“Are we talking about more cutbacks?” My voice is barely above a whisper, dread pooling like ice water in my veins.

“More than that,” she admits, her fingers worrying the edge of an unopened bill. “We need to cut you down to zero paid hours.”

The words hit like a gut punch, knocking the wind from me. It’s not just about the money; it never has been. But losing those hours feels like losing a piece of my identity, a slice of purpose in a world that often seems senselessly cruel.

I at least have a few clients at the moment, Isaac included. And two other potential ones have already gotten in touch. Thanks to my work with Isaac and Baxter, doors are opening up. My bills are paid.

But the shelter is a different story.

“Okay.” The word emerges hollow, devoid of the conviction I’m scrambling to muster. “I’ll still be here. I’ll still come?—”

“You don’t have to.”

“Ricki.” I pin her with a hard look. “You know there’s nowhere else I would rather be. If I don’t train these dogs, who will?”

Ricki nods, but her expression remains guarded, hope a flickering candle in a storm. “We’ve brainstormed some fundraising ideas,” she offers with a forced smile. “Bake sales, community dog washes... Maybe even a training demonstration by you?”

“Sure. That sounds amazing.”

Anything for these dogs, for this place that feels more like home than anywhere else. But deep down, I know the truth. Bake sales won’t buy the expensive heartworm medicine. Dog washes won’t cover surgery costs.

“Times are tough,” Ricki continues, folding her hands atop the desk. “People are giving up their pets because they can’t afford them anymore. Asking for donations...” She shrugs, the gesture laden with sorrow. “It’s asking a lot.”

A lot from people who have little left to give. I understand that all too well; my own bank account isn’t exactly inspiring. But it’s not the numbers that keep me lying awake at night. It’s the faces of the dogs, each one imprinted on my heart, each one dependent on human kindness, money, and time that seems in ever-shorter supply.

“Let’s set something up for next weekend,” I say, trying to inject determination into my tone. “The weather’s supposed to be nice. People might come out, enjoy some sun, spend a few dollars...”

“Hopefully,” Ricki replies, but there’s a resignation in her tone that mirrors my own internal defeat. We’re two people fighting a tide with teacups, desperate to make a difference in a world that feels increasingly indifferent.

“Hey,” I add, leaning forward, compelled to offer some sliver of reassurance, however frail. “We’re not giving up. Not yet.”

Ricki manages a weary chuckle. “Never thought you would. You’re stubborn like

that.”

“Comes with the territory,” I say, forcing a smile. My heart may be shattered, but it’s still beating — still fighting.

I leave the office feeling like there’s a weight tied around my ankle. I’m trying to be positive, but it seems like every time something good happens there’s another blow that just knocks me straight to the ground.

But I gotta keep going. For Baxter, for Taco, for every furry soul that will walk through those front doors in the days and years to come.

Because if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that love is a force unto itself — a power that defies logic and leaps over obstacles. Love can heal a broken chihuahua mix. Love can soften the heart of a grumpy, solitary billionaire. And love, I have to believe, will find a way to save this place that means everything to me.

“Emily, wait.”

Stopping in the hallway, I turn to see one of the volunteers, her arms wrapped around a trembling bundle of fur. The new arrival is a scruffy thing, his matted coat doing little to hide the quiver that runs through him.

“Got a tough case here,” she says, her voice low and steady. “Behavioral issues. Found wandering the streets. We named him Prince.”

The dog’s eyes meet mine, deep wells of fear and confusion. His body is tense, a coiled spring ready to release. I kneel down, offering a calming presence, but he shies away, his anxiety palpable.

“Can you...?” She trails off, hope mingling with resignation.

I nod, despite the weight in my chest. “I’ll take a look.”

I speak in hushed tones, words meant to soothe. He flinches with each sound, a testament to his troubled past. I want to help, to ease his fears, teach him to trust.

“Hey, buddy,” I say gently, extending a hand, but not touching. “You’re safe now.”

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He doesn't understand, let alone believe. I can see it in the rigid set of his shoulders, the wary flicker of his gaze.

"We're full again, huh?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

She nods. "Yeah, and a couple of people have already called this morning about dogs they found. We had to turn them away."

My gaze drops to the floor. We're not the only shelter at capacity, and that means that sometimes — unfortunately — dogs will have to end up staying on the streets.

"I'll let Prince get adjusted," I say, swallowing down the knot of pain. "And then I'll check in with him and start some training."

"Thanks." She gives me a grateful look. "The sooner we can get him adopted, the sooner we can give another dog a bed."

"Exactly," I agree.

I watch her take Prince to the last kennel, my chest all twisted. I refuse to stand here feeling helpless, though, like life is against us and there's nothing we can do. Instead, I'll take action. There are dogs to train, and I can volunteer to spearhead organizing the event Ricki and I were talking about.

No matter what the circumstances are, there's always a choice. An action to take or a new perspective to adopt. I only wish that it could be simpler, though.

What if I asked Isaac for the money we need?

The moment I have the thought, I laugh out loud at myself. How silly. I've never gone begging for money, and I'm not about to start.

Yet I can't help but think about how little something like twenty thousand would mean to Isaac and how much it would mean to this shelter. I won't ask for it, though. I would rather work my fingers to the bone before doing something like that — especially because I don't want Isaac to think I'm interested in him for his money.

The truth couldn't be further from that. Isaac is?—

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out to see a text from him.

Baxter says hi... And so do I :)

My lips stretch into a grin. Isaac is a light in my life. That's what he is. A sign of hope, a reminder that things can and do get better.

With that reminder in mind, I grab a leash and go to find my next student.

CHAPTER 18

ISAAC

The hum of my office fades to a murmur. I'm here, but not quite. Baxter snores softly from his dog bed in the corner, while I lean back in my chair, staring at the ceiling as if it holds answers.

Did I push too far last night? Emily's smile, warm yet reserved, replays in my mind. She was pleasant, sure. But she left early. Evasion or simply tired? Others linger for

the prestige, the allure of wealth. Not her. That's rare. Refreshing.

I glance at my phone. We've texted a few times today, but it's been hard to get a read on her mood. I've been telling myself to be patient, to let things unfold naturally and in their own time. But the "what-ifs" claw at me with relentless urgency. I can't wait. So, I type out the words that have been circling my thoughts since dawn.

Would love to see you again soon.

I hit send.

There we go. It's done. I add my office address, telling her that I would love to give her a tour of the place today if she has the time. I already know she probably won't come; work claims her time as it does mine. Yet, hope flickers — a candle that can't fully die.

Refocusing, I dive back into spreadsheets and projections, the tools of my trade. Numbers blur, formulas tangle. Instead of profit margins, it's the curve of Emily's lips that I see. What would it be like to kiss her, to feel the soft pressure and warmth?

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the fantasy.

But the image persists, tenacious as the memory of her laughter, light and genuine. In my mind, we're no longer separated by decorum or hesitation. We're close, closer than ever before. And just before our lips meet...

"Isaac?" A voice cuts through daydreams.

I shake my head, realizing that it's Carol, speaking through the intercom.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:05 am

Heat rises in my cheeks. Even though Carol isn't a psychic looking into my head and reading my fantasy, I still feel slightly embarrassed. "Yes?" I clear my throat.

"You have a visitor."

"I do?" I glance at the calendar on my computer, but there's no meeting scheduled.

Wait. Could it be...?

Was I really sitting here for that long, lost in daydreams? Long enough for Emily to make her way across town?

"Let them in," I tell Carol.

There's a soft knock at the door, and then it opens before I can respond. Emily enters, wearing a soft smile, her hair in a messy ponytail that might be the sexiest hairdo I've ever seen.

Baxter stirs from his slumber, ears perking up before he bounds across the room with puppylike energy. His tail wags furiously as he greets her, and something warm blooms in my chest at the sight of them together. It's a picture of simple happiness, unburdened by anything else.

"Hi, Isaac," she says with that easy smile that always seems to reach her eyes.

"You don't have to say hello to me." I stuff my hands in my pockets, suddenly unsure of what to do with these things I've had my whole life.

“You invited me over here.”

I grin. “Yes. I did. I hope I wasn’t bothering you.”

“I was in the neighborhood and I actually have something for Baxter.” She holds up a small bag of bacon-flavored dog treats.

“Thank you,” I manage, my voice not quite steady. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“I also... wanted to see you.”

She says it so softly that I almost miss it, her gaze now focused intently on Baxter who is frantically tail-wagging in appreciation of the treats she’s giving him one at a time. It’s the words I’ve wanted to hear for so long that they seem unreal.

“You did?” I blink, the taste of surprise bittersweet. It wasn’t long ago that we were two strangers, her swooping in to save me from my dog — or, rather, myself.

“Yeah,” she finally looks up, meeting my gaze squarely. Her eyes are filled with honesty, a kind of pure transparency that leaves no room for doubt. “I missed you.”

She says it like it’s a confession, like she’s giving me a part of her world she’s never shown anyone else. I can do nothing but stand here, wordlessly accepting the gift she offers.

Baxter barks, breaking the silence and somehow lightening the moment. Emily laughs, and the sound echoes through the room.

“That’s because you won’t stop feeding him treats,” I tease her.

“Blame it on me, then,” she answers, tossing another treat at Baxter. “I don’t want to

keep you too long..." She glances at my desk, where all the work I don't want to do waits.

I can tell she means to leave — her body angled toward the door, ready to slip away. But I'm not ready for her to go. Not yet.

"Would you... Could we go for a walk?" I ask, surprising myself with the impulsive invitation.

She blinks, taken aback. "Now? In the middle of your workday?"

"Sure," I say, more confidently than I feel. Work can wait. This feels important, necessary even.

"Okay," she agrees, her surprise giving way to a smile that suggests she's intrigued by my spontaneity. "Let's go for a walk."

We take our leave, Baxter trotting happily between us. The bustle of the city envelops us as we step outside, but somehow it all fades into the background. It's just Emily, Baxter, and me — a trio that a month ago I would have never expected but that now somehow fits perfectly together.

As we walk, I watch her. Really watch her. She's different from the women I've known — the ones drawn to the lure of my last name or the promise of my bank account. With Emily, those things don't matter. And I realize how refreshing it is to be seen for who I am, not what I possess.

"Thank you for coming," I say, my words slicing through the hum of the city. "I thought you might be at work and not able to."

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I imagine her at the coffee shop she moonlights at, steaming milk, an apron tied around her waist. The vision I'm conjuring makes her look ridiculously cute. Would it be weird if I popped in there sometime to get a latte from her? I've never been to that coffee shop, and it's not on my way to work at all, but I don't mind making a detour. Not for her.

"Not today. I was volunteering at the animal shelter. I'd actually run out of dogs to work with by the time you texted me, and I was at the pet store, getting some supplies for the shelter."

"And that's where you saw Baxter's favorite treats?"

"Yep."

"I didn't realize that you did shopping for the shelter."

She shrugs, her gaze focused on the sidewalk ahead. "Not officially, but I help out in any way I can."

We talk as we wander — about little things, inconsequential things. Yet, with each word exchanged, I find myself wanting to dive deeper, to know the essence of her thoughts, her dreams, her past. The curiosity is a gnawing hunger, a yearning for connection I haven't felt in a long time.

The scent of her shampoo, citrus and vanilla, wafts to me on the cool breeze. It mixes with the smell of car exhaust and steamed hot dogs from the nearby vendor, creating an oddly intoxicating blend.

She suddenly stops walking, glancing up at a tall building. My rhythm breaks, forcing me to stop and look in the direction she is staring. It's an old-fashioned film theater with its marquee lit up, listing show times for movies from decades past.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says, her voice carrying a tone of wonderment.

My gaze follows hers, absorbing the magnificent building as she does. Its aging bricks murmur tales of a different time. "It certainly is," I say.

The truth is, I've passed this theater countless times but I've never really seen it. Not like she does now, engrossed in its grandeur. Time seems to stand still for her. She's lost in a trance, seemingly communicating with the building's past, its stories and secrets.

Something must have shown on my face because she quickly shifts her gaze towards me, a veil of clouds masking her eyes. "You've never noticed it before?" Her inflection curls upwards, making me feel like a schoolboy who failed a simple test.

"No," I admit. "Not like this. Not until you pointed it out."

The corners of her lips curl up into an understanding smile. "That's the essence of life, isn't it?" she murmurs. "Seeing things for the first time, even when they've been there all along."

"Yes," I murmur, thinking how that's the way things have been with her. She came into my life quite unexpectedly, and it took me a bit to really see her. To really understand the jewel I had in front of me.

"Emily..." I pause to gather the courage to continue. "Would you like to have dinner with me again tonight? This time planned?" I tack a grin on the end, hoping that my attempt at humor will sweeten the deal.

She strokes Baxter's head, considering my offer. There's a vulnerability in asking, in putting my hopes out there without the security of certainty. Last night was one thing — an impromptu dinner born out of an unexpected blackout — but this... this would be a real, proper date. Our first.

Assuming she accepts.

"Are you sure you want to add dating to your to-do list?" she teases, but there's a softness in her eyes that tells me she won't be saying no.

"Absolutely," I say, my heart steadfast in its newfound purpose. "It's about time I prioritized what truly matters."

"Then yes," she says, her hand brushing against mine — a touch as light as a promise. "Yes, I'd like that very much."

We resume our walk, the city streets stretching out before us. There's a sense of anticipation in the air, a prelude to change. And as I glance over at Emily, her smile a beacon in the ordinariness of the day, I realize I'm ready. Ready to embrace the unknown, to let love chart its course.

Is this what my dad was hoping for me? That by leaving Baxter with me I would stop focusing so much on work and start thinking about other things? Like caring for others; creating relationships outside of the office.

I hate to give it to him, but the old man was kind of a genius.

CHAPTER 19

EMILY

Baxter's nails click against the sidewalk between me and Isaac, a beautiful song. We're walking, the three of us, along a path in the park framed by whispering trees. Everything is nearly perfect. And yet... I breathe deep, waiting to feel lighter.

Because I should. I'm going to have dinner with Isaac tonight. The thought tingles through me, electric and warm. But it's shadowed, overcast by a cloud of worry that refuses to dissipate. The shelter... the money just isn't there. We're sinking, and all I can do is bail water with a cup full of holes.

"Hey." Isaac's voice breaks through my reverie, his tone laced with concern. "You got quiet. What's on your mind?"

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I hesitate, caught between the urge to confide and the instinct to protect myself. But Isaac isn't my parents. He doesn't wear their mask of indifference. Perhaps it's okay to let someone see behind my own façade.

"The shelter," I start, my voice barely above a breath. The words come, halting, as if each one is a step closer to admitting defeat. "We're struggling. More and more each day. Dogs keep coming, but there's less money for everything. Training, healthcare... it's all slipping through our fingers. It's bad. Really bad. A lot of people can't even afford pets now — forget about donations — and it's only getting worse. I didn't even spend the shelter's funds at the pet store today. It was my own money."

"You shouldn't have to do that."

"Who else will do it?" I counter, the question coming out harsher than I meant for it to.

A lump forms in my throat, thick and stubborn. I swallow hard, fighting back the swell of emotions. I didn't mean to take things out on Isaac. I'm a mess right now, though, and maybe it's best if I back out of dinner tonight. I won't be very good company.

He stops walking, turning to face me, his gaze earnest. "You're right. What you're doing is amazing, I just meant... it sounds like more than one person can handle." His voice is soft and soothing, but unfortunately not enough to make the problem go away. "You're doing so much already, volunteering your time to train the dogs."

I nod, drawing in a shaky breath. "It's just... Yeah, you know... I'm only one person.

I can't be the solution they all need." The admission feels like a surrender, and the tears that I've held at bay threaten to break free.

He steps closer, close enough that I can see the flecks of gold in his eyes, close enough that his concern wraps around me like a blanket. "You're doing more than you realize. Those dogs, they have a chance because of you."

His words are meant to comfort, but they echo in the hollow space where hope used to live. I blink rapidly, willing the tears to retreat. Baxter nudges his nose against my leg, a silent show of solidarity.

"Thank you, Isaac," I manage to say, my voice wobbly with the effort of holding myself together. "It means a lot that you care."

"I can help."

"You... can?"

Of course I've been secretly hoping he would say this, what with his resources and connections. I haven't wanted to ask, though, or get my hopes up. He's not obligated to do anything just because he knows me.

"Maybe we could get local businesses to donate services for an auction," he says, smiling at the thought.

I nod. "Yeah. That's a great idea."

"Or organize a benefit concert," he continues, enthusiasm lighting up his features.

I listen, absorbing his eagerness. It buoys me, a life raft in a sea of worry. The ideas are good, some even great, and the simple fact that he is here, brainstorming ways to

save a dream that isn't his own, it's... touching.

"Thank you, Isaac." The words tumble out, small and sincere. "Even if these ideas don't pan out, I appreciate you trying."

A strange look crosses his face, almost like he's surprised. Did it sound like I'm questioning him?

"Emily, you're not alone in this." His voice is soft, earnest.

The vulnerability steals my breath. He reaches out, arms enveloping me in a hug that feels like coming home. My head rests against his chest, heartbeat steady beneath my ear.

Safety. Warmth. Understanding. All wrapped up in one long, charged embrace.

After a moment that stretches into eternity, he pulls back just enough so our eyes meet. The air crackles with unspoken words, with the electricity of a connection neither of us anticipated but that we're falling headfirst into regardless. We lean in, closer, closer...

Baxter chooses that instant to leap up, paws landing squarely on Isaac's chest. Laughter bubbles up in him, genuine and infectious, breaking the spell.

"Seems someone's jealous," I tease, biting back my own smile as Baxter wags his tail, oblivious to the moment he's interrupted.

Isaac looks at me again, a grin still playing on his lips. "I think you're right," he agrees, eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. "But I love him too now... and I'm definitely falling."

His words linger, hanging in the balance, and I wonder if he's talking about Baxter or me. The way he looks at me, like I'm the only person in his world, makes me hope it's the latter.

Isaac's phone buzzes, and he pulls it out to glance at it.

"You should get it," I say, tucking hair behind my ear, my face still warm from trying to dissect the meaning behind his words.

"It's okay... although I should get back to the office."

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“Of course,” I quickly say. “I didn’t mean to keep you.”

“I don’t mind it at all,” he grins.

I bite into my smile, once again feeling better for another quick moment, all thanks to Isaac. We’ve made a loop through the neighborhood, and his building is just across the street. Leaving the park, we cross and stop at the massive structure’s front door.

“Tonight,” he says, breaking the quiet, “I’ll pick you up at six?”

“Six sounds perfect.”

His eyes meet mine, and there’s a promise in them, something that speaks of more than just dinner. The desire to close the space between us tugs at me, urging my feet forward. But I resist. Not here. Not where anyone can see the beginning of something that feels so intensely private.

“Great,” he replies, a hint of relief lacing his words, as if he too fears this moment slipping away.

“Isaac...” I start, unsure how to put into words the gratitude for his support, for his willingness to dive headfirst into the chaos of my world.

“Emily, you don’t need to say anything.” His hand brushes mine, sending a jolt of warmth up my arm. “I’m just glad I can be there for you.”

I nod, letting his assurance settle over me like a comforting blanket, and give Baxter’s

head a hearty rub.

“See you later,” I murmur, stepping back.

“Later,” he confirms, his gaze holding mine until the very last second before I turn away.

As I walk to my car, my mind remains stuck in the space that we shared. The impromptu walk around our block, the tender words exchanged beneath the hazy sunlight of the afternoon. The seemingly insignificant gestures that turn heavy with meaning in my heart. A comforting squeeze of the hand, an understanding smile. It all accumulates into Isaac’s silent promise of being there.

And for the first time in perhaps my whole life, I believe someone.

CHAPTER 20

ISAAC

The office feels too quiet, the kind of silence that presses against your temples and reminds you of rooms left too long empty. I’m at my desk, but not really here. My gaze is fixed on the skyline, where the sun dips close to the horizon, painting the glass buildings with amber light. Emily’s laughter echoes in my ears, a melody I didn’t know I’d missed until now. Baxter’s tail wagging in sync with our steps, an odd yet perfect symphony.

A pile of reports sits untouched by my elbow. Numbers and forecasts, they’re important; they say who’s winning, who’s losing. But today, they’re just paper and ink. Today, Emily’s smile outshines them all, her eyes bright enough to outdo the city lights.

“Isaac?” Carol’s voice cuts through the haze of daydreams. “Your three o’clock? They’ve been waiting.”

“Shoot.” I lurch to my feet, the spell broken. How did I forget? Meetings are the scaffolding of my day, but Emily and her gentle ways have unraveled them without even trying.

“Sorry,” I mutter, grabbing the laptop that I should’ve had in my hands twenty minutes ago.

The meeting room is stuffy, filled with expectant faces and the scent of ambition. Apologies fall from my lips, their edges blunted by distraction. We talk land plots and strategies, but my mind keeps wandering back to Emily. To her warmth, to the possibilities she’s unknowingly penned into my life’s script.

It ends in a blur, handshakes and nods, promises to reconvene. I return to my office, to Carol’s knowing look. Does she see it? The shift inside me, the softening of edges worn sharp by years of loss?

“You’ve been miles away lately,” she says, leaning against the doorframe. “Anything I can help with? Your father’s estate... or the dog?”

The dog in question lifts his head from the bed in the corner, where he’s been snoozing since we returned from our walk with Emily.

“Things are going well, actually,” I reply, and mean it.

The weight of my father’s absence is still there, but it’s different now. Lighter, maybe. Or perhaps just less noticeable thanks to everything that I have going on.

Carol smiles. “That pretty dog trainer has something to do with it, doesn’t she?”

“Maybe,” I say slowly, although I can’t keep back the smile.

“I like Emily. She seems wonderful... and I already know she’s a genius with dogs.”

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“She’s very smart,” I agree, although she’s so much more than that.

“It’s good to see you socializing.”

I bristle, more out of reflex than true annoyance. “I have a personal life, Carol.”

“Do you?” She arches an eyebrow. “Name one friend.”

The silence stretches too long, filled with the names of business associates, contacts, partners. But friends? My chest tightens.

“Fine. I don’t get out much.”

“It wasn’t an accusation. I’m just happy to see you happy.”

“Thank you. And things are changing,” I say, the words less for her and more for myself. “I’m turning over a new leaf.”

“Good.” She nods, her smile softening. “You deserve that, Isaac. Really.”

I watch her retreat, the click of her heels fading as she returns to her desk. Alone again, I let myself think about tonight. About Emily waiting in her apartment, about the moments we’ll share. It’s a new chapter, one I’ve never allowed myself to read before.

Change, I’ve learned, isn’t just about what you lose. It’s about what you find along the way.

Noticing the time, I realize the meeting went way over. There's no time for me to go home and get ready for tonight's date. Luckily, the gym here has showers and I always keep a few changes of clothes at work.

I head down to the floor right below my office. My steps echo in the empty hallway as I make my way to the executive gym, a place of isolation even in a building full of people.

Showering quickly, I toggle between hot and cold water, letting the shock of it awaken my senses. Dressing, I carefully select a charcoal suit from the options available. It's not as casual as I'd prefer for a dinner with Emily, but it's better than showing up in my business attire reeking of today's stress and worry.

With one last look at myself in the mirror, I rush back to my office. Baxter is up from his bed, tail wagging in anticipation of dinner.

"Damn." The word slips out as I glance at my watch. Five forty p.m. How have I forgotten about Baxter?

I need to take him home, but there's no time. I'll have to tell Emily I'm running late. Baxter needs a walk and some food.

"Leaving early?" Carol's voice cuts through my reverie as I stride toward the door, Baxter trotting next to me.

"Got plans," I respond, already halfway through the threshold. "Dinner with Emily."

"Wait, Isaac. What about Baxter?"

I pause, the question anchoring me back to the present. "I... forgot to make arrangements. I'm taking him home. I was just about to tell Emily I'll be late."

“Want me to take him? He knows my place well enough.” Carol is already reaching for his leash. “He used to stay there all the time when your father couldn’t take him on trips.”

“Would you?” Gratitude floods me. Carol for the win once again. I was dreading having to tell Emily I’m running behind.

“Of course. Go enjoy your date.” She smiles, and it’s a warm thing, a shared secret between us.

I bend down to scratch Baxter’s ears. “You’re going to stay with Carol tonight, buddy,” I tell him, and there’s a pang in my chest.

Baxter has been my constant, my shadow, since Dad passed. Leaving him, even for an evening, feels like another small letting-go. It’s weird to think that only weeks ago I couldn’t stand this beast, and now I’m starting to feel like I wouldn’t be able to live without him.

“Thank you,” I say, sincerity heavy in my voice. “Really.”

“Anytime.” She waves me off, adding, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

A laugh escapes me, brief and genuine. “That leaves plenty of room for interpretation.”

With a final nod to Carol, I leave my office, the door clicking shut behind me like the closing of a book I’ve read too many times. This company is still important to me, but right now it needs to take a back seat.

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As I make my way to Emily, the sun dips lower, painting the world in hues of gold and amber. It's beautiful and bittersweet, this transition from day to night, from what I knew to what I hope to discover.

The drive to Emily's apartment is a blur of traffic lights and honking horns, the city's heartbeat syncing with my own. I park, check my reflection briefly in the rearview mirror, and exit the car. The evening air greets me, a mix of slight chill and the promise of warmth to come.

I'm punctual, as always. But as I stand outside her door, it's clear that this moment doesn't adhere to the tick of a clock. It's about the leap of faith, the hope that what lies beyond will be worth the risk.

"Here goes nothing," I mumble to myself.

And then I knock.

The door swings open, and there she stands — Jenn, not Emily. She's just as Emily described: tall, with a watchful gaze that seems to weigh my intentions from across the threshold.

"Isaac?" Her voice is friendly, but I can tell she's dissecting me.

"Hi, Jenn," I reply, nodding. "Emily's mentioned you."

"Only good things, I hope." A small smile plays on her lips as she steps aside, ushering me into the apartment.

“Of course.”

The place is cozy, lived-in, with photos of Emily and Jenn laughing together on the walls. It’s the kind of warmth that comes from shared memories, from being there for each other through thick and thin. I can see how this space could foster a bond strong enough to inspire protectiveness.

It makes sense that Emily’s friends would be her family, since she isn’t close to her parents. It makes me want to try extra hard to impress Jenn.

“Emily will be out in a sec,” Jenn says, taking a seat at the small kitchen table. “Can I get you anything while you wait? Water? Coffee?”

“No, thanks.” My hands find their way into my pockets, fingers brushing against the smooth fabric of my slacks. Nervous habit.

“Okay, then.” She watches me, curious but not intrusive. “Just holler if you change your mind.”

“Will do.”

“Isaac?”

Her voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I turn. There she is. Emily.

Time slows. She’s a vision in soft fabric that whispers over her skin, a delicate dress that seems made of moonlight and dreams. Her hair falls in gentle curls around her shoulders, framing her face with careless grace. It’s a look that speaks of effort, but also of ease — the perfect balance between trying and simply being.

“Wow,” escapes from me before I can stop it, a single word that carries the

magnitude of every sensation coursing through me.

“Good wow or bad wow?” Emily asks, a playful lilt to her voice, though I can see the vulnerability hiding in the corner of her smile.

“Definitely good,” I assure her, and it feels like the most honest thing I’ve ever said.

“Ready?” she asks, stepping closer, her scent — a mix of lavender and something slightly spicy — filling the space between us.

“Absolutely.”

We make our way out of the apartment, leaving the safety of familiar surroundings behind. Jenn gives us a wave, and I offer a grateful nod in return; knowing Emily has someone like Jenn in her life eases a lingering tension I hadn’t realized I was holding on to. Life is rough, and it’s good to know that Emily has someone at home to always have her back.

The walk to the car is a blur, my focus solely on Emily beside me. The click of her heels against the pavement, the soft light from the setting sun glinting off her hair — it’s as if the world is putting on a show just for us.

I open the passenger-side door for her, and she slides in with a grace that makes it seem like she’s floating rather than moving. As I close the door gently behind her, I catch a glimpse of her eyes — deep pools reflecting the sky as day fades to night. There’s trust there, expectation, and something that looks a lot like hope.

Tonight, I already know, will be amazing.

Circling around to the driver’s side, I slip into the seat and start the engine. The car hums to life, and I glance over at Emily, our eyes meeting.

“I hope you’re hungry,” I say.

She nods. “I am.”

“Good.” I’ve reserved a table at one of the most popular restaurants in the city.

The city lights flicker like distant stars as I pull up to the spot, which is already teeming with activity. The valet takes my keys with a nod, and we step into the warmth that spills out from the lobby. The host recognizes me right away and gives a warm welcome. I suddenly feel awkward. I meant to impress Emily by bringing her here, but will she think it’s too flashy? Or that I’m trying too hard?

I know I’m overthinking, but my nerves are getting the best of me tonight. It’s strange. I’m not normally like this on dates — though, granted, I haven’t dated in quite a while. Perhaps I’m just out of practice.

The host leads us to a table secluded from the rest, a view of the city skyline painting the window beside us. The best table. For her.

“Wow,” she breathes, taking it all in — the elegance, the ambiance, the surreal feeling of being on top of the world — and I realize that I did the right thing, bringing her here.

Just like that, I feel tremendously better not only about myself but about the whole night.

“Only the best,” I say, pulling out her chair.

She sits, and I catch her scent again. It stirs something primal in me, a deep longing, a

pull that's stronger than gravity. It takes my breath away. I move to my seat, unable to shake that intoxicating fragrance. It's unexpected, and it shakes me to my core.

The waiter arrives, a silent specter ready to tend to our every need. "A bottle of your finest champagne, please," I tell him. It's an indulgence, an extravagance I've earned but rarely savor. Tonight feels different. Special.

"Champagne?" Emily's eyebrow arches playfully, her eyes bright with curiosity. "What are we celebrating?"

I hesitate, the words lingering on the edge of my tongue. In the vast expanse of my mind, memories and possibilities swirl — a dance of what was and what could be. Dad would have liked her, I think. Her spirit, her resilience. It's a thought that brings both sorrow and solace.

"The promises of the future," I reply finally, my voice steady despite the emotions churning within. The cork pops, and the waiter fills our flutes with liquid gold, bubbles racing to escape their crystal confines.

"To the future," she echoes, lifting her glass.

Our eyes meet, and in hers, I see more than just reflection — I see depth, understanding, and a willingness to embark on this journey with me.

We toast, the chime of our glasses a fragile symphony, marking the beginning of something new. As the champagne fizzes on my tongue, I realize that this moment, simple as it may be, is a turning point. A pivot from the path of solitude I've walked for so long.

"Isaac," she says, her voice a tender melody that pulls at my heartstrings, "whatever the future holds, I'm glad to have met you... and Baxter."

“Me too.” And I mean it. With her, the loneliness that has cloaked my existence seems to fade, chased away by her light, her laughter, her sheer vitality.

Emily sips from her glass, her eyes never leaving mine. “You’re different,” she remarks. Her tone is contemplative, but not judgmental.

“Different?” I repeat. Is it that obvious?

“In a good way,” she reassures quickly, catching my hesitation. “You’re reserved but kind... A gentle soul.”

A gentle soul. The words resonate within me. It’s not something I can remember ever being called. I dwell on them, mulling over the implications. Perhaps she sees beyond the calculated façade I present to the outside world.

“I’ve always been a bit of a loner,” I confess, hearing the vulnerability in my own admission. The night wraps us in secrecy, the dim candlelight flickering across our private space.

Emily listens intently, her eyes inviting me to continue. Never have I felt so seen, so appreciated for who I am beneath all my layers. It feels... honest.

“Do you ever get lonely?” she asks, her voice as soft as the breeze outside.

Often. “Sometimes,” I answer. But tonight, loneliness feels like a stranger.

“Me too.” Her lashes flutter as she looks to the side. “I usually manage to ignore it by staying busy, though.”

“Same,” I chuckle.

Her smile lights up the room. “But you have so much to show for it. You’re running an entire company.”

“My father built it.”

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“And you’re continuing it,” she presses, not allowing me to be hard on myself. “Me? I don’t really have anything to show.”

I gape at her. “Are you kidding me?”

“Yeah, I?—”

“How many dogs have you helped? How many shelter dogs have you trained so that they could be placed in homes?”

She shrugs, sheepish, but there’s pride in her face. A blush on her cheeks. “I’m not sure.”

“Just take an educated guess. I’m genuinely curious.”

Her gaze drops to the tablecloth, her fingers tracing the dainty floral pattern embroidered across pale linen. A pause. “Probably a few hundred.”

“A few hundred,” I echo, my astonishment palpable. From where I’m sitting, Emily seems nothing short of remarkable.

“Not every story ends happily,” she admits, her soft-spoken voice barely carrying over the clink of silverware and the low hum of conversations.

“But you’ve given them a chance, Emily. Don’t sell yourself short.” I mean every word.

We fall silent again, both lost in our respective reveries.

“Speaking of dogs...” I clear my head and lean forward. “I’ve been thinking.”

She tilts her head, her eyes reflecting the soft light that dances around us, casting shadows that play with the contours of her face. “About?”

“Fundraisers,” I say, watching her reaction closely. “For the shelter. And I want to involve my marketing team to work with you. At no cost to the shelter, of course.” The words hang in the air, a gift offered with open palms.

Her eyebrows knit together slightly, as if she’s preparing to push back, to argue that it’s too much. But then, something shifts in her gaze. A tear escapes, tracing a path down her cheek, and her hand covers her mouth. My heart clenches at the sight, at the raw emotion that spills forth despite her usual composure.

“Isaac, that’s... incredible.” Her voice trembles, each word wrapped in layers of gratitude. “Thank you. You have no idea how much this means.”

I lean forward, offering a napkin to catch the rogue tear. “I think I do,” I say quietly. “And it’s my pleasure, really. I want to help.”

There’s a pause as we sit, surrounded by murmurs of other patrons and the clinking of cutlery against fine china. I feel the weight of my past choices, of the man I used to be — one who would never have considered such an offer without looking for something in return.

But that man is fading, his edges blurring into the background as I embrace the person I’m becoming. Good things are happening. I’m a decent dog owner now, Baxter’s loyalty a testament to that. I’m useful to Emily, not just a passing interest but someone who contributes to her passion. And the company, my legacy, is secure

with Baxter at my side — his presence a constant reminder of the responsibility I've shouldered.

It's an ascent from the depths of grief, a climb toward a peak bathed in the warmth of companionship and purpose.

"We'll discuss it more," I promise. "But how about we order now?"

"Sounds good." She peruses the menu. "Oh, I don't know what to pick. Everything here looks amazing. What's the best?"

"Let's order the chef's tasting menu," I suggest. "A little bit of everything." A metaphor for the new experiences I crave, shared at a table with Emily.

"Sounds perfect," she agrees, her smile returning, lighting up the space between us.

The waiter takes our order, and I watch Emily, her elegance matched only by the kindness that radiates from her. She catches me staring and blushes, a rose blooming in winter.

"What are you thinking?" she asks, the question simple yet loaded at the same time.

"Many things," I admit, my hands clasped on the table. "But mostly, how good life feels right now."

We talk more, about small things, about nothing and everything. And as the plates arrive, one after another, I savor the flavors, the textures, the way Emily's eyes light up with each new taste. It's a symphony of senses, of moments collected like precious stones.

I want to kiss her, to seal this evening with the intimacy of touch. But I resist the

urge, holding back with a willpower I didn't know I possessed. Slow, Isaac. Let this unfold like the petals of a flower, each layer revealing more beauty than the last.

Because this, right here, is new territory. A landscape painted with the hues of patience and anticipation. A place where the rush of past conquests has no power, where the thrill of the chase has been replaced by the depth of discovery.

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“I hope this is just the beginning of many evenings like this,” I say, as the last course is cleared, not even meaning for the words to escape my lips.

“Me too,” she responds, her voice a whisper.

The check comes, and I settle it swiftly, eager to continue our evening beyond the confines of the restaurant. We rise, and I offer her my arm, which to my relief she accepts.

Outside, the valet brings the car around and opens the door for Emily. While I look forward to the drive together, my heart sinks a little bit at the thought of dropping her off at her apartment and ending the night.

“Thank you, Isaac. For dinner, for the shelter, for... everything,” she says as I drive away from the restaurant.

“It’s the least I can do.”

She laughs. “No, you don’t have to do anything.”

I glance at her. “I like you, Emily.”

Her cheeks turn pink, and she ducks her face as she bites into her bottom lip. It takes all my willpower to tear my gaze away from her mouth and focus on the road instead.

At her apartment, I hurry out of the car and go around to open the door for her. Our eyes meet, sharing silent longings and unspoken attraction. There’s a part of me that

wants to rush ahead, to claim this feeling, to brand it as mine forever.

But I won't. Because this time, it's about savoring every second, letting the story write itself at its own pace. So, instead, I walk her to her front door then take a step back.

"Good night, Emily," I murmur.

"Good night," she replies softly. She opens the door and slips inside, a lovely shadow vanishing from view.

But it's only temporary. Tomorrow is already on its way, and along with it a multitude of good things. I can feel it deep within my soul, the promise as guaranteed as the rising sun.

CHAPTER 21

ISAAC

My feet press against the rugged trail, Baxter bounding ahead on his extending leash, his coat glistening with droplets from the creek we just crossed — or, for Baxter, plunged through. Emily's laughter floats on the breeze, her joy as clear and pure as the mountain air around us. It's a perfect day, a moment suspended in time where the stresses of my world seem to lift.

"Look at him go," Emily says, her eyes tracking Baxter's every leap and splash. She's right beside me, close enough that I can catch the scent of her shampoo.

"He's having the time of his life," I reply, my voice more relaxed than it has been in years. Watching the golden retriever frolic makes me wonder when was the last time I allowed myself such unbridled happiness.

We climb higher, the path narrowing as it winds its way up the small mountain. The incline is steep, but it's nothing compared to the corporate ladder I've been scaling my whole life. Here, though, with Emily and Baxter, the ascent feels different — invigorating rather than exhausting.

“Almost there,” I encourage, reaching out a hand to help Emily over a particularly gnarled root. Her fingers brush mine, sending an unexpected jolt through me, one that I welcome and crave more of.

We crest the peak, and the view unfolds before us, a tapestry of nature untouched by skyscrapers or boardroom politics. We settle down on a patch of soft grass, and Baxter, finally tiring, curls up beside us and lets out a big, happy sigh.

Emily and I find a rock next to him, a large and smooth one that's probably seated thousands of people over the course of humanity.

“Wow, Isaac,” Emily beams, gesturing to the sprawling vista. “It's breathtaking.”

“Nothing beats the view from the top,” I say, though I'm not really talking about the mountain. From where I sit, I see not only the vastness of the valley but also the potential in the days stretching out before me.

“Speaking of the top.” She shifts her gaze from the scenery to me. “I saw the flyers your team designed; they're incredible.”

“Thanks. They're doing their best to get the word out.” I pause, considering how much to share. I'm proud to be helping with the shelter's dog-wash fundraiser, but I don't want to gloat. Then again, I want her to know that there is some real money on the way. “Actually, a few of my friends have already pledged donations. Sizeable ones.”

And I will, of course, be writing my own sizeable check. Mentioning that, though, really does feel too much like gloating.

“Really?” Her surprise is genuine, and I feel a warmth in her gratitude. “That’s amazing. God knows the shelter could use every penny.”

“Let’s just say, the day of the wash, they might be in for a bit of a surprise,” I hint, concealing the full extent of my planned contribution. For once, it feels good to hold back details, knowing the reveal will bring a smile to her face.

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Emily beams at me, and I can't help but reflect it back at her. "You're incredible, you know that? You've done so much for us already."

"Anything for a good cause," I say, but there's more truth in those words than I care to examine right now. Because this cause —hercause — has become mine, too.

Baxter stirs then, chasing something in his dreams. The sight of him, so content and carefree, reminds me of why I'm here, atop a mountain with a woman who's turned my life upside down in the best possible way.

"Hey," Emily says softly, drawing my attention back to her. "I don't think I've ever seen you this... content. It suits you."

"Maybe I'm starting to realize there's more to life than work and deadlines," I admit, allowing myself to lean into the vulnerability she always seems to draw out of me. It's a strange feeling, laying bare parts of myself I've kept hidden for so long.

"Good," she says. "Because the man I see now, he deserves to smile. Every day."

I don't know what to say to that, so instead I just sit here and soak in the kindness. Maybe she's right, though smiling and enjoying each day has never been a priority to me. It's always been about proving myself — to my father, to my colleagues, to clients, to the world. I'm growing tired of that, though.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I murmur, not just about the view but everything — this moment of serenity, the woman by my side, the dog that's somehow become part of my soul.

“Absolutely,” she agrees, her voice soft like the breeze whispering through the leaves around us. “Have you hiked much?”

“No... We weren’t an outdoorsy family.” I smirk. “My father was usually working when I was a kid, and I spent a lot of time with my nanny. She took me to sports practices... tutoring... watched me and my friends swim in the pool at the house.”

“Oh.”

I glance at her, and it seems she’s trying to hide something in her face. “What?”

“It sounds... good.”

“It’s okay. You can say it. It sucks that my dad didn’t spend more time with me. He was always... distant.” The admission hits a nerve, as if saying it aloud gives the pain form and shape. “Work came first. Always. I guess that’s where I learned it from.”

She nods, just watching me. Her silence is an invitation to continue, to spill secrets I’ve held on to for too long.

“I tried to get his attention,” I confess. “I worked hard, pushed myself. I thought if the company thrived, he’d... see me.”

“Did he?” she asks, the question simple yet loaded with expectation and hope.

“Rarely,” I say, a bitter laugh escaping me. “Even to the end, he needed proof I could handle it all. That’s why he left me Baxter.” I gesture toward our sleeping dog. “Dad knew I wanted the company. But he made me earn it, even in death.”

“Isaac...” Emily’s hand finds mine, her fingers intertwining with mine in a grip that steadies me.

“Truth is,” I continue, feeling the dam inside me crumble, “I resented him for it. For making it so damn hard when all I wanted was his approval.”

“Yet, you did it. You proved him wrong,” she says, her thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand.

“Proved him right, more like. I hung onto Baxter.” My voice cracks a bit. “But it wasn’t because of the company. It was at first, but then... not anymore.”

“Because of?”

“Because of you.” I turn to face her more fully. “You showed me what it means to care for something beyond my image and name. You taught me how to love this dog.”

“Isaac, I—” she starts, but I can see the uncertainty in her eyes.

“Emily.” I squeeze her hand, needing her to understand. “I’m not just keeping Baxter so I can hang onto the company. I love that dog. And it’s thanks to you.”

She studies my face, searching for the truth in my words. I hold her gaze, laying bare the honesty of my emotions. Slowly, a smile blooms on her lips, a silent acknowledgment that she believes me.

“Okay,” she breathes, and relief washes over me like the gentle lap of waves against the shore.

“Your father,” she begins, her voice gentle yet hesitant, and I can tell she’s about to say something she thinks I might not like. “Maybe he did you a favor without realizing it. These past weeks, they’ve been different for you, haven’t they?”

I nod, the weight of her observation heavy in my chest. “Different,” I echo. “Sure.”

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“Seeing you now, it’s like watching someone come up for air after being underwater too long.” She tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear, a small, unconscious gesture. “You smile more. There’s this lightness about you.”

“Hmm,” I murmur, letting myself think about that. My gaze drifts over the valley below. “I didn’t know how much I needed... space. A new approach to life. Not until you showed me.”

“Sometimes,” she says, scooting closer until our shoulders touch, “we don’t see how tangled we are in something until we step back.”

“Like seeing the forest for the trees,” I murmur. It’s true. Away from the relentless demands of work life, I can breathe. I can think. And I can feel — more than I ever allowed myself before.

“Exactly.” She smiles. “This whole ordeal with Baxter, your father... Maybe it was his way of pushing you to find balance.”

It’s a concept so foreign to my previous life that it seems almost laughable. And yet, here I am, perched on a mountaintop, feeling more grounded than ever.

We fall into a comfortable silence, the kind that only comes when two people understand each other without needing words. Baxter shifts in his sleep, his paws twitching. His presence is a reminder of the journey I’ve embarked on — the journey towards something real and fulfilling.

“Emily,” I say, my voice barely above a murmur. My heart beats a rapid tattoo

against my rib cage, nerves suddenly alight with the intensity of the moment. “You’re always on my mind. Every moment, every decision... it’s all different now because of you.”

“Really?” She turns to face me, her expression open and vulnerable.

“Everything that’s happening between us, I love it. I love...” The words hang in the air, a confession laid bare under the vast expanse of the sky. These feelings are still blooming, but even though I’m sure of how I feel, it’s too soon to take that step — to admit to the both of us that I’ve passed the point of no return.

“Me too,” she says softly, her breath warm against my skin. And then she leans in, closing the distance between us until our lips meet.

Our kiss deepens, a mingling of breath and warmth that ignites something fierce within me. This isn’t just physical; it’s a connection that transcends the barriers I’ve built around my heart. Emily is the catalyst, the one who sees beyond the layers of the billionaire façade, to the man who yearns for something more.

Her hands cradle my face, fingers gentle yet insistent, pulling me closer as if she too can’t bear the thought of distance between us. I respond in kind, my own hands finding their way to her waist, drawing her into the circle of my embrace.

In this kiss, there’s healing. In this kiss, there’s understanding. And in this kiss, there’s a silent vow that no matter what challenges lie ahead, we’ll face them together. Because for the first time in my life, I’m not alone. I have Emily — and with her, I have everything.

Slowly, reluctantly, we part, our foreheads resting against each other as we catch our breath. Baxter stirs, lifting his head to look at us with sleepy confusion before laying it back down with a quiet huff.

“See?” Emily says with a soft chuckle. “Even Baxter approves.”

I can’t help but laugh, the sound bubbling up from a place of pure joy. “He’s got good taste.”

“Must be why he likes you,” she teases, and I feel the last remnants of my old self — the guarded, driven businessman — slip away like shadows at dawn.

“Must be,” I agree, and as we sit on this mountaintop, I know that I wouldn’t change a single thing. Not the struggles, not the pain, and certainly not the hoops my father made me jump through.

Because they led me here. To this moment. To her.

CHAPTER 22

EMILY

I cradle the warm mug in my hands, the steam swirling up like morning mist. The scent of freshly brewed coffee fills the kitchen, mixing with the faint smell of rain from the open window. It’s a quiet Sunday, the kind that invites reflection.

“Tell me everything,” Jenn urges, her eyes gleaming with excitement. It’s been a busy week for both of us, and despite living together, we haven’t had time to catch up on what’s happened between Isaac and me these last few days.

I take a sip, enjoying the robustness of the coffee. “Yesterday’s hike was... amazing. Just like the dinner we had.” I let the words hang between us, enjoying the memories. “Isaac, he’s just...” I struggle to find the words, but they seem inadequate, too small for the bigness of what I’m feeling.

Jenn props her chin on her hand, patient and attentive. She witnessed the beginning, Isaac on our doorstep with that effortless charm that doesn't quite mask the depth behind his eyes. He had looked at me like I was the only one in the room, even with Jenn there.

"And Baxter?" she prompts, a smile teasing her lips. She knows how much I adore the golden retriever, with his boundless energy and slobbering kisses.

"He's getting better with the training every day," I say, a laugh escaping me. It feels good to let go of the tension that's been building since Isaac dropped me off last night. Since then, the apartment has felt too empty, too silent.

"Sounds like you're really falling for him," Jenn observes, her voice soft.

Am I? The thought sends a shiver down my spine, not of fear, but of anticipation. I nod, conceding to the truth I've been avoiding. "Yeah, I think I am."

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She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “That’s great, Em. You deserve someone who makes you happy.”

But happiness is a fragile thing, and I’ve learned to handle it with care. Too often, it’s slipped through my fingers, leaving behind the sharp edges of loss. The memory of grief is a shadow that lingers, even in moments of joy.

“Thanks, Jenn.” My voice is a whisper, barely audible over the hum of the fridge. I curl my fingers tighter around the mug, seeking warmth that seems to be retreating.

“Hey, I’ve got to head out to dance class,” she says, standing up and gathering her things. “You’ll be okay here?”

“Of course,” I reply, mustering a smile for her benefit. But as the door closes behind her, the silence rushes back in, oppressive and heavy.

I stand and begin cleaning, moving mechanically. Dust the shelves. Straighten the cushions. Wipe down the counters. Each task is an anchor, holding me to the present, away from the pull of memories — Isaac’s kiss, his hands in my hair. The way he pulled me to him when he dropped me off at home, his lips brushing against the corner of my mouth, his thumbs pressing into the small of my back.

The apartment is spotless now, a reflection of the order I try to maintain in my life. But order can’t fill the emptiness, can’t replace the laughter and warmth that Isaac brings into my world. I want to see him again, hear his voice, feel the steady touch of his hand on mine.

But we don't have plans today, and the last thing I want is to seem clingy. Isaac is a billionaire, used to people wanting something from him. I won't be one of them. I refuse to be a burden, another obligation in his undoubtedly busy life.

And so I sink onto the couch, the worn fabric welcoming me. It's just a day, I tell myself. Just a few hours of solitude. But the apartment is too quiet, the ticking of the clock too loud.

I need to get it together. I can't sit here, wallowing in this... whatever this is. Longing? Loneliness? I didn't feel this way before Isaac came into my life. It's new territory, and I'm navigating without a map.

I need something to do, some way to distract myself. Something that isn't sitting around in pajamas, waiting for a text that might never come. I need to assert some control, reclaim my independence.

I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with resolve. Today is mine, and I won't spend it pining for a man. Hopping to my feet, I stomp into my bedroom and dig my yoga mat out of the closet.

It's been too long since I've used it, but today feels like the perfect time. Yoga at the rec center it is. A decision that quiets the buzzing of my thoughts, if only for a moment.

I'm changing into leggings and a sports bra as the screen of my phone lights up. My heart flutters as I read Isaac's name. A text from him. Now?

A smile tugs at my lips before I even open his message.

Fancy a walk in the park with Baxter and me?

My pulse quickens. Yes. The word forms in my mind before I can think better of it. I type the response, fingers trembling slightly over the keys.

I'd love to.

It's done. Plans made, the yoga mat lies forgotten on the floor as I scramble out of the leggings. I'll go to yoga next weekend. Right now I need to find something cuter to wear, so I grab a floral sundress from a hanger, a compromise between casual and trying.

I pause, staring at my reflection. The girl looking back seems different; her eyes hold hope where there was caution. I'm letting my guard down, allowing Isaac past the walls that have kept me safe. Safe but isolated. It scares me — the openness, the vulnerability. But excitement bubbles up too, warm and intoxicating.

"Today is different," I say to the woman in the mirror. She nods, a silent vow to embrace whatever comes.

A knock at the door pulls me back to reality. Heart dancing a wild rhythm, I move to answer it. The locks click as I turn the handle, releasing a breath I didn't know I was holding.

Isaac stands there, looking like he's part of a dream. Baxter wags his tail at my feet, excited to be back at my apartment.

"Hi," Isaac greets.

"Hey," I reply, caught in the brilliance of his smile.

He steps closer, and the air between us crackles with an energy I've never known. His hand finds my cheek, a touch so tender it might as well be a whisper. And then his

lips are on mine — a spicy kiss that ignites every nerve ending. It's a taste of possibility, a promise of more.

We part, and the world hasn't shattered. It's brighter somehow. Stronger.

“Ready for our walk?” he asks, his thumb brushing along my jawline.

“You bet.”

And I step into the light beside him, ready to see where this path will lead.

CHAPTER 23

ISAAC

The leather steering wheel is cool under my hands, the engine purring as I navigate the familiar roads. Baxter sits beside me, his head occasionally nudging against my arm, his restlessness only slightly annoying.

“We’ll be there soon, buddy,” I tell him. “It’s somewhere you haven’t been, but there’s grass. You’ll like it.”

Emily’s laughter echoes in my mind, a melody that’s become the soundtrack of my days. We’ve been inseparable this past week, her presence sunlight breaking through clouds. It’s new, invigorating, and yet there’s a familiarity in it that tugs at something deep within me. She fits into my life with an ease that both excites and terrifies me.

I turn into the cemetery, the gates looming, iron-wrought and silent. The car rolls to a stop on the gravel, and I cut the engine. Baxter whines softly, sensing the shift in my mood. I pat his head, the coarse hair slipping through my fingers.

“Come on, boy,” I say, my voice subdued.

We step out, the quiet pressing in around us. Gravestones stand like sentinels, their inscriptions holding tales of lives lived and lost. Baxter stays close, his leash slack in my hand as we weave through the markers.

My father’s grave is fresh, the earth still unsettled. I release Baxter’s leash, trusting

him to stay nearby. He sits, a silent guardian as I approach the stone. It's stark, the letters etched deep — a testament to a man who left too soon.

“Hey, Dad,” I start, my throat tight. The words come slowly. “I don't know why I came here today. I know I haven't... visited.”

I snort and shake my head. “I don't even know if you can hear me from wherever you are now. I guess... just in case you can, I wanted you to know that... things have been... good.”

I tell him about Baxter, how he's learning new commands and listening better to me each day. I can almost hear my father's gruff approval, see the nod of his head. He was so austere, so uptight, but with Baxter a different side of him came out. A softness that I never understood and often rolled my eyes at. However, after adopting Baxter, I finally get it.

Sure, I have some destroyed furniture to show for our journey here... and there was that time I almost surrendered him to the shelter. But that was me, refusing to see what was really going on. Just like Emily argued, Baxter was grieving the loss of his human. He needed my understanding and patience, not my anger.

“Emily,” I say, her name a sigh on my lips. “She's Baxter's trainer, and she's incredible, Dad. She sees me, not just the money or the image.” I chuckle, a soft, disbelieving sound. “I'm falling for her, hard.”

The anger that once burned hot within me simmers down to embers. My father wasn't perfect, but neither am I. Standing here now, with love budding in my heart and a loyal dog at my side, the bitterness that clung to me like a second skin continues to peel away.

“I thought I'd be mad forever,” I confess to the unyielding stone. “But I'm not.

Things are looking up, and... I think you'd be happy for me."

Baxter noses my hand, his dark eyes filled with a comfort that no human words could provide. I kneel beside him, burying my face in his neck. He licks my cheek, a simple gesture laden with empathy.

"Let's go, buddy," I murmur, standing up. "I have plans with Emily tonight."

Back at home, I feed Baxter dinner, take him out once more, then get him settled in his crate. He's been doing good in it for a few hours at a time, even though he clearly doesn't love being in it. It's a lot better than him destroying the penthouse or eating something that will poison him, though.

"Be good," I say, though I know he will be. Confidence blooms in my chest; Emily has done well with him.

And so have I.

I change quickly, choosing a shirt I know Emily likes. It's soft, blue, the color she says brings out my eyes. I smile at the thought, tugging at the collar. This is new, this desire to impress, to be seen through someone else's gaze.

I grab my keys, lock up, and head back out. The car door shuts with a thud, sealing me inside my own bubble of excitement. We're meeting at a spot for dinner that's close to the shelter, which is why I'm not picking her up for tonight's date.

Emily's waiting out front of it, a silhouette against the glow. She turns, and her smile hits me like the first ray of sun after a long night. She's beautiful, stunning in a way that's less about her features and more about the life behind them. Her eyes find mine, and everything else fades.

“Hey,” she breathes, stepping closer.

“Hey,” I echo, taking her in. The dress she wears hugs her curves, a deep red that speaks of wine and roses. I want to tell her how amazing she looks, but words seem inadequate.

Instead, I step forward and press a kiss to her lips, hoping that will be enough. Judging from the look on her face, it is.

“Shall we?” she asks, gesturing to the entrance with a tilt of her head.

“Let’s.” My hand finds the small of her back, guiding her through the door. My touch is light, respectful, but beneath it courses a current of longing, electric and undeniable.

I’d be lying if I said I haven’t had dirty, sweaty thoughts about the two of us. But I know that anticipation makes everything all the sweeter, and I don’t want to rush things and make what’s growing between us complicated by physicality. I would rather have her lead when it comes to that.

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We're seated in a quiet corner then left to read over the menu. It's intimate, the table set for two, and there's a thrill in that exclusivity. This space, this moment, it's ours alone.

"Hey. Look." She slides her phone across the table, screen up.

I pick it up, thumbing through the event page she's pulled up. Two thousand interested or coming — numbers that translate to hope, to change. The dog-wash fundraiser, my brainchild turned reality by the hands of my team, suddenly feels tangible, like I can reach out and touch the success of it.

"Wow, this is... incredible," I say, handing the phone back. Pride swells within me, buoyed by her excitement. "I never imagined it would get this much attention."

"Your marketing team really went all out." Her eyes sparkle.

"Yeah, they did. They're the best." I lean back, letting the full impact of the accomplishment settle over me. For so long, my efforts were aimed at personal gain, at increasing the divide between myself and others. But this — helping the shelter, giving back — it's a different kind of satisfaction, one that fills rather than depletes.

"Thank you," I say sincerely. "For inspiring me to do more, to be more."

Her hand reaches across the table, fingers brushing mine. "You did this, Isaac. The dogs have you to thank."

Our waiter arrives, forcing a break in the conversation, but the connection lingers,

and I order the first thing I set eyes on, just to get the waiter to leave so Emily and I can be alone again.

As he leaves, our hands resume their silent conversation, each touch filled with echo and ache, and Emily's fingers linger ever so slightly on mine. I feel the electricity coursing through us, a raw energy that consumes my senses.

"I want to make a difference in the world," I tell her. "Not because of money or power... but because it's right. Because it feels right." I stare into her eyes. Do I sound like I'm babbling?

She smiles, her gaze soft. "You're already on the right track."

"I went to see my dad today," I say, the words bringing up more emotion than I anticipate.

Her expression shifts, a gentle empathy replacing the mirth from moments ago. "How was that for you?" she asks.

"Better than I thought it would be. I talked to him — about Baxter, about us."

"Sounds like you've forgiven him," she observes, squeezing my hand.

"Maybe I have," I admit.

We sit in silence for a moment, each lost in our thoughts. Emily's right — I hadn't expected forgiveness to find its way through the tangled memories and hurt. But there it is, a quiet acceptance settling in my chest.

"Most times we're together, Baxter's tagging along," she says, changing the subject with a lightness that brings me back. Her smile is back too, teasing at the edges. "It's

kind of weird being here without him.”

“Do you want me to bring him next time?”

“No,” she laughs.

“Good, because I’m enjoying our alone time, and I assume he’s just sleeping in his crate.”

“Sounds nice,” she murmurs. “Will I get to say hello to him tonight?”

“Of course. I would love for you to stop by.”

There’s something about the way she’s looking at me, though, with the hooded eyes and pink cheeks. Is she suggesting…?

I swallow hard. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you like,” I add, hoping I’m not misreading and overstepping a boundary. “I would… love it if you… stayed.”

My pulse quickens. And suddenly, the idea of heading back to my penthouse — with or without Baxter there — seems like the only thing that matters.

Our meal arrives, interrupting us once more. My face is warm, my hands shaking the slightest bit. It’s a strange nervousness that I’m not used to, but I do my best to focus on dinner and the conversation — one that shifts from talk about the weather to her latest client — though the whole while I’m acutely aware of how close her knee is to mine.

“Let’s not wait for dessert,” Emily suggests once our plates are cleared.

There’s no need to read between the lines. What she wants is heavily implied, and I

couldn't agree more. I want —need— to be alone with her. Just the two of us, in our own little bubble.

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I catch the waiter's attention, my fingers tapping against the table. "Can we have the check, please?" The words are out before I can second-guess the urgency in my voice.

Emily watches me, a knowing smile curving her lips. There's an unspoken promise in her gaze, one that sends heat coursing through my veins. The thought of touching her, here, in this upscale restaurant is both tempting and forbidden. I fear that if I were to do more than graze her hand, though, I might not be able to stop. I have to get us out of here.

The check arrives. I don't even glance at the total before my card is on the tray, my signature scribbled hastily. Everything feels like it's moving too slowly, the seconds stretching out as I fight the impulse to pull her close.

"Ready?" I ask, already standing, my chair scraping against the floor.

"Very," she says, her hand sliding into mine as we walk towards the exit.

It's agony splitting apart briefly so that she can take her car back to my place, and I'm leaning forward as I drive to the penthouse, clutching the wheel, trying to not put the pedal to the metal.

We park next to each other in the private deck, and I can't wait any longer. Wrapping my arms around Emily's waist, I back her against her car and claim her mouth with my own. Her body melds against mine, our heat searing through the thin fabric of our clothing. Her hands rake up my chest, fingers threading their way into my hair to pull me deeper into the kiss. The world becomes unimportant; nothing matters but her lips

and her taste — intoxicatingly sweet with a hint of spice. I want more.

Emily breaks the kiss first, gasping for air, her chest heaving against mine. Her touch is like lightning running wild through my veins, a raw magnetic pull that draws me closer. “We should... get inside,” she says between ragged breaths.

“Yes,” I concur, reluctant to let go of her.

The doorman greets us with a nod as we step inside the building. I barely register his presence — my focus is entirely on Emily, on the anticipation that vibrates between us.

The elevator doors close, and it’s just us again. She turns to me, her hands finding their way to my chest, and pulls me down to her.

Our lips meet, and propriety shatters. Every kiss is a revelation, a desperate claiming of moments we’ve lost to hesitation. The elevator dings at my floor, but neither of us is ready to part.

It’s a messy, beautiful tangle of limbs and longing as we stumble from the elevator to my apartment door. My key slides into the lock, and we’re inside, the city lights casting a soft glow through the windows.

“Isaac,” she breathes against my lips, and the sound of my name on her tongue is all it takes.

I’m home.

CHAPTER 24

EMILY

My eyes flutter open, but something is off. Something is different.

It's the feel of the sheets, the weight on the mattress next to me.

And then I remember. I'm not in my bed at the apartment I share with Jenn. I'm in Isaac's bed, where I fell asleep with him, tangled in his arms, my heart full to the brim.

"Morning," Isaac murmurs, his voice a low rumble that sends a shiver down my spine. I lift my head, meeting his sleepy smile with one of my own.

"Morning," I echo, rolling over and settling into the cocoon of his arms.

His hand trails up my back, light as a feather, stirring the air between us with electricity. We're in a bubble, untouched by the world outside. The laughter comes easily, blooming from a place of pure joy as we exchange teasing kisses that promise more but ask for nothing.

Time is a thief, stealing moments like these, turning minutes into memories before we're ready to let them go. I hold on to Isaac a little tighter, wishing I could stop the clock. He responds, pulling me closer until there's no space left between us, our giggles muffled against each other's skin.

The door creaks open, and the bed dips unexpectedly as Baxter, all eager paws and wagging tail, jumps onto it. He pushes his way between us, panting in excitement.

"And there goes our peace," Isaac chuckles, untangling himself to accommodate the excited bundle of fur now wedged between us.

"Looks like someone needs to go out," I say.

Baxter's ears perk up at the word. Yes, he most definitely needs to go out.

Isaac's phone buzzes on the nightstand, an intrusive sound that breaks the last remnants of our early morning tranquility. A glance at the caller ID, and his brow creases slightly — it's Carol. Work beckons, even as we linger in the warmth of the sheets.

"Go ahead, take it," I smile, brushing a kiss on his forehead. "I'll take Baxter out."

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“Are you sure?” he asks, his expression apologetic as he reaches for the phone.

“Absolutely,” I reassure him, sliding out of bed. Baxter wiggles in excitement, sensing the impending walk. “We’ll be fine.”

The only clothing I have here is the dress I wore last night, which won’t do for taking the dog out. Isaac seems to read my mind, though. He’s already answered the phone, but he nods at his wardrobe, silently telling me to put some of his clothes on.

So, I slip into a pair of his sweatpants, the fabric loose and comforting around my hips. His hoodie swallows me whole, but it’s cozy nonetheless, and I like that I’m wearing something that belongs to the man I have the massive hots for.

I at least wore flats last night, so I don’t have to look ridiculous walking around in high heels and sweat pants. Slipping the shoes on and clipping Baxter’s leash to his collar, I head outside.

We step out of the penthouse, and a gentle breeze kisses my face. It’s a beautiful day, and maybe I’m imagining it, but I feel like Baxter is extra happy this morning because he woke up to me being in his home.

It feels right, being here — like pieces clicking into place. Memories flash before me: Isaac’s smile in the moonlight, the tenderness of his touch, the promise in his eyes. I’m falling deeper with each passing moment, and it scares me. Love was never part of the plan. But plans change.

Back in the penthouse, the energy has shifted. Isaac is in the kitchen brewing coffee

and making scrambled eggs, but though he flashes me a smile, there's something tense about him.

"A big client wants a meeting today. Last minute. I'm sorry. I have to go in early. My father used to deal with them, but now..." He sighs. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay." I press my palms to his chest. "I understand. Don't worry about me."

A grateful smile tugs at the corner of his lips. He sets down the spatula and pulls me close, his kiss sweet and reassuring. "Thanks, Em. It means everything that you understand."

Understanding is easy. The weight he carries is immense, his father's legacy, a company worth billions — it's not just a job; it's his life. And now, somehow, it's becoming part of mine.

"Last night was amazing," he says, brushing a stray hair from my cheek. "And seeing you in my clothes..." A chuckle escapes him, warm and genuine. "I like it. You should leave some of your things here, make it easier for yourself."

Leaving things behind, marking territory — it's a step. A big one. But when I look into his eyes, all I see is the invitation to come closer, to become a part of his world. So, I nod, because what else can I do when every fiber of my being already feels entwined with his?

"I like that idea." I give him another kiss.

"I'm making some eggs and toast. You okay with that?"

"Perfect. I'll feed Baxter." It aches to step away from his warmth, but I force myself to do so anyway.

I scoop the kibble into Baxter's bowl while he sits watching, salivating. Isaac slides eggs onto plates, pours coffee. It's our first morning together, and already we have a routine that I could get used to.

"Here you go, boy," I murmur as Baxter eagerly noses his breakfast, his tail wagging a frenetic rhythm against the sleek kitchen cabinets. I smile, my heart echoing that simple joy.

Isaac catches my eye from across the island, his own lips curling up in response. There's a lightness between us, fragile as a soap bubble, shimmering with possibility. For a moment, everything else fades — the looming meeting, the responsibility for his empire, the uncertainty of our future. It's just us, and the quiet comfort of domesticity.

"Thanks for understanding about the meeting," he says, taking a seat at the island.

"Of course," I tell him. "You have your responsibilities."

He nods, acknowledging the unspoken balance we're navigating. Two lives, each with their own orbits, gradually drawing closer. Leaving things at his place, sharing mornings like this — it feels like a silent signal, a beacon guiding us toward something more official, more real.

We eat mostly in silence, the occasional brush of fingers or shared glance an ample substitute for words. I don't miss the way he glances at the clock, and it's clear that he's nervous about the upcoming meeting.

"Would you mind watching Baxter today?" Isaac asks eventually. "I would take him with, but this meeting will be a long one and he'd go stir-crazy in my office by himself, and Carol will be out running errands."

“I wish I could,” I say, feeling a pang of regret. “But I’ve got the shelter today. They need all hands on deck.”

“Right, of course.” Disappointment flickers in his gaze before he masks it with a brisk nod. “No problem. I’ll leave him in the office with a bone, and he’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure?” Guilt threads through me, mingling with the reluctance of leaving his side.

“Absolutely.” He sets down his mug, his hand reaching out to cover mine. “He’ll be fine.”

And so will we, the touch seems to promise. Even as the world demands our attention, pulling us in different directions, there’s a tether forming between us.

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Too soon, breakfast is over. Isaac is gathering his things, Baxter hovering by the door in anticipation. Slipping on my shoes, I open the door so the three of us can head out.

“I wish I could spend the day with you,” Isaac says in the elevator, his fingers threading through mine.

“Me too,” I respond, squeezing his hand gently. “But we have our duties.”

He nods, eyes soft and full of understanding. The elevator dips and groans underneath us as it carries us to the ground floor. Outside, the city is already awake, the rhythm of life pulsing through its veins.

“Can I come by after the meeting?” Isaac asks as we walk through the lobby, Baxter’s leash jingling in his hand.

“You’re always welcome,” I assure him with a small smile.

A grin lights up his face, and a wave of warmth washes over me, erasing the bite of the morning chill.

At my car, he kisses me deeply, lingering for a moment longer than necessary. It’s one of those kisses that make you forget there’s a world beyond the two of you. When he pulls away, he brushes a loose strand of hair from my face and tucks it behind my ear.

“Be safe, all right?” he says.

“I will. You too.” The words feel inadequate. I want to say so much more.

Giving me another wave, he opens his passenger-side door so Baxter can jump in, then goes around to the driver’s side. I wave back at them and get into my own car. Baxter’s tail is wagging out of the window as they pull away, the morning sun glinting off Isaac’s car. I watch until they disappear around the corner before starting my own engine and heading off.

I’m still in a daze, still wrapping my head around everything that’s happened since the first day I walked into that park and met Baxter and Isaac. I would never have guessed that our path would take us to where we are now, that destiny would weave our stories together in more ways than one.

And that I, a girl who grew up learning to trust no one, would be so willing to let it happen.

No, not willing. Eager.

CHAPTER 25

ISAAC

The air in my office feels too thick. My heartbeat throbs in my ears, a pained drumming that underscores the tension coiling in my stomach. Baxter paces restlessly, his nails clicking on the hardwood floor with each frantic lap he makes around the room.

“Easy, boy,” I say. But my voice lacks conviction. I’m anything but easy.

Baxter doesn’t understand the stakes of today, how this meeting could change everything for this quarter. If only Carol were here, she’d take him out, let him burn

off that energy that's got him acting like a furry tornado.

I glance at my phone, drafting a text with thumbs that feel too big. Carol, Baxter's in my office. Could you please walk him when you get back?

I stand, my movements stiff and robotic as I leave Baxter behind and head to the boardroom. The door looms before me, and I'm shocked to discover that I'm more nervous than I thought I would be. This is my company; soon I will sign the documents that make me the official — not just acting — CEO, and yet here I am, feeling like a schoolkid.

It's not like these clients can make or break the company, but they can certainly make things uncomfortable if they decide to pull. I shake my head to clear the thoughts of doom and gloom, trying to focus on the opportunity instead of the danger. I've led countless meetings like this in the past, but never with stakes as high as this. I suppose that when you're playing for keeps, every move feels crucial, even when it isn't.

As I step into the boardroom, I feel their eyes on me. Watching me. Judging me.

They're already seated — suits and ties, leather briefcases, an air of importance that chokes me. Their eyes turn toward me, expectant, assessing. Do they see the cracks in my armor, the doubt that gnaws at my insides?

"Good morning," I say, but it comes out hoarse, as if I've forgotten how to speak.

There's a chorus of greetings in return, a chorus of politeness that masks the scrutiny happening beneath the surface.

I sit, papers shuffled in front of me, figures and projections that should make sense but now swim before my eyes. It's all there, the result of sleepless nights and

relentless work, but somehow, it feels like sand slipping through my fingers.

“Let’s begin,” I say, but my voice sounds foreign to my own ears.

I start talking, laying out the plans, the numbers, the benefits of choosing us for this massive deal. Yet, every word feels laborious, like speaking underwater. They nod, they jot downnotes, but I can’t read their expressions. Are they impressed or simply polite?

I stumble over a figure, correct myself with a flush creeping up my neck. They don’t comment, but I see it — the brief flicker of doubt in their eyes.

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“Apologies,” I say, clearing my throat. “Long night.”

“Understandable,” one replies with a tight smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

We continue, the dance of negotiation persisting, yet I feel two steps behind the rhythm. With each passing minute, the burden of expectation grows heavier, pressing down until I fear I might crumble beneath it.

“Any questions?” I ask finally, my voice a plea for this to be over, for them to see beyond my faltering and recognize the potential of what I’m offering.

They exchange glances, murmurs pass between them, and I’m left to the mercy of their judgment. I’ve laid out my hand, played my cards; now it’s up to them to call or fold.

“Thank you.” The head of the team stands and shakes my hand. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you,” I echo, my heart sinking like a stone in deep water.

I rise, legs unsteady, a veneer of calm plastered on my face, while inside I’m a tempest of doubt and recrimination. I shake their hands, the touch brief and impersonal, and watch them leave the room that now feels cavernous and empty.

As the door closes behind them, I lean against the conference table, the cool wood a sharp contrast to embarrassment burning my cheeks. How did I let myself get so distracted? Emily, Baxter — they’ve become my world, but at what cost?

I need to regroup, to find my footing again. Sighing heavily, I head back to my office, checking my phone on the way there to see if Carol ever responded to my text.

But she didn't... which is odd for her.

Unlocking the phone, I discover that, while I typed the text, I neglected to send it. The mistake is enough to make me want to slap my forehead.

I pick up the pace, knowing that Baxter likely needs a potty break. Carol's desk is empty, meaning she's probably still out running the office errands.

"I'm coming, Bax..." The rest of his name dies before it takes shape, and I stop walking.

My office door is open.

"Baxter?" The name falls from my lips, a whisper of hope against the dread blooming in my chest.

I push the door open, finding what I feared. My office is empty. The dog isn't in here.

My heart slams against the inside of my chest. Not only did I neglect to send Carol the text; I also forgot to close my office door when I left. What the hell is wrong with me?

The cushion on his bed is indented, a ghost of his presence. His toys are scattered, a chaotic testimony to the energy that once filled this space. But Baxter is not here.

"Isaac." The voice startles me, and I spin around to find Yasmin, one of my employees, standing in the doorway, her face pale and eyes wide with concern. "It's Baxter. He?—"

Dread coils tight within me. “What? What happened?”

“He got out,” she says. “The front door... The doorman tried but... Baxter slipped away.”

“Slipped away?” I repeat, the reality of the situation crashing down on me. “He’s loose in the city?”

Yasmin nods, her expression mirroring the panic that’s starting to claw its way up my throat. “We’ve got people out looking for him now, but...”

But the city is vast, and Baxter is small in comparison. A wave of frustration washes over me. This was my responsibility. My father entrusted me with caring for Baxter as a test — a test I have clearly failed.

“Thanks, Yasmin,” I manage to say, though my voice sounds distant even to my own ears. “I’ll join the search.”

She steps aside as I stride past her, each step fueled by a growing sense of urgency. I can’t lose Baxter. Not because of what my father would think of me, but because at this point losing Baxter would mean losing a piece of myself.

Out on the street, the city looms large around me. The cacophony of blaring horns and chattering pedestrians is dissonant, and for the first time I imagine how scary it must all be for a lost dog. I scan the crowds, searching for a flash of Baxter’s golden fur among the sea of faces and legs.

“Where are you, boy?” I murmur, though Baxter cannot hear me. I feel adrift in this metropolis, so full of life and yet so devoid of the one life that matters most to me right now.

“Sir!” One of our security guards jogs toward me, breathless. “Any luck?”

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I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“We’ll find him, sir,” the guard assures me. “I’m so sorry. I tried to stop him, but he slipped right past me. He’s fast.”

“It’s all right. It’s not your fault. Anyway, he can’t have gone far.”

But even as I say it, I know it’s a lie. Baxter is curious, adventurous. The city is an endless labyrinth of sights and smells for a dog like him. He could be anywhere.

I walk on, my eyes never ceasing their search. Every honk, every shout sends a jolt of fear through me. Is it Baxter? Has someone found him? Or worse — has something happened to him?

“Please,” I pray to no one in particular, “let him be safe.”

“Isaac!”

I turn at the sound of my name, my heart leaping in my chest. It’s Carol, finally back from her errands, her face flushed from running.

“Carol, thank God,” I breathe out. “Have you?—”

“No,” she cuts me off, her voice tight. “I just heard. I’m so sorry, Isaac.”

“It’s not your fault,” I tell her, though part of me wants to blame someone, anyone, other than myself.

“Let’s go in opposite directions and circle back around,” she suggests. “We can cover more ground that way.”

“Good idea,” I agree, though I feel anything but good. We part ways, and I’m alone again in my search for Baxter.

As I search, asking people if they’ve seen a golden retriever anywhere, I think about how different things could have been if I’d only paid attention, if I hadn’t let the distractions of business and romance overshadow the simple task of caring for my dog. My father’s words echo in my mind, a reminder that responsibility is about more than just showing up — it’s about being present, being mindful.

“Please,” I say again, my voice breaking with the strain of holding back emotions that threaten to consume me. “Come home, Baxter.”

I should’ve been better. My father entrusted me with one simple task — to care for Baxter — and I couldn’t even manage that. The weight of his disappointment feels heavier than ever, even with him not here.

I’ve done it. I failed the test, just after starting to think I had aced it. There’s no coming back from this, I know. This will be the nail in the coffin both for my job and my self-worth.

And all because of a dog.

CHAPTER 26

ISAAC

My lungs burn, feet pounding against the concrete, each step taken in desperation. I have to find Baxter before Emily knows he’s gone. If she finds out, she’ll be so

worried, so stressed... and maybe — selfishly, I think — angry with me.

Sweat beads on my forehead, not just from exertion but also from the awful sense of guilt pressing down on me. I know this was all my fault, and because I didn't pay attention this morning, something horrible might have happened to Baxter. With all the traffic in this city...

The poor dog. He trusts me to care for me, to keep him safe, and in the end I've just let him down.

"Here, Baxter," I call out, voice cracking, hoping for a miracle.

I scour alleyways and parks, anywhere he might have wandered off to. The city feels vast, overwhelming — each person I pass oblivious to the urgency that tightens my chest.

A leaf flutters to the sidewalk, landing in front of my feet. It reminds me of when Emily and I walked through the park, laughing as Baxter chased the dandelion puffs, his tail wagging like a metronome keeping time with our happiness. Now, every second without him stings with the sharpness of lost moments.

I check my phone for the twentieth time. No messages, no missed calls. My thumb hovers over Emily's contact, but I can't face her yet — not without Baxter by my side. I can't let her see this failure; after all, she entrusted me with something precious.

The sun climbs higher, each minute that passes a reminder that time is running out. Panic seethes under my skin, a living thing desperate to escape. I remind myself to breathe, slow and deep, but it does no good.

My phone rings in my pocket, making me jump, and I quickly pull it out. Maybe

someone has found Baxter.

It's Emily, though.

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My heart drops into my stomach, and I consider not answering. I don't have to tell her Baxter is missing, but I don't trust my acting abilities. She'll probably be able to tell just from the sound of my voice that something is up.

My need to hear her voice, to lose myself in its soothing qualities, finally wins out, though, and I answer.

"Hey," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "What's up?"

"Isaac," Emily's voice is tense, a thread pulled too taut. Right away I know something is wrong.

"What is it?" I suck in a sharp breath.

"It's Baxter. Someone brought him into the shelter. He was found running around downtown."

Relief crashes into me, so powerful it almost brings me to my knees right there on the bustling street corner. But then I catch the strain behind her words, and the relief curdles into shame.

"Thank God," I breathe, leaning against a lamppost to steady myself. "I'm so sorry, Em. He got out of my office somehow, and?—"

"Out of your office?" Her shock is palpable, even through the phone.

"Yeah," I admit, rubbing the back of my neck. "He slipped out when Carol and I

weren't there, and then a door was propped open downstairs and... I've been looking for him everywhere."

"Isaac," she exhales, and I can almost see her shaking her head, her brow furrowed. "How did this..."

"I'll be at the shelter as fast as I can." I start moving again, purpose renewing my tired legs. "I'm going to make this right."

"Okay," she says, but her voice is distant, like she's already pulling away.

"Em, please," I plead, my heart hammering against my rib cage. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

There's a pause, long enough for me to hear the roar of the city around me, a reminder of how alone I feel in this moment.

"I know," she finally replies. "Just... get here soon, okay? He's freaking out. The shelter is a really stressful place."

"Of course," I say and end the call, my grip on the phone so tight it could snap.

As I weave through the crowds, the reflections in the shop windows show a man frayed at the edges, holding himself together with sheer will. I think about Emily, her love for Baxter, her belief in me — the belief I'm scared I'm not worthy of anymore.

Baxter was supposed to be my responsibility, a symbol that I could care for something other than work, that I could grow and become the kind of man my father wanted me to be. Yet here I am, scrambling to fix a mistake that should never have happened.

“Almost there, buddy,” I say to the empty air, picturing Baxter’s brown eyes and wagging tail. The image fuels me, pushes me past the fatigue and the ache of my conscience. I have to be the man Emily believes I can be, the man I promised her I’d try to be.

Back at work, I go straight to my car, calling Carol as I get into it and giving her an update.

“Thank goodness he’s safe,” she breathes.

“Yeah,” I murmur through tight teeth. I’m also relieved that Baxter is okay, but I’m not looking forward to standing as a true loser in front of the woman I’m crazy about.

Every red light is a test of patience, every crosswalk crowded with people a barrier to overcome. But I can’t stop now, won’t stop until I’ve made things right.

“Sorry” has become a useless word. It won’t change what happened, won’t undo the knot in my stomach or the worry I heard in Emily’s voice. Only action can do so, only getting to Baxter and proving that this isn’t who I am.

Finally, the shelter comes into view, and I grab the first parking spot I see then jog into the building.

“Emily,” I call out, stepping into the world where her passion lives, where she heals and loves unconditionally. “I’m here.”

I look around, expecting to see her holding Baxter, expecting to see the life we’ve been building together still standing despite my missteps. But the lobby is empty, not even a person behind the front desk.

“Isaac,” her voice comes from behind, and I turn to see her walking toward me,

Baxter on a leash next to her. It's a scene that holds both relief and confrontation — a moment suspended between what was and what could be.

“Hi,” I manage to say, my heart lodged in my throat.

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Baxter runs over to me, his body vibrating with tension and relief. His paws are wet and muddy, and as I pet him he presses his side against me, silently begging me to stay with him. It breaks my heart, seeing him like this.

I look up and there's Emily, her arms crossed, her gaze like the edge of winter — sharp and unforgiving.

“Emily, I—” I start, but she cuts me off.

“How could you be so careless?” Her voice is a whip, each word striking deep. “He could have gotten hit by a car. Thank God someone was kind enough to grab him and bring him in. Also, if I weren't here today, no one would have recognized him. It would have been hours before someone scanned him for a chip.”

Her face turns red as she goes on, and I stay quiet, allowing her the time to dish out what she needs to. “I mean, how does he get from that floor, so high up, to the bottom — then out? There had to be more than one act of negligence there!”

My throat tightens. “It was an accident. He slipped out when?—”

“Accidents happen when you're not paying attention.” She steps closer, her eyes searching mine, demanding accountability. “What if he got hurt? What if someone took him and kept him? Did you even think about that?”

The questions hang heavy around us, and I feel the weight of each one. “Of course I did. That's why I was out there, looking for him.”

“Looking for him after the fact doesn’t change that you weren’t careful enough to prevent this.” Her tone softens, but only to drive her point home. “You promised you’d take care of him.”

“My job is demanding. You know that. It’s not just something I can put aside.” I try to explain, but my words sound hollow.

“Your job,” she repeats, her voice trembling. “It’s always your job, isn’t it, Isaac? Just like your dad.”

Those words, they feel like a blow to the chest. I recoil as if she’s struck me physically. “That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” She steps back, wrapping her arms around herself as if warding off a chill only she can feel. “Your job is important, yes, but what about Baxter? What about us? You made more time for him, but I should have known that it wouldn’t stick. Tigers don’t change their stripes.”

I search for the right words, but they seem to dissolve before they can reach my lips. “I’m trying, Em. I really am.”

“Trying isn’t good enough when it comes to the ones you love.” She looks away, and in that gesture, I see the distance between us stretch further than the miles I ran tonight.

“Emily, please. Don’t do this. Don’t make it about?—”

“About what? About reality? You’re turning into him — into the person that you complain about. Prioritizing work over everything else, over everyone who cares about you.” Her accusation hangs in the air, a verdict delivered without hope of appeal.

“Emily...” My voice breaks, my defenses crumbling. “I don’t want to be him. I don’t want to lose you, not over this.”

“Then show me,” she says softly. “Show me that he means more to you than a deal, a meeting, a never-ending climb to the top. I get that you were distracted, but normal distraction is forgetting to turn a light off. You have an animal depending on you.”

She looks down at Baxter, who is sitting as small as he can, his tail tucked. My chest feels like a dish towel being wrung dry. I already know how much I messed up, and I don’t need Emily rubbing salt into the wound. Venting for a minute was fine, but this? It’s unnecessary.

“I’m not perfect,” I say, “but neither are you, so you have no right to point fingers.”

Her eyes narrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, it’s just—” I clutch at the roots of my hair in frustration. “I wasn’t talking about anything in particular, just that you’re being kind of harsh right now.”

Her eyes stay narrowed. “I don’t think it’s harsh to want the best for Baxter. And if you can’t take care of him, maybe it’s best that you leave him here so we can find him a home with someone who has the time for him.”

Bile rises in my throat. Did she seriously just say that?

“I can take care of my own dog,” I spit at her.

We stare at each other for a long moment, our chests heaving. Finally, she shakes her head. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

“With what? Which part? Me losing Baxter? Or the way this situation is triggering

you? I'm not your parents, Emily. You can count on me. Just because?—”

“I need some space.” She’s still as a statue, unblinking.

I suck in a breath. I was just getting started.

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“Bye,” she says without looking at me.

She pivots and walks away, down a hallway that leads to the back of the shelter. I watch her go, every step she takes a punctuation mark to our conversation — a period, an ellipsis, a question mark. What happens next? Can we bridge this gap, or are we destined to walk separate paths, haunted by what-ifs and might-have-beens?

“Come on, boy.” I give Baxter’s leash a gentle tug, and he hustles to fall into step next to me.

Anger, disappointment, and frustration turn my vision blurry as I walk to the car. I know I messed up, but Emily’s reaction was way out of proportion. And the fact that she lashed out at me after I mentioned that I’m not her parents tells me everything I need to know.

It’s not that I wanted to push the parents button. I simply refused to keep standing there while she endlessly attacked me. And now she needs space. And now... now I don’t even know if I’ll ever see her again.

I sit behind the steering wheel, staring at nothing, feeling everything. The past, the present, the uncertain future — they meld together in a tapestry of moments and memories. The firsttime I saw Emily, her smile brightening the park. The day I brought Baxter home, so angry with my dad, feeling so betrayed. The nights spent working late, the phone calls I didn’t answer, the dinners I missed.

All those moments, all those decisions, have led me here. Alone. Grieving. Grappling with the stark reality of Emily’s absence.

Baxter pushes his wet nose into my thigh, whimpering a little. I barely register the sensation. With a heavy sigh, I turn the ignition and steer the car out of the shelter's lonely parking lot.

Maybe this is for the best. I know that I need to do better, but at least I'm taking responsibility for that. Emily thought her reaction was completely justified. So maybe I've dodged a bullet. Emily and me, we're oil and water, fire and ice. Like two parallel lines destined never to meet — chasing each other in perpetual pursuit but fated to never intersect.

It's not even because we're from different worlds. That's never mattered to me. It's the way she attacked me for a mistake that anyone could make.

No answer. No apology. Just bitterness and accusations. It stings, even more so because I hadn't seen it coming. I guess love really does blind you.

Well, not anymore. I'll be here if she wants to apologize, but until then I won't be budging.

"Looks like it's me and you, buddy," I tell Baxter.

For how long, I don't know. Maybe Emily and I will patch things up. Maybe we'll never speak again.

That last possibility feels like a knife to my heart, but I refuse to let it bring me to my knees. I'm a Lennox. I run one of the biggest realty companies in the world. A little blip like this won't take me down.

Even if it feels like I might die from the pain of it all.

CHAPTER 27

EMILY

Water sloshes from the bucket, warm and soapy. My hands work through thick golden fur, and I try not to think. Try not to remember. Jenn stands across from me, her sleeves rolled up and a determined smile on her face as she scrubs the retriever's back — the retriever who reminds me so much of Baxter.

Around us, other volunteers bathe other dogs. It's a joyous afternoon, with music pumping, raffle tickets being handed out, and a food truck serving Italian ice. It's sunny and hot, humans smiling and dogs barking in glee.

It seems I'm the only one who isn't happy.

"Look at him," Jenn says, her voice bright against the backdrop of barking dogs and laughter. "He's loving this."

I nod, forcing a smile that I know doesn't quite reach my eyes. "He does." But it's Baxter I see beneath my fingers; Baxter's trusting gaze that looks up at me through this dog's eyes.

"Emily?" Jenn's concern peeks through her cheerfulness. "You're doing that thing again. Where you go all quiet."

I shake my head, dispelling the image of another golden retriever, one that belongs to Isaac. "Just thinking about the fundraiser. It's a big success."

"Thanks to you... and Isaac." She hesitates, biting her lip, knowing she's ventured into dangerous waters.

I focus on rinsing the dog, watching the water turn murky before clearing again. "Yeah, Isaac helped." The words are heavy, leaden with what I don't say. We haven't

spoken since that day. Since he came to the shelter to get Baxter. Since I had the realization that maybe he hasn't changed at all.

"Hey." Jenn snaps her fingers gently, bringing me back to the dog wash around us. "You've done an amazing job here. Don't let anything take that away from you."

"Thanks," I murmur, but my gaze drifts. To the parking lot entrance. To every tall figure that walks by. Looking for him. For them.

The golden retriever shakes vigorously, sending droplets flying. Laughter bubbles up around us, people undeterred by the spray of water, their joy infectious. They're here for their pets, for the shelter. They believe in second chances.

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I should, too. But second chances feel like luxuries I can't afford, not when they come with risks I've already taken and lost.

I know I overreacted. I was too harsh on Isaac. It's the kind of person my life has made me — but it's not the kind of person I want to be. I've spent all the days since then thinking about ways to apologize, but not once have I picked up the phone and actually done so.

It's because I'm afraid. I know it. Too afraid to take another shot and get hurt again. Too afraid to hurt Isaac, to lash out at him again like I did at the shelter.

So, here I am, frozen, waiting for something to happen, for my destiny to change. I know it won't, though. Since I'm not doing anything different, I'll probably be alone the rest of my life.

“Emily, seriously, you're doing great,” Jenn insists. She nudges me with an elbow, a playful spark in her eyes. “And look at all the money we've raised!”

It's true. Ricki has already informed me that the lockbox is full with cash and checks. People are generous today, not just paying for washes but donating extra. All thanks to the marketing push, to Isaac's influence.

“Can't argue with that,” I admit, and it's a genuine moment of pride that cuts through the melancholy. “The shelter needs this.”

“Exactly.” Jenn grins and hands me a towel. “Let's get this big guy dried off.”

As we work, laughter comes easily between us, moments of lightness that feel almost normal. Almost. Because even as I throw myself into the task, part of me is elsewhere. Wishing for different circumstances. Wishing for Isaac to walk up, Baxter in tow, proving me wrong.

But he doesn't.

"Do you ever wonder if you're making the right decisions?" I ask Jenn, watching as the retriever bounds away with his human, happy and clean.

"Every day." She shrugs. "But life's about taking those leaps, isn't it? Sometimes you land on your feet; sometimes... not so much."

"Feels like I've been landing on my face a lot lately," I confess, half-joking.

"Then it's time for a change in strategy." Jenn tilts her head, considering. "Or maybe a change in perspective."

"Maybe." The word lingers, uncertain but open. A possibility among the tangle of thoughts that refuse to settle.

"Are you thinking about Isaac?"

"I'm always thinking about Isaac," I admit, brushing off a droplet of water from my cheek.

His face, his voice, his warm laughter — they're all etched indelibly onto the backdrop of my mind.

"But he's got a world of his own," I say, struggling to put my feelings into words. "A world that I'm not sure I fit into."

“You could just call him up,” she says. “Say that you want to move past what happened.”

I can never fool her. “Maybe,” I say again, biting my lip.

The day wears on, the sun arching across the sky as we wash and rinse and dry and repeat. And still, my heart whispers what my mind refuses to acknowledge. I miss him. I miss them both.

But missing isn’t enough to bridge the gap. Not when trust has been tested, and the results remain inconclusive. Not when I don’t know what to say to fix everything. Not when space feels like the only safe option left.

“Maybe it’s good he didn’t come,” Jenn says softly, reading my silence like a book. “Maybe you need this time.”

“Maybe,” I echo again, but conviction wavers. Because despite everything, despite the rationale and the justifications, there’s a hollow space inside me that only Isaac seems to fill.

“Or maybe,” she adds, a mischievous edge to her tone, “he’s giving you the space you asked for. That’s a kind of change, isn’t it?”

I don’t have an answer to that. Because what if it is change? What if Isaac really is trying, and I’m too scared to see it? What if...

“Focus on the now, Em,” Jenn advises. “Today is about the shelter, the dogs, and this incredible thing you’ve helped create.”

“Right.” I straighten up, resolve settling over me like a mantle. “The now.”

A woman with a springer spaniel approaches me, her smile as warm as the sun overhead. She's been watching Jenn and me with the other dogs, taking in the lathered fur and wagging tails.

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“You’re so good with the dogs,” she says, her gaze fixed on my hands as I gently scrub behind a chocolate lab’s ears. “The woman at the table told me you’re a trainer. Do you have a card? I’d love for you to work with our Sammy.”

“Sure.”

I fish a business card from the pocket of my apron, slightly damp from the day’s work but still crisp. Handing it over, I feel a prick of pride. It’s the fourth one today. My tiny dog-training business is growing, leaf by leaf, like the young sapling it is.

“Thank you!” The woman tucks the card into her purse, then leads Sammy away.

I watch them go, feeling the sense of success in my chest. It’s heavy, bittersweet. Because even though everything is going so well, there’s a hollowness to it all. A space where Isaac should be, sharing this moment with me. But he’s not here, and that’s a choice I made. A necessary one.

“Oh my goodness, can you believe the turnout we had?” Ricki exclaims as the event draws to a close. She wraps me in an embrace that’s all enthusiasm and gratitude. “We’ve raised so much money!”

“I know. It’s fantastic.”

“But?” Ricki asks, pulling back to look at me, concern painted in her icy-blue eyes.

I shrug. “No buts,” I say. “Just tired, I guess.” She doesn’t need to know about Isaac, about the longing that still lingers like mist in the early morning. It’s not her burden

to bear, and I don't want to bring the mood down any further than I already have.

"Go home and get some rest," Ricki insists, squeezing my hand.

"After I help get everything cleaned up," I tell her. No way am I leaving to let the other volunteers carry the load.

It's good to keep my hands busy — if not washing dogs, then packing up supplies and loading cars. The joy of the day is like a radio station just out of frequency range; I can almost hear the music, but it's interspersed with static. The static is Isaac. Baxter. Us.

A beep from my phone jerks me back to the present. I pull it out, heart skipping in anticipation. Not Isaac, though. Just Brenda from the coffee shop asking if I can switch a shift next week.

"Everything okay?" Jenn asks, eyeing the phone in my hand.

"Yeah, just work stuff," I mumble, slipping the device back into my pocket and putting the lid on another container.

She gives me a sympathetic look, and I hate that she feels sorry for me.

"Let me help you with that," she insists, reaching for the container.

"No, I got it," I say, pulling it away gently.

I don't need pity. I've had enough of that. What I need is to keep going, to move one foot in front of the other. Even if it hurts. So, I plaster on a smile, pick up the container, and ignore the tightness in my chest.

I'm used to being hurt, used to bandaging up my heart and moving on. Yet something made me hope this time was different.

But it wasn't after all. And I can't shake the sadness that comes with accepting that my fears were right all along.

CHAPTER 28

ISAAC

Sighing, I gaze out my office window, not remembering the last time I stayed in the office this late. I'm hunched at my desk, the soft glow of the computer screen casting shadows across the piles of paperwork. Baxter lies at my feet, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Stretching my back, I get back to work, tapping away at the keyboard, but my heart isn't in it. Work used to be my refuge, my escape. Now it's just another place to hide from thoughts of Emily.

"Break time, huh?" I mutter as Baxter stirs, a low whine slipping from his throat.

He's reminding me without words that it's time to step away. I push back from the desk and stand, feeling the ache in my bones. This dog, with his knowing eyes and relentless need for fresh air, keeps me human.

"Come on." I grab his leash and we walk through empty hallways, me keeping his close.

After losing him, I'm making sure that nothing like that ever happens again. Since Emily and I have been taking our space, I haven't had much of anyone in this life other than my dog. Sad, but true. I talk, he listens. It's our routine.

The building is silent when we return. Everyone else has long since gone home to families, to lives outside these walls. Not me. Tonight, I stay late on purpose. Home is where her laughter still lingers, where the ghost of her smile haunts every corner. I can't face it, not yet.

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I pour kibble into Baxter's bowl, the metallic clink echoing too loudly. He eats with gusto, and I envy his simple pleasures. Watching him, I lean against the desk, lost in memories of a night so perfect it hurts.

"Good boy," I say.

Baxter finishes eating and pads over, nuzzling my hand with his wet nose. Gratitude wells up inside me. At least one creature doesn't want anything complicated from me — just companionship, just walks, just talks.

I try to go back to the work I was slogging my way through, but it's impossible to focus. I need something new to distract me. Something like...

My father's office.

It's been sitting mostly untouched since his death, all of the documents pertinent to the company's success long since retrieved, the plants taken out and put into other rooms. It's mostly been collecting dust, a task that no one wants to deal with.

Tonight, though, clearing it out sounds perfect to me.

I call for Baxter and he hustles to my side, keeping close as we head to my dad's office. The dog's ears perk up as we get closer, and I feel sorry for him. Does he understand the permanence of death, or does he keep expecting his first owner to pop up all of a sudden?

The office is shuttered and dank. Switching on the lights, I take in the cluttered mess.

For such a successful man, he was insanely disorganized.

I shuffle through the remnants of my father's world, each paper a memory from the past. His desk is an untouched shrine, dust motes dancing in the slanting light. The room smells like leather and old books, familiar and comforting. The dog paces the room, unsettled.

"Sit, Baxter," I murmur, and he obeys, collapsing with a soft thud onto the carpet.

I feel bad for both of us — he doesn't know what to do with himself, being in here where his old human should be but isn't, and I can relate. Going through my father's things feels so wrong, even though someone has to eventually do it.

Papers rustle under my fingers. Scribbles, numbers, ideas jotted down in haste. My father's handwriting, always more scribble than script. A reminder here to call a partner, there to invest in something new. And then, one note catches my eye, the writing shakier, the ink bled through with urgency.

Love this dog, it reads. Baxter opens up my heart.

I pause, my breath catching. More words follow, a confession in loops and lines. Makes me realize I've failed Isaac. How change that? Want to teach him that life is about more than work. Love is important. Being the bigger man important. Saying sorry.

A chill runs down my spine. My throat tightens. I never knew. Dad, you felt that? All this time?

"Did you know?" I ask Baxter, but he only wags his tail, oblivious to the gravity of the discovery.

I sit back in the worn leather chair, the magnitude of my father's regrets pressing on me. We were alike — driven, determined, distant. But he found solace in Baxter. Did he find forgiveness too?

The part about being the bigger man really sticks to me. Is that where I've gone wrong with Emily? If I had put my ego to the side during or right after our argument, could it have repaired things between us?

Baxter whines, sensing my distress. He nudges my knee with his nose, reminding me of simpler affections. Of love without strings. Something shifts inside me, a lock turning.

I can't end up like Dad. No. I refuse to let regrets be my legacy.

"Emily," I say aloud, tasting the hope and fear mingled with her name. And suddenly, I see it — the path back to her.

"Come on, boy," I tell Baxter, standing up with newfound resolve. "We've got work to do."

He leaps to his feet, eager, ready for whatever comes next. A plan forms in my mind, clear and bright as a beacon.

"Let's win her back," I say to both of us.

With Baxter by my side, maybe, just maybe, I can mend the missing pieces. Fill the spaces where joy used to be.

It's time to chase after something more precious than any deal or dollar. It's time to chase after love.

CHAPTER 29

EMILY

Windows down, I let the breeze toss my hair around. It's a beautiful day, a good day. The week has been long, yet rewarding. New clients have filled my schedule, and the day when I can quit the coffee shop feels close.

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Everything is going so well, and I should be happy, but Isaac lingers in my mind. He's always there, like a ghost of a touch I can't shake off.

A sign catches my eye. Bright and cheerful, it points the way to the shelter. "Dog Adoption Drive for Seniors" it reads. My brow furrows. I don't remember hearing about this. Curiosity nudges at me, worming its way through thoughts of Isaac.

The parking lot is fuller than usual, with tents set up, dogs in the shade in pens and being walked on leashes, and people milling around. It feels like I've walked into the twilight zone. Catching sight of Ricki, I jog up to her.

"What's going on?" I ask. How could such a big event be planned without my knowing?

She grins big. "Like it? We're matching dogs up with senior citizens. Not only are the adoption fees covered, so are food and basic care. Plus vet bill assistance and dog walkers if they need it."

My jaw drops. "What... That's... How—I mean, where..."

The shelter doesn't have this kind of money. Who on earth is paying for all of this?

"I could explain," Ricki says. "But I was asked to keep it a surprise for you."

I feel my eyebrows pinch together in confusion. "By who?"

"And maybe I should let him explain." She nods at someone behind me.

“Hello, Emily.” That familiar voice, deep and gentle, sends a thrill through me.

Spinning around, I come face to face with none other than Isaac.

He’s here, really here, Baxter sitting loyally at his side. The dog’s tail wags, thumping against the asphalt.

“Isaac?” I can barely get his name out, the question in it bigger than any single word could hold.

He steps forward, eyes holding mine. “I thought this might help. Dogs finding homes, seniors finding friends.” His smile is hesitant, hopeful. “Loneliness doesn’t have to be an epidemic. Not if we do something about it.”

“And you... you’re doing this?” My voice trembles as much as my hands. “You’re the one who’s footing the bills?”

“I am.” Pride lights up his face, but there’s something else there too — vulnerability, perhaps. “It’s important. You taught me that.”

Tears blur my vision. His understanding of loss, his embrace of change — it moves me more than I can say.

“Isaac, I...” Words fail me, so I let the tears fall instead. “I’m sorry. I overreacted that day. I was so just scared. I was...” I shake my head.

He steps closer, his presence enveloping me in warmth. “I’m sorry, Emily. For before. For letting my job become everything, for letting Baxter get out.”

I wipe away my tears. “I guess neither one of us is perfect.”

He grins. “No one ever said we have to be.”

That makes me chuckle, though there’s also a relieved sob in there. I’ve been wishing for some sort of miracle to bring us back together, but while I’ve been sitting on my hands, Isaac has been making plans. I could kiss him for it.

“Thank you,” I say. “For this event... for... coming back.”

“No, thank you.” His gaze holds a weight, a promise. “I don’t want to be the guy that you first met. I’ve learned a lot since you came into my life, and I want to do things differently — and I won’t just say that.”

“I know.” I nod, happy tears streaming down my face. “You’re showing me that.”

“Emily... I love you. I want to be with you.”

My heart beats louder than the barks and chatter around us. He’s here, really here. Offering a future.

“Thank you,” I manage to whisper through the tightness in my throat. “I want to be with you, too.”

The words hang heavy in the air between us, a pact solidifying, an invisible bond strengthening. For a moment, we are silent, absorbing the magnitude of our confessions, basking in the warmth of this acceptance and understanding.

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“It won’t be easy...” I start to admit, trailing off as I acknowledge all the hurdles we have yet to overcome. The world of high society, his business, my commitment to the dogs, our own individual issues that are sure to rear their heads again... a mountain range of challenges that will test us, time and again.

“I know,” he acknowledges, gently taking my hand in his. His fingers trace the lifeline etched across my palm. “But we’re stronger than we were before. We’ve learned from past mistakes. We’ve become resilient.”

His words, so full of assurance, soothe the storm that’s been brewing in my heart. I gaze into his eyes, shimmering blue-green pools reflecting a lifetime worth of shared dreams, and I see a truth that I’d been too afraid to accept.

We’re still incomplete, still healing, but together we might find a way through. His presence is like a harbor that shields me from the storm; the lighthouse guiding me back when I get lost in the choppy waters of doubt.

Isaac steps closer, his arms wrapping around me. I sigh, sinking into his embrace as his lips press against mine. It’s the perfect kiss, the perfect moment.

Until Baxter starts barking his head off.

Isaac sighs and shakes his head. “I love that dog, but I can’t pretend to not be annoyed at that.”

I giggle, partly at him, partly at what Baxter is doing. “Look.”

He's in play pose, front lowered and tail wagging, fixated on a caramel-colored puppy in a pen.

"He wants to play." Before I can say anything else, Baxter pulls his leash out of Isaac's hand and runs over to the puppy.

He shoves his snout through a hole in the pen and carefully licks the puppy, one too small to even bark properly. My breath catches in my throat. Baxter has never been this gentle, this attentive.

"Looks like he's made a friend," Isaac observes, a smile playing on his lips. He kneels down, not caring that his suit pants brush against the kennel floor. "What do you think? Should we take this little guy home?"

I hesitate, biting my lip. The idea of more responsibility looms large in my mind. "Do you really have time for a puppy, Isaac?" I ask, doubt lacing my voice.

He looks up at me, eyes earnest. "I'll make time. It's different now, Emily. Everything's different with you."

The puppy yips, a tiny sound that tugs at my heartstrings. I want him. I can't deny it. If Isaac doesn't take him, I might just...

"Let's raise him together, Em." Isaac's words are soft but powerful. "Together in my place. What do you say?"

"Are you asking me..."

He stands. "I know it's fast. Maybe a little crazy, but yes. Will you move in with me?" He grins. Takes my hands in his. "Move in with me and raise this puppy?"

A thousand thoughts race through my head. Change is scary. But change brought me to Isaac. To this moment. To love.

“Okay,” I breathe, the word more a feeling than a sound. “Yes. I would love to.”

His face lights up with a joy that echoes through me. Our lips meet, a kiss that seals the promise of new beginnings.

“Yes,” I say again, stronger this time, as Baxter and the puppy play at our feet.

This is yes to the puppy. Yes to Isaac. Yes to a future where we build something beautiful together.

EPILOGUE

EMILY

Stepping into the penthouse, I breathe in the familiar smells of home — lemongrass, the lingering scent of bacon from this morning, and just the slightest hint of wet dog. But, hey. That’s my life.

And I love it.

It’s been a whole year since this place became ours — mine and Isaac’s. A year since Baxter found his unlikely best friend in Hurley, our rambunctious rescue puppy. So much has changed, but life has only gotten better. With my business growing, I left the coffee shop months ago. And even though Isaac likes to remind me that I don’t have to work — he has more than enough money to cover our needs and wants — he also knows how important it is to me. I need to help dogs like I need the sun.

“Hey, guys,” I call out softly.

The jingle of collars is my greeting as two sets of paws pad across the sleek hardwood floor. Baxter, ever the dignified older brother, nuzzles against my leg while Hurley, all clumsyenthusiasm, jumps up to lick my face. I laugh, a sound that seems too loud in the quiet expanse of our home.

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“Dad will be back soon,” I promise them, stroking their heads.

I fill their bowls while they drool like they’re about to receive the finest cuisine and not the same thing they eat every day, twice a day. The dogs chow down, and I start on dinner, chopping vegetables with a rhythm that feels like breathing — inhale, chop, exhale.

My phone buzzes, Isaac’s name lighting up the screen. Curiosity flutters in my chest. His text is simple: Meet me at the park with the boys?

Our park. The one lined with oak trees that turn golden in the fall.

Why there? Why now?

“Come on, then,” I tell Baxter and Hurley, slipping into decision mode like it’s another layer of skin.

The evening air is still warm from the day’s sun as we pile into the car, the sky painted in strokes of orange and pink. It’s summer, the season when everything feels possible.

It’s only a few minutes’ drive to the park where I first met Baxter and Isaac, now the park where we regularly take the dogs to play. They recognize the route, the two of them bouncing around the back seat in anticipation.

After parking, I release the latch, and Baxter and Hurley burst into the park, a whirlwind of paws and wagging tails. My heart swells watching them play, free and

unburdened. This place, drenched in nostalgia, is where it all began — where Isaac's smile first caught me like a lasso.

He strides through the gate, the setting sun casting a halo around him. Even after all this time, he still takes my breath away. The balance he's found, CEO by day and loving partner by night, amazes me.

"Hey." He greets me with that kiss, the one that always promises more. It's soft but filled with the silent words we've learned to say with just our lips.

"Hi." I can't help the smile that breaks through, even as confusion dances in my mind. "What's going on? Why did you want to meet here?"

"Walk with me?" His voice is a gentle command, a familiar melody.

"Of course." I gather the leashes, hands trembling slightly. I'm nervous, but I don't know what for.

We stroll side by side, Isaac leading us to the entrance where we first met.

"Remember this place?" His gaze holds mine, deep pools of promise.

"Like it was yesterday."

"Me too," he says, and the world narrows to just us, to the space between heartbeats, to the hope that hangs in the air, as tangible as the scent of summer grass.

Baxter sniffs a dandelion, Hurley dances around our feet. Isaac's hand, warm and steady, slips from mine. He steps away, eyes locked on me.

"Emily," he starts, voice soft as a secret.

I tilt my head, heart stumbling over its beats. What is he doing?

He lowers himself, one knee bending, meeting the earth. My breath catches; it's a picture I've seen in dreams.

"Will you marry me?" he asks as he pulls a ring box out of his pocket and opens it.

The words hang, delicate in the space between us. Time pauses, waits for my answer. I swallow hard, feeling every second of the year that has led us here. The love that grew, quiet and strong.

"Yes." The word is a breath, but it feels like a shout.

"Really?" His smile breaks through, wide and real.

"Really!" I laugh, tears making diamonds in my eyes.

Isaac stands, slides the ring onto my finger. It's a perfect fit, like the life we've built together.

"I love you," he says, and it's everything.

"Love you more," I reply.

The dogs circle us, part of our little family. They sense the shift, the promise that wraps around us all. We are four hearts beating as one, just as it was always meant to be.

Even when we didn't know it yet.

The End