



Paws of Hope on the Bay (A New Beginning #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: Its never too late to open your heart to new beginnings!

At sixty-seven, Lynda has spent a decade rebuilding her life after her ex-husbands betrayal ended their marriage. Returning to Sapphire Bay for a reunion with her childhood friends wasn't supposed to be a permanent move. But she's now dividing her time between Isabels bookstore and volunteering at the local animal shelter.

After losing his wife fifteen years ago, Matt Reynolds, the local veterinarian, spends all his time helping animals in the small Montana town. He'd created a life that felt complete—until a strong-willed Denver vet with silver hair and a guarded heart walked through the shelter's doors.

When a sudden storm leaves a litter of wolfdog puppies orphaned, Lynda and Matt rush to save the vulnerable animals. Through long nights of shared concern over their tiny patients, the walls they've built over decades of heartache begin to crumble.

As their friendship blossoms into something deeper, Lynda wonders if she can ever trust a man again, while Matt questions whether opening his heart means dishonoring the love he once shared with his wife.

Against the breathtaking backdrop of Montanas Flathead Lake, and surrounded by four-legged companions, Lynda and Matt discover that it's never too late to open your heart to new beginnings.

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Lynda Morth woke up to the sound of pine branches swaying outside her window.

For a moment, she stayed where she was, enjoying the gentle rustling that had become her morning soundtrack.

It was so different from the noise that had greeted her for decades in Denver—traffic, sirens, and impatient drivers honking their horns—that it made her smile.

She stretched under the quilt, feeling the usual aches in her sixty-seven-year-old body. The guest room at Kathleen's house wasn't big, but it felt just right. With its sage green walls and a window that overlooked the backyard, it had everything she needed.

Outside, beyond the trees, lay Flathead Lake. It wasn't visible from her window, but it was always a part of life in Sapphire Bay.

When she'd first come here for the reunion with her childhood friends, she'd planned to stay for two weeks, maybe three at the most. That was nearly three months ago. She'd enjoyed each day, but it was time to work out what she wanted to do with her life.

Pushing back the quilt, Lynda got out of bed and walked to the window. Outside, a couple of chickadees hopped between the branches of the pine trees, chirping happily. Nature was so straightforward, unlike people with all their complications and messy feelings.

That honesty was one of the things she'd always loved about being a vet. Animals

didn't lie. They didn't cheat. They just lived their honest lives—something she'd found comforting after discovering her husband's affair ten years ago.

The smell of coffee drifted up from the kitchen, telling her Kathleen was already awake. Lynda quickly got ready for the day, made her bed, and walked down the hallway and into the kitchen.

Kathleen was humming while pouring coffee into two mugs. "I thought I heard you moving around," she said, sliding a hot mug across the counter. "Did you have a good sleep?"

"I slept like a rock," Lynda admitted, sitting on one of the barstools at the kitchen island. "There's something about being close to the water that knocks me right out."

Kathleen smiled, the morning light catching the silver strands in her blonde hair. They'd all aged since their teenage summers at Flathead Lake, but there was something nice about growing older with friends who knew you when you were young.

"It's the negative ions from the pine trees," Kathleen said confidently, like someone who'd read too many wellness articles. "They're supposed to lower stress and help you sleep better."

Lynda took a sip of her coffee, enjoying the rich taste. "Did they teach you that in barista school, or was it in one of those health magazines you're always reading?"

"Make fun all you want, but I'm not the one who fell asleep during movie night last week," Kathleen shot back with a grin.

"That wasn't the negative ions. It was the boring plot of the costume drama you made us watch." Lynda rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Two hours of people in fancy

clothes giving each other meaningful looks isn't exactly exciting."

Kathleen laughed. "It's the dresses and drama that keep me coming back for more. What's your plan for today? Bookstore in the morning, animal shelter in the afternoon?"

"You're half right," Lynda said with a smile. "Isabel wants me to organize a shipment of books that arrived yesterday, so I'm working at the bookstore for most of the day. I'm helping Matt at the shelter tomorrow."

Kathleen handed Lynda a slice of toast covered in homemade apricot jam. "Matt's asked you to help him a lot lately."

Lynda gave her friend a warning look. "Matt and I are colleagues who both care about the animals in Sapphire Bay. That's all."

"If you say so," Kathleen said, raising her hands in surrender. "But if you do like him, I wouldn't blame you. His wide shoulders and carefree grin charm most of the people he meets."

Lynda focused on her toast. Matt Reynolds was a great vet with a gentle way that the animals responded to. The fact that he had kind blue eyes and a smile that sometimes made her forget what she was saying wasn't important.

"Robert called from the practice yesterday," Lynda said, quickly changing the subject. "They've had more exotic pet cases lately. A lot of people have bought bearded dragons and sugar gliders."

"And they're struggling without the great Dr. Morth to help them?" Kathleen asked, sitting on the stool beside her.

Lynda shrugged. “They’re managing. Robert’s very capable. He’s been my right hand for nine years.”

“But they want you back,” Kathleen guessed, watching her friend’s face. “Are you thinking about going back to Denver?”

The question hung in the air. Lynda had asked herself the same thing more than once. Her practice was running fine without her being there. A property service was looking after her house, but she wasn’t sure if staying in Sapphire Bay was financially sustainable in the long term.

“I should go home at some point,” Lynda said slowly. “I have responsibilities. Patients. A business I built over decades.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Kathleen said gently.

Lynda sighed, meeting her friend’s knowing gaze.

“No, it’s not what you asked.” She took another sip of coffee, gathering her thoughts.

“The truth is, I don’t know if I’ll go back to Denver.

I love working with Isabel at the bookstore.

The animal shelter needs the help—they’re terribly understaffed for the number of animals they take in.

And being here with you and Isabel has been healing in a way I didn’t expect. ”

“And your house in Denver?”

“It’s just a house,” Lynda admitted. “Empty rooms filled with furniture and memories. Some good, some not so good.”

“Then why go back?” Kathleen asked.

“Because it’s the responsible thing to do,” Lynda replied, falling back on the rule that had guided most of her adult decisions.

“Because I can’t just abandon the practice I built, or my daughter.

I spoke to Amy last night. Her boys are getting into all sorts of mischief, and she needs her mom. I can’t hide out here forever.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Hiding?”

Lynda traced the rim of her coffee mug with her finger. “Maybe a little,” she admitted. “It’s easy here. Comfortable. I have my friends, meaningful work, and no one expecting anything from me beyond what I choose to give.” She sighed. “But it’s not real life.”

“Seems pretty real to me,” Kathleen observed, reaching for the coffee pot to refill her mug. “Just a different version than the one you had before.”

“I’ve spent so long defining myself by my work,” Lynda said quietly. “Dr. Morth, the veterinarian. Then, after the divorce, I was the woman who rebuilt her life on her own terms. I know who I am in Denver. Here, I’m... I don’t know. Still figuring it out, I guess.”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing,” Kathleen suggested. “At our age, how many chances do we get to reinvent ourselves?”

Lynda smiled, thinking of Isabel and her decision to buy the bookstore after decades as a librarian. “Good point.”

She finished her toast and took the plate to the sink, glancing at the clock on the wall. “I thought you’d be at the café by now.”

Kathleen shrugged. “Chloe offered to bake the muffins and organize the special orders this morning. It was wonderful to have a sleep-in and not have to rush into work.”

Lynda wiped her hands on the dish towel. “You should have more time off, especially while you’re remodeling the house on the point.”

“I enjoy being busy,” Kathleen told her.

“Well, don’t do too much.” Lynda picked up her purse and jacket. “I should get going. You know how Isabel gets when she has a project in mind.”

“Like a very bookish bulldozer,” Kathleen agreed with affection. “You’ll be there before she arrives.”

Lynda looked on the table for her reading glasses. “I know where she keeps the spare key. You haven’t seen my?—”

Kathleen picked up a black velvet case. “Reading glasses? I saw them when I came into the kitchen. Tell Isabel I’ll drop some lunch off for both of you around noon.”

“That’d be wonderful. Enjoy your day, Kathleen.” As Lynda walked down the path toward town, she thought about what Kathleen had said about reinventing yourself.

At sixty-seven, was she really thinking about starting over yet again? Trading the life

she'd carefully rebuilt after her divorce for something new and undefined?

The idea was terrifying. Exciting. Possibly foolish.

But as Sapphire Bay came to life around her—shopkeepers opening doors, locals greeting each other by name, the mountains standing tall in the distance—Lynda felt a sense of rightness she couldn't ignore.

For the first time in years, she was going through her days without the empty loneliness that had become her constant companion in Denver.

Maybe this wasn't hiding after all. Maybe it was finally finding her way home.

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Matt Reynolds parked his truck outside the Sapphire Bay Animal Shelter and grabbed his medical bag from the passenger seat. The old building needed a fresh coat of paint and probably a new roof, but the blue and white “Animals Need Homes” sign hanging over the entrance was as cheerful as ever.

He checked his watch. It was eight o’clock, a full hour before the shelter officially opened.

Carol, the shelter manager, had texted him about a border collie they’d found near the highway yesterday.

The dog was spooked and wouldn’t let anyone touch him, so Matt had offered to come in early and check him out.

As he unlocked the door with the key Carol had given him years ago, the familiar chorus of barks and meows greeted him.

The shelter was small, with just ten dog kennels and separate rooms for the cats and kittens.

But it was clean and the animals were well cared for, despite the constant struggle for funding.

“Morning, everyone,” Matt called out as he opened the door to the kennels. The barking intensified, and he smiled. After all the years he’d been coming here, he still enjoyed the noisy welcome at the animal shelter. “I know, I know. Breakfast is coming soon.”

He made his way to the isolation room where new arrivals were kept until they could be examined. Through the glass window in the door, he saw the border collie huddled in the far corner of the kennel, his black and white coat matted with dirt.

“Hey there, buddy,” Matt said softly as he entered the room. The dog’s head snapped up, his eyes wary. “Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you.”

He set his bag down and sat on the floor, pretending to ignore the dog. This wasn’t his first rodeo with scared strays. Years of practice had taught him that patience often worked better than anything else.

After a few minutes of Matt quietly humming while organizing his supplies, the border collie’s curiosity got the better of him. The dog inched forward, nose twitching.

“That’s it,” Matt murmured. “I’m just a boring old vet. Nothing to be afraid of.”

He slowly removed a dog treat from his pocket and placed it on the floor between them. The border collie eyed it suspiciously but took another step forward.

The sound of the shelter’s front door opening made the dog retreat to his corner. Matt sighed. So much for progress.

“Hello?” a familiar voice called out. “Matt? Are you here?”

Something in Matt’s chest lightened at the sound of Lynda’s voice.

“In the isolation room,” he called back.

Footsteps approached, and then Lynda appeared in the doorway, her silver hair pulled into a neat bun. She wore jeans and a blue sweater that matched her eyes, and she was

carrying two take-out coffee cups.

“I was on my way to work and saw your truck outside,” she explained, holding up the coffee. “I thought you might need this if you’re starting this early.”

Matt smiled, genuinely touched by the gesture. “You’re a lifesaver. Carol texted about this guy last night, and I wanted to check him out before the shelter got busy.”

Lynda glanced at the border collie, who was watching them with alert eyes. “Poor thing looks scared to death. Have you been able to examine him yet?”

“Not even close. He won’t let me near him.” As Matt took the coffee Lynda handed to him, their fingers brushed against each other. “Thanks for this. I’ve been up since five, dealing with Mrs. Peterson’s horse. He has colic again.”

“Is Butterscotch okay?” Lynda asked, kneeling down to get a better look at the dog while staying at a respectful distance.

“He’ll be fine. Mrs. Peterson panics every time he so much as sneezes.”

Lynda’s smile started in her eyes and lit her entire face. “Mind if I try?” she asked, nodding toward the border collie.

“Be my guest,” Matt said, taking a sip of his coffee. “But he’s pretty spooked.”

Lynda sat cross-legged on the floor, repeating his trick of completely ignoring the dog. She began talking in a low, soothing voice—not to the dog, but to Matt.

“Isabel has some new animal books that she wants me to arrange at the bookstore. I told her most of them would collect dust, but she insists that every bookstore needs books about Amazonian Rainforest monkeys.” She continued chatting casually, her

voice calm and even.

Matt watched the border collie gradually relax, his ears perking up at Lynda's voice. After a few minutes, the dog inched forward again, his nose twitching with curiosity.

"You've got a gift," Matt said softly, not wanting to break the spell.

Lynda shrugged. "It comes from years of working with abused animals at my practice in Denver." She continued her casual conversation, and slowly, the dog moved closer.

Fifteen minutes later, through Lynda's patience and a handful of treats from Matt, the border collie was letting them both touch him. Matt was able to check his teeth and paws, and listen to his heart.

"No microchip that I can feel," Matt said, carefully running his hands along the dog's neck and shoulders. "Looks like he's about two years old. No obvious injuries, but he's undernourished."

"He's beautiful," Lynda said, gently working a burr out of the dog's fur. "Smart, too. Look at those eyes. He's calculating his next three moves."

The dog had ended up sitting calmly between them, occasionally nudging Lynda's hands for more petting.

They worked together to give the dog a basic exam, clean his ears, and apply flea treatment. The easy way they moved around each other, anticipating what the other needed, reminded Matt of the times his wife had helped him in the clinic.

The thought stopped him cold.

"I should get going," Lynda said, standing up and brushing dog hair from her jeans.

“I promised Isabel I’d be at the bookstore by nine.”

“Thanks for the help,” Matt said, suddenly feeling awkward. “And the coffee.”

“Anytime,” Lynda replied with a smile. “What are you going to call him?”

Matt looked at the border collie. “I think that’s Carol’s department, but with the white stripe between his eyes, he looks like a Bandit to me.”

“Bandit,” Lynda repeated, nodding. “It suits him. I’ll see you here tomorrow.”

“That sounds great.”

After she left, Matt finished examining the dog and then moved him to a clean kennel with fresh water and food. By the time Carol arrived, he’d updated the intake forms and was ready to head to his regular clinic.

“You’ve worked miracles again,” Carol said, looking at the now-calm border collie. “When they brought him in yesterday, he snapped at anyone who came near.”

“I can’t take much credit this time,” Matt admitted. “Lynda was here earlier and worked her magic.”

Carol raised an eyebrow. “Lynda has that effect on most creatures. Including certain veterinarians I could mention.”

Matt cleared his throat. “It’s too early in the morning for matchmaking.” Carol had been trying to set him up with various women since he’d started volunteering at the animal shelter. “We’re colleagues. She’s just helping out at the shelter while she’s visiting.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Carol didn’t look as though she believed him. “That ‘visit’ has stretched to three months.”

Matt shrugged, packing up his supplies. “It’s not my business how long she stays.”

Though if he was being honest, he’d noticed Lynda’s continued presence in Sapphire Bay with more interest than he wanted to admit.

When she’d first started volunteering at the shelter, he’d assumed she’d be gone in a week or two.

But weeks had turned into months, and he’d found himself looking forward to the days when they were working together.

“Whatever you say,” Carol said, mercifully dropping the subject. “Thanks for coming in early. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Happy to help,” Matt replied. “I’ll see you this afternoon for the vaccination clinic.”

He drove the short distance to his small veterinary practice on Main Street, smiling at the memory of Lynda sitting on the floor, patiently winning over the scared border collie. Then he frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it.

There was something about her that intrigued him. It could have been the quiet confidence in the way she handled animals, the no-nonsense approach that never came across as harsh, or the intelligence in her blue eyes when she discussed treatment options.

He hadn’t thought about dating anyone since Maria died fifteen years ago.

After the cancer took her, he’d thrown himself into raising their daughter, Stephanie,

and building a successful vet practice.

Between work and being a single dad, there hadn't been time for romance, and honestly, he hadn't missed it.

No woman could compare to Maria anyway—that's what he'd told himself for years.

But Stephanie was grown now, with children of her own in Missoula. His practice ran smoothly with a small but dedicated staff. But sometimes, in the evenings when he returned to his empty house by the lake, he felt the silence pressing in on him.

"Get it together, Reynolds," he muttered to himself as he pulled into his parking spot behind the clinic. "She's a Denver vet temporarily helping out. That's it."

Brenda, his receptionist, was unlocking the front door as he approached.

"Morning, Doc," she greeted him cheerfully. "How's our highway stray doing?"

"Better," Matt replied, following her inside. "I think we'll call him Bandit. He's settled down now."

"Good. Oh, and Mrs. Landry called. Her cat threw up twice this morning, and she's convinced it's something serious."

Matt smiled, hanging up his jacket. "Schedule her for an appointment. It's probably just another hairball, but you know Mrs. Landry."

As he headed to his office, he tried to push thoughts of Lynda out of his mind. Even as he prepared for his first appointment, he realized he was looking forward to going back to the shelter. Somehow, Lynda made even the most routine tasks enjoyable.

He caught where his thoughts were going and sighed. This was ridiculous. He was sixty-eight years old, for heaven's sake, not some lovesick teenager.

"Dr. Reynolds? Your first patient is here," Brenda called through the door.

"Coming," he replied, grateful for the interruption.

Whatever this strange attraction was, he needed to get over it. Fast. The last thing he needed was to develop feelings for a woman who was just passing through Sapphire Bay—and his life.

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Lynda carefully arranged the last book on the new display, stepping back to assess her work.

Isabel had been given a great selection of animal books—everything from basic pet care to more specialized texts on wildlife rehabilitation and exotic animals.

Lynda had organized them by subject, making sure the books aimed at children were placed on the bottom shelf.

“That looks perfect,” Isabel said, joining her by the display. “I knew you’d make it look professional.”

“It’s a good collection,” Lynda admitted. “Although I still think most of these will gather dust. Sapphire Bay isn’t exactly overrun with aspiring veterinarians.”

Isabel shrugged, adjusting a book that had tilted sideways. “You never know. A teenager came in last week asking about wildlife rescue books. She said she wants to volunteer at a bird sanctuary when she gets to college.”

“Well, at least someone will appreciate them.” Lynda smiled, thinking of her own teen years when she’d devoured every animal book she could find. “How’s the book you’re writing coming along?”

Isabel sighed. “I have a dead body that no one can identify and a serial killer on the loose. I have to work out a way my heroine can find the killer.”

Lynda grinned. “If you need a brainstorming session, Kathleen and I have great

imaginations.”

“I might have to take you up on that. Frank had some ideas, but they wouldn’t work with the rest of my plot.”

“Let us know when you want to meet,” Lynda told her friend as they moved to the front counter. “I’ve enjoyed reading the chapters you’ve finished.”

Isabel handed Lynda a box of bookmarks. “Sometimes, your feedback is the only thing that keeps me writing.”

Lynda unpacked the bookmarks and placed them on the counter. Isabel was a talented writer. Providing a little support and encouragement was the least she could do.

“What’s happening at the animal shelter?” Isabel asked. “Carol said you’ve been working a lot of extra hours.”

Lynda nodded. “They’re so short-staffed. It doesn’t help that there’s been an increase in the number of abandoned pets in the area. I helped Matt with a scared border collie this morning. Someone found him wandering near the highway.”

Isabel leaned against the counter. “Has Robert called again? About the practice in Denver?”

“He called yesterday,” Lynda admitted. “They’ve had a busy week. One of the vet techs quit, and they’re struggling to find a replacement.”

“So when are you going back to check on things?”

Lynda hesitated. “I should go soon. Just for a few days to help Robert sort out the staffing issues.”

“But you don’t want to,” Isabel guessed, studying her friend’s face.

Lynda sighed. “Even though I’m living here, I’m still responsible for the clinic. If there’s a staffing issue, I need to fix it. Robert’s awesome, but he’s swamped.”

Isabel smiled. “The Lynda Morth I remember from our teenage years would have said, ‘Responsibility is just grown-ups trying to stop you from having fun.’”

“The Lynda Morth from our teenage years thought leg warmers were high fashion and New Kids on the Block was classic music,” Lynda replied dryly. “Not exactly a paragon of wisdom.”

They both laughed, and Lynda felt some of the tension ease from her shoulders. That was what she loved about being with her old friends—the easy way they could move from serious to silly and back again.

“Speaking of responsibilities,” Lynda said, “how are things going with Frank and Tommy? The last time I saw them, Tommy was talking about joining the junior fishing tournament.”

Isabel’s face softened at the mention of Frank and his grandson. “They’re wonderful. Tommy has entered the tournament, and Frank’s been taking him to the dock to give him fishing tips. And Frank...” She paused, a smile playing at her lips. “He’s unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

Lynda nodded. She’d seen the way Frank looked at Isabel when he thought no one was watching him. It was sweet and kind, and everything her friend needed. “I’m happy for you,” she said, meaning it. After Isabel lost her husband, she deserved this second chance at happiness.

“It’s not always easy,” Isabel admitted. “We both have our baggage. But we’re

figuring it out together.” She gave Lynda a pointed look. “Some baggage is worth unpacking.”

“Subtle,” Lynda said with a snort.

“I’m not talking about anyone in particular,” Isabel clarified, though her expression suggested otherwise. “I’m talking about you holding onto the past so tightly it’s stopping you from moving forward.”

The comment hit closer to home than Lynda wanted to admit. Instead of dwelling on the past, she busied herself with unwrapping more books.

“Ray destroyed your faith in people,” Isabel continued gently. “But not all men are like him.”

A customer walked in. It gave Lynda a moment to collect herself as Isabel greeted them warmly and directed them to the mystery section. When Isabel returned, Lynda had composed herself.

“It’s not just about Ray,” she said quietly.

But it was, at least partly. The memory of his betrayal made her stomach knot.

She’d walked into her home office to grab a file, and Ray’s phone had flashed with a text someone had sent.

Usually, she wouldn’t have looked at it, but the preview wasn’t something she could ignore.

Miss you already. Last night was amazing.

When she'd unlocked Ray's phone with his password, she found hundreds of texts between him and Melissa, his twenty-nine-year-old receptionist. When he arrived home, the confrontation that followed had upset Lynda more than seeing the evidence of his affair.

His half-hearted denials had quickly crumbled, followed by the worst admission of all—he wasn't sorry.

He'd fallen in love with Melissa. He wanted to start a new life with her. Maybe even have children together.

Thirty years of marriage had ended in a single afternoon.

"Lynda?" Isabel's voice pulled her back to the present. "What are you thinking about?"

Lynda shook her head. "Just remembering the day it all fell apart."

Isabel squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"It's okay." Lynda managed a small smile. "It was ten years ago. Ancient history."

"But it still hurts."

"Sometimes," Lynda admitted. "Not because I miss Ray. I haven't missed him since Amy had her first baby.

But because of what it did to how I interact with people.

"She placed her hands on the book she'd been unwrapping.

“I didn’t see it coming, Isabel. Not a clue.

We had dinner together every night. We went on vacations and had the occasional dinner with our friends.

I thought we were happy.” She shook her head.

“How do you trust your own judgment after something like that?”

Isabel was quiet for a moment. “James and I had our rough patches,” she said finally. “No marriage is perfect. But there was always honesty between us, even when it hurt.” She met Lynda’s eyes. “Just keep reminding yourself that not all men are like Ray,” she repeated softly.

“I know that,” Lynda said. “Logically, I know that. But logic has nothing to do with it.”

“So, tell me about Matt Reynolds. Is he just a colleague?” Isabel asked.

Lynda hesitated. “He’s... I don’t know. He’s kind. Good with animals. Funny in that quiet way that sneaks up on you.” She looked out the window, watching Main Street come to life as more shops opened. “But he’s also still in love with his late wife.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“He doesn’t have to. You can see it in the way he talks about her. She’s been gone fifteen years, and he still wears his wedding ring.”

Isabel nodded thoughtfully. “Grief is complicated. But it doesn’t mean that there isn’t room in his heart for someone new.”

The bell above the door chimed as another customer entered the bookstore.

Lynda was grateful for the interruption.

She liked Matt. More than she wanted to admit.

This morning, when they'd been sitting on the floor with the border collie, she'd felt something she hadn't experienced in years—a connection that went beyond professional respect.

And it terrified her.

“All I'm saying,” Isabel continued when the customer was browsing out of earshot, “is that maybe it's time to unpack some of your baggage. See what's still worth carrying and what you can leave behind.”

“I'll think about it,” Lynda promised, more to end the conversation than anything else.

But as they went about their morning tasks—shelving new arrivals, helping customers find the perfect book, preparing for the afternoon book club meeting—Lynda found herself turning Isabel's words over in her mind.

Had she been using Ray's betrayal as an excuse to keep people at a distance? Was she truly protecting herself, or was she just hiding? And even if she was ready to open her heart again—a big if—was Matt Reynolds the right person to take a chance on?

She didn't have answers to any of these questions. But for the first time in years, she was at least willing to ask them.

That, she supposed, was some kind of progress.

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Matt cradled Mrs. Pemberton's ancient orange tabby, keeping his movements slow and gentle. Rusty was at least sixteen years old, and his kidneys were starting to fail. He'd stopped eating two days ago, which had sent his eighty-year-old owner into a panic.

"Will he be okay, Dr. Reynolds?" Mrs. Pemberton asked, her veined hands twisting the strap of her purse. She'd been coming to Matt's clinic since he'd first opened, bringing her cats with her.

"Let's get him on some fluids first," Matt said, carefully placing Rusty on the examination table. "He's pretty dehydrated, which is making him feel worse than he needs to."

The cat gave a weak meow of protest as Matt checked his gums and felt his abdomen. There was some tenderness around the kidneys, but not a hard mass that could mean a tumor.

"I think we caught this in time," Matt told Mrs. Pemberton. "We'll run some blood work, but I suspect he's having a flare-up of kidney disease. It's common in cats his age."

Relief washed over the older woman's face. "Oh, thank goodness. When he wouldn't touch his tuna, I thought the worst."

Matt nodded, understanding her fear. For many of his older clients, their pets were their only companions. "You did the right thing bringing him in. Kidney disease is manageable with the right treatment."

He worked efficiently but unhurriedly, drawing blood for testing and starting an IV line for fluids. Throughout the procedure, he kept up a steady stream of conversation—partly to reassure Mrs. Pemberton and partly to distract Rusty.

“There we go, big guy,” he murmured as the fluids began flowing. “You’ll be feeling better in no time.”

After Rusty was in a crate, Matt turned to Mrs. Pemberton. “I’d like to keep him on fluids for a few more hours. You can pick him up this afternoon, around four. By then, he should be feeling much better.”

Mrs. Pemberton nodded. “Thank you, Dr. Reynolds. I don’t know what Rusty and I would do without you.”

After seeing Mrs. Pemberton out to the waiting room, Matt asked his vet tech, Sarah, to monitor Rusty while he saw his next patient.

The morning flew by with a steady stream of appointments.

In between giving someone advice about how to look after their goldfish, he’d vaccinated a litter of puppies, stitched a laceration on a dog’s paw, drained a cyst on a cat’s back leg, and performed wellness checks for five elderly cats.

By lunchtime, Matt was ready for a break.

“I’m heading out for a sandwich,” he told Brenda as he grabbed his jacket. “Do you need anything from the deli?”

Brenda looked up from her computer. “No thanks. I had a big breakfast.” She held up her phone. “Carol just texted. She’s freaking out about the fundraiser this weekend. She said they’re short on volunteers to set up the barn, and the printing company

messed up the programs.”

Matt sighed. The shelter fundraiser had been consuming most of Carol’s energy for weeks. As the only full-time employee at the chronically underfunded shelter, she was trying to run the place and organize a major event at the same time.

“I told her we’d stop by after work to help,” Brenda continued. “Is that okay?”

“Of course it is,” Matt told her. “I need to drop off the latest list of auction items anyway. As well as all the other last-minute donations, Frank’s offered to take two people onto the lake for a full day of fishing.”

Brenda looked impressed. “How did you convince him to do that?”

Matt shrugged. “I went to his grandson’s school with a litter of puppies and talked about being a vet. He was grateful.”

“I imagine the students were, too,” Brenda shook her head. “No wonder you’re never going to retire. You love working with animals too much.”

“The animals aren’t the only thing I’d miss,” Matt said with a grin. “I enjoy seeing what ideas you and Carol come up with to keep the shelter’s doors open.”

“While we’re talking about keeping the doors open,” Brenda said, giving him a meaningful look, “you’re staying for the entire fundraiser, aren’t you? Not just dropping by, but actually attending the event?”

Matt’s eyebrows rose. “Have you been talking to Carol? She asked me the same thing.”

Brenda smiled. “And you’re dodging my question. You should bring someone. It’ll

be a fun night.”

“It’s a community fundraiser,” Matt replied dryly. “Most women wouldn’t see that as a great date option.”

“Still.” Brenda wasn’t giving up. “Lynda Morth was here yesterday. She’s looking forward to going to the fundraiser.”

Matt felt heat rise to his face. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“Oh, please.” Brenda rolled her eyes. “You light up like a Christmas tree whenever she comes into the clinic.” She raised her hand to stop his protest. “And don’t try denying it. You talk about her all the time.”

“She’s a good vet with decades of experience. Of course, I mention her work.”

Brenda shrugged. “All I’m saying is, you’re both going anyway. You could go together. Maybe get dinner after it finishes.”

“I’m getting lunch now,” Matt said firmly, zipping up his jacket. “Alone. Are you sure I can’t tempt you with a chicken and avocado salad?”

Brenda shook her head. “I’ll be fine, but don’t be surprised if I mention Lynda’s name a few more times before the fundraiser.”

The shelter’s doorbell rang, and Matt turned to see Diana Preston and Charlie, her Golden Labrador.

Diana smiled. “Don’t mind us. I know I’m incredibly early, but I wanted to talk to Brenda about the fundraiser.”

Brenda's smile widened. "Are your sisters happy to donate a night's accommodation at the inn?"

Diana nodded. "It's better than that. We'll do a weekend getaway for two, including all meals and a special gift basket."

While Brenda added the donation to the fundraiser's spreadsheet, Matt escaped into the crisp spring air. He wasn't seeing Charlie for another half hour. If he was quick, he might even be able to have his lunch at his favorite picnic table overlooking the lake.

As he headed toward Pete's Deli, his mind stubbornly returned to Brenda's suggestion of inviting Lynda to the fundraiser.

It'd be hectic, especially if everyone who had bought tickets arrived.

There were bound to be last-minute issues that didn't bode well for spending time with anyone other than Carol and Brenda.

Yet he couldn't deny the little jolt he felt at the thought of seeing Lynda there. In some ways, she reminded him of Maria. Not in appearance or even personality, but in the compassion that seemed to guide her actions.

That thought sent a pang of guilt through him. Maria had been gone for a long time, but sometimes it felt like yesterday. The suddenness of her cancer diagnosis, her rapid decline, and the terrible emptiness of the house afterward had all left scars that he doubted would ever fully heal.

After picking up a sandwich, Matt checked the time.

The table by the lake was too far away, so he sat at one of the outdoor tables in front

of the deli, watching the easy flow of life in Sapphire Bay.

Tourists mingled with locals, everyone enjoying the perfect spring weather.

Across the street, someone walked into Isabel's bookstore, and he wondered if Lynda was still there.

By the time he returned to the clinic, he'd pushed the fundraiser to the back of his mind. After seeing Charlie, his afternoon appointments kept him busy. Before he knew it, Mrs. Pemberton was back to collect a much-improved Rusty.

"The fluids made all the difference," Matt explained as he gently placed the cat in its carrier. He's eaten a little wet food and seems more comfortable. Here's your prescription for his kidney medicine and a sample of the special diet I want you to try."

Mrs. Pemberton tucked the items into her large purse. "What about the fluids you mentioned? The ones I need to give him at home?"

"I'll have Sarah show you how to do that," Matt reassured her. "It sounds difficult, but it's simpler than you think. And if you're not comfortable doing it yourself, you can bring him in three times a week, and we'll do it for you."

"You're a blessing, Dr. Reynolds," Mrs. Pemberton said, touching his arm again. "I don't know what this town would do without you."

After Mrs. Pemberton left, Matt finished his charts and checked on the overnight patients. Rusty wasn't the only one getting fluids today. When he was finished, he told Brenda he was heading out.

"Don't forget we're stopping by the barn," she reminded him. "Carol's probably

having a meltdown by now.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Matt assured her. “I’ll meet you there in half an hour.”

Instead of driving straight to the barn, he stopped at The Flower Cottage and bought a small bouquet of daisies—Maria’s favorite. Then he took the short detour to Sapphire Bay’s only cemetery on the outskirts of town.

The cemetery was peaceful at this time of day. Matt knew the path to Maria’s grave by heart—down the main walkway, left at the big oak tree, then halfway up the gentle slope. The granite headstone was simple but elegant, just like his wife had been.

Kneeling beside Maria’s headstone, he touched the silver lettering. Maria Elizabeth Reynolds, Beloved Wife and Mother. But it was the next words that always made his heart ache. Wherever a beautiful soul has been, there’s a trail of beautiful memories.

He placed the daisies in the small vase beside the headstone, removing the wilted ones from his last visit. Then he sat on the grass, as he’d done every week for fifteen years.

“Hey, honey,” he said softly. “It’s been a busy week. Rusty Pemberton’s kidneys are acting up. You remember him. He’s the orange tabby you said had more lives than any cat you’d ever met. Well, he’s on life eight or nine now, but I think we caught it in time.”

He talked about the clinic, the shelter, and the new kennels they hoped to build if the fundraiser went well. He told her about Stephanie’s latest call and how their granddaughter had passed her last set of exams.

“Carol’s worried about the fundraiser,” he continued, running his fingers through the grass beside the headstone. “I’ve been calling in every favor I can think of for auction

items. I'm not sure how much longer the shelter can keep going if we don't raise the money we need."

A gentle breeze ruffled the daisies, and Matt fell silent. He looked across the cemetery and then back at his wife's grave. "I miss you," he said. "Every day. I know you told me it would change, that I'd get used to you not being here, but that hasn't happened."

An image of Lynda filled his mind, and he sighed.

Before Maria had died, they'd talked about what would happen afterward.

Maria had insisted that he shouldn't spend the rest of his life alone, that he should find happiness again.

At the time, he'd brushed off her words.

He'd been unable to imagine a world without her in it, let alone one where he could feel anything for someone else.

"I think I might be feeling something again," he admitted quietly.

"It's different, Maria. Not like what we had.

But it's... something." He took a deep breath.

"I don't know if I'm ready. She volunteers at the animal shelter but isn't staying permanently in Sapphire Bay.

I'm not even sure she'd want to spend time with me. "

The soft spring breeze rustled the flowers, sending a few petals dancing across the grass. Matt watched them, thinking about how unpredictable life could be.

“I should go,” he said finally, checking his watch. “Carol’s waiting at the barn. The fundraiser is this weekend, and you know how she gets.”

He stood up, brushing the grass from his trousers. “I’ll be back next week.” He touched the top of the headstone, a gesture that had become as natural as breathing. “Love you, always.”

As he returned to his truck, Matt felt his wife’s presence beside him. For some crazy reason, he’d thought he’d feel guilty if he told Maria about Lynda, but he hadn’t. And, for the first time in fifteen years, he was curious about what the future might hold.

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Lynda balanced at the top of the ladder, stretching to secure a string of twinkling lights to a wooden beam.

The cavernous old barn at the edge of Sapphire Bay had been used for community events for decades.

Transforming it from a blank canvas into something magical for the fundraiser was proving to be a challenge.

“A little to the left,” Carol called from below, squinting up at Lynda’s handiwork. “We need to make sure the lights cascade evenly across the dance floor.”

“Like this?” Lynda asked, shifting the strand of lights.

“Perfect!” Carol smiled for what seemed like the first time that afternoon. “You’re a lifesaver. I don’t know how I would have managed all this without your help.”

Lynda carefully made her way down the ladder. “Happy to help,” she said, meaning it despite her aching shoulders. “Though I’m pretty sure I’ve hung more fairy lights in the past two hours than I have in my entire life.”

She surveyed their progress. The barn was slowly being transformed.

White fabric draped from the ceiling beams, creating the illusion of clouds, while the lights twinkled like stars above what would be the dance floor.

Long tables lined one wall, waiting for the auction items, and a make-shift stage had

been set up for the local band who'd volunteered to play.

Carol checked items off her clipboard. "Lights, check. Stage, check. Now we need to finish setting up the tables for the silent auction items and then arrange the hay bales for additional seating."

"How many people are you expecting?" Lynda asked, taking a sip from her water bottle.

"We've sold over two hundred tickets," Carol said, her pride evident. "It's our biggest turnout ever. If the auction goes well, we might raise enough for the new kennels."

Lynda knew how badly the shelter needed the renovations. The current kennels were functional but outdated, and they needed proper isolation areas for sick animals. The barn fundraiser was their best chance at gathering enough money to make it happen.

Carol frowned. "The only thing I'm worried about is the weather. If the storm comes through like it's supposed to, it might stop people from coming to the barn."

From what Lynda had heard, a little wild weather wouldn't stop anyone. "Everyone's super excited," she reassured Carol. "I don't think anything will stop the community from supporting the animal shelter."

"I hope you're right." Carol straightened her shoulders. "But I can't let that worry me. We have a fabulous venue and lots of donated prizes for everyone."

"Including a basket of books from Isabel," Lynda told Carol. "And Kathleen's giving us a 'coffee and pastries for a month' package from her café."

"That's wonderful," Carol said as she wrote the donations on her clipboard. "The

community's support has been amazing.”

The barn door swung open, flooding the room with late afternoon sunlight. Lynda's heart jumped when she saw Matt standing in the doorway.

“I can't believe how good the barn looks,” he called out as he made his way toward them.

Lynda tugged self-consciously at her old t-shirt, suddenly aware of how hot and sweaty she must look. Her hair had mostly escaped its practical bun, and she'd long since abandoned her sweater in the unseasonable warmth of the day.

“Matt! Thank goodness,” Carol rushed over to him. “Please tell me you brought the updated auction list.”

He pulled a folder from under his arm. “Brenda ran after me when I left the clinic without it. Is she here yet?”

The barn door opened again, and Brenda hurried inside. “I hope I'm not too late.”

Carol gave her friend a quick hug. “Your timing's perfect. Matt just gave me the updated auction list. We can add some extra gift boxes to the table to match the donations.”

Brenda glanced around the barn, her eyes lingering on the lights above them. “It looks incredible in here.”

“Lynda's been here since one o'clock,” Carol told her. “She hung all the fairy lights.”

Matt's gaze shifted to Lynda. The warmth in his blue eyes made her feel oddly flustered.

“You’ve done an incredible job,” he said. “I didn’t know veterinary school included a specialty in event decoration.”

“It was an elective,” Lynda replied dryly. “Right after ‘Dealing with Difficult Cats’ and before ‘The Art of Adding Pills to Peanut Butter.’”

Matt laughed, the sound echoing pleasantly in the barn. “Well, they taught you well. This place looks completely different.”

“It’s still a work in progress,” Lynda said, gesturing to the stacks of hay bales yet to be arranged and the tables pushed against the far wall.

“Then put me to work,” Matt said, rolling up his sleeves. “I’m all yours for the next few hours.”

The phrase sent an unexpected tingle down Lynda’s spine.

If she didn’t get a grip on her emotions, she’d never be able to look Matt in the eyes again.

“The hay bales need to be arranged in conversational groupings,” she instructed, falling back on what needed to be done.

“And we need to cover the hay with the quilts beside them. It’ll make them more comfortable when people sit on them. ”

Matt nodded and immediately went to work, effortlessly lifting hay bales that Lynda had been struggling to drag across the floor. She tried not to notice the way his shirt stretched across his shoulders or the way he positioned the bales so they were perfect for what they needed.

For the next hour, they worked with Carol and Brenda, arranging seating, setting up tables, and helping to organize the auction items.

“So,” Matt said as Lynda covered the final hay bale with a colorful quilt, “Brenda said you’re coming to the fundraiser.”

Lynda nodded. “I was supposed to be on duty at the animal shelter, but another volunteer said they’d look after the animals. Isabel and Kathleen had already bought me a ticket, so it worked out well. Kathleen even convinced Frank and Tommy to come.”

“It should be a good night,” Matt said. He hesitated, then added, “Carol asked me to look after the auction tables, but I’ll have time for a dance or two if you’re interested.”

Lynda’s hands stilled on the quilt. Was Matt asking her to dance? She looked up, trying to read his expression, but Carol called out before she could reply.

“Can you help me with this banner, Matt? It’s too high for me to reach.”

“Be right there,” he called back, then gave Lynda a quick smile. “Duty calls.”

As Matt walked away, Lynda was surprised by how much she was looking forward to dancing with him.

It had been years since she’d danced with anyone.

After the divorce, she’d avoided most social situations where couples were the norm.

But this was Matt. He’d stood beside her as she’d delivered a calf, trudged through ankle-deep mud to rescue a litter of kittens, and made more house calls to sick

animals than anyone else she knew.

“Earth to Lynda,” Brenda’s whispered voice broke into her thoughts. “You’re staring.”

Lynda felt heat rise to her cheeks. “I was just thinking about where the rest of the quilts should go.”

Brenda smiled. “You aren’t the only person who’s been distracted. Matt’s been asking everyone if you’re coming to the fundraiser.”

“He has?” Lynda couldn’t keep the surprise from her voice.

Brenda nodded. “When Sarah offered to work your shift at the shelter, I thought he’d be happy.”

“It’s probably because we get along so well,” Lynda insisted, busying herself with straightening a quilt that was already perfectly positioned. “It’s always more fun to go somewhere when you know who’ll be there.”

“If you say so.” Brenda shrugged. “All I know is that he smiles more when you’re around. And that didn’t happen much before you arrived in Sapphire Bay.”

Before Lynda could reply, Matt returned from helping Carol. “Banner’s up,” he announced. “What’s next on the list?”

“The centerpieces,” Brenda told him. “Carol wants each table to have a mason jar with a floating candle inside.”

As they walked to the table holding the empty mason jars, Lynda was super-sensitive to Matt standing beside her.

She was caught off guard by the casual brush of his arm against hers as they reached for the same jar, the faint scent of his aftershave, and the way he concentrated on filling each jar with just the right amount of water.

Lynda was grateful when more people arrived to help decorate the barn. The additional volunteers created a welcome buffer, allowing her to collect her thoughts without having to analyze why her heart beat faster whenever Matt was near.

Matt placed a box of candles beside her. “Have you ever been to one of these fundraisers before?”

Lynda shook her head. “This will be my first. We had similar events in Denver, but they were more formal. Most of them were silent auctions in hotel ballrooms, that sort of thing.”

“Our version is a little more rustic,” Matt said with a smile. “But what we lack in glamour, we make up for in heart. Most of the town will be here.”

“It seems that way,” Lynda agreed. “Everyone I’ve met has mentioned coming. It wasn’t so easy to sell tickets to fundraising events in Denver.”

“It’s because we’re doing more than raising money,” Matt explained. “It’s a chance for everyone to catch up with their friends. Plus, there’s something about dancing in a barn that feels timeless. It’s just the mice we have to watch out for.”

The warmth in his voice made Lynda smile. “I’ll make sure I bring a few mousetraps with me.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry. The line dancing should scare away the mouse population. If it doesn’t, the rancher’s resident cats might make an appearance.”

Lynda grinned. His enthusiasm was almost boyish and completely different from the serious, professional mask he usually wore. “You enjoy being part of this town, don’t you?” she asked softly.

Matt nodded. “It’s my home.” He paused, his hands stilling on a mason jar. “I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

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Lynda thought about her own life in Denver—the practice she’d built, the house she’d redecorated after Ray left, the routine she’d carefully constructed. But had it ever felt like home the way Sapphire Bay did to Matt?

“What about you?” Matt asked, breaking into her thoughts. “Do you miss Denver?”

Lynda was surprised to realize she needed to think about her answer. “I miss parts of it,” she told him. “My practice, some of my clients. But I don’t miss the noise, the traffic, or the sense of always rushing from one thing to the next.”

“And your daughter?” Matt asked. “You must miss her.”

Lynda smiled, thinking of Amy and her growing family. “I do. Even though she’s busy with her own life, we still talk on the phone. But I miss giving my grandsons a big hug.”

“I know what you mean about our children being busy,” Matt said.

“They build their own lives while we figure out what to do with ours.” He glanced at her.

“Though it doesn’t sound like you’ve been idle.

Between the bookstore and the shelter, you’re busier than most of the people who live in Sapphire Bay. ”

“I’ve enjoyed helping out while I’m here,” she said, reaching for another mason jar.

“How long are you staying?” Matt asked casually—too casually.

Lynda needed to remind Matt that she wasn’t sure she’d ever live permanently in Sapphire Bay.

Whether that was for his benefit or hers, she wasn’t sure.

“I have to go back to Denver at some point. My practice is running well, but there are times when I need to be there. And the woman who rented my house leaves in two months.”

Matt nodded, his expression unreadable. “I did the same thing when I moved to Montana with Maria, my wife. She was born here and wanted to come back. I left someone in charge of my practice and rented our home to my cousin. Coming back to Sapphire Bay was never supposed to be a lifetime commitment, but when Maria died, I couldn’t bear to leave. ”

An awkward silence fell between them, and Lynda wished she could somehow lift the heartache she saw in Matt’s eyes. “Does Maria’s family live here, too?”

Matt nodded. “Three cousins about our age are still living here. Most of their children have left.”

Lynda sighed. “That’s the problem with small towns. Unless there’s a way for people to make a decent living, it’s hard to stay.”

“Okay, everyone!” Carol’s voice rang out across the barn. “I think we’ve done enough for today. The rest can wait until tomorrow morning. Thank you all for your hard work!”

As people began gathering their belongings and heading out, Matt helped Lynda into

her jacket, his hands lingering briefly on her shoulders.

“Can I walk you to your car?” he asked.

Lynda nodded, suddenly unable to find her voice. They stepped out of the barn into the golden light of late afternoon, the lake shimmering in the distance. For a moment, she was struck by the beauty of it all—the mountains rising majestically around them, the clear blue sky, and the tranquil water.

“You know,” Matt said as they walked across the gravel lot, “whatever you decide—about staying or going back to Denver—you’ve made a difference here. At the shelter, especially. I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

“I was happy to help. Besides, the animals respond to kindness,” Lynda said. “Anyone can give them that.”

Matt stopped beside her car, his expression serious. “Not everyone. You have a gift, especially with animals that are frightened because they’ve been hurt or abandoned. And don’t let me start on the amount of patience you have.”

Matt’s words touched her deeply. “Thank you. That means a lot, coming from you.”

They stood there for a moment, the air between them charged with unspoken possibilities. Lynda found herself noticing details she’d overlooked before—the flecks of gray at his temples, the laugh lines around his eyes, the quiet strength in his weathered hands.

“Well,” Matt said finally, “I should let you go. I’m sure you’re exhausted after all that decorating.”

“A little,” Lynda admitted. “But it was worth it. The barn looks beautiful.”

“It does,” Matt agreed. “Almost as beautiful as—” He stopped abruptly, clearing his throat. “Well, it’s going to be a great event. I’ll see you there?”

Lynda nodded, her heart beating a little faster at his unfinished sentence. “Absolutely. Save me a dance.”

The words slipped out before she could stop them, surprising both of them. Matt’s face lit up with a smile that made him look years younger.

“It’s a date,” he said, then quickly added, “I mean, not a ‘date’ date, just a... dance. At some point. During the fundraiser.”

His uncharacteristic awkwardness was endearing, and Lynda found herself smiling back. “I’ll look forward to it.”

As she drove back to Kathleen’s house, Lynda tried to untangle the emotions of the afternoon. The easy teamwork with Matt, the way her heart had raced when he’d almost called her beautiful—it all pointed to something she hadn’t experienced in years. Something she wasn’t sure she was ready for.

Yet when she thought about the fundraiser, about dancing with Matt under the twinkling lights they’d hung together, she couldn’t deny the flutter of anticipation in her chest. It wasn’t a ‘date’ date, as Matt had so adorably clarified. It was only a dance between friends. Colleagues.

But as she turned onto Kathleen’s street, Lynda wondered if it could be the start of something more.

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Lynda held two dresses in front of the mirror, trying to decide which one to wear.

The navy blue dress had subtle silver threading and was her go-to for Denver fundraisers.

It was sophisticated, understated, and comfortable to wear.

The other pale periwinkle dress had flowy sleeves and was purchased on impulse during a shopping trip with Isabel.

“You’re overthinking this.” Kathleen walked into Lynda’s bedroom holding a glass of white wine in each hand. “I’ve never seen you this concerned about what to wear to an event. It’s only the shelter fundraiser.”

Lynda took the glass Kathleen held toward her and placed the dresses on the bed. “I know. It’s ridiculous.” Taking a sip of wine, she let the crisp liquid cool her frayed nerves. “I’m a sixty-seven-year-old woman fussing over clothes like a teenager.”

Kathleen sat on the edge of the bed, picking up the periwinkle dress. “I’ve always liked this one. The color brings out your eyes.” She studied Lynda over the rim of her glass. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain veterinarian who’ll be at the fundraiser, would it?”

Lynda smoothed nonexistent wrinkles from the navy dress. “Don’t be absurd. I don’t know what to wear because I haven’t been to any other fundraisers in Sapphire Bay.”

“Is that why you’ve tried on four different outfits and redone your makeup twice?”

“Three outfits,” Lynda corrected automatically. “And I only redid my eyeliner once because I smudged it.”

Kathleen laughed, the sound warm and familiar in the cozy room. “Whatever you say. But for what it’s worth, Carol told me Matt’s looking forward to seeing you.”

Lynda bit her bottom lip. “If I tell you something, do you promise not to breathe a word of it to Isabel or Susan?”

Kathleen’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me you’ve been seeing Matt without telling me.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Lynda said quickly, setting her wine glass on the nightstand.

“It’s just... he asked me to save him a dance tonight.

Only it wasn’t the words he used, but the way he looked at me.

” She sank onto the edge of the bed. “It’s ridiculous, I know.

It’s just a dance at a community fundraiser, not a marriage proposal. ”

“It’s not ridiculous at all,” Kathleen said, sitting beside her. “It’s perfectly normal to feel excited about dancing with an attractive man who enjoys your company.”

“That’s just it,” Lynda confessed. “I haven’t felt this way in.

.. well, longer than I care to admit. Even before the divorce, Ray and I were only going through the motions.

” She picked up the periwinkle dress again.

“I came to Sapphire Bay to reconnect with my oldest friends, not to develop feelings for the local veterinarian.”

Kathleen smiled. “Sometimes the best things in life are the ones we don’t plan for.” She nodded at the dress Lynda was holding. “Wear that one. It’s perfect for a barn dance.”

Lynda considered it, running her fingers over the soft fabric. It was more casual than she usually wore to events, but it could be more appropriate for a small-town fundraiser. “You don’t think it’s too... I don’t know, young?”

Kathleen snorted. “You’re not wearing a mini skirt and go-go boots. It’s a lovely dress that happens to make you look radiant.” She stood up and handed Lynda the navy blue dress. “Try both dresses with your jewelry and see which one you prefer.”

Lynda slipped into the navy dress first, adding a simple pearl necklace she’d brought with her. The reflection staring back at her was familiar—polished, professional, safe. It was the version of herself she’d crafted after the divorce, a shield against vulnerability.

“It’s nice,” Kathleen said diplomatically.

Lynda nodded, already unzipping it. “But not right for tonight.”

When she stood in the periwinkle dress moments later, even she had to admit there was something special about it. The color warmed her complexion, and the cut was flattering without being overly formal.

“Now we’re talking,” Kathleen said with satisfaction. “You look beautiful.”

Lynda twisted to see the back of the dress in the mirror. “Are you sure it’s not too

casual for a fundraiser?”

“It’s perfect for a barn dance in Sapphire Bay,” Kathleen assured her. She rummaged through Lynda’s jewelry box. “What about these silver earrings?”

Lynda took the dangling earrings, simple silver leaves that caught the light when she moved. They were another recent purchase, bought on the same shopping trip as the dress. “I’ve never actually worn these,” she admitted. “They seemed a bit flashy for wearing during the day.”

“Which makes them perfect for tonight,” Kathleen said firmly. “Put them on.”

As Lynda fastened the earrings, she caught Kathleen watching her with a curious expression. “What?”

“Nothing.” Kathleen smiled. “It’s just nice to see this side of you. I don’t often see the Lynda who buys periwinkle dresses and silver earrings on impulse.”

Lynda felt her cheeks warm. “Blame Isabel. She’s a terrible influence when it comes to shopping.”

“I don’t think it’s Isabel’s influence,” Kathleen said softly. “I think it’s Sapphire Bay. You’re different here, freer somehow.”

Lynda couldn’t quite meet her friend’s eyes. There was too much truth in what Kathleen was saying. She was different here—less guarded, more willing to step outside the careful boundaries she’d drawn around her life in Denver.

“Well, whatever the reason,” Lynda said, reaching for her silver bracelet, “I’m wearing this dress.”

Kathleen looked triumphant. “Matt won’t know what hit him.”

“This isn’t about Matt,” Lynda insisted, even as a traitorous part of her mind wondered what he might think of the dress.

“If you say so,” Kathleen replied. “Have you spoken to Robert at your clinic?”

“I did,” Lynda said with a heavy dose of relief. “I sorted the staffing issues with a Zoom call to everyone and a promise I’d fly to Denver next month.”

Kathleen grinned. “Yeah, for modern technology.” She glanced at her watch. “Isabel should be here with Frank and Tommy any minute. She texted that they’re on their way to pick us up.”

Lynda frowned. “I thought you’d be going with Patrick.” Not long after Kathleen arrived in Sapphire Bay, she’d met Patrick Devlin, one of the foremen on the tiny home project. They’d become firm friends and spent a lot of time together.

Kathleen shook her head. “He’s on babysitting duties while his grandsons and their wives have a date night at the fundraiser. I’ll meet you in the living room when you’re ready.”

The doorbell rang just as Lynda was applying a final touch of lipstick.

“They’re here!” Kathleen called from the hallway. “I’ll let them in while you finish up.”

Lynda took a deep breath and looked at herself in the mirror. The woman staring back at her looked both familiar and like a stranger. She had the same silver hair and blue eyes, but there was a brightness to her expression she hadn’t seen in years.

She grabbed her small silver clutch and headed to the living room, where voices and laughter greeted her.

Isabel stood by the window in a deep green dress that looked beautiful with her blonde hair.

Frank was beside her, dressed in a sports coat and an open-collared shirt, looking handsome and relaxed.

Tommy, fidgeting in his “dress-up” outfit of khaki trousers and a blue button-down shirt, was the first to notice her entrance.

“Wow, Dr. Morth!” Tommy exclaimed. “You look pretty!”

The others turned, and Isabel’s face lit up with delight. “I told you that dress was perfect. You look absolutely gorgeous.”

Frank nodded in agreement. “Tommy’s right. You look lovely, Lynda.”

“Thank you all,” Lynda said, feeling a warm flush rise to her cheeks at their genuine compliments.

Isabel approached, adjusting one of Lynda’s silver earrings slightly. “These are perfect with your dress. I’m so glad you bought them.”

“I wouldn’t have noticed them without you pointing them out to me,” Lynda replied with a smile.

Kathleen emerged from the kitchen, elegant in a floral dress that looked perfect on her. “Sorry to keep everyone waiting! I just needed to grab my jacket.”

“You’re right on time,” Isabel assured her. “You might need to grab a jacket, too, Lynda. It’s just started to rain.”

Tommy tugged at Frank’s sleeve. “Can we go now, Grandpa? You said there’d be ice cream.”

Frank ruffled Tommy’s hair with affection. “Yes, there’ll be ice cream. And yes, we can go now.” He turned to the women. “Your chariot awaits, ladies.”

As they filed out to Frank’s SUV, Isabel shared her umbrella with Lynda. “When I dropped off the books, Matt turned on the lights you hung in the barn. They look amazing.”

“Everyone worked hard,” Lynda replied with a smile. “Matt and Carol have organized other events at the barn, so they knew the best way to arrange everything.”

Isabel leaned closer to Lynda. “Matt seems quite interested in you.”

Lynda shrugged. “He’s interested in a lot of people.”

Isabel shot her a knowing look but mercifully dropped the subject as they climbed into Frank’s SUV.

As they drove toward the barn, Tommy chattered excitedly with Frank about the night ahead. Kathleen discussed the auction items with Isabel, and Lynda gazed out the window at the mountains silhouetted against the darkening sky.

Tonight was just a community fundraiser, she reminded herself. If she happened to share a dance with a certain silver-haired veterinarian under the twinkling lights they’d hung together, well, that was simply being sociable.

But the flutter in her chest told a different story.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Matt straightened the last of the information pamphlets on his makeshift examination table.

Even though it was raining, the red barn hummed with activity.

The local band was keeping everyone entertained, the silent auction tables were attracting clusters of people, and the aroma of barbecue filled the air.

Through the open barn doors, he could see more cars arriving as headlights swept across the dark sky.

So far, the fundraiser was shaping up to be their most successful yet. Carol had sold every ticket, and the auction items were generating lots of interest.

A woman in her seventies approached his booth with a small terrier cradled in her arms. "Is this where I can get my dog checked?"

"That's right, Mrs. Hatcher," Matt said, recognizing one of his longtime clients. "What brings Max in tonight?" He patted the examination table, and she gently placed the dog down.

"He's been scratching his left ear something fierce," she explained. "I've been meaning to bring him in, and when I heard you were doing free check-ups tonight, I had to come. Especially when I can support your fundraiser at the same time."

"Let's have a look." As Matt examined Max's ear, he was acutely aware of the activity at the booth next to his.

Lynda stood in a lavender-colored dress that made her eyes seem even bluer. She was speaking to a young couple about a tabby kitten in a small enclosure, her hands gesturing as she explained something about the cat's personality.

"...and she's already litter trained," he heard Lynda saying. "She'd make a wonderful pet if you're looking for one that's affectionate but independent."

Matt smiled to himself, returning his attention to Max's ear. "Just as I suspected, Mrs. Hatcher. He's got a mild ear infection. Nothing serious, but I'll give you some drops to clear it up."

As he wrote down instructions for the ear medication, Lynda glanced his way. When their eyes met, she smiled briefly before turning back to the couple, who were now filling out adoption paperwork.

After Mrs. Hatcher left with her prescription and a promise to bring Max in for a follow-up next week, Matt found himself with a momentary lull. He used the opportunity to lean toward Lynda's booth.

"Looks like you've found a home for Mittens," he said.

Lynda nodded, handing a clipboard to the couple. "It's the fifth adoption of the night. We might break last year's record at this rate."

"Your dress suits you," Matt said before he could stop himself.

A faint blush rose to Lynda's cheeks. "Thank you. It was a bit of an impulse buy."

"Well, it was a good impulse," he replied with a grin.

Before Lynda could respond, Carol hurried over, clipboard in hand. "We're ahead of

schedule on the silent auction,” she reported excitedly. “And the barbecue dinner is ready to be served. They’ve set up a table for shelter volunteers in the corner—you should both grab food while it’s hot.”

“I’ll watch your booths,” Brenda offered, appearing with a plate of her own. “Go eat. You’ve both been working hard.”

Matt glanced at Lynda. “Shall we?”

“Lead the way,” she said, setting down her clipboard. “I realized I was starving the moment Carol mentioned food.”

They made their way through the crowded barn, stopping occasionally to greet friends and neighbors. Lynda chatted with everyone as if she’d been part of the community for years instead of months.

“You’ve made quite an impression,” Matt told her as they joined the line for food.

Lynda laughed. “Hardly. I’m just the stranger who helps out at the shelter and the bookstore.”

“You’re more than that,” Matt said quietly. “You’ve become part of Sapphire Bay.”

Something flickered in Lynda’s eyes—uncertainty, perhaps, or something deeper he couldn’t quite read. Before she could reply, they reached the food tables piled high with barbecue brisket, pulled pork, coleslaw, and all the fixings.

“Dr. Reynolds!” Tommy’s voice carried across the crowded area. The boy waved enthusiastically from a table where he sat with Frank, Isabel, and Kathleen. “We saved you and Dr. Morth seats!”

Matt waved to Tommy, then smiled at Lynda. “Are you happy to sit at Tommy’s table?”

“It’ll be good to hear what Tommy’s been doing,” Lynda replied. “Though I warn you, Kathleen will be watching us like a hawk. I told her I’d saved you a dance, and now she thinks we’re more than friends.”

Matt’s heart pounded. “I’ll make sure I’m on my best behavior then.”

With their plates full of delicious food, they joined everyone at the table. Matt was sandwiched between Tommy and Lynda, an arrangement he didn’t mind at all.

“The shelter area looks fantastic,” Isabel said as they began eating. “I’ve seen at least four people filling out adoption forms.”

“It is going well,” Lynda agreed. “Though I’m worried we might run out of applications at this rate.”

“I’ve got extras if we need them,” Carol said, stopping by their table. “This barbecue is amazing. Have you tried the brisket?”

“It’s so good,” Lynda enthused around a bite. “Who’s the chef?”

“Pete from the deli,” Matt explained. “He smokes the brisket for twenty-four hours. The recipe’s a favorite with everyone.”

Lynda closed her eyes briefly as she savored another bite. “I can see why. We didn’t have anything like this at our Denver fundraisers.”

“That’s because those were fancy hotel ballroom events,” Kathleen teased. “You can’t have a real barbecue when everyone’s in cocktail dresses.”

“I’ll take this over rubber chicken any day,” Lynda replied, spearing another piece of brisket.

Matt enjoyed the easy banter around the table, the way everyone laughed and talked over each other. He’d lived in Sapphire Bay for a long time, but sometimes, he was still amazed at how the community had embraced him after Maria’s death. These people weren’t just neighbors—they were family.

When Tommy launched into a detailed account of his latest fishing adventure, Matt watched Lynda.

She listened attentively to Tommy, asking him questions and showing genuine interest in his story.

Her silver earrings caught the light when she laughed, and Matt realized he couldn’t remember the last time he’d noticed that kind of detail about anyone.

A sudden commotion near the entrance drew everyone’s attention. A large dog was backed against the wall, barking at the crowd around him. The dog’s owner, a teenager Matt recognized as Joey Williams, was trying to calm his canine buddy.

“That’s Luna,” Matt said, already rising from his seat. “She’s a rescue dog and still getting used to being around people.”

Lynda was on her feet just as quickly. “Poor thing looks overwhelmed.”

Without discussing it, they moved together through the crowd, approaching the nervous dog with careful, measured steps. Matt gestured for people to back away, creating space around the anxious animal.

“Hey, Joey,” Matt said calmly. “Luna seems a little stressed. What happened?”

The boy looked close to tears. “I thought she was ready for something like this. She’s been doing so well at home, but when she heard the band, she freaked out.”

“It’s okay,” Lynda said softly. “Let’s give Luna some space and see if we can help her calm down.”

Matt nodded as Lynda approached the dog from his left side while he took the right.

“Luna,” Matt called softly, keeping his body language relaxed and non-threatening. “It’s just me, honey.”

Lynda, meanwhile, was kneeling a few feet away, making herself smaller and less intimidating. “Hey there, gorgeous,” she murmured. “That’s a lot of noise, isn’t it? I don’t blame you for being worried.”

The dog’s barking subsided to a whine, her ears tilting at Lynda’s soothing tone.

“Joey, do you have treats with you?” Matt asked.

The boy nodded, fumbling in his pocket and producing a few small dog biscuits.

“Good,” Matt said. “Give one to Dr. Morth.”

Lynda accepted the treat but didn’t immediately offer it to Luna. Instead, she sat quietly on the floor, waiting.

Matt joined her, settling a respectful distance from the dog. “I think Luna might feel better in a quieter spot,” he suggested to Joey. “There’s a small office at the back of the barn where she can relax.”

“I didn’t mean to upset her,” Joey said miserably.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” Lynda assured him. “Some dogs, especially rescues, get overwhelmed in noisy, crowded places. It’s part of their adjustment process.”

Luna had stopped barking entirely now. Her attention was fixed on Lynda. Cautiously, the dog took a step toward her, then another.

“That’s it,” she encouraged softly. “No one’s going to hurt you.”

Matt watched as Luna gradually approached Lynda, sniffing tentatively at her outstretched hand. When Luna seemed comfortable, Lynda offered the treat on her open palm. The dog took it, then pressed against her side, seeking comfort.

“There we go,” Lynda murmured as she stroked Luna’s head. “You’re okay.”

A small crowd had gathered to watch them work, including Carol, Brenda, and several of the shelter’s volunteers. Matt caught Joey’s eye. “Let’s walk Luna to the quiet room while she’s calm.”

Together, they escorted the dog through the barn, Lynda keeping a gentle hand on Luna’s back, Matt leading the way and making sure no one approached too suddenly. By the time they reached the small office, Luna had stopped trembling.

“That was amazing,” Joey said once they’d settled Luna on a blanket in the corner. “How did you know what to do?”

“Experience,” Matt and Lynda said simultaneously, then exchanged surprised glances.

Joey sat beside his dog. “I’ll stay with Luna. My brother said he’d take me home early if we want to leave.”

“That might be a good idea,” Lynda said. “The music might get a little noisy for Luna.”

Matt looked at Joey. “Do you want me to find your brother?”

“That’d be great, Dr. Reynolds.”

Lynda stood beside Matt. “I’ll help look for your brother, too. We won’t be long.”

As they stepped out of the office, Joey sat closer to Luna.

Matt stood beside Lynda in the narrow hallway. The sounds of the fundraiser seemed distant here, the music and chatter muffled.

“We make a good team,” he said quietly.

Lynda met his eyes, something unreadable in her expression. “We do, don’t we?”

For a moment, Matt thought about reaching for her hand, about giving voice to the thoughts that had been circling in his mind for weeks now. But before he could gather his courage, Carol appeared at the end of the hallway.

“There you are!” she called. “They’re about to announce the first round of silent auction winners, and they need Matt’s help.”

Matt sighed. “Duty calls. Remember to save me a dance.”

Lynda nodded, the silver earrings catching the light. “I will.”

As Matt followed Carol back into the bustling main area of the barn, he realized he was looking forward to that dance more than he cared to admit. Because working

with Lynda to calm Luna had confirmed what he'd been suspecting for weeks—they weren't just good colleagues or casual friends.

They were something else entirely, something with potential that both thrilled and terrified him. And for the first time in fifteen years, he was ready to find out exactly what that something might be.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Matt stood by the refreshment table, sipping his punch and scanning the barn.

The fairy lights that Lynda had hung created a magical atmosphere, casting a warm glow over the crowded dance floor.

Thankfully, the fundraiser was a resounding success.

The weather hadn't deterred anyone, and the first five auction items had sold for far more than they were worth.

He spotted Lynda across the room, talking with Isabel and Frank.

Carol appeared beside him. "You should ask her to dance."

Matt nearly choked on his punch. "I'm supposed to be helping you."

"There's another half hour before the next items are auctioned," Carol replied, nudging him with her elbow. "And you've been watching Lynda all evening. Go on before someone else asks her."

As if on cue, the band finished their current song and the lead guitarist stepped up to the microphone.

"Alright, folks! Time for everyone to get on the dance floor. We're going to do the Sapphire Bay Stomp—you all know this one!"

A cheer went up as people began moving toward the dance floor, forming lines. Matt

recognized the traditional line dance that had been a staple at town events for as long as he'd been here.

Taking a deep breath, he set down his cup and walked across the barn. Lynda saw him coming and smiled, causing his carefully rehearsed greeting to evaporate from his mind.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked simply when he reached her. "It's the Sapphire Bay Stomp. Everyone joins in."

"I have no idea what that is," Lynda admitted with a laugh, "but I'd love to try."

"Don't worry," Matt assured her, feeling more confident as he led her toward the dance floor. "I'll teach you the steps. It's pretty simple once you get the pattern."

They joined one of the lines forming on the dance floor. Isabel and Frank were already in position a few people down, and Matt noticed Tommy eagerly demonstrating the steps to a group of children nearby.

"Okay," Matt explained quickly as the band began to play the introduction. "It's four steps forward, back-step, quarter turn, stomp twice, then clap and repeat. Just follow my lead for the first round."

Lynda frowned but still nodded. "Forward, back, turn, stomp, clap. Got it."

The music started in earnest, and the lines began to move. Matt stepped confidently through the familiar pattern, watching from the corner of his eye as Lynda followed his movements. She was a quick learner, only hesitating slightly on the quarter turn before finding her rhythm.

"You're a natural!" he called over the music as they completed the first cycle.

Lynda laughed, her eyes bright with enjoyment. “This is fun! The last time I line danced was when I was a teenager.”

As the music continued, Matt relaxed in a way he hadn’t in years.

There was something wonderfully uncomplicated about the line dance—the predictable pattern, the communal energy, the simple joy of moving to music.

And seeing Lynda beside him, cheeks flushed and laughing every time she got a step slightly wrong, made everything better.

By the third repetition, Lynda had mastered the basic steps and was adding her own flair to the movements. When they reached the stomp section, she caught his eye and deliberately stomped with extra enthusiasm, making him laugh out loud.

“Show-off!” he teased as they clapped in unison.

“Just following the local customs,” she retorted with a grin.

The dance grew more spirited as the music quickened. Matt felt years younger, especially when the pattern changed and partners briefly joined hands for a twirl before returning to their lines. Lynda’s hand felt warm and steady in his as they spun into the next steps.

When the song finally ended, everyone erupted in applause. Matt and Lynda stood side by side, slightly breathless and smiling.

“That was wonderful,” Lynda said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Though I think I might have stomped on someone’s foot during that last turn.”

“If you did, they’ll survive,” Matt replied. “You were great for a first-timer.”

The band started playing a slower tune, and couples began pairing off on the dance floor. Matt hesitated, wondering if he should ask Lynda to stay for another dance.

Before he could decide, Carol's voice called out over the crowd. "Matt! We need you at the auction table. It's time to announce the next set of winners!"

Matt's shoulders sagged. At this rate, he wouldn't be spending much time with Lynda at all. "Thanks for the dance."

"Thank you for reminding me how to line dance," she replied. The warmth in her eyes made him wish he could stay. "I'll have to practice before the next fundraiser."

Something about the way she said "next fundraiser" gave Matt hope. It sounded like she might be planning to stick around Sapphire Bay a little longer. "I'd be happy to give you more lessons."

Lynda smiled. "I might take you up on that."

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Lynda swayed gently on the dance floor, holding both of Tommy's hands as he carefully tried not to step on her toes. The eight-year-old's face was a picture of concentration, his tongue poking out slightly as he focused on remembering the steps Frank had taught him earlier.

"You're doing wonderfully, Tommy," Lynda encouraged him, smiling as he executed a careful turn.

"Grandpa says knowing how to dance is important," Tommy informed her seriously. "He says ladies like a man who knows how to dance."

Lynda bit back a laugh. "Your grandpa is a very wise man."

"I know," Tommy agreed, looking up at her with earnest blue eyes. "I saw you dancing with Dr. Matt earlier. Was he good at the Sapphire Bay Stomp?"

"He was wonderful," Lynda replied. "I didn't think I'd remember the steps, but he was a good teacher."

Tommy grinned. "He taught me how to listen to animal heartbeats with his stethoscope. He says I could be a vet when I grow up if I want to."

"I think you'd make a great vet," Lynda told him. "You're very gentle with animals."

The song began to wind down, and Tommy looked relieved that he'd made it through without any major missteps. As the final notes played, he gave a formal little bow that made Lynda's heart melt.

“Thank you for the dance, Dr. Morth,” he said with childish formality.

“The pleasure was all mine, Mr. Tommy,” she replied, matching his serious tone.

Tommy grinned, then his eyes focused on something over her shoulder. “Dr. Matt’s coming,” he announced. “I think he wants to dance with you.”

Before Lynda could respond, Tommy darted away through the crowd, leaving her alone on the edge of the dance floor. She turned to see Matt approaching. If she didn’t know better, she’d say he looked a little nervous.

“Has Tommy abandoned you?” Matt said, coming to stand beside her.

“He was a perfect gentleman,” Lynda replied with a smile. “He even bowed at the end of the dance.”

“Frank said he was teaching him how to dance.” Matt glanced at the couples around them as the band started to play the next song. “Would you like to dance again? This one’s a bit slower than the Stomp.”

Lynda smiled. “I know how to waltz, so I’d love to.” Her heart beat a little faster as Matt placed one hand lightly on her waist while taking her hand with the other. She placed her free hand on his shoulder, feeling the solid warmth of him beneath his dress shirt.

“The auction seemed to go well,” she said as they began to sway to the music. “Everyone looked excited with their winnings.”

Matt nodded, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “We raised more than ever before. Carol’s over the moon. Did you see Mayor Wilson’s face when he won the fishing trip with Frank? You’d think he’d won the lottery.”

“I did,” Lynda chuckled. “And Mrs. Pemberton was practically in tears when she got Isabel’s rare book collection about cats.”

“She loves her cats more than most people love their children,” Matt said with a fond smile. “She’s already planning to build them a library corner in her sunroom.”

They moved together easily, finding a natural rhythm as they swayed across the floor. Lynda was surprised at how comfortable it felt to be in Matt’s arms, how right it seemed.

“I haven’t danced like this in years,” she admitted softly.

“Neither have I,” Matt replied. His hand was warm and steady against her waist. “Not since Maria got sick.”

The mention of his late wife didn’t feel like a barrier between them as it once might have. Instead, it felt like Matt was sharing a part of himself, opening a door.

“What was she like?” Lynda asked gently.

Matt’s expression softened. “Vibrant. Full of life. She loved this town more than anywhere else in the world. She knew everyone’s name, remembered their birthdays, and brought soup when people were sick.” He paused. “She was a fourth-grade teacher. The kids adored her.”

“She sounds wonderful,” Lynda said sincerely.

“She was.” Matt’s eyes met hers. “What about you? Was your marriage good before everything ended?”

“I thought it was,” Lynda said. “But then Ray left me for his twenty-nine-year-old

receptionist. That was the hardest part—realizing that what I thought we had wasn't real.

"She shook her head slightly. "Ray always wanted more—more money, more prestige, a bigger house, fancier vacations. When we were young, it seemed exciting. As we got older, it was exhausting."

Matt nodded, understanding in his eyes. "What do you want now?" he asked quietly. "From life, I mean."

The question caught Lynda by surprise. She'd been so focused on rebuilding everything after the divorce that she hadn't spent much time thinking about what she wanted for her future.

"I want peace," she said finally. "Connection. Work that matters. And I want to stop being afraid of getting hurt again." She looked up at him. "What about you?"

"For years, all I wanted was to raise Stephanie well, to make Maria proud," Matt said. "And to be a good vet, to help the animals in this community." He hesitated. "But lately, I've been thinking there might be more."

"More?" Lynda prompted.

"Companionship," he said quietly. "Someone to share coffee with in the mornings. Someone to tell about the interesting cases I see at the clinic." His blue eyes held hers. "I didn't think I'd want that again, but I miss it."

The music swelled around them, and Lynda felt something shift between them—a recognition, a possibility. For years, she'd guarded her heart, convinced that opening it again would only lead to pain. But as they moved slowly to the music, she wanted to believe there was another path she could follow.

“I’ve been thinking about moving permanently to Sapphire Bay,” she admitted, the words surprising her even as she spoke them.

Matt’s hand tightened slightly on her waist. “What about your practice in Denver?”

“I could sell it to Robert,” she said, ideas forming as she spoke. “He’s been helping me to run it for years anyway. And I’ve been thinking about specializing in wildlife rehabilitation—something I’ve always wanted to do but never had the time for.”

“The shelter could certainly use someone with your expertise,” Matt said, a careful hope in his voice.

“I was worried about my house,” Lynda continued. “But I have to keep reminding myself it’s only four walls and a roof. Apart from my daughter and grandsons, there’s nothing really keeping me in Denver.”

“And here?” Matt asked softly. “What would keep you here?”

Lynda looked into his eyes, feeling brave in a way she hadn’t in years. “Possibilities,” she answered truthfully. “New beginnings.”

As the song drew to a close, neither of them seemed eager to part. When the final notes faded, they remained for a moment, still holding each other in the middle of the dance floor.

“Lynda,” Matt began, then hesitated. “I’d like to?—”

“There you are!” Carol’s voice broke through their moment as she hurried over. “Sorry to interrupt, but the shelter just got a call from one of the park rangers. Someone saw a litter of puppies near Wolf Creek Pass. The mother was alive, but was injured. They think they might be wolfdog hybrids.”

Matt frowned. “When did they see them?”

“About an hour ago. They weren’t prepared to get closer to the den, but from what they saw, the pups are really young.”

Lynda looked at Matt. “If their mom can’t look after them, they’ll be cold and hungry.”

Carol handed Matt a piece of paper. “Ben Davis is the ranger who called. He said he’d meet you outside your clinic in twenty minutes and take you to the den.”

Matt nodded. “I’ll head there now.”

“I’ll come too,” Lynda said without hesitation. “If the mother’s injured, you’ll need two sets of hands.”

Matt nodded. “I’ve got a change of clothes at the clinic. We could stop at Kathleen’s house if you want to change into something warmer.”

“That’d be great,” Lynda said before turning to Carol. “Could you let Kathleen and Isabel know where I’m going?”

“I will. Take care on the road.”

As they hurried out of the barn, Lynda thought of all the things they’d need to transport the animals back to Sapphire Bay. Hopefully, between the ranger and Matt, they’d have everything they needed—especially if the mother’s injuries were serious.

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Matt gripped the door handle of the rangers' truck as it lurched over another muddy rut in the service road.

Rain lashed against the windshield, the wipers barely keeping up with the deluge.

Beside him in the back seat, Lynda braced herself against the headrest, her face a mask of determination in the dim light.

"How much farther?" Matt asked, squinting through the rain-streaked glass.

Another ranger, Daphne Stevens, was seated in the front passenger seat beside Ben. She looked down at her GPS. "Half a mile to the trailhead, then it's a quarter-mile hike to the den. The person who found the pups said there are lots of fallen branches and the river is rising fast."

Matt exchanged a glance with Lynda. Sturdy hiking pants, a waterproof jacket, and boots now replaced her elegant dress from the fundraiser. She'd tied her hair back in a practical braid, and her face was free of makeup. To Matt, she'd never looked more beautiful.

Lynda checked the medical kit for the third time. "If we can stabilize the mother, we might be able to save both her and the pups."

Matt nodded, though privately he was less optimistic. The worsening storm and the remote location was working against them.

The truck slid as they rounded a bend, and Ben corrected the steering. Flathead Lake

was to the left of them, but it was so dark that Matt couldn't see a thing past the edge of the road.

"There!" Daphne pointed to a small clearing ahead. "That's the trailhead."

Ben pulled the truck as close as possible, then cut the engine. The sudden silence made the hammering rain seem even louder. "We'll need to move quickly but carefully. Remember to stay together. This storm's getting worse by the minute."

They geared up quickly—headlamps, rain ponchos over their already wet-weather gear, backpacks with medical supplies, and a GPS to find the pups location. Matt carried a collapsible stretcher for the mother wolfdog, while Lynda held a carrying case designed for small animals.

The moment they stepped out of the truck, the full force of the storm hit them. The rain was coming sideways now, driven by gusts of wind that bent the tops of the pines surrounding them. The ground underfoot was a treacherous mix of mud, fallen leaves, and exposed roots.

"This way!" Ben called, already heading up a narrow path that was quickly becoming a stream.

Matt fell into step behind him, with Lynda close behind and Daphne bringing up the rear. The beam of his headlamp bounced off rain-slicked rocks and puddles as they climbed steadily upward. Though the distance wasn't great, the conditions made every step a challenge.

Ten minutes into the hike, the walkie-talkie on Ben's belt crackled to life. "Base to rescue team. There are reports of flash flooding farther up the valley. How far away from the pups are you?"

“We’re almost at the den site,” Ben replied. “We’ll get out of here as fast as we can.”

There was a pause, then the voice said, “Understood. But make it quick. The worst of the storm hasn’t passed.”

Ben ended the call and they pushed forward, climbing the steep and slippery slope as best they could.

“There!” Ben stopped, pointing his light toward a rocky outcropping about fifty yards ahead. “The den should be just beyond those fallen trees.”

They approached carefully. Wolfdog hybrids could be unpredictable in the best of circumstances, and an injured mother protecting her pups would be doubly dangerous.

As they drew closer, Matt’s heart sank. Even from a distance, he could see the massive trunk of a pine tree that had fallen directly across the entrance to a small cave. Beneath it, barely visible, was the still form of a large animal.

“Oh no,” Lynda breathed beside him.

They all hurried toward the wolfdog. She lay motionless, the fallen tree pinning her body to the ground. Even in death, the mother was magnificent. She had silver-gray fur, a powerful build, with features that clearly showed both her wolf and dog heritage.

Matt knelt beside the animal, placing a gentle hand on her side, though he already knew what he would find. No heartbeat, no breath. “She’s only been dead for an hour or two,” he said quietly.

Lynda was already moving past the mother, toward the small opening of the den.

“The puppies,” she said urgently. “If they’re still alive, we need to get to them.”

Matt joined her, shining his light into the darkness. The beam caught a movement—something small and furry huddled at the back of the den.

“They’re alive!” Lynda exclaimed. “I can see at least three of them.”

Matt looked around the opening. “It’s too small for either of us to crawl through. We’ll need to move some of these rocks to widen it.”

Working together, they removed the stones from around the entrance while the rangers kept watch for any signs of further landslides or falling trees. The rain continued to pour down, and thunder rumbled ominously in the distance.

“Almost there,” Matt grunted as he shifted a heavy boulder. “Try now, Lynda. You’re smaller than me.”

Lynda didn’t hesitate. She dropped to her hands and knees and began to wiggle into the opening, her headlamp shining into the cave.

“Be careful,” Matt couldn’t help saying, his heart in his throat as she disappeared into the dark space.

For a few tense moments, all he could see were her boots. Then her voice came back to him, filled with a mix of relief and urgency.

“Five puppies!” Lynda said loudly. “All alive but cold and hungry. They look about three weeks old. Matt, I’ll need the carrying case and some of those warming packs.”

Matt quickly unpacked the supplies she needed, passing them through the opening. Working together, they managed to get all five squirming puppies safely into the

insulated carrier.

“They’re dehydrated but otherwise seem healthy,” Lynda reported as she emerged from the den, mud-streaked but triumphant. “No obvious injuries.”

A crack of lightning split the sky, followed almost immediately by a deafening thunderclap. The storm was directly overhead now.

“We need to move!” Ben shouted over the wind. “That slope above us is showing signs of giving way!”

Matt secured the carrier with the puppies while Lynda quickly examined the mother one last time, her face solemn.

“We’ll have to leave her,” she said regretfully. “We can come back after the storm passes.”

Matt nodded and helped Lynda to her feet. It didn’t matter what the circumstances were, it was always hard when an animal died. “Let’s get out of here.”

The journey back down the trail was even more treacherous than the climb up. The path had transformed into a muddy stream, with water rushing down the hillside. Matt carried the precious cargo of puppies, while Lynda stayed close beside him, helping to navigate the safest route.

At one point, Matt’s foot slipped on a submerged rock, and he started to lose his balance. Instantly, Lynda’s hand was there, gripping his elbow with surprising strength, steadying him.

“I’ve got you,” she said, their eyes meeting briefly in the glow of their headlamps.

“Thanks,” he replied, the word encompassing far more than just gratitude for preventing a fall.

They continued downward, watching out for each other. When they finally reached the truck, all four of them were soaked to the skin, covered in mud, and breathing hard from exertion.

Matt placed the puppies between Lynda and himself in the back seat. Ben took the wheel again, with Daphne radioing updates to their office.

“There’s a landslide blocking the main road,” Daphne told them. “We’ll have to take the long way around through the logging roads.”

Ben nodded, putting the truck in gear. “As long as they’re passable, we’ll make it.”

For the next hour, they navigated a maze of increasingly flooded logging roads, the truck struggling through sections where water reached halfway up the wheels. Ben drove with intense concentration, his hands steady on the wheel despite the treacherous conditions.

From the back seat, Lynda kept a careful eye on the puppies. “They’re responding well to the warming packs. I’ve given them each a little glucose solution, which has perked them up. They’re going to need formula as soon as we get back to town.”

“We’ve got supplies at the clinic,” Matt told her. “We can set up the incubator for them there.”

After another thirty minutes of nerve-wracking driving, they finally stopped outside Matt’s clinic. Even though the storm was still raging, the tension in his shoulders began to ease.

“You both did amazing work up there,” Ben said, glancing at them in the rearview mirror. “Most people wouldn’t have gone out in this weather, let alone saved those little ones.”

“The puppies wouldn’t have survived without us,” Matt told him. “Thanks for the ride. My truck would have struggled on the roads.”

Daphne turned and smiled. “That’s what we’re here for. Let us know how the puppies are in a few days’ time.”

“And don’t worry about the pups’ mother,” Ben added. “We’ll go back and bury her once the storm passes.”

Lynda undid her seatbelt. “Thank you. I hope you don’t have any more callouts.”

When they’d said goodbye to Ben and Daphne, Matt picked up their supplies while Lynda carried the puppies toward the clinic.

As quickly as possible, they warmed the incubator to the perfect temperature, prepared some formula, and one by one, fed the tiny puppies.

“They’re fighters,” Lynda said softly as the smallest of the litter eagerly sucked on the bottle she was giving her.

Matt glanced up from the puppy he was feeding. Lynda’s braid had come partially undone, her silver hair forming a soft frame around her face. There was still mud on her cheek and her clothes were damp and rumpled. Yet to Matt, she looked absolutely perfect.

“You were amazing out there,” he said, the words coming from somewhere deep and honest within him.

Lynda smiled, her focus still on the puppy in her arms. “Anyone else would have done the same thing. Besides, I’ve had years of emergency calls in Denver.

But I’ve never done a rescue quite like this one.

” She looked up, meeting his eyes. “Thank you for letting me come along. Most vets would have insisted on handling it themselves.”

“Most vets haven’t worked with you,” Matt replied simply.

A comfortable silence fell between them, broken only by the soft whimpers and suckling sounds of the puppies. Outside, the storm continued to rage, but in here, they had created a sanctuary of warmth and safety.

Matt returned the pup he’d fed to the incubator. “They’re going to need round-the-clock care for at least two weeks. We’ll have to feed them every three hours.”

Lynda nodded and looked at him, a small smile playing at her lips. “Once the community hears about the pups, we’ll have more volunteers to help us. But until then, I don’t think either of us will be getting much sleep.”

“Partners?” he asked, offering her a clean bottle for the next puppy.

Lynda’s smile deepened as she accepted it, their fingers brushing. “Partners,” she agreed.

As the storm raged outside and five tiny lives depended on them inside, Matt felt more certain than he had in years. Whatever happened next—with the puppies, with Sapphire Bay, and with his life—having Lynda beside him made everything better.

And that was something worth holding onto.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Lynda checked her watch and yawned. It was just after one o'clock in the morning. Outside, the storm that had hit Sapphire Bay wasn't as wild as it had been, but rain still fell heavily against the clinic's metal roof.

Inside, the clinic hummed with the reassuring sound of the emergency generator. It kept the essential equipment running despite the power outage that had plunged most of the town into darkness.

Lynda carefully cradled the smallest puppy against her chest while recording the animal's vitals in a notebook. With a white patch on her chest, she'd nicknamed the female pup Star.

All five wolfdog puppies had been cleaned, warmed, and fed, but they still had a long way to go until they were healthy. "Star's temperature is still a little low," she murmured, frowning at the thermometer. "It's better than before, but not where I'd like it to be."

Matt looked up from the examination table where he was checking another puppy's gums. "Their glucose levels are improving, at least. The formula seems to be agreeing with them."

Lynda nodded, gently placing Star back in the incubator they'd set up. She adjusted the warming pad beneath the tiny body, making sure it provided even heat. The puppy curled into a tight ball, its breathing quick but steady.

"They're all underweight," she observed, moving to help Matt with his assessment. "I'd guess they weren't getting enough milk even before their mother died. She might

have been injured earlier than we thought.”

“I agree,” Matt said. He handed her a clipboard with the chart he’d been compiling. “I’ve calculated their weights against standard wolfdog development charts. They’re about three weeks old but developmentally closer to two weeks.”

Working together, they reassessed each puppy’s condition, checking for signs of dehydration, testing reflexes, and listening to the little hearts and lungs.

All five puppies were still malnourished and suffering from mild hypothermia, but didn’t have any underlying conditions that would prevent them from recovering.

Matt washed his hands, and then dried them on a paper towel. “Until we find more volunteers, it’s just us to look after them. We could take shifts—one of us resting while the other monitors the pups. There’s a cot in my office. It’s not the Ritz, but it’s comfortable enough for a few hours’ sleep.”

“I’ve slept in worse places during emergency calls,” Lynda assured him with a smile. “Remember, I’ve worked at a practice that specialized in large animals. I once spent the night in a barn during a blizzard, helping a horse through a difficult labor.”

Matt smiled back. “I’ve had my share of those nights, too. I can take the first shift.”

A timer beeped, letting them know it was time for another round of feedings.

Lynda stretched. “I’ll help with this meal and then get some sleep.”

“Sounds good to me.” Matt prepared the bottles of special formula while Lynda carefully lifted two puppies out of the incubator.

“I’ll take those two,” Matt said. He settled into a chair holding a puppy in each arm,

and expertly positioned the tiny bottles.

Lynda smiled as she lifted another pup out of the incubator. There was something endearing about seeing Matt holding the puppies and coaxing them to feed. As a flash of lightning illuminated the clinic, she sat opposite Matt.

“The generator should hold,” he said, noticing her glance toward the window. “It’s never failed me yet.”

“This reminds me of hurricane season in Florida,” Lynda said as she gently encouraged one of the puppies to suckle. “I spent a year at a wildlife rehab center in the Everglades right after vet school. We’d be up all night during storms, making sure the animals were safe and calm.”

“Did you go to Denver after that?” Matt asked.

Lynda nodded. “I was offered a job I couldn’t refuse. At the time, I was specializing in exotic animals. The clinic needed someone with my training, and the pay was good. I meant to stay a year or two, but then I met Ray, and...” She shrugged. “Life happened.”

Matt nodded, understanding in his eyes. “That’s how it goes sometimes. One decision leads to another, and suddenly, you’re on a path you never planned.”

“What about you?” Lynda asked, carefully shifting the puppy in her arms to a more comfortable position. “Did you always want to practice in a small town?”

A shadow crossed Matt’s face. “I had a thriving practice in Seattle before moving here. Maria—my wife—was born in Sapphire Bay. We came back to be closer to her family when she got sick.”

Lynda looked up, surprised. “I didn’t know you’d practiced somewhere else.”

“I worked in Seattle for twenty years,” Matt confirmed. “Large clinic, six vets, all the latest equipment. It was very different from here.”

“Do you miss it?”

Matt considered the question. “Sometimes I miss the resources. The specialists were a phone call away, and the advanced diagnostic tools were better than I can provide.” He glanced around the small, simple clinic. “But I’ve never regretted the move. This clinic and the town suit me better.”

The puppy in Matt’s left arm finished its bottle, and he expertly shifted it to his shoulder, patting gently to release any air bubbles. “Maria used to help me in the clinic when she wasn’t teaching,” Matt said quietly. “She was brilliant with the animals.”

Lynda felt a tightening in her chest at the love and respect in his voice. “You must have made a great team.”

“We did,” Matt agreed. “When she was diagnosed with cancer, we sold the practice and moved back here. I opened this clinic so I could work flexible hours and be with her during treatments.” He sighed.

“She worked at the elementary school for a year before it became too much. After that, she insisted on helping at the clinic whenever she had good days, right up until the end.”

“I’m sorry,” Lynda said softly, meaning it. “How long were you together?”

“Twenty-eight years.” Matt’s smile was sad but genuine. “Not nearly long enough.”

They fed the puppies in comfortable silence for a few minutes, each lost in their thoughts.

“What about you and Ray?” Matt asked eventually. “How long were you married?”

“Thirty years,” Lynda replied, surprised at how distant that life now seemed. “We met at a conference. He was brilliant and charismatic. Everyone wanted his attention, but somehow, he noticed me.”

“Of course he noticed you,” Matt said with unexpected firmness. “You’re extraordinary, Lynda. Anyone would notice you.”

The sincere compliment caught her off guard, and warmth rose to her cheeks. “Well, he certainly didn’t think so by the end of our marriage,” she said, trying to lighten the moment. “He traded me in for a younger model.”

“His loss,” Matt said.

Their eyes met over the tiny creatures in their arms, and Lynda felt something shift between them—a deepening of the connection that had been building since the first day they’d met at the shelter.

Here in this quiet clinic, surrounded by the storm outside and the gentle sounds of the puppies, she felt strangely at home.

“We should get these little ones back in the incubator,” she said, breaking the moment before it became too intense. “And we need to set up a feeding schedule.”

Matt nodded, standing carefully with the puppies in his arms. “I’ll wake you in three hours.”

“I’m not tired yet,” Lynda protested. “Why don’t you rest first? I’m still too wired from the rescue.”

Matt studied her face, then conceded. “All right. Wake me up in three hours or if you need anything. Anything at all.”

After they’d settled the puppies back in the incubator, Matt showed her where everything was—extra formula, clean bottles, and medical supplies. He grabbed a blanket from a cabinet and hesitated at the door to his office.

“I’m glad you were here tonight, Lynda. I couldn’t have done this alone.”

“Yes, you could have,” she replied honestly. “But I’m glad I was here too.”

After Matt disappeared into his office, Lynda settled into the chair beside the incubator, a cup of fresh coffee warming her hands.

She watched the rise and fall of five tiny chests, each breath a small victory against the odds.

Outside, the storm continued to rage, but it couldn’t touch the calm center she’d found here.

Lynda thought about what Matt had told her.

His wife had been his partner in every sense.

They’d built a wonderful life together, and his career had given him something to focus on after her death.

It explained so much about him. The wedding ring he still wore, the slightly distant

look that sometimes crossed his face, and the dedication to this small-town clinic that seemed beyond professional duty.

She understood loss—the way it reshapes you, and forces you to rebuild around an absence. But Matt had done more than survive his wife’s death. He’d honored her memory by staying here, by helping the community in a place she’d loved.

There was something beautiful in that, Lynda thought. Something worth admiring.

Star, the smallest puppy, whimpered softly, and Lynda immediately reached in to check on her. Her tiny body was warmer now, and her heartbeat was stronger. Lynda smiled, gently stroking the fuzzy head with one finger.

“Be strong,” she whispered.

As the hours passed, Lynda continued to check on the puppies. Occasionally, she’d glance toward the closed office door, thinking about the man resting beyond it, and wonder at the strange turns life could take.

Three months ago, she’d come to Sapphire Bay for a brief reunion with her friends. Now, here she was, in the middle of a storm, helping save orphaned wolfdog puppies alongside a man who was quickly becoming far more than just a colleague.

Lynda sighed. This was one time when the life she’d never planned turned out to be exactly where she needed to be.

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Matt woke suddenly before he could fully process where he was. The small office cot creaked as he sat up, disoriented for only a moment before the events of the night rushed back to him. The storm. The rescue. The puppies.

Lynda.

He checked his watch. It was half past four in the morning.

He'd slept longer than the planned three hours.

Swinging his legs over the side of the cot, he stood and rolled his stiff shoulders.

The storm didn't sound as loud as when he'd gone to sleep, but the rain was still hitting his office window.

When he opened the door to the exam room, Lynda was bent over the incubator. "Is everything okay?" he called softly.

She turned quickly, relief washing over her tired face. "I was just about to wake you."

He frowned and crossed the room. "What is it?"

"It's Star—the smallest pup." Lynda stepped aside to let him see into the incubator. "Her breathing changed about ten minutes ago. It's shallow and too rapid, and her temperature's dropping again despite the warming pad."

Matt leaned in to examine the tiny puppy with the white chest patch. Even in the

warm light of the incubator, he could see the bluish tint to her gums. Her tiny ribcage heaved with the effort of breathing, each inhale a struggle.

“Respiratory distress,” he murmured, his mind already cycling through what could be causing the issue. “It could be Pneumonia.”

“That’s what I thought, too.” Lynda looked down at the tiny pup. “Her breathing was normal at four o’clock when I gave her something to eat. But when I checked her a few minutes ago, I noticed the change. Her temperature’s dropped from 97.2 to 95.4 in the last twenty minutes.”

Matt carefully lifted the struggling puppy. “Let’s move her to the treatment table. We need to get a better listen to those lungs.” Lynda had already prepared the table, laying out a warming pad and the pediatric stethoscope he kept for his smallest patients.

They worked in silence—Lynda stabilizing the tiny body while Matt listened to the congested sounds in the puppy’s chest.

He looked at Lynda. “Star definitely had aspiration pneumonia. It’s probably from the formula entering the lungs during feeding.”

Lynda opened a cupboard. “I’ll suction the airways and start antibiotics. Are you happy for me to use Amoxicillin?”

Matt nodded. “Once you’ve done that, I’ll set up a small oxygen tent.”

As they worked over the next thirty minutes, Matt appreciated Lynda’s steady hands and positive outlook. The pup would need more than a few prayers if she were going to survive.

“Pulse is steadying,” Lynda reported as Matt carefully inserted the smallest suction tube he had into the puppy’s airway. “Oxygen saturation coming up slightly.”

“Let’s move her into the tent,” Matt said softly. He gently placed Star inside, adjusting the flow rate to the optimal level for her tiny body. Creating a small support from towels, he gently placed it under her back. “This will help her breathing.”

Lynda was already preparing the nebulizer treatment, her movements efficient but gentle. “I think we should start fluids. She’s still dehydrated.”

“Good call,” Matt agreed, preparing the smallest butterfly needle he had. “I’ll give her just enough to support kidney function without overloading her system.”

For the next hour, they focused on the puppy’s care, barely speaking except to exchange vital information or treatment adjustments. The other four puppies remained stable in the incubator, occasionally whimpering but generally sleeping through their littermate’s crisis.

Finally, Star’s oxygen levels stabilized, and the bluish tint to her gums faded to a healthier pink. Matt inserted a tiny IV catheter for fluids and medication, securing it with the lightest possible bandage.

“I think she’s turning the corner,” he said softly, watching the now-regular rise and fall of the tiny chest.

Lynda nodded. She looked tired but happy. “She’s a fighter.”

They carefully transferred Star back to the incubator, keeping her chest slightly elevated to help her breathe more easily. Matt adjusted the monitoring equipment to alert them to any changes in her condition.

He looked at Lynda. “You must be exhausted. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Lynda replied, checking the remaining puppies one more time before following him.

As Matt made two mugs of coffee, he thought about the last few hours. Looking after a litter of wolfdog pups was the last thing he thought he’d be doing, but that was life when you lived in a small town.

He poured coffee into two mugs and handed one of them to Lynda. “Careful, it’s hot.”

Lynda held the mug carefully in her hands. “Thanks. It smells delicious.”

“I bought the blend from Sweet Treats,” Matt told her as he searched another cupboard for his secret stash of cookies.

“Brooke got a new shipment in last week.” When he found the shortbread cookies, he filled a plate with them and sat beside Lynda.

“If you hadn’t caught the change in Star’s breathing when you did. ..”

“We would have lost her,” Lynda finished quietly.

Matt pushed the plate of cookies closer to Lynda. “Try these. Mrs. Pemberton makes the best shortbread I’ve ever tasted. I’m hoping she’ll share her recipe with me, but she said it’s a family secret.”

Lynda chose a cookie and sighed as she bit into it. “It reminds me of the shortbread my nana used to make. She used to send a small box of cookies to Denver each week.”

“She sounds like a nice person.”

Lynda nodded. “She was the best.”

Matt chose a cookie for himself and bit into the gritty shortbread. “Why did you stay in Denver after your divorce?” he asked, the question emerging before he’d fully formed it in his mind. “Was it for your practice?”

Lynda looked surprised by the sudden change in topic but not offended. She stared into her coffee for a long moment before answering.

“Partly,” she admitted. “The practice was successful, and I’d built relationships with clients over decades.

But honestly? I stayed because I refused to be the one who left.

” Her voice hardened slightly. “Ray wanted everything to be easy. He wanted me to quietly disappear so he could move Melissa—his receptionist—into our house without any messiness.”

“How long had it been going on?” Matt asked gently.

“The affair? Almost a year when I discovered it.” Lynda’s laugh held no humor.

“And I only found out by accident. I saw a text preview on his phone. If I hadn’t walked into my office at that exact moment, I might still be married to him, blissfully unaware that he was sleeping with someone half my age. ”

Matt winced. “That’s rough.”

“The worst part wasn’t even the affair,” Lynda continued, her eyes distant.

“It was realizing that I’d been completely blind to it.

We ate dinner together most nights. We still went on vacations.

I thought we were happy, or at least as happy as most couples our age.

” She shook her head. “Finding out I’d been so wrong about my marriage made me question everything—my judgment, my perceptions, my worth. ”

“He’s the one who should have questioned his worth,” Matt said, surprising himself with how upset he was. “Cheating isn’t a reflection on you. It’s a reflection on him.”

Lynda looked up, meeting his eyes. “That’s what my therapist said.

It took me a long time to believe it.” She sighed.

“After the divorce, I threw myself into work. I built a shell around myself that kept everyone at a safe distance. That way, there was no risk of being hurt if I never let anyone close enough to matter.”

The honesty of her confession touched something in Matt. “I know something about building shells,” he said quietly. “After Maria died, I did the same thing. I focused on my daughter and the clinic. It was easier than facing the emptiness of the house every night.”

“How did you manage?” Lynda asked. “With a child to raise alone and your grief?”

Matt considered the question. “One day at a time,” he said finally. “Some days were just about surviving—getting Stephanie to school, seeing patients, making dinner. Other days were better. Stephanie helped—children have this way of pulling you back into life whether you’re ready or not.”

He took a sip of coffee, gathering his thoughts.

“The hardest part was learning to sleep alone. From the day we were married, I always fell asleep with Maria beside me. After she was gone, the bed seemed enormous, impossibly empty.” He looked down at his hands.

“I slept on the couch for almost six months.”

Lynda’s expression held no judgment, only understanding. “I rearranged all the furniture in my bedroom. I bought a new bed, new sheets, new everything. I couldn’t bear to sleep in the same space where Ray had been lying to me for so long.”

“Did it help?” Matt asked.

“Not really,” Lynda admitted with a small smile. “But it gave me something to do with all that anger.”

Their conversation continued as dawn crept toward them.

They shared stories of their lives—the triumphs and failures, the moments of joy and heartbreak.

Matt told Lynda about raising Stephanie and about the challenges of being a parent to a grieving child.

Lynda spoke of her daughter Amy’s initial anger about the divorce and how it had taken years to rebuild their relationship.

They talked about their careers—complex cases, memorable patients, and the evolution of veterinary medicine over the decades they’d practiced. They discovered shared mentors and similar training experiences despite having taken different paths

in their specialties.

Every thirty minutes, one or both of them would check on the puppies, particularly Star, whose condition remained stable but delicate. They worked together to feed the healthy puppies, clean them, and monitor their temperatures.

Matt couldn't remember the last time he'd opened up to someone this way.

When they checked on Star again around five-thirty, Matt felt a surge of relief. The tiny puppy's breathing had eased further, and her temperature had stabilized at a healthy 99.2 degrees.

"She's going to make it," he said, watching her little paws twitch in sleep.

"They all are," Lynda agreed, her tired face brightening.

As they stood side by side at the incubator, Matt became acutely aware of Lynda's presence—the faint scent of her shampoo beneath the antiseptic smell of the clinic, the warmth of her arm barely touching his, the gentle rhythm of her breathing.

"Thank you," he said, turning to face her. "For staying. For helping. For..." He gestured vaguely, unable to articulate everything he meant.

"For talking through the night?" Lynda suggested with a smile. "I should be thanking you. It's been a long time since I've had a conversation that honest with anyone."

A soft glow began to filter through the blinds—the first light of dawn breaking through the storm clouds.

Matt moved to the window and raised the blinds.

The rain had stopped, though water still dripped from eaves and trees.

The rising sun saturated the puddles on the wet sidewalk with a golden glow, making the world seem ready for a new day.

“The storm’s passed,” he said to Lynda.

She joined him at the window, their shoulders touching lightly. “It was quite a night.”

Matt turned to look at her, struck by how right she seemed standing there in his clinic. “I’ve told you more in one night than I’ve told anyone in years,” he admitted softly.

Lynda tilted her head, holding his gaze. “Sometimes it’s easier to be honest with someone new than with people you’ve known forever.”

“Is that what we are?” Matt asked. “New to each other?”

Lynda considered the question. “New in some ways. But it doesn’t feel like we just met a few months ago, does it?”

“No,” Matt agreed. “It feels like...” He hesitated, searching for the right words. “Like we’ve known each other a long time, just not in this life.”

The sentiment might have sounded foolish in another context, but here, in the quiet dawn with five tiny lives they’d saved together, it felt like a simple truth.

Lynda smiled, the rising sun illuminating her face. “I know exactly what you mean.”

A small alarm beeped from the incubator. It was time for another feeding. The moment between them stretched, fragile and perfect, before reality gently reasserted itself.

“Duty calls,” Matt said, reluctant to break the connection but conscious of doing their best for the pups.

As they moved back to the incubator, Matt took a deep breath. Whatever happened next—with the puppies, with the clinic, and with his life—sharing it with Lynda made everything brighter.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

The morning sunlight streamed through the clinic windows. Lynda rubbed her eyes and checked the time. It was a few minutes after nine o'clock. She'd managed a quick nap on the cot after the dawn feeding, but exhaustion still tugged at her muscles.

She ran her hands through her hair and straightened her sweatshirt. From farther down the hallway, she heard a microwave pinging in the staff room. After folding the blanket she'd slept under, she headed toward Matt.

He smiled when she walked into the room. "Coffee's fresh," he said from beside the small counter. "I even kept some of the shortbread cookies for you."

Lynda grinned. "You've found the way to my heart." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she bit her bottom lip. "Oops, sorry. Sometimes, I speak before I think about what I'm going to say."

"That's all right," Matt mumbled. "I have the same problem."

Matt poured her a coffee, then went back to restocking the supplies in a large backpack. He looked as tired as Lynda felt, but there was a determined energy in his movements.

"The generator's holding up," he told her. "But we should conserve electricity where we can. I've shut down everything but essential equipment."

Lynda sighed as she took her first sip of coffee. "Is there any word from emergency services about the road conditions?"

“Highway 93 is still closed,” Matt replied, checking his phone.

“Landslides in three places. They’re saying it’ll be at least forty-eight hours before the road’s passable.

The bridge to Polson is underwater, and most of the back roads are washed out.

” He looked up, his expression serious. “We’re effectively cut off except for emergency vehicles. ”

“Which makes us the only functioning veterinary clinic for miles,” Lynda concluded.

Matt nodded. “I’ve already had calls from three ranchers with injured livestock, and Carol says some of the shelter’s roof gave way. They’re bringing the affected animals here as soon as they can get through.”

As if on cue, the clinic’s front door chimed. Lynda walked into the hallway with Matt and looked through the glass door. Ben Davis, the ranger who’d taken them to find the pups, stood outside, soaked and muddy, and carrying a large cardboard box. Matt unlocked the door and let Ben inside.

“Got a family of raccoons,” Ben announced as he carefully set down the box. “I found them clinging to a tree branch in the flood waters. Their mother’s injured. I think she’s broken her leg. I couldn’t just leave them.”

Lynda immediately moved across to the reception desk to check the raccoons. The female raccoon was curled around three tiny kits, her front leg sitting at an unnatural angle. Despite her injury, she hissed warningly when Lynda got a little too close.

“We’ll need to sedate her to treat her leg,” Lynda said. “The kits look unharmed, but they’re too young to be separated from their mother.”

Matt joined her and looked inside the box. “We can use the isolation room for them. It’s the furthest from the puppies, which should reduce the stress for everyone.”

Ben picked up the box and followed Matt and Lynda.

While Matt cleared a space in the isolation room, Lynda prepared the sedative. Ben hovered nearby, clearly concerned for the animals he’d rescued.

“You two seem to have things under control,” he told them. “I should get back out there. There are still a lot of people and animals in trouble.”

“Thank you for bringing the raccoons into the clinic,” Lynda said.

“You’re welcome. How are the wolfdog puppies doing?”

Lynda looked at Matt.

“Better than last night,” Matt said with a smile. “They’re warm and eating the right amount of formula.”

Ben nodded. “That’s good to know. I’ll catch up with you later today.”

After Ben left, Lynda and Matt divided up the work they’d have to do next.

She would handle the raccoon family while Matt checked on the wolfdog puppies and prepared for the shelter animals Carol was bringing to the clinic.

They’d coordinate the feedings for the orphaned puppies between their other cases and hope there weren’t too many callouts.

Forty-five minutes later, Matt returned to the isolation room. “Star’s breathing

normally now,” he told Lynda. “She’s still weaker than the others but improving.”

Lynda felt a surge of satisfaction. “That’s wonderful. I’ve splinted the raccoon’s leg and checked her babies. All she needs now is a lot of rest.”

By lunchtime, the clinic had transformed into a buzzing emergency center.

Carol had arrived with three dogs and four cats from the damaged shelter, each needing assessment and treatment for mild hypothermia or stress.

A local farmer brought in a lamb with a deep laceration, probably caused by debris in the floodwaters.

Just when they thought the worst was over, two rangers arrived with a barn owl that had been blown from its nest.

Matt checked his watch. “It’s time to feed the pups. Do you want to take Star and the two males, Lynda?”

She smiled as she prepared the formula. “I’m happy to feed any of them, but Star’s my favorite.

” When she was ready, she carefully picked up the smallest pup.

Star’s condition had improved dramatically since their night-time crisis.

Now she sucked eagerly at the bottle, her tiny paws pushing against Lynda’s hand.

“You’re a stubborn one, aren’t you?” she murmured affectionately. “Just like someone else I know.”

Matt glanced up from his feeding duties. “I hope that’s a compliment.”

“Definitely,” Lynda replied, their eyes meeting briefly over the puppies in their arms.

The clinic door chimed again, but this time, Brenda was there to help whoever had arrived.

A few minutes later, Kathleen bustled in carrying two large bags that filled the treatment room with the mouth-watering aroma of pancakes.

“I figured you two hadn’t eaten a proper meal since yesterday,” she announced, setting the bags on the counter. “Blueberry pancakes, maple syrup, and some of my special scrambled eggs with cheese and herbs.”

Lynda’s stomach rumbled on cue. “Kathleen, you’re an angel.”

“I try,” Kathleen replied with a grin. She moved across to the incubator and smiled at the pups. “They’re so cute. The whole town’s talking about your midnight rescue of the wolfdog puppies.”

Matt looked surprised. “How did they hear about them?”

“Ben Davis posted about it on the community Facebook page,” Kathleen explained, unpacking containers of food. “Complete with a photo of you two carrying the puppies to your truck. He called you the ‘Wildlife Rescue Dream Team’ or something equally dramatic.”

A blush crept up Lynda’s neck. “Oh, good grief.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Kathleen said, setting out paper plates and plastic forks.

“People are inspired. You should see the comments. Everyone wants to help. I’ve had at least a dozen people ask how they can donate supplies or volunteer.

” She moved across to Matt and held out her arms. “And talking about helping, how about I take that cutie out of your arms and feed him? The pancakes taste better when they’re hot. ”

Brenda appeared in the doorway. “We have a situation in the reception area. Everyone’s arriving with supplies for the injured animals.

Diana from the Lakeside Inn brought blankets and towels.

The high school biology teacher delivered a box of syringes and medical supplies donated by the school.

Even Mayor Wilson stopped by with bottled water and energy bars “for the heroes of the hour,” as he put it. ”

As Matt handed the pup to Kathleen, Sarah, his vet tech, came into the room with a dozen hot water bottles. “Mrs. Pemberton thought these might come in handy. Would you like me to feed Star, Lynda, while you have something to eat?”

“That would be wonderful.” As Lynda handed Sarah the tiny pup, Matt’s cell phone buzzed in his pocket.

When he glanced at the screen, his expression softened. “It’s my daughter,” he said with warmth in his voice. “Do you mind if I take this?”

“Of course not,” Lynda replied, gesturing for him to answer.

Matt smiled and lifted the phone to his ear. “Hey, sweetheart. Yes, we’re okay.” He

listened for a moment, his face creasing with concern. “The news is exaggerated as usual. The clinic’s fine, just busy with animals needing help after the storm.”

Lynda poured some syrup over two of Kathleen’s pancakes while Matt spoke to his daughter. She didn’t want to intrude on their conversation, but she couldn’t help noticing the gentle affection in his voice as he talked to Stephanie.

“No, don’t worry about driving out here,” he said.

“The roads are still closed. I’ve got plenty of help.

” His eyes met Lynda’s briefly, a smile crinkling the corners.

“Yes, the puppies are doing well, especially the little one we almost lost.” He chuckled at something Stephanie said.

“I’ll send pictures when I get a chance.

Give the kids a hug from Grandpa, okay? Love you too. ”

As Matt ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket, Lynda felt a warmth spread through her chest. The tender way he’d spoken to his daughter told her a lot about the man she admired more with each passing hour.

“It sounds like you have a great relationship with your daughter,” she said.

Matt’s expression was proud. “She worries about me too much, though. She saw the storm coverage on the news and was convinced half the town was underwater.”

“It’s nice that she cares.”

Matt smiled. “The blessing and curse of having a daughter who inherited her mother’s protective nature.” His smile was wistful but not sad. “She’s going on vacation with her family soon, but after they get back, you’ll have to meet them. Stephanie visits me at least once a month.”

“I’d like that,” Lynda replied, surprised by how much she meant it. She handed Matt a plate of food. “We’d better eat something before more people arrive.”

As they ate the pancakes, Kathleen and Sarah told them what had been happening in Sapphire Bay.

The volunteer fire department had been busy clearing fallen trees and covering roofs that had been damaged in the storm.

With the electricity supply still being unreliable, some families were staying in the local school to keep warm.

Lynda was just happy that Matt’s clinic had a generator. Without that, looking after the injured and abandoned animals would have been nearly impossible.

By early afternoon, the wolfdog puppies were still in the incubator, except during feedings when Matt and Lynda would carefully tend to them together. Despite the clinic’s increased activity, they managed to maintain the quiet, controlled environment the vulnerable orphans needed.

“We can’t take any more animals,” Matt told Brenda, Kathleen, and Sarah after a family arrived with yet another injured bird. “We’re at capacity. Direct any new cases to the emergency station the rangers have set up at the community center.”

Lynda nodded in agreement. The clinic was full to bursting, with every available cage and bed occupied. They’d even converted the break room into overflow housing for

the less critical cases.

Matt sighed as he returned to one of the treatment rooms with Lynda. “We don’t often get overrun like this. I hope the storm hasn’t put you off staying in Sapphire Bay.”

Lynda shook her head. “If anything, it’s made me even more certain about living here. From what we’ve been told, the animal shelter will need every dollar the community raised to fix the building. I’d love to be part of that.”

“I’d love you to be part of it, too,” Matt said softly. And with a twinkle in his eyes, he picked up Mrs. Pemberton’s hot water bottles. “But for now, we have a family of raccoons, a litter of kittens, and an elderly cat who needs their hot water bottles changed.”

“Lead the way, Dr. Reynolds,” Lynda said with a grin. “It might be the easiest job we’ve had all day.” And with a lightness in her heart, she followed Matt to the kitchenette.

Regardless of what they’d done during the storm and what they still had to do, Lynda hadn’t been this happy in years.

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Five days later, Lynda gently lifted Star from the large enclosure that had replaced the incubator.

The smallest of the wolfdog puppies had thrived under their constant care.

She'd put on weight and was more alert than she'd been when she arrived.

All the puppies were growing rapidly; their eyes were bright and curious, and their personalities were emerging with each passing day.

"There's my brave girl," Lynda murmured, cradling Star against her chest as she settled into a rocking chair. The clinic was quiet this evening. Matt had gone to check on a horse at the Peterson farm, and the volunteer who usually helped with the evening routine had called in sick.

The past few days had transformed Lynda's life in ways she hadn't anticipated.

On the nights when she looked after the pups, she'd slept on a cot between the three-hour feeding schedules.

A set of clothes now occupied a small corner of the storage closet, and she'd brought some toiletries from home so she could shower each morning.

More surprising than the time she spent at the clinic was how natural it all felt. Between Matt and the other volunteers, they were on a shared mission that was making a difference in the pups' lives.

“You’re getting so strong,” Lynda told Star, checking the puppy’s gums and eyes with practiced ease. “Baker and Rainier better watch out. You’ll be wrestling them to the ground before they know what hit them.”

The puppies’ names had been chosen through a community contest organized by the local radio station.

Apart from Star, the other four now bore the names of Montana mountains: Baker, Rainier, Helena, and Granite.

They’d become local celebrities, with daily updates on Facebook and a steady stream of visitors hoping for a glimpse of the “miracle pups,” as everyone called them.

Star yawned, her tiny pink tongue curling as she settled more comfortably in Lynda’s arms. The weight of the puppy, warm and trusting against her chest, brought an unexpected lump to Lynda’s throat.

“What will I do when you’re all grown up, little one?” she whispered, her voice soft in the quiet room. “I wasn’t planning on getting attached to you.”

She glanced around the small break room that had become her temporary home.

Matt had done his best to make it comfortable for her and the other volunteers.

He’d added a small bookshelf filled with veterinary journals, murder mysteries, and romance novels.

There was a lamp for reading and a small vase that he’d filled with flowers.

“I was supposed to be visiting for a few weeks,” Lynda continued, absently stroking Star’s soft fur. “But here I am, hopefully selling my practice to Robert and getting my

house ready to put on the market.”

Star blinked up at her with innocent amber eyes.

“Now, there’s you and your brothers to consider, too. And the shelter needs so much help.” Lynda sighed, rocking slightly. “And then there’s Matt.”

His name hung in the air, weighted with all the complicated emotions she’d been trying to sort through.

Working alongside him these past weeks had shown her a man of extraordinary compassion, skill, and quiet strength.

He’d sung to the puppies when he thought no one was listening.

When he was treating even the most fragile patients, he was gentle and patient.

And he’d welcomed her into his clinic and his life as if she’d always belonged there.

“What if staying here doesn’t work out?” she asked Star softly. “What if I sell everything in Denver, move here, and then discover I’ve made another terrible mistake? What if I’m seeing what I want to see, not what’s actually there?”

Star snuggled closer, her tiny paws pressing against Lynda’s arm.

“Ray seemed perfect too, you know,” Lynda continued, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I thought we had a good marriage. Not perfect, but good. And the whole time...” She swallowed hard.

“The whole time, he was just waiting for something better to come along. Someone younger, less demanding, less...” She gestured vaguely at herself. “Less me.”

The puppy squirmed, and Lynda adjusted her hold, bringing Star up to eye level.

“I’m sixty-seven years old, Star. That’s too old to start over if I get it wrong again.” She touched her nose gently to the puppy’s. “And I really don’t want to get it wrong. Not with Matt. He’s too important.”

The admission, spoken aloud for the first time, even if only to a puppy, sent a ripple of something like terror through Lynda’s chest. Matt had become important to her—more than she’d allowed anyone to be since the divorce.

“And what about my daughter?” she continued, settling Star back against her chest. “Amy will have to fly here instead of driving for twenty minutes. The boys are already growing up so fast.”

Star’s eyes began to droop as the puppy fell asleep in Lynda’s arms.

“But when I think about going back to my empty house, back to the life I built after Ray left...” Lynda’s voice caught. “I don’t want that anymore. That life was about proving that I could survive, that I didn’t need anyone. But maybe... maybe I do want someone. Maybe I want Matt.”

The admission hung in the quiet room. Lynda closed her eyes, feeling the gentle weight of the sleeping puppy against her heart.

“But what if he doesn’t feel the same way?” she whispered. “What if I’m misreading everything? What if he’s just being kind? He might see us as friends and nothing more.”

A floorboard creaked in the hallway outside the break room, and Lynda's eyes flew open. Matt stood in the doorway, his expression impossible to read in the dim light. Her heart dropped. How long had he been standing there? How much had he heard?

"Matt," she said, heat rising to her cheeks. "I didn't hear you come in."

He stepped into the room, his movements careful as if approaching a skittish animal. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop," he said quietly. "I was going to say something, but then..."

Lynda froze. Having Matt hear her deepest fears left her feeling exposed in a way she hadn't been in years.

He moved closer, kneeling beside the rocking chair so they were at eye level. "Lynda," he said softly. "I need to tell you something important."

Her heart stuttered in her chest. Here it came—the gentle letdown, the kind explanation that he valued her friendship but nothing more. She braced herself, determined to accept his words with dignity.

"I've been trying to find the right moment, the right words," Matt continued. "But I think I've just been afraid. Afraid of rushing you, afraid of my own feelings." He took a deep breath. "But after what I just heard..."

Lynda waited, barely breathing.

"I'm not being kind, Lynda. And while I value your friendship more than I can say, that's not all I feel for you.

" His blue eyes held hers, steady and sure.

“If you’re wondering if staying in Sapphire Bay is a mistake, I want you to know that there’s at least one person who thinks it’s the best thing that’s ever happened. ”

The words hung between them, a bridge being extended across their shared fears.

“Whatever you decide about Denver,” Matt added gently, “I want you to know where I stand. I care about you and want you to be happy.” A small smile touched his lips. “Just in case what I think factors into your decision.”

Lynda felt something tight and knotted begin to unravel inside her chest. “It does,” she whispered. “It factors in a great deal.”

Star stirred between them, making a tiny mewling sound before settling back to sleep. Matt’s hand came to rest on the puppy, his fingers brushing Lynda’s in the process.

“We’ve got time,” he said softly. “To figure it all out.”

Lynda nodded, grateful for his understanding. “I’m not good at trusting anymore,” she admitted. “Not after Ray.”

“I know,” Matt replied. “And I’d never ask you to blindly trust me. Just... maybe... trust a little? Enough to see where this might lead?”

In the quiet of the break room, with a sleeping puppy between them and the uncertain future ahead, Lynda turned her hand beneath Matt’s, their palms meeting, fingers intertwining.

“I can do that,” she said. And Lynda was surprised to discover she meant it.

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Matt adjusted his tie for the third time, then decided to remove it altogether.

The blue collared shirt looked fine on its own, more relaxed but still respectful of the occasion.

He hadn't worn a tie since going to a veterinary conference in Bozeman two years ago.

It felt foreign now, like a remnant from another life.

"It's just dinner," he told his reflection in the hall mirror. "A thank-you dinner. Nothing more."

But the flutter in his stomach as he checked his watch suggested otherwise.

Grabbing his keys and wallet, he took one last glance around the house before heading to his truck.

He'd made reservations at The Lakeside Grill.

It wasn't Sapphire Bay's fanciest restaurant, but it was its most popular.

The floor-to-ceiling windows offered spectacular views of Flathead Lake, and the chef, Paul Renard, had a knack for preparing locally produced food that had earned him more than one award.

As he drove the familiar route into town, Matt rehearsed conversation topics, then

immediately felt foolish.

He'd spent countless hours with Lynda over the past few weeks, caring for the puppies, treating the clinic's regular patients, and handling the influx of animals displaced by the storm.

They'd never struggled to find things to talk about before.

But this was different. The conversation he'd overheard had shifted something between them, acknowledging the possibility that had been growing since the first time they'd met.

The Lakeside Grill's parking lot was half-full when Matt arrived. It was busy enough to create a pleasant ambiance, but not so crowded that they wouldn't be able to hear each other.

Lynda was waiting for him in the small reception area, wearing a pretty, deep green dress. Her silver hair was loosely styled around her shoulders rather than in her usual practical braid, and she'd added simple pearl earrings that caught the light when she turned to greet him.

"I was early," she said by way of explanation, a hint of nervousness in her smile. "It's an old habit from my clinic days. If I wasn't fifteen minutes early to everything, I was somehow running late."

"I know exactly what you mean," Matt said with a relieved sigh as some of his nerves disappeared. "For years, I set all the clocks in my house ten minutes fast."

The hostess appeared before Lynda could respond, leading them to a table by the windows. The sun was beginning to set, casting golden light across the lake and turning the water into a dazzling mirror of the sky.

After they were seated and had ordered drinks, an awkward silence settled between them. Matt was suddenly conscious of the weight of his hands, unsure about where to rest them on the table.

“This is ridiculous,” Lynda finally said with a self-deprecating laugh. “We’ve spent more time together than apart over the last few weeks, and now we’re acting like strangers.”

Matt smiled. “I was just thinking the same thing. I rehearsed conversation topics in my truck on the way here.”

“You didn’t,” Lynda said, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“I did,” Matt admitted, grinning now. “I had a whole list of possibilities. The top three were veterinary school memories, favorite surgical techniques, and the time Mrs. Pemberton brought her cat in wearing a hand-knitted sweater and booties.”

“I’d pay good money to see that,” Lynda said, taking a sip of her wine.

Matt laughed. “I’ll see if I can find the picture. I know I took one, but it was only for medical record purposes.”

“Of course,” Lynda agreed, her smile reaching her eyes.

The awkwardness disappeared, and they settled into a comfortable rhythm of conversation as they studied the menus. Matt recommended the trout, explaining how Chef Renard used a local huckleberry glaze that transformed the dish into something extraordinary.

“I haven’t eaten trout before,” Lynda confessed. “It wasn’t on the menu of the restaurants I visited in Denver.”

After the waiter took their order, Matt leaned forward. “What do you do in Denver when you aren’t working?”

Lynda’s fingers traced the rim of her water glass, and Matt noticed the slight hesitation before she answered.

“Apart from catching up with my friends, I spend most of my time at work. My ex-husband and I started the vet clinic. We worked long hours, trying to build our client base and pay our bills. Those bad habits stayed with me.” Lynda looked up at him with a rueful smile.

“Since I’ve been in Sapphire Bay, I’ve realized how small my world has become.

It’s embarrassing to admit, but I can’t remember the last time I tried something new, like trout, just because I wanted to. ”

Matt sent her a reassuring smile. “Well, I’m glad you’re trying something new tonight. Did you enjoy working with your ex-husband?”

Lynda nodded. “In the beginning, I did. Ray was always pushing the boundaries of what was possible. We focused on cases other vets wouldn’t take.

” Her eyes grew distant. “They were good years. We made real advances, helping animals that would have been euthanized elsewhere. After the divorce, I kept the practice going the same way. I pushed even harder and took on more complex cases. I guess I had something to prove.”

“To Ray?” Matt asked.

“To myself,” Lynda corrected. “I wanted to know that what we’d built at the clinic had been as much mine as his.”

Matt nodded, understanding the need to assert your own identity after loss, even if it was a different kind. “I know what you mean. When Maria wasn’t teaching, she handled all the clinic’s accounts and tax requirements. I was just the vet who treated the animals.”

Their food arrived, and they fell silent as they tried the trout. It was perfectly prepared, with the huckleberry glaze adding a sweet tartness that balanced the richness of the fish.

“This is amazing,” Lynda said after her first bite. “You weren’t exaggerating.”

“Paul is an incredible chef,” Matt replied. “He uses local, organic ingredients in all his dishes. I’ve never been disappointed in a meal I’ve bought here.”

They ate in appreciative silence for a few moments before Matt continued his earlier thought. “Anyway, after Maria was gone, I had to figure out how to run a business, not just treat animals. Stephanie helped when she could, but she was sixteen and dealing with her own grief.”

“That must have been incredibly difficult,” Lynda said, her expression softening. “Raising a teenage daughter alone while grieving yourself.”

Matt nodded. He rarely spoke about how he’d felt after Maria died.

“There were days when I wasn’t sure we’d make it.

Stephanie was so angry at the cancer, at the world, and at me for somehow not saving her mother.

” He set down his fork, the recollection still powerful after all these years.

“She’d slam doors, stay out past curfew, and pick fights over nothing.

Then I’d find her in Maria’s closet in the middle of the night, surrounded by her mother’s clothes, sobbing.”

Lynda reached across the table, her hand covering his briefly. “Grief isn’t linear, especially for teenagers. They feel everything so intensely.”

“Amy had a hard time with your divorce, too?” Matt asked.

“She was in college when it happened, but yes.” Lynda’s expression grew thoughtful.

“At first, she was firmly on my side. She was furious with her father for the affair, for throwing away our family. But then Ray began a campaign to win her over. He bought her expensive gifts and took her on incredible vacations with Melissa. Nothing was too much trouble.” She shook her head.

“It created a rift between Amy and me for years. She couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t just ‘get over it’ and be friendly with her dad at family events.”

“That’s a lot to ask,” Matt said, feeling a surge of protectiveness toward Lynda.

“It was,” she agreed. “Eventually, Stephanie and I found our way back to each other. When her first son was born, she called me straight away. That’s when I knew we’d be okay.

” A smile touched her lips. “My grandsons have been the greatest joy. Dylan is eight and full of energy and curiosity. What he doesn’t know about computers isn’t worth knowing.

Eddie is five years old and more reserved.

He thinks things through, carefully watching everything before diving in. ”

The pride in her voice as she spoke about her grandsons made Matt smile.

“Stephanie’s children are similar. Their personalities shone through from the day they were born.

Lily’s the fearless one, always climbing higher than she should, trying things that make me hold my breath.

Ethan observes, calculates, and then executes his plans with impressive precision.

He’s six years old and manages to surprise me each time I see him. ”

“How old is Lily?” Lynda asked.

“Nine going on nineteen,” Matt replied with a chuckle. “She’s already negotiating bedtime extensions and allowance increases like a seasoned diplomat.”

Lynda laughed, the sound rich and genuine. “Dylan recently gave his mom a PowerPoint on why he should be allowed to have a pet snake.”

“Did it work?”

“It might have if his mother hadn’t been so firmly against the idea,” Lynda admitted. “I was impressed with his research, though. He’d included habitat requirements, feeding schedules, even a budget for supplies.”

As they finished their meal and ordered coffee, Matt was drawn to the way Lynda’s face became animated when she spoke about her family, her work, and the causes she cared about.

There was a depth to her that went beyond their shared profession—a compassion tempered by experience, a wisdom earned through both joy and heartbreak.

“Do you know what I’ve realized?” Matt said as they ate the huckleberry crumble they’d split for dessert.

“No, what have you realized?” Lynda asked, looking up from her spoon.

“I’ve spent fifteen years defining myself by what I’ve lost. I was a husband, father, and a widower.

Even my role as a vet became wrapped up in carrying on Maria’s legacy.

” He met Lynda’s eyes, finding understanding there.

“But these past few weeks, working with you, I’ve felt like.

.. just Matt again. Not defined by what came before, but by what’s happening now. ”

Lynda’s expression softened. “I know what you mean. After the divorce, I became so focused on proving I was fine on my own, that I didn’t need anyone, that I forgot how to simply be with someone.” She set down her spoon, her eyes meeting his. “Until I met you.”

The moment stretched between them, filled with unspoken possibilities. Matt thought about reaching for Lynda’s hand but hesitated, still cautious about rushing what felt like a delicate new beginning.

“I called Robert yesterday about buying my practice,” Lynda told Matt. “He’s interested, although we’re still discussing the terms.”

Matt felt a surge of joy, quickly tempered by concern. “I don’t want you to feel pressured. Whatever’s happening between us shouldn’t be the only reason for such a major life change.”

“It’s not,” Lynda assured him. “I love working at the shelter, and there’s a real need for wildlife rehabilitation expertise in this area.

The puppies were just the beginning. With the right facilities, we could help so many more animals.

” Her eyes lit up as she spoke. “And then there’s Isabel’s bookstore.

I enjoy helping her, especially with the community programs she’s planning. ”

“You’ve made a place for yourself here,” Matt said.

“I think I have,” Lynda agreed. “It surprised me how quickly it happened, how natural it feels.” She paused, then added more softly, “And you’re part of that. A significant part.”

Matt finally gave in to the impulse he’d been resisting all evening, reaching across the table to take her hand. Her fingers were warm against his, and she didn’t pull away.

“I’m glad,” he said.

As they walked to their cars after dinner, Matt felt lighter than he had in years. The evening had confirmed what he’d been feeling for a long time—that Lynda Morth was someone special, someone who understood both his past and his present in a way few others could.

“Thank you for dinner,” she said when they reached her car. “It was lovely.”

“Thank you for saving five puppies with me,” he replied with a smile. “And for everything else these past weeks.”

They stood for a moment in the soft glow of the parking lot lights, the slight awkwardness of a first date’s end hanging between them. Matt wondered if he should kiss her or if that would be rushing things.

Lynda solved his dilemma by rising slightly on her toes and pressing a gentle kiss to his cheek. “Goodnight, Matt,” she said softly.

“Goodnight,” he replied, watching as she got into her car.

As he drove home later, the taste of huckleberries still on his tongue and the memory of Lynda’s kiss warming his cheek, Matt Reynolds felt something he hadn’t experienced in fifteen years: the simple, profound joy of beginning again.

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Lynda set the phone down on Kathleen's kitchen counter, her mind racing with the implications of the call she'd just received. Outside, morning sunlight sparkled on the lake, a perfect Montana day that contrasted sharply with the turmoil she felt inside.

"Bad news?" Kathleen asked, looking up from the muffin batter she was mixing.

"It was Robert," Lynda replied, naming her practice manager in Denver.

"Two of our veterinary technicians have quit without notice. One left for a better-paying job at the emergency clinic across town, and the other because her husband got transferred to Chicago." She sighed and ran a hand through her hair.

"And our only other exotic animal specialist has pneumonia. They're overwhelmed with cases that they can't refer elsewhere. "

Kathleen set down her mixing spoon. "They need you to go back."

It wasn't a question, but Lynda nodded anyway.

"Robert's been incredible, but I can't leave him in this situation.

" She moved to the window, gazing out at the lake that had become such a comforting presence.

"He's interviewed three vet techs already, but needs my approval for final hiring.

And we have a few complex surgical cases scheduled that no one else at the practice

can perform. ”

“How long do you think you’ll need to be there?” Kathleen asked.

Lynda turned from the window. “Two weeks, maybe three. Just long enough to hire new staff, handle the urgent cases, and put better contingency plans in place.” She attempted a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I was planning to go back soon anyway to sort through my things and discuss selling the practice to Robert.”

Kathleen wiped her hands on a dishtowel and came to stand beside Lynda. “Have you told Matt yet?”

The question made Lynda’s chest tighten.

Since their dinner at The Lakeside Grill, her relationship with Matt had changed.

They still focused on the puppies and their veterinary work, but with an undercurrent of something deeper developing between them.

Last night, he’d invited her to his house for coffee after their evening shift at the clinic.

They’d sat on his porch swing, talking for hours about everything and nothing, his arm gradually coming to rest around her shoulders as the evening cooled.

“Not yet,” Lynda admitted. “I need to tell him in person.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “He’ll be at the clinic now, doing morning rounds before the regular appointments start.”

“And the shelter?” Kathleen asked. “Carol was counting on you for that wildlife rehabilitation workshop next weekend.”

“I know,” Lynda said, guilt adding itself to the mix of emotions she was feeling. “I’ll stop by the shelter after I see Matt. We might be able to reschedule the workshop for when I return.”

Kathleen squeezed her arm reassuringly. “Everyone will understand. You’ve given so much of your time already.”

“I wasn’t planning to leave like this,” Lynda confessed. “Everything feels... unfinished. Matt and I were just getting to really know each other.”

“Sometimes life doesn’t work out how we want it to,” Kathleen said. “But this isn’t an ending. You’ll be back before you know it.”

Lynda hoped her friend was right. As she climbed the stairs to shower and dress, she tried to organize her thoughts.

The practical matters were straightforward—she needed to book a flight, pack her belongings, and arrange for her mail to be forwarded.

The emotional aspects were far messier. How would Matt react to her sudden departure?

What would this interruption mean for their budding relationship?

An hour later, dressed in jeans and a soft pink sweater, Lynda drove to Matt’s clinic.

The familiar single-story building with its simple “Reynolds Veterinary Clinic” sign had become a second home to her in recent weeks.

Inside, everyone would be involved in their morning routines.

Sarah would be checking the overnight patients, Brenda would be answering the phones at the reception desk, and somewhere in the back, Matt would be examining an animal.

Brenda looked up with a smile as Lynda entered. “Hi Lynda! We weren’t expecting you until this afternoon. Matt is just finishing with the wolfdog puppies’ checkups.”

“I need to speak with him when he has a moment,” Lynda said, trying to keep her voice casual. “Is he busy this morning?”

“Just the regular wellness appointments,” Brenda replied. “Nothing urgent. He’s in Exam Room 2 with the puppies now if you want to see him.”

Lynda thanked her and made her way to the examination room.

Through the half-open door, she could see Matt kneeling on the floor, surrounded by the five wolfdog puppies who were full of energy.

Star was trying to climb into Matt’s lap while Baker and Rainier wrestled nearby.

Helena was investigating a set of toys scattered on the floor, while Granite dozed in a sunny spot by the window.

Seeing Matt with the puppies made Lynda’s heart ache with a mixture of tenderness and regret.

“Well, look who’s here,” Matt said, glancing up with a smile that warmed his blue eyes. “Star’s been asking for you.”

As if on cue, the small puppy abandoned her attempt to climb Matt and scampered toward Lynda, tail wagging furiously.

“Hello, little one,” Lynda said, bending to scoop up the puppy. Star immediately began licking her chin, making Lynda laugh despite the heaviness in her chest. “I’ve missed you too.”

Matt rose to his feet, brushing dog hair from his khakis. “They’ve all gained weight since yesterday,” he reported. “Even our little runt is catching up to her siblings.”

“That’s wonderful,” Lynda said, holding Star close. “Have you found permanent homes for them yet?”

Matt nodded. “Carol’s finalizing the list. We’ve found four couples who’ve raised high-content wolfdog hybrids before, but we’re still making sure they’re the right match.” He stepped closer, his expression shifting as he studied her face. “Something’s wrong. What is it?”

Lynda had forgotten how perceptive he could be.

Setting Star back on the floor with her siblings, she took a deep breath.

“I had a call from Robert this morning,” she began, explaining the situation at her practice in Denver.

As she spoke, she watched Matt’s expression change—surprise, understanding, and finally, a carefully masked disappointment that he couldn’t quite hide from her.

“When do you leave?” he asked when she’d finished.

“This evening. I’ve booked a flight from Kalispell.” Lynda held his gaze, needing

him to understand. “Matt, I have to go. These people have worked with me for years. I can’t leave them in this situation.”

“I know,” he said, his voice gentle. “You wouldn’t be the person you are if you could walk away from people who need you.” He reached for her hand, his fingers warm and steady around hers. “How long will you be gone?”

“Two weeks, possibly three,” Lynda replied. “Just long enough to hire new staff and handle the most complex cases. Then I’ll come back.” She squeezed his hand. “I am coming back, Matt.”

Something in his eyes softened at her declaration. “I believe you.”

They stood for a moment in the quiet exam room, surrounded by playful puppies, their hands still joined.

Lynda found herself memorizing details—the fine laugh lines around his eyes, the slight curl of his hair at his temples, the way the morning light through the window cast a golden glow over his features.

“I have something for you,” Matt said suddenly. “Wait here.”

He disappeared into his office, returning moments later with a small wrapped package. “I was saving this for later, but now seems like a better time.”

Curious about what it could be, Lynda unwrapped the package.

Inside was a hand-carved wooden wolf, about five inches tall, standing proud and alert.

The craftsmanship was exquisite—each detail of the fur texture, the alert ears, and the

intelligent eyes had been rendered with obvious care and skill.

“Matt,” she breathed, running her finger over the smooth wood. “It’s beautiful.”

“I’ve been working on it in the evenings,” he admitted. “I wanted you to have something that reminds you of the pups, especially Star and her mother.”

Lynda looked up at him, deeply touched by the gesture. “You made this yourself?”

Matt nodded with a hint of shyness in his expression. “I used to enjoy woodcarving. After Maria died, I couldn’t pick up a knife. But recently...” He glanced at the carving in her hands. “Recently, I’ve felt inspired again.”

The simple admission brought unexpected tears to Lynda’s eyes. This wasn’t just a memento of the puppies. It was Matt sharing part of himself, part of his past, and how he was moving forward.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll treasure it.”

Matt stepped closer, his hand coming up to gently brush away a tear that had escaped down her cheek. “I’m hoping it will remind you of Sapphire Bay,” he said, his voice warm with affection. “And give you even more reasons to come home to me.”

The gesture undid her careful composure. Lynda hugged Matt close. His arms wrapped around her, strong and comforting, as his chin rested lightly on the top of her head.

They stayed that way for several moments, saying without words what neither was quite ready to articulate aloud. When they finally separated, Lynda felt both steadier and somehow more vulnerable than before.

“I should go to the shelter next,” she said, reluctantly stepping back. “I need to talk to Carol about rescheduling the workshop.”

Matt nodded. “I’ll walk you out.”

As they passed through the reception area, Brenda looked up with concern, clearly sensing the shift in mood. “Everything okay?”

“Lynda’s heading back to Denver for a couple of weeks,” Matt explained.

Brenda’s face fell. “Oh no! What about the puppies? They’ll miss not having you around.”

“I won’t be gone for long,” Lynda promised. “Matt’s promised to send me plenty of photos.”

Brenda came around the desk and hugged Lynda. “Take care. It’s amazing what you’ve done for us since the pups arrived.”

Lynda smiled. “I’ve enjoyed being here.”

Outside, the morning had warmed further, promising another beautiful day in Sapphire Bay.

Matt walked Lynda to her car. “Can you call me when you land? I’d like to know you arrived safely.”

“I will,” Lynda promised. On impulse, she rose on her toes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “I’ll miss you.”

Matt caught her hand as she began to turn away. “Lynda,” he said, his voice low and

serious. “I’ll miss you, too, but I meant what I said the other night. There’s no pressure, no expectations. Take the time you need in Denver.” His blue eyes held hers. “I’ll be waiting here for you.”

The simple promise, offered without demands or conditions, affected Lynda more deeply than flowery declarations or passionate pleas would have.

Matt understood her sense of duty, her need for independence, and her cautious approach to change.

And he was giving her the space to honor all those parts of herself.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said, the words feeling somehow inadequate for the emotions swirling within her.

As she drove toward the animal shelter with the wooden wolf on the passenger seat beside her, Lynda realized she was falling in love with Matt. It should have terrified her, given everything that had happened with Ray, but it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

Holding the steering wheel tighter, she made a promise to herself. She’d spend two weeks in Denver. Then she’d return to Sapphire Bay—to the shelter, to her friends, and to Matt. Not for a visit this time, but to begin the next chapter of her life.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Lynda stared out the window of her Denver office, watching the morning traffic crawl along the busy street below. A week into her return, and the city still felt strangely foreign to her—too loud, too crowded, too disconnected from the natural rhythms she was used to in Sapphire Bay.

Her desk was cluttered with resumes from veterinary technician candidates, interview notes, and patient files that required her attention.

The staffing crisis that had brought her back was gradually resolving itself.

She'd already hired two experienced vet techs who would start next week, and the exotic animal specialist was recovering well from his pneumonia.

If his health continued to improve, he was scheduled to return part-time in three days.

Efficiency had always been Lynda's strong suit, and she'd approached the clinic's problems with her usual methodical focus.

Yet even as she worked through the practical issues, a part of her mind remained firmly anchored in Montana, alongside a certain silver-haired veterinarian and five wolfdog puppies.

As if on cue, her phone chimed with a message notification.

Lynda reached for it with an eagerness that would have embarrassed her just a few months ago.

The screen displayed a photo from Matt. Star and Helena were playing tug-of-war with a rope toy, their growing bodies showing the lean, powerful build they'd inherited from their mother.

Star has decided she's the boss now, Matt's message read. She now outweighs Baker as of this morning's weigh-in.

Lynda smiled, studying the image of the once-frail puppy who'd nearly died that first night. Star's white chest patch was more prominent against her thickening silver-gray coat, and her amber eyes held the confident gleam of a healthy young animal.

She typed a quick reply: I always knew she had it in her. How are the others doing?

Matt's response came almost immediately. All thriving. Everyone's impressed with how well-socialized the pups are. It should make finding the right people to adopt them easier.

Lynda felt a pang of regret at missing this milestone. She'd become so attached to the puppies, especially Star, that knowing they'd one day be living with other people made her feel sad.

Wish I could be there, she wrote, then hesitated before adding, for the puppies and you.

She hit send before she could overthink it. Matt had been sending daily updates, sometimes multiple times a day, since she'd arrived in Denver. His messages were a lifeline, connecting her to Sapphire Bay and the life she'd begun to build there.

A knock at her office door interrupted her thoughts. Robert Lawson, her practice manager and longtime colleague, stood in the doorway with two coffee cups in his hands.

“I thought you might need a break,” he said, setting one cup on her desk. “You’ve been going through resumes for three hours straight.”

“Has it been that long?” Lynda glanced at her watch, surprised to see it was already past eleven. “Thank you for the coffee. I lost track of the time.”

Robert settled into the chair across from her desk, his lanky frame folding comfortably into the familiar position they’d occupied during countless meetings over the years.

“The Miller surgery went well this morning,” he reported.

“Kidney stones are completely removed, and the ferret is recovering nicely in the small animal ward.”

“Good,” Lynda said, taking a sip of the coffee. He’d prepared it exactly how she liked it, with just a splash of almond milk. “And the Johnsons’ iguana?”

“Responding to the antibiotics. Temperature’s down, and he’s showing interest in food again.

” Robert studied her over the rim of his coffee cup.

“You know, the place has been running smoothly even with you in Montana. Not that we don’t appreciate you dropping everything to come back, but it seems like you’ve trained us well. ”

Lynda smiled at the compliment. “You’ve done an excellent job, Robert. I couldn’t have stayed away so long if I didn’t trust you completely.”

“Speaking of staying away,” Robert said, his expression curious but kind, “you seem

different since you've been back. Distracted, maybe? Or just not quite here."

Lynda sighed. It didn't matter what she was doing. Her thoughts kept wandering back to Montana. "I am a bit distracted," she admitted. "Sapphire Bay has a way of getting under your skin."

"Is it Sapphire Bay," Robert asked with gentle perceptiveness, "or someone in it?"

Lynda felt heat rise to her cheeks, surprised to find herself blushing like a teenager. "There is someone," she acknowledged, finding unexpected relief in saying it aloud. "His name is Matt Reynolds. He's the veterinarian there."

Robert's smile widened. "Now that makes sense. Two vets with similar values and a shared passion for animals. No wonder you've been checking your phone every five minutes."

"Have I been that obvious?" Lynda asked, slightly mortified.

"Only to someone who's known you for a long time," Robert assured her. "The staff just thinks you're monitoring patient cases back in Montana. Do you have time to talk about selling the practice to me?"

"Of course I do," Lynda told him.

Robert placed his coffee mug on Lynda's desk. "I was worried about some of the more tricky exotic cases we get at the clinic. If you'd be willing to consult on some of the more difficult cases, I'd love to buy the clinic for the price we negotiated."

Lynda's heart leaped in her chest. "That's the best news I've had all day."

Robert smiled. "I thought you might say that. But I can't imagine you retiring from

being a vet. If you move to Sapphire Bay, what will you do there?”

“The animal shelter desperately needs someone with exotic animal experience. They get everything from injured eagles to orphaned bear cubs, and the nearest wildlife rehabilitation center is hours away. I want to set up the shelter so we can treat a wider range of animals before they’re moved to more appropriate facilities. “

“That sounds like something you’d enjoy,” Robert said. “There’s no rush on my offer. I’m happy to sign the contract whenever you’re ready.”

Lynda smiled. “What if we set the sale date to six weeks from today? That’ll give me time to sort out the business side of the changes and bring you up to speed with anything you don’t already know.”

“Sounds great to me.” Robert pulled himself out of the chair and smiled. “I’ll sign the contract and bring it back to your office.”

As soon as Robert had left her office, Lynda’s phone chimed. This time, it was a message from Kathleen. The coffee shop was packed today! Three different people asked when you’re coming back. The town’s not the same without you.

A warmth spread through Lynda’s chest at the simple message.

In just a few months, she’d become part of Sapphire Bay in a way she’d never managed in Denver, despite decades of living here.

In Sapphire Bay, she’d found not only Matt but a community—friends, a purpose, and a place where she felt genuinely needed and valued.

She picked up the wooden wolf carving sitting on her desk. Its presence was comforting, a tangible reminder of the connection she’d formed with Matt and the

puppies they'd saved together.

Her phone chimed once more. Matt again, this time with a video of Star attempting to climb onto a table by herself, her determination evident in every failed but persistent attempt. The final frames showed her triumphantly reaching the top, tail wagging furiously as she surveyed her accomplishment.

The video is from Star's last checkup. She reminds me of someone else I know, Matt had written. Determined, resilient, and unwilling to give up.

Warmth spread through Lynda at the comparison.

Seven days into her Denver stay, with another week stretching before her, she found herself counting the hours until she could return to Sapphire Bay.

To the shelter animals who needed her expertise.

To her friends who'd welcomed her so completely into their lives.

And to Matt, who was waiting for her with patient understanding and a growing place in her heart.

Picking up her phone, she typed a message to Matt. I'm counting the days until I come home—seven more to go.

His reply came moments later. I'll be waiting.

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Matt checked the time on his phone again.

It was three-fifteen in Denver, which meant Lynda would be in the middle of her afternoon appointments.

This morning, he'd taken some great photos of the wolfdog puppies.

He'd already sent Lynda three pictures, and sending another so soon might seem excessive.

But his thumb hovered over an image of Star investigating a butterfly.

"Just send it already," Brenda said with a smile from across the table in the break room. "That's the fourth time you've checked your phone in ten minutes."

Matt felt heat rise to his face as he tucked the phone back into his pocket. "I was just checking the time. The Jenkins family will be here soon for their cat's vaccinations."

Brenda's eyebrows rose. "Your nose is growing, Matt. I'm sure Lynda appreciates the updates you send her."

Matt sighed. "Am I that obvious?"

Brenda smiled as she stood and rinsed her coffee mug in the sink. "Sending her the photos is very sweet. While you're deciding what to do, I'd better get back to the front desk."

After Brenda left, Matt quickly sent the photo and then returned to his office.

Nine days into Lynda's absence, and he was behaving like a lovesick teenager.

He'd never expected to miss her quite this much.

He missed seeing her after work and hearing about what was happening in the bookstore and the shelter.

He missed spending time with her when she came in to see the wolfdog pups or when they had lunch together.

But most of all, he missed the laughter and joy she brought into his life.

On his desk sat a small wooden carving he'd been working on during lunch breaks—a female wolf with five tiny pups clustered around her feet.

It wasn't finished yet, the details of the puppies still rough and undefined, but the mother wolf's face already held the alert, intelligent expression he'd imagined from the stormy night on the mountain.

Matt ran his thumb over the smooth wood, feeling the grain beneath his fingertips.

After that first rescue with Lynda, he'd wanted to start carving again.

The impulse had felt natural, almost necessary, as if the experience had unlocked something within him.

The first carving, the single wolf he'd given Lynda before she left, had flowed from his hands with a certainty he hadn't felt in years.

A knock on his office door interrupted his thoughts.

“Dad?” Stephanie’s voice called. “Are you in there?”

Matt quickly set down the carving and opened the door. Stephanie stood in the corridor with her six-year-old son Ethan beside her, and nine-year-old Lily already darting toward him.

“Grandpa!” Lily exclaimed, throwing her arms around his waist. “We decided to surprise you! Mom said we could see the wolfdog puppies.”

Matt hugged his granddaughter, genuinely delighted by the unexpected visit. “They’re still here and getting bigger every day. They’ll be going to their forever homes next week.”

“Can we see them?” Ethan asked, his natural reserve giving way to a surge of excitement. “They looked really big in the last photos you sent us.”

“They’re strong and healthy now,” Matt told Ethan with a smile.

“I’ll call Sarah to see if she’s still with the pups.

” After speaking to Sarah, Matt was reassured that Lily and Ethan would be safe.

He placed his cell phone on his desk and looked at his two grandchildren.

“Sarah said it’s okay to see them. They’re in the large playpen in Exam Room 2.

You can look but don’t touch. Even though they’re cute, they’re still wild animals. ”

As the children hurried off to see the puppies, Stephanie stepped into the office, her

gaze immediately falling on the half-finished carving on his desk.

“You’re carving again,” she said softly, picking up the wooden wolf family. “I haven’t seen you do this since Mom died.”

Matt nodded, watching as his daughter carefully examined the piece. “It’s beautiful,” she said, running her finger over the mother wolf’s face. “The expression is so alive.” She looked up at him, her eyes—so like her mother’s—searching his face. “What inspired this?”

Matt hesitated, unsure how to explain the emotions that had led him back to his old hobby. “We rescued those puppies during a terrible storm. A fallen tree killed their mother, but somehow they survived. The whole experience made an impact on me.”

Stephanie returned the carving to his desk. “Was Lynda the vet who went onto the mountain with you?”

Matt nodded. He’d told Stephanie about Lynda, but hadn’t mentioned how important she’d become in his life. “Lynda’s in Denver right now, dealing with a staffing crisis at her practice there.”

“But she’s coming back?” Stephanie asked.

“Hopefully, next week.” Matt straightened some papers on his desk, avoiding his daughter’s perceptive gaze. “We’ve found some people who can look after the pups. Their adoption day is Saturday, and it would be nice if Lynda could be here for that.”

Stephanie leaned against the desk, studying him with the same scrutiny she’d given the carving. “Dad,” she said gently, “are you dating Dr. Morth?”

The directness of the question caught Matt off guard. “We’ve had dinner,” he

admitted. “And coffee. We’ve spent a lot of time together with the puppies and at the clinic. But dating seems like such a teenage word for... whatever this is.”

“Whatever this is,” Stephanie repeated with a small smile. “That sounds serious.”

Matt sighed, finally meeting his daughter’s eyes.

“It could be. I don’t know yet. Lynda’s moving to Sapphire Bay, but she has a successful veterinary practice in Denver, and a daughter and grandchildren who live close by.

And I’m here with my small-town clinic and memories of your mother in every corner of this place.”

“Mom’s been gone fifteen years, Dad,” Stephanie said softly. “She would want you to be happy.”

“I know she would,” Matt agreed. “But it feels strange. A small part of me feels like I’m betraying her somehow, even though logically I know that’s not true.”

Stephanie stepped closer, placing her hand on his arm. “It’s not a betrayal to find happiness again. If anything, it honors what you and Mom had.”

The wisdom in his daughter’s words struck Matt deeply.

He’d raised her to be insightful and compassionate, but sometimes, he forgot that she was no longer the grief-stricken teenager who’d lost her mother.

She was a strong, thoughtful woman with a family of her own and an understanding of love that included its messiness and imperfections.

“When did you get to be so wise?” he asked, a hint of a smile touching his lips.

“I had good teachers,” Stephanie replied. She glanced at the carving again. “So, is Lynda the person who inspired you to pick up your tools again?”

Matt nodded. “I made her a wolf before she left. A thank-you gift for helping with the puppies.” He ran his hand through his hair, a gesture of mild embarrassment. “I’ve been sending her daily updates about them while she’s away. Probably too many, if Brenda’s teasing is any indication.”

Stephanie’s smile widened. “You know, in all the years since Mom died, I’ve never seen you like this. You’re excited and nervous, and a little unsure of the future.” She squeezed his arm. “It’s nice, Dad. Really nice.”

Before Matt could respond, a commotion from the examination room interrupted them—children’s laughter mingled with excited yipping.

They hurried down the hall to find Lily and Ethan sitting cross-legged on the floor outside the puppies’ pen.

The five energetic puppies were trying to get as close as possible to them while excitedly tumbling over each other.

“They’re so friendly!” Lily exclaimed, giggling as Baker licked Star’s chin. “I thought wolfdogs were supposed to be shy around people.”

“These ones were handled from a very young age,” Matt explained, leaning against the doorframe. “They’ve had human contact every day of their lives since we rescued them, so they’re used to being around people.”

“Can we keep one?” Ethan asked, looking up with hopeful eyes as Rainier stared at

him with his golden eyes.

“They’re not pets, buddy,” Matt explained gently. “They need special homes with people who understand wolf hybrids. They’re going to families who have experience with animals like them.”

Ethan’s face fell slightly, but he nodded in understanding. “Will we get to visit them?”

Sarah picked up one of the pups before weighing it on the scales. “Probably not, but there’ll be other animals you can visit at the clinic.”

Matt watched the puppies, struck by how quickly the once-fragile animals had grown into robust young canines. In the short time they’d looked after them, they’d nearly doubled in size. Their gangly legs and oversized paws provided a clue to the large, powerful adults they would become.

Star suddenly abandoned the rest of her litter and moved toward Matt.

“That one seems to know you,” Stephanie told him.

“Star was the smallest and weakest when we found them,” Matt told her. “She nearly died the first night. Lynda and I took turns sitting up with her.” He smiled at the memory. “Lynda refused to give up on her, even when things looked bleak.”

“She sounds special,” Stephanie said softly. “Lynda, I mean.”

“She is,” Matt admitted. “Strong-willed, intelligent, and deeply compassionate. She went through a difficult divorce about ten years ago. Her husband left her for a younger woman after thirty years of marriage.”

Stephanie winced. “That’s terrible.”

“It’s made her cautious,” Matt said.

“And yet she’s coming back to Sapphire Bay to spend more time with you,” Stephanie pointed out.

Matt sighed, unable to deny the hope that had been growing inside him with each passing day. “Maybe, but I don’t want to pressure her. She needs to make her own decisions about her future.”

Stephanie leaned against her father’s shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I’d really like to meet her. Anyone who can bring you back to carving and make you send puppy photos all day is someone I want to know.”

“How did you—” Matt began, then shook his head with a rueful smile. “It was Brenda, wasn’t it?”

“She only mentioned that you’ve been documenting the puppies progress with unusual thoroughness since Dr. Morth left town.”

Matt groaned, realizing he’d been even more transparent than he’d feared. “Is there anyone in this town who isn’t keeping tabs on my personal life?”

“Probably not,” Stephanie replied cheerfully. “That’s the price of being the town’s beloved veterinarian.” Her expression softened. “But seriously, Dad. I’m happy for you. And if Lynda Morth is the reason you’re carving again and smiling more, then I already like her.”

Matt felt a weight lift from his shoulders at his daughter’s words. He’d been so concerned about how Stephanie might react to him developing feelings for someone

new that he'd underestimated her capacity for understanding and support.

"Thank you," he said softly. "That means a lot."

As they turned their attention back to the children and puppies, Matt counted the days until Lynda's return. Five more days until she was back in Sapphire Bay. Five days until he could see for himself whether the connection they'd begun to build would continue to grow.

And whether the careful hope he'd been nurturing might blossom into something deeper, something that could last a lifetime.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Lynda carried another stack of photo albums into the living room, adding them to the growing pile on the coffee table.

“I had no idea you had so many albums,” her daughter Amy said, looking up from the box of papers she was sorting through. “Dad was always the one taking pictures, but it seems like you’re the one who organized them all.”

Amy smiled, tucking a strand of her auburn hair behind her ear. She was the perfect blend of her parents—Ray’s coloring and Lynda’s determined chin and practical nature. “Dylan keeps asking to see pictures of me when I was his age. He’s convinced I was never a child.”

“Well, these should dispel that notion.” Lynda handed Amy the album. “Especially the photos from your cowgirl phase.”

“Oh no,” Amy groaned, flipping to a page that showed her seven-year-old self in a fringed vest, cowboy boots, and a hat far too large for her small head. “I’d successfully blocked this from my memory.”

Lynda laughed, the sound echoing in the house that had seemed too quiet since her return from Sapphire Bay. Having Amy visit for the day was a welcome change from the emptiness she’d felt moving through the spacious rooms alone.

They’d been working for hours, sorting through decades of accumulated papers, photographs, and memorabilia.

It was part of Lynda’s plans to prepare the house for its eventual sale.

Boxes labeled “Keep,” “Donate,” and “Discard” were gradually filling up, though the “Keep” box remained stubbornly small despite Amy’s attempts to preserve more family heirlooms.

“What about these?” Amy asked, holding up a stack of photo envelopes. “They’re from your thirtieth wedding anniversary trip to Hawaii.”

Lynda hesitated, then reached for the packet. She hadn’t looked at these photos in a long time. She’d deliberately avoided any images from what had turned out to be her final vacation with her husband. Six months later, she’d discovered Ray’s affair.

Her hands were surprisingly steady as she opened the envelope. There they were—her and Ray on the beach, hiking to waterfalls, at a luau with ridiculous flower leis around their necks. She looked genuinely happy in the photos, and Ray had his arm around her in most of them, his smile matching hers.

“You both look really good,” Amy said carefully, watching Lynda’s reaction. “It was a nice trip, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Lynda agreed, studying the images with a sense of detachment that would have been impossible a few years ago. “I remember feeling so grateful that we’d made it to thirty years, that we still enjoyed each other’s company enough to travel together.”

“Did you have any idea then?” Amy asked softly. “About Melissa?”

Lynda shook her head. “Not a clue. That’s what made it all so surreal when I found out. I kept thinking there must be some mistake, that the person in those text messages couldn’t possibly be the same man who’d held my hand as we walked along a Hawaiian beach six months earlier.”

She set the photos down, surprised to discover that the familiar knot of anger and hurt that usually accompanied memories of Ray had loosened considerably. The betrayal was still there, the facts unchanged, but the sharp edge of the pain had dulled to a distant ache.

“You seem different when you talk about him now,” Amy observed. “Less angry.”

“Do I?” Lynda considered this. “I suppose I am. Ten years is too long to be bitter.”

“It’s more than that,” Amy insisted, studying her mother with the perceptive gaze she’d inherited from Lynda herself. “It’s like you’ve finally let go of it. You used to get this tight look around your eyes whenever Dad’s name came up, but it’s not there anymore.”

Lynda thought about what Amy had said as she returned the photos to their envelope.

There was truth in what she’d said. The burning sense of injustice, of having been fooled and discarded after decades of shared life, was her constant companion for years after Ray left.

It had fueled her determination to succeed on her own, to prove she didn’t need him or anyone else.

But somewhere along the way—perhaps in the quiet mornings watching the sun rise over Flathead Lake, or during long nights helping Matt care for orphaned puppies, or in the simple pleasure of being part of a community that valued her for exactly who she was—that burning had cooled.

“I think I’ve just gained some perspective,” Lynda said finally. “Your father’s choices were about him, not me. I can acknowledge that our marriage had good years, that we created a wonderful daughter together, without letting his betrayal define the

rest of my life.”

Amy’s eyes widened slightly. “That’s... remarkably healthy, Mom. And not at all what you were saying a year ago.”

Lynda laughed, surprising herself with the lightness she felt. “I know. I’m as shocked as you are.”

“Does this change of heart have anything to do with a certain veterinarian in Montana?” Amy asked, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “The one who sends you puppy photos every day?”

Lynda blushed. It didn’t surprise her that Amy had noticed her checking her phone or the smile that appeared whenever Matt’s name flashed on the screen.

“Matt is part of it,” she admitted. “But not everything. It’s Sapphire Bay itself, the work at the shelter, the friends I’ve reconnected with. I’ve found something there that I didn’t even realize I was missing.”

Amy set aside the box she’d been organizing and sat beside Lynda on the couch. “You’re moving there permanently, aren’t you? That’s why we’re sorting through all this stuff.”

The direct question caught Lynda off guard, though it shouldn’t have. Her daughter had always been able to read her with uncomfortable accuracy.

“I am,” she confirmed, the first time she’d said the words aloud to anyone besides herself. “I’ve already spoken to Robert about buying the practice. We signed a contract yesterday, and he takes over ownership of the clinic in six weeks.”

Amy was quiet for a moment, processing what Lynda had said. “Wow. That’s... a big

step, Mom.”

“It is,” Lynda agreed. “And there are a lot of things to work out. But the more I think about it, the more right it feels.”

“What would you do in Sapphire Bay? Start a new practice?”

Lynda shook her head. “Not a full practice, no. But I could set up a small clinic focused on wildlife rehabilitation and exotic animals. The shelter desperately needs someone with that expertise, and with the money from selling the practice plus my savings, I could create something that serves a real need in the community.”

“And live where?” Amy asked, practical as always.

“I haven’t figured that out yet,” Lynda admitted. “I’ve been staying with Kathleen, one of my childhood friends, but I’d want my own place eventually. There aren’t many homes for sale, so I’ll have to move fast if something comes on the market.”

Amy nodded, her expression thoughtful. “And Matt? How does he factor into all this?”

Lynda smiled softly. She’d been open and honest with her daughter about her relationship with Matt.

She didn’t want Amy to be blindsided by the news that there was a special person in her mom’s life.

“Matt’s a significant consideration, but he’s not the only reason.

I wouldn’t uproot my entire life for a relationship that’s just beginning.”

“But you care about him,” Amy pressed gently.

“I do.” Lynda sighed. “More than I expected to, more than I thought I could after your father.” She reached for her phone, opened the photo Matt had sent that morning, and showed it to Amy.

Star sat proudly on the examination table, her transformation from a frail newborn to a thriving young animal beautifully captured in the image.

“He’s kind, Amy. Genuinely kind in a way that has nothing to do with what he might gain from it. ”

“You deserve that,” Amy said softly. “After everything with Dad, you deserve someone who sees your worth.”

Lynda’s hand shook as she placed her phone on the coffee table.

She was touched by the sincerity in her daughter’s voice.

The divorce had complicated Amy’s relationship with her father.

Her initial anger at his betrayal of her mother gave way to a cautious reestablishment of their father-daughter bond.

She rarely spoke critically of Ray now. Instead, she chose to maintain a careful neutrality that sometimes made Lynda wonder what she honestly thought of her father’s actions.

“Thank you for saying that,” Lynda replied. “But what about you and the boys? If I move to Montana, I’ll be a flight away instead of a short drive. I’ll miss school plays and baseball games, impromptu Sunday dinners, and so much more.”

“We can visit, Mom,” Amy said with a hint of amusement. “And we have phones and video calls. Besides, Sapphire Bay sounds like exactly the kind of place Eddie and Dylan would love to visit—a lake, mountains, and wildlife. It’s probably a lot more exciting than coming to your house in the suburbs.”

“That’s true,” Lynda conceded, picturing her grandsons exploring Flathead Lake, perhaps even joining her and Matt on rescue calls when the animals weren’t dangerous. “Matt has grandchildren too—Lily and Ethan. They live in Missoula, about an hour from Sapphire Bay.”

“See? Built-in playmates for when we visit,” Amy said with a smile. She reached over to take her mother’s hand. “Mom, I want you to be happy. If Sapphire Bay, a new job, and Matt make you happy, then that’s where you should be.”

The simple, unconditional support brought unexpected tears to Lynda’s eyes. “Thank you for that. I was worried you’d think I was crazy.”

“I’d never think that, especially after what Dad put you through.” Amy squeezed Lynda’s hand. “You’re a strong, independent woman who showed me that it’s never too late to rebuild your life on your terms. Matt’s lucky to have found you.”

Lynda blinked back tears, deeply moved by her daughter’s words. “I just want to be sure I’m not making a rash decision. Moving to a small town and starting a new chapter at sixty-seven has a few risks.”

“Of course it does,” Amy agreed. “But so does staying here, living a life that doesn’t excite you anymore just because it’s familiar and safe.

” She gestured around the living room. “Look at this house, Mom. It’s beautiful, comfortable, exactly what you needed after the divorce.

But when's the last time it truly felt like home? ”

The question struck Lynda with unexpected force.

She looked around at the tasteful furnishings she'd selected after Ray left, the neutral colors that had felt calming during that tumultuous time, the carefully curated artwork that meant nothing to her emotionally.

Everything in this house had been chosen to create a sanctuary from pain, a controlled environment where she could rebuild her sense of self.

But a sanctuary could also become a prison if you never ventured beyond its walls.

“I think,” Lynda said slowly, “that I’ve been confusing safety with happiness for a long time now.”

“And now?” Amy prompted.

“Now I’m ready for something different.” Lynda reached for her phone again, this time opening a photo Isabel had sent her of the Sapphire Bay animal shelter. “Something that feels more like purpose than protection.”

Amy looked at the photo and smiled, a hint of mischief in her eyes. “Something—or someone—with silver hair and a talent for carving wooden animals?”

Lynda laughed, feeling lighter than she had in days. “We’re taking things slowly.”

“Of course you are,” Amy said, rolling her eyes good-naturedly. “I wouldn’t expect anything else from you. Just don’t take things too slowly, Mom. Life’s short, even when you’re not sixty-seven.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Lynda promised, pulling her daughter into a hug.

As they returned to their sorting, Lynda moved with renewed purpose.

The photos of her life with Ray went into a small box for Amy to keep.

They were a record of their family history that no longer needed to occupy space in Lynda’s present.

The treasured mementos of her veterinary career and items of genuine sentimental value were carefully packed for the eventual move to Montana.

And in the pocket of Lynda’s sweater, the wooden wolf Matt had carved rested against her, a tangible reminder of the new life waiting for her in Sapphire Bay. A life she was finally ready to embrace, with all its uncertainties and possibilities.

Three more days, and she’d be heading back to Montana. Not for a visit this time, but to begin the process of making Sapphire Bay her permanent home. With a smile, Lynda looked at her daughter. The thought of starting again filled her with a quiet joy that had been missing for far too long.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

The familiar sign for the Sapphire Bay Animal Shelter came into view as Lynda rounded the final curve in the road.

She'd driven straight from the airport, her rental car filled with the essentials she'd packed for what would now be a permanent move rather than a brief return.

The rest of her belongings would follow once she'd finalized the sale of her house and practice.

Lynda hadn't told anyone she was coming back two days ahead of schedule.

She preferred to surprise her friends after the whirlwind of decisions and arrangements she'd made in Denver.

Robert had been both shocked and delighted when she'd brought forward their timeline for the practice sale, and they'd spent her final days in Denver discussing patient transitions.

As she pulled into the shelter's gravel parking lot, her heart quickened with anticipation. This modest building, with its peeling paint and slightly crooked "Adopt Me!" sign, already felt more like home than her elegant Denver practice ever had.

Carol was at the front desk when Lynda entered. Her reading glasses were perched on the end of her nose as she examined a stack of donation forms. She looked up, and her expression shifted from intense concentration to one of surprise and delight.

"Lynda!" she exclaimed, rushing around the desk to envelop her in a warm hug. "You

weren't supposed to be back until Saturday! Why didn't you tell us?"

Lynda returned the embrace, surprised by how much she'd missed this place and its people. "I wanted it to be a surprise. Things in Denver wrapped up sooner than I expected."

Carol held her at arm's length, studying her face. "You look different. Good different. Like you've made some big decisions."

"I have," Lynda confirmed, unable to keep the smile from her face. "Very big ones. But first, how are the puppies?"

Carol smiled. "They're growing in leaps and bounds. Matt keeps updating the community Facebook page. Mabel Terry has been interviewing everyone involved in their care and posting short videos on all the social media platforms you can imagine."

"I saw some of the videos. Mabel's done a great job." Lynda leaned against the desk. "Have you been busy at the shelter?"

"No busier than usual. Thanks to our fundraising efforts, we were able to repair the shelter after the storm, and the animals are now safe and warm. With all the publicity about the wolfdog puppies and our funding crisis, people are sending us donations." Carol took a check out of an envelope.

"This is for two hundred dollars. Can you believe that total strangers are sending us this much money?"

"They must be impressed by what the shelter is doing," Lynda told her friend.

"That's exactly what Matt's been saying," Carol said. "He's here now, actually. He'll

be thrilled to see you.”

Carol pushed open the door to the shelter’s largest play area.

The space had been transformed into a puppy paradise, with climbing platforms, tunnels, and various toys scattered across the floor.

In the center of the playground, five wolfdog puppies tumbled over each other, their silver-gray coats gleaming in the light from the skylights.

Lynda’s mouth dropped open. “I didn’t know the pups were here.”

Carol grinned. “Matt and Sarah brought them to the shelter yesterday. The clinic was wonderful while they were little, but they needed to be somewhere with more room. With the remodeling we did, the shelter is the perfect place for them.”

“They’ve gotten so big!” Lynda exclaimed, kneeling at the edge of the enclosure.

At the sound of her voice, Star lifted her head, ears perked forward. With a yip of what Lynda could only interpret as recognition, the puppy bounded across the enclosure, tail wagging furiously.

“She remembers you,” Carol said softly as Star stood on her hind legs and leaned against the wall of the enclosure, looking up at Lynda with excited eyes.

“Hello, little girl,” Lynda murmured as she rubbed the back of Star’s head. Though still the smallest of the litter, she’d grown into a healthy young animal, her once-frail body now solid with muscle and vibrant energy.

The other puppies soon noticed the newcomer and raced over, creating a chaotic swirl of fur and excitement in front of Lynda. Only Rainier held back, watching with the

cautious nature that had marked him since their rescue.

“They’ve missed you,” said a voice from the doorway.

Lynda looked up, her heart skipping a beat as she met Matt’s gaze. He stood at the entrance to the play area, a medical bag in one hand, his blue eyes filled with a mixture of surprise and something deeper she couldn’t quite name.

“Matt,” she said, her voice softer than she’d intended. “I was going to call you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” he replied, setting down his bag and crossing to where she knelt in front of the puppies. “This is a much better surprise.”

Carol cleared her throat. “I’ll be at the reception desk if you need me.”

Lynda nodded and made room for Matt as he kneeled beside her.

“You came back early,” he said. “Is everything okay in Denver?”

“Better than okay,” Lynda told him with a smile. “Robert’s buying the practice. It officially belongs to him next Friday, and my house will be on the market by next week.”

Matt’s hands stilled where he’d been scratching Rainier’s ears. “You’re selling everything? Are you sure?”

Lynda met his gaze. “I’m sure. I’ve given it a lot of thought and talked it through with Amy. This is where I want to be.”

Something in Matt’s expression changed into quiet joy. “That sounds great to me. I’m halfway through giving the puppies their weekly health check. Do you want to help?”

Lynda nodded. “I’d love to. Which pup are you up to?”

Matt pointed to Rainier. “This little man’s up next.”

As they checked the last three puppies, they fell into a familiar routine, examining each puppy for weight gain, proper development, and any health concerns.

Matt typed Star’s weight into his spreadsheet. “Star’s gained another pound.”

Lynda felt a surge of pride as she checked the puppy’s heartbeat. “She’s still the smallest, but her proportions are perfect for her size.”

“Like someone else I know,” Matt said with a grin.

Their eyes met over the examination table. Two weeks had felt like an eternity, Lynda realized. The daily photos and messages had been a lifeline, but nothing compared to being here, working alongside Matt, seeing the subtle crinkles at the corners of his eyes when he smiled.

“I missed this,” she said, gesturing to encompass the puppies, the shelter, and him.

“I missed you,” Matt replied. He hesitated, then added more softly. “More than I expected to.”

The admission touched Lynda’s heart. In a world where her ex-husband had found it so easy to discard three decades of marriage, Matt’s straightforward acknowledgment of his feelings felt like a precious gift.

“I missed you, too,” she confessed. “Denver didn’t feel like home anymore. Nothing felt right.”

Matt's smile deepened, and he reached across the table to briefly touch her hand.

"I had the same feeling, only here in Sapphire Bay." One of the pups barked, and Matt sighed.

"I need your advice," he said, gesturing to the wolfdog puppies.

"While you were gone, I talked with wildlife experts, and I'm concerned about the pups.

I was hoping you'd get back in time to help me figure out the best way to give them a great future. "

"What are you worried about?" Lynda asked.

"They're not ordinary dogs," Matt explained, sitting on a nearby stool while Star investigated his boots.

"Their high wolf content means they'll never be suitable as typical pets.

I've contacted sanctuaries and specialized facilities that might be able to take them, but most are already at capacity. "

Lynda considered the five energetic puppies. "What about keeping them here? They could be part of an educational program instead of being adopted. With the right environment, they could serve as ambassadors, teaching people about wolfdog hybrids and why they shouldn't be bred as pets."

Matt rolled a ball toward one of the pups. "That's the direction I was leaning. But it would require specialized enclosures, ongoing care, and educational programming. We don't have enough money to make it happen."

Lynda shrugged. “They’re all part of what could be a reimagined service,” she suggested. “I’ve been thinking about the shelter’s future. There’s a huge need for a wildlife rehabilitation center in this region. With my skills, I could help fill that gap.”

Matt nodded. “Carol’s been saying the same thing for years. The nearest wildlife center is in Missoula, and they’re always at capacity.”

“That’s what I heard from the vets there,” Lynda said, her enthusiasm growing as she shared her ideas with Matt.

“With the right equipment and some dedicated space, we could handle everything from orphaned bear cubs to injured eagles. I have savings, and once the sale of my practice is finalized, I’ll have more than enough to fund the initial setup of a wildlife rehabilitation center. ”

“You’re thinking of a partnership with the shelter?” Matt asked.

Lynda nodded. “I’d work full-time, overseeing both the domestic animal care and the wildlife rehabilitation. I’ve already discussed it with the board as a possibility, but now that I’m staying here permanently, we can make concrete plans.”

As they walked toward the reception area, Lynda continued, “I also have some ideas about fundraising. The shelter’s always struggling for food, medicine, and fixing any building problems.”

“It’s been an ongoing issue for years,” Matt agreed. “The annual fundraiser helps, but it’s never quite enough.” He opened the door to the reception area. “Money’s tight everywhere. I’m not sure what we can do to encourage more people to support the shelter.

“What if we rebranded?” Lynda suggested. “We could call the shelter something like

‘Paws of Hope’. It’s a name that reflects what we do in Sapphire Bay. We give hope to animals that might otherwise be lost.”

Matt stopped walking. “That’s a great idea. A new name, a new focus on wildlife rehabilitation, and a fresh approach to fundraising. We could transform this place.”

Lynda nodded. “I’ve done some research on grants available for wildlife education and rehabilitation.

If we incorporated educational programs for local schools, we could qualify for additional funding.

And if we document the wildlife rehabilitation cases, we could create a social media presence that might attract donors from beyond Sapphire Bay. ”

“And the wolfdog puppies could be our first educational ambassadors,” Matt added with a smile. “We could build a proper outdoor enclosure with enrichment activities, teach visitors about wolf conservation and the problems with breeding wolfdogs as pets.”

Carol put down the brochures she’d been folding and smiled. “I heard what you said about ‘Paws of Hope’ and nearly fell out of my chair. That’s the kind of change we need. And keeping the puppies as educational ambassadors is brilliant!”

For the next twenty minutes, the three of them discussed possibilities—the empty storage building that could be converted for wildlife rehabilitation, potential grants, and the logistics of Lynda joining the shelter full-time.

They brainstormed ideas for a wolfdog habitat that would give the puppies the space they’d need as they matured, while allowing visitors to observe and learn.

“We need to present this to the board next week,” Carol said finally, her eyes bright with excitement. “They’ve been looking for ways to expand our services without increasing our budget. This could be the perfect solution.”

“I’ll prepare a proper proposal,” Lynda promised. “With projected costs, potential funding sources, everything they’ll need to make an informed decision.”

“And I’ll help with whatever you need me to do,” Matt added.

Carol looked at Lynda and Matt. “Well, I think this calls for a celebration. But since I have a mountain of paperwork to finish before closing, I’ll leave that to you two.” She gave Matt a meaningful look. “Didn’t you mention some Labrador puppies that you wanted Lynda to see at your clinic?”

“You’re not being very subtle,” Matt told her.

Carol grinned. “Life’s too short to be subtle. In my humble opinion, you’re perfect for each other. But right now, the Labrador puppies need your expertise.”

Matt sighed. “Carol’s right. I’d appreciate a second opinion. The puppies were abandoned near the highway about four weeks ago. One of them is a lot sicker than the others, and I don’t know why. But if you’re too tired from your flight, I understand.”

“I’m never too tired for puppies,” Lynda replied with a smile. “I just need my bag from the car.”

Outside in the parking lot, the late afternoon sun sent a golden glow over the mountains surrounding Sapphire Bay. As they walked to their vehicles, Matt hesitated beside Lynda’s car.

“I meant what I said inside,” he told her, his voice quiet but firm. “About missing you. About being glad you’re staying here.”

Lynda looked at the man who’d become important to her in such a short time. The man who’d stayed up all night to save orphaned puppies, who’d carved wooden animals with such care, and who’d waited patiently for her to find her own path back to Sapphire Bay.

“I’m glad too,” she told him. “This feels right, Matt. All of it—the shelter, the puppies, Sapphire Bay.” She took a deep breath, then added more softly, “And you.”

Matt’s expression softened, and he reached for her hand, his fingers warm and steady around hers. For a moment, they stood quietly together, the distant puppy yips making the moment even more special.

Then Matt stepped closer. His blue eyes never left hers as he raised his free hand to brush a strand of hair from her cheek. “Lynda,” he whispered, before leaning down to kiss her.

His lips were gentle yet certain, a promise of all that might come. When they finally drew apart, Lynda sighed. “I could become addicted to your kisses.”

Matt smiled. “I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

And neither did Lynda.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Two weeks later, Lynda smoothed the edge of the oversized plan with her palm, studying the detailed sketch of the wolfdog habitat she'd designed with Matt. After a lot of planning, measuring, and consulting with wildlife experts, they finally had something to show for their efforts.

"What do you think?" Matt asked, pointing to the enrichment area they'd added. "We could expand this section another ten feet if we rearrange the visitor viewing platform."

Lynda nodded. "That would give the animals more vertical space to climb. It'll make them a lot happier."

Carol burst through the office door, a stack of papers clutched to her chest and her eyes bright with excitement. "They approved it! Every last detail!"

"The board?" Lynda asked, her heart suddenly racing. Though Matt had assured her the shelter board would support their proposal, she'd still been worried.

"It was a unanimous vote," Carol confirmed, dropping the paperwork on the desk.

"They loved the 'Paws of Hope' rebranding and the detailed budget projections. Mrs. Franklin—you know, the one who's always worried about money—actually said it was the most thorough proposal she'd seen in twenty years on the board. "

Matt's hand found Lynda's shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I told you they'd realize how needed this is."

“I was concerned about the cost,” Lynda admitted, glancing at the impressive figure at the bottom of their budget. Transforming part of the shelter into a wildlife rehabilitation center wasn’t cheap, even with the money she was investing in the facility.

“That’s the best part,” Carol said, pulling a letter from her stack of papers.

“Mayor Wilson’s already pledged fifteen thousand dollars toward the wolfdog habitat.

He says that, as well as being an educational asset for the entire county, it could also attract more tourists to the town.

That got the business representative on the board excited, and they’ve pledged another fifteen thousand dollars. ”

A wave of gratitude washed over Lynda. In her decades of practice in Denver, she’d never experienced this kind of community enthusiasm. There, her clients appreciated her skills, but here in Sapphire Bay, people didn’t just support the project—they embraced it as their own.

“We should celebrate,” Matt said, his eyes crinkling at the corners in a way that made Lynda’s heart do a tiny flip. “We could have dinner in Polson.”

Carol checked her watch. “You might want to postpone your celebration until after the town meeting tonight. It starts at six, and Mayor Wilson has added our proposal to the agenda. He’s expecting a presentation.”

“Tonight?” Lynda’s eyes widened. “But we haven’t prepared anything formal.”

Matt smiled. “Welcome to small-town life. Everything happens at lightning speed

once it's approved." He gestured to their plan and budget sheets. "We have everything we need right here. Everyone will want to know what's happening and how they can help."

"I've already made copies of the overview," Carol added, patting a folder. "And Brenda from Matt's clinic called to say she's created a slideshow of the puppies. If that doesn't encourage people to support the rehabilitation center, nothing will."

Lynda shook her head in amazement. "The meeting's in three hours, and you've already organized visual aids?"

Carol grinned. "Matt's right. News travels fast, especially good news about animals. If we don't have something organized, there'll be a lot of disappointed people at the meeting."

As Carol left to add a post on the community Facebook page about the meeting, Lynda turned to Matt. "I'm not much of a public speaker," she admitted. "In Denver, I spent most of my time in surgery, not giving presentations."

"I'll be there to help," Matt assured her. "When you talk about the center, tell everyone why it matters. The community has seen how you helped save the wolfdog puppies and how you've volunteered countless hours at the shelter. They trust you."

Matt's confidence in her warmed Lynda from the inside out. It was still strange, having someone believe in her so completely. After Ray's betrayal, she was used to valuing herself by what she did at work instead of who she was as a person.

She picked up a pen and her notebook. "We'd better prepare what we're going to say. Otherwise, I'll forget everything."

Matt sat beside her. "Everyone will be too excited to worry about a few forgotten

facts. The town has been wanting something like this for years, and Carol has been pushing for expanded shelter services since I moved here. We couldn't have done this without you."

"The buildings are one thing, but what about you?" Lynda asked. "Are you sure you have the time to help with the wildlife cases? Your clinic already keeps you busy."

Matt shrugged. "I've been treating the occasional injured eagle or orphaned fawn for years, usually with limited resources and outdated information. Having you here is a dream come true, professionally and personally."

Lynda held her breath. Even though their relationship had deepened since her return from Denver, they'd been careful not to rush anything. They both had busy lives and didn't want to make them any more complicated than they were.

Matt looked into Lynda's eyes. "These past weeks have been the happiest I've known in years." He reached for her hand. "I was content before we met. I had my practice, the community, and my family. But having you here has changed everything. I've fallen in love with you, Lynda."

"I feel the same way," she admitted. "I thought I was satisfied with my life in Denver. But it wasn't until I came here that I realized how much was missing." She squeezed Matt's hand. "You make me happy. Happier than I ever thought possible."

Their quiet moment was interrupted by Matt's phone buzzing with a text message. He glanced at it quickly. "It's from Stephanie. I sent her a copy of the plans, and she thinks they're fantastic."

"I'm glad she likes them," Lynda said, meaning it. She knew how important it was to him for his daughter to be proud of what he was doing.

Matt left his cell phone on the table. “Stephanie’s bringing the grandkids here this weekend.” He hesitated, then added more softly, “They’re excited to meet the woman who’s made their grandpa smile again.”

The depth of feeling in his voice made Lynda’s heart swell. This was what had been missing in her carefully reconstructed life after Ray—not just companionship, but a sense of building something together, of being part of a family again.

“I’d like to meet them,” Lynda told him. “Amy wants to meet you, too. However, it’s not for the same reason as Stephanie. I think she’s worried I’ll get hurt again.”

Matt held her hand. “I’m glad she’s looking out for you. But I need you to know that I wouldn’t do or say anything to hurt you. If something happens that makes you unhappy, please let me know. I want to be part of your life, and I’d like Amy to know how much you mean to me.”

Lynda smiled. “You might meet her sooner than you think. I told her I wanted to buy a house in Sapphire Bay, so she’s hunting through the realtors’ websites looking for listings. She’s found two houses she thinks will be perfect.”

“She sounds exactly like Stephanie,” Matt said with a grin. “If it weren’t for my daughter, I never would have found my house.”

Matt’s cell phone buzzed again. “It’s from Brenda. She’s emailed me some more information we can use in our presentation.”

Lynda waited while he opened his laptop. With everyone looking out for them, today’s presentation couldn’t be anything other than a success.

She only hoped that introducing each of them to their daughters would be just as easy. Because families could be seriously fickle when it came to welcoming new

people into their lives.

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Before they knew it, it was time to head to the town meeting. The Welcome Center was already filled with people when they arrived. Familiar faces from around Sapphire Bay turned to greet them as they looked for somewhere to sit.

Kathleen waved from the front row, pointing to some seats for them. Isabel and Frank sat nearby, Tommy fidgeting between them with a notebook open on his lap.

“He’s taking notes for his school report,” Isabel explained as they passed. “He’s decided he wants to be a ‘wolf expert’ when he grows up.”

Lynda smiled at Tommy. “I’ll need assistants at the new center. Maybe you could volunteer once we’re open?”

Tommy’s face lit up. “Really? I could help with the puppies?”

“Under supervision,” Matt said quickly. “They’re still part-wild, remember.”

Mayor Wilson called the meeting to order, moving efficiently through routine town business before introducing their proposal. “Now, for what I suspect most of you came to hear about tonight—the exciting changes planned for our animal shelter.”

As Matt explained the vision for “Paws of Hope,” Lynda studied the faces in the crowd, looking for signs of hesitation or skepticism. Instead, she found nothing but interest and support, heads nodding as Matt outlined the benefits to the community.

When it was her turn to speak, Lynda’s initial nervousness melted away.

She wasn't talking to strangers but to neighbors who cared about the same things she did.

She explained the specialized needs of wildlife rehabilitation, the importance of proper facilities, and the educational opportunities the center would provide.

"The wolfdog puppies will be our first permanent residents," she told everyone. "Their mixed heritage makes them unsuitable as pets, but as educational ambassadors, they can help visitors understand the complex issues surrounding wolf conservation and the problems with breeding wolf hybrids."

The questions that followed were thoughtful and practical. How many animals could they handle at once? What types of wildlife would they treat? Would there be volunteer opportunities for high school students interested in veterinary careers?

Councillor Grayson finally intervened. "Before we go any further, I'd like to open the floor for community support. Those wishing to make pledges or volunteer services for the new 'Paws of Hope' center, please come forward."

What happened next left Lynda speechless.

One by one, people approached the microphone, offering donations, skills, and materials to build the center.

Andrea from The Starlight Café offered to provide meals during the construction phase.

Mabel and Allan Terry from the general store promised discounted building supplies, and Patrick Devlin said he could provide a construction crew to help with the building work.

Even Mrs. Pemberton, the older woman with the orange cat named Rusty, came forward with a substantial check.

“In honor of Dr. Reynolds’ years of caring for Sapphire Bay’s animals,” she told everyone.

By the time the last pledge was made, Lynda and Matt had received commitments covering nearly fifty percent of their projected budget. Tears prickled Lynda’s eyes as she thanked the community for their overwhelming support.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” she whispered to Matt as they made their way through the crowd afterward, accepting handshakes and congratulations.

“It’s what makes Sapphire Bay special,” Matt replied. “When people believe in something, they don’t just talk about it—they make it happen.”

Later that evening, they stood on Matt’s deck overlooking the lake, mugs of coffee warming their hands against the cool night air. The water reflected the moon’s silvery light, creating a pathway that seemed to lead directly to them.

“So,” Matt said, leaning against the railing beside her, “do you still have doubts about your decision to move here permanently?”

Lynda shook her head, a sense of certainty settling deep in her bones. “Not after the meeting.” She gestured toward the twinkling lights of Sapphire Bay in the distance. “I’ve found my place, Matt. I belong here.”

“I’ll second that,” he agreed, slipping an arm around her waist.

As they stood together in comfortable silence, Lynda marveled at how her life had changed.

In just a few months, she'd gone from a Denver veterinarian visiting old friends to creating a much-needed wildlife rehabilitation center.

Before she'd arrived in Sapphire Bay, she was defined by her past. But now, she was someone who embraced new possibilities and had found a wonderful friendship with Matt.

In her carefully ordered life in Denver, she'd protected herself from disappointment by keeping her expectations low and her heart guarded. But standing here now, with Matt beside her, she knew she'd made the right choice in opening herself to change, to risk, and to love.

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Three days later, Lynda stood on the veranda of the second house she'd viewed that morning, watching her daughter walk around the garden.

The property was perched on a gentle slope overlooking Flathead Lake.

Pine trees framed a view that took Lynda's breath away even after months of living in Sapphire Bay.

"What do you think of this one?" she called to Amy, who was examining an old apple tree in one corner of the yard.

Amy turned, shielding her eyes against the sun.

Her auburn hair caught the light, reminding Lynda of autumn leaves.

"Much better than the first one. The garden alone makes it worth considering." She gestured toward the gnarled tree.

"This has to be at least fifty years old. Dylan and Eddie would love climbing it."

Lynda smiled at the mention of her grandsons. "I was thinking the same thing. It reminds me of the tree you used to climb at your grandparents' house."

The real estate agent, Denise Smith, appeared in the doorway behind her. "The previous owners planted that tree when they first moved in. They raised three children here before downsizing to a condo in Bozeman."

“It has good bones,” Amy said, rejoining them on the veranda. “The kitchen needs updating, and the bathroom wallpaper is a crime against humanity, but the layout is perfect.”

Lynda nodded in agreement. The house wasn’t as polished as her Denver home had been, but it had character and warmth that appealed to her far more than sleek modern finishes.

With three bedrooms, a spacious living area with a stone fireplace, and a wonderful veranda wrapping around two sides of the house, it felt like somewhere she could belong.

Amy looked down the sloping lawn toward the blue water visible between the trees. “The location is perfect. It’s close enough to walk to town but private enough to feel like a retreat.”

Denise smiled, clearly sensing a potential sale. “An electrician has checked all the wiring, and the roof is only three years old. The owners are motivated to sell—they’ve already purchased their new home.”

Amy walked to the railing. “It’s so different from your house in Denver,” she said to Lynda. “But it suits you better, somehow.”

Lynda joined her daughter, their arms touching as they both gazed at the view.

It was still remarkable to her how supportive Amy had been about this move.

After the initial shock of learning her mother was uprooting her entire life, she’d thrown herself into helping with the transition—organizing the Denver house sale, sorting through decades of accumulated belongings, and now flying to Montana to help Lynda choose her new home.

“I think this is the one,” Lynda said softly. “I can see myself here.”

Denise took a measuring tape out of her bag. “Would you like to take some measurements or see any part of the house again before we wrap up?”

Lynda ran her gaze along the old wooden siding. “I’d like to check the basement one more time, just to be sure about the potential for storage.” With the sale of her Denver home finalizing next week, she needed to know exactly how much of her remaining belongings would fit in the new space.

As they moved through the house again, Lynda mentally placed her furniture in each room.

She could read by the bay window in the living room before she went to work.

Evenings could be spent cooking in the kitchen while gazing out at the lake.

The house needed work, but nothing that couldn’t be done over time.

The essential elements were already there—light, space, and character.

“Are you sure you want to make an offer?” Amy asked as they finally returned to Denise’s car. “What about asking a builder to inspect the house?”

Lynda shook her head. “It’s an old house. There are bound to be things that need fixing. Besides, I won’t be offering the asking price. The kitchen and bathroom need updating, and I’ll allow a little more room in my offer for unexpected expenses.”

Amy looked back at the house. “I can see why you like it so much. If you need to save money on your remodel budget, Steven and I could do some painting. His parents could look after the boys while we helped you.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Lynda told her daughter.

Denise beamed. “I can have the paperwork ready this afternoon, if you’d like to come by the office around four.”

“Perfect,” Lynda agreed. She checked her watch. “That gives us time for lunch and to stop by the clinic afterward to see Matt.”

“The mysterious Matt I’ve heard so much about but still haven’t met,” Amy said, sliding into the passenger seat of Denise’s car. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Lynda felt a tinge of nervousness at the thought of Amy meeting Matt.

It was ridiculous, of course. They were both adults, not teenagers being introduced to each other’s parents.

But there was something significant about her daughter meeting the man who’d become such an important part of her new life.

“He’s looking forward to meeting you, too,” Lynda said, which was true. Matt was genuinely interested in getting to know her daughter. It was one of the many things she appreciated about him—his understanding of how important family was to her.

After Denise dropped them off at Kathleen’s house, Lynda drove her car into town, pointing out the landmarks to Amy as they went—Isabel’s bookstore, Casey’s jewelry store, Sweet Treats, and The Welcome Center, where they’d held events for the shelter.

“Sapphire Bay is gorgeous,” Amy said as they parked outside The Lakeside Café for lunch.

“It’s not perfect,” Lynda replied, thinking of some of the challenges of living in a small town. “But it’s real in a way Denver never felt to me, at least not in the later years.”

Over soup and sandwiches, they discussed the house in greater detail—the renovations it would need, the furniture from Denver that would work in each room, and the new pieces Lynda might want to purchase locally.

“So,” Amy said, stirring her iced tea with a deliberate casualness that put Lynda on alert. “When do I get to meet the wolfdog puppies I’ve been hearing so much about?”

“They’re at the shelter,” Lynda replied. “We can visit them after we see Matt if you’d like. Carol will still be there, and she can show you the plans for their new enclosure.”

“Perfect,” Amy said with a smile. “Tell me more about the wildlife rehabilitation center you’re planning. You’ve been suspiciously vague about the details.”

Lynda sighed, recognizing her daughter’s determined expression. “Because nothing is finalized yet. The shelter’s board approved the concept, and the community is excited about the plans. But we’re still working on funding and permits. I don’t want to jinx it by talking too much about it.”

Amy fixed her with a look that reminded Lynda uncannily of herself.

“You’ve always been the practical one, Mom, the person who plans everything meticulously.

But ever since you came to Sapphire Bay, you’ve been taking amazing leaps of faith, from buying a house to planning the rehabilitation center.

” She reached across the table to take Lynda’s hand.

“I’m proud of you. I want to hear about all of it, jinxed or not. ”

Warmth spread through Lynda’s chest at her daughter’s words. “Thank you,” she said. “That means a lot.”

As they finished their lunch, Lynda told Amy about the big and small donations they’d received for the rehabilitation center. Her daughter was suitably impressed and looking forward to seeing the project come to life.

After paying the bill, they walked to Matt’s clinic. The familiar building with its simple “Reynolds Veterinary Clinic” sign brought a smile to Lynda’s face. She’d spent so many hours here during those first weeks with the wolfdog puppies that it felt like her home away from home.

“So this is where the magic happened,” Amy smiled at Lynda. “The scene of the great puppy rescue that brought you and Matt together.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” Lynda chided, though she couldn’t entirely suppress her smile. “It was a veterinary emergency. And, just for the record, we’d worked together well before the pups were found.”

“Uh-huh,” Amy said, clearly unconvinced. “A veterinary emergency that led to midnight vigils, puppy bottle-feedings, and my mom uprooting her entire life to move to Montana.”

As they entered the clinic, Brenda looked up from the reception desk, her face lighting up at the sight of Lynda. “We weren’t expecting you today.”

“I’ve brought someone special in to meet Matt,” Lynda told her. “Brenda, this is

Amy, my daughter. Amy, this is Brenda. She keeps the clinic running smoothly.”

Brenda held out her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Have you come for the weekend, or are you staying for longer?”

Amy smiled. “I’m only here for the weekend. Mom and I are searching for the perfect house for her.”

“Have you found anything good?” Brenda asked.

“Actually, yes,” Lynda replied. “The old Simmons place on Lakeview Road. I’m making an offer this afternoon.”

“That’s wonderful!” Brenda exclaimed. “It’s a beautiful property and just the right distance from town.” She picked up the phone. “Let me tell Matt you’re here. He’s just finishing another appointment.”

While they waited, Amy wandered around the reception area, looking at the educational posters and the community bulletin board. “This clinic is smaller than your one in Denver,” she said quietly. “But it feels warmer, somehow. More personal.”

Lynda nodded. “Matt knows every pet and owner by name. He still makes house calls, keeps his prices affordable, and works with people who can’t pay the full amount.

” She smiled, remembering how he’d helped a client who couldn’t afford her dog’s surgery by setting up a payment plan and bartering baking for some of the bill. “He’s a great veterinarian.”

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The examination room door opened, and Matt appeared, escorting an elderly woman and her orange tabby cat. “Remember, Mrs. Peterson, one pill twice a day with food, and call me if his appetite doesn’t improve by Thursday,” he was saying.

“Thank you, Dr. Reynolds,” the woman replied, clutching her cat carrier. “I don’t know what Rusty and I would do without you.”

Matt’s eyes found Lynda’s over Mrs. Peterson’s head, and the warmth in his smile sent a warmth through her chest.

After the older woman left, he crossed the reception area toward them. “This is a nice surprise,” he said, his gaze moving from Lynda to Amy. “You must be Amy. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

Lynda watched her daughter study Matt as they shook hands.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, too,” Amy replied. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Mom.”

“All good things, I hope,” Matt said with a smile.

“Mostly,” Amy replied with a hint of mischief that made Lynda roll her eyes.

“We’ve just come from looking at houses,” Lynda explained. “I’m making an offer on the Simmons place this afternoon.”

“The blue one with the wrap-around veranda?” Matt asked, his expression

brightening. “It’s a beautiful property. My daughter would say it’s got great bones.”

Amy laughed. “That’s exactly what I said. Mom told me you’re the person to talk to about the wolfdog puppies. I’ve seen the photos, but I’d love to hear more about them.”

Matt’s face lit up at the mention of the puppies. “They’re doing remarkably well. Even Star—the smallest one—has thrived with your mom’s care and attention. Did Lynda tell you about the permanent habitat we’re building for them?”

“Only a little,” Amy said, shooting Lynda a teasing look.

“It’ll be remarkable,” Matt said proudly. “The wildlife rehabilitation center will be the first of its kind around Flathead Lake. We’ll focus on everything from orphaned bear cubs to injured squirrels.” He glanced at Lynda. “Did you tell Amy about the grant we found out about yesterday?”

Lynda shook her head. “Not yet. The Wildcare Foundation is considering our proposal for funding the raptor recovery area,” she explained to Amy. “It would cover the last of our startup costs.”

“Mom, that’s amazing!” Amy exclaimed. “Why didn’t you say something during lunch?”

“I told you I don’t want to jinx it,” Lynda replied with a small smile. “We won’t know for sure for another few weeks.”

“Well, I think it calls for a celebration regardless,” Matt said. “Are you two free for dinner tonight? The Lakeside Grill has a new chef from Seattle—his trout with huckleberry glaze is incredible.”

Amy nodded enthusiastically. “We’d love to. Maybe we’ll have a house offer to celebrate by then, too.”

“Perfect,” Matt replied, his eyes meeting Lynda’s. “I’ll make a reservation for six-thirty. I don’t know if my daughter can join us, but would you mind if I asked her?”

Lynda looked at Amy and then smiled at Matt. “We’d love to meet Stephanie. I think our daughters will have a lot in common.”

A buzzer sounded from one of the examination rooms, and Matt glanced apologetically toward the back of the clinic. “That’s my signal that Brenda has my next patient ready. I should get back to work, but I’ll see you both tonight.”

He touched Lynda’s arm briefly, a simple gesture that conveyed a world of affection, before heading back toward the exam rooms.

As they left the clinic and walked toward the car, Amy was suspiciously quiet.

“Well?” Lynda finally asked, unable to stand the silence. “What do you think?”

Amy’s expression softened into a genuine smile. “I think he’s wonderful, Mom. Warm, kind, clearly intelligent, and completely smitten with you.”

“Smitten is a strong word,” Lynda protested, though she couldn’t help the pleased flush that rose to her cheeks.

“It’s the right word,” Amy insisted. “You should have seen his face when you were talking about the funding for the raptor center. He looked at you as if you’d personally hung the moon and stars.”

“He’s a good man,” Lynda said. “The best I’ve known since your father... well, since

the early days with your father.”

Amy linked her arm through Lynda’s as they walked. “I’m happy for you, Mom. You deserve to find happiness after everything Dad did.”

As they drove toward the shelter to see the wolfdog puppies, Lynda thought about what Amy had said. Ray had made a conscious decision to sleep with Melissa. For more years than she wanted to admit, Lynda had let his decision suffocate her. She wouldn’t do that anymore.

The house on Lakeview Road, with its expansive veranda and ancient apple tree, would become her home.

The shelter would become Paws of Hope, a place where injured wildlife and abandoned pets could find healing and second chances.

And Matt... well, that relationship was still unfolding, one careful step at a time, but with a promise that grew stronger with each passing day.

Lynda glanced at her daughter in the passenger seat, grateful beyond words for her support and understanding. Then she turned her eyes back to the road and drove toward the shelter where five wolfdog puppies were waiting.

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Matt smoothed his hands down his navy jacket as he walked toward The Lakeside Grill, checking his watch for the fourth time in ten minutes. Stephanie was walking beside him, her heels clicking confidently on the sidewalk.

“Stop fidgeting, Dad,” Stephanie said, adjusting the strap of her purse. “You’d think you were meeting the President instead of having dinner with people you already know.”

“I’ve only met Amy briefly at the clinic,” Matt reminded her. “And this is different. This is...” He paused, searching for the right words. “This matters.”

Stephanie’s expression gentled. “I know it does. And that’s exactly why everything will be fine. When something matters this much to you, it shows.”

The hostess recognized them immediately and led them through the bustling restaurant toward Lynda and Amy.

Several locals nodded greetings, and Matt realized that by tomorrow morning, half of Sapphire Bay would know about this family dinner.

The thought should have made him nervous, but instead, it felt right, as if they were taking a public step forward together.

Lynda stood as they approached, her face brightening with relief and pleasure. She was wearing a burgundy sweater that brought out the color in her eyes, making her look even more beautiful than usual.

“Stephanie, I’m so glad you could join us,” Lynda said, stepping forward to embrace Matt’s daughter. “Amy’s been curious about you ever since she arrived.”

Amy rose from her chair with an easy smile, extending her hand to Stephanie. “Mom told me about the mysterious daughter who helped design the perfect house.”

Stephanie laughed, accepting the handshake warmly. “And you’re the daughter who can find real estate listings faster than a search engine and doesn’t mind your mom moving across two states.”

“Guilty on both counts,” Amy replied, her eyes sparkling with humor that reminded Matt strongly of Lynda.

As they settled into their seats, Matt noticed how naturally the conversation began to flow. The initial stiffness he’d expected between their daughters didn’t materialize.

“So Stephanie,” Amy said as they studied their menus, “Mom mentioned your children are about the same ages as my boys. Do they have any interest in wildlife?”

“Lily wants to examine everything that moves,” Stephanie replied. “Last week, she brought home an injured bird she found and demanded that Grandpa fix it immediately. Ethan’s more cautious, but he’s fascinated by the science behind animal behavior.”

“That sounds exactly like Dylan and Eddie,” Amy said with delight. “Eddie’s only five years old, but he thinks carefully about everything, while Dylan jumps right in and figures things out as he goes.”

Matt relaxed as he watched the two women discover their common ground. Their situations were remarkably similar— both were protective daughters watching their parents navigate new relationships after years of being alone.

“I have to admit,” Amy said as their appetizers arrived, “I was nervous about Mom moving here. Not because of you,” she added quickly, glancing at Matt, “but because she’s been so careful about letting people get close since the divorce.”

“I understand completely,” Stephanie replied. “Dad hasn’t shown interest in anyone since my mom died. When he started mentioning Lynda’s name in every phone call, I knew something significant was happening.”

Matt felt heat rise in his cheeks. “I didn’t mention Lynda in every phone call.”

“Dad, you sent me ten photos of the wolfdog puppies in one day,” Stephanie said dryly. “And somehow Lynda appeared in the background of six of them.”

Lynda laughed, covering her face with her hands. “I’ve been just as obvious. I called Amy three times last week to tell her about Matt’s wood carvings. He made me a beautiful wolf,” Lynda said softly, her eyes meeting his across the table. “It sits on my bedside table.”

The simple admission carried more weight than a grand declaration, and Matt felt something warm settle in his chest.

“Dad’s a wonderful woodcarver,” Stephanie said with genuine pleasure in her voice. “He used to carve all the time when I was growing up. Mom always said his hands were happiest when they were creating something.”

“What was your Mom like?” Amy asked Stephanie.

Stephanie sighed. “She was great. We had a lot of good times together. Mom loved baking. We’d try different recipes and create some amazing food. That changed when she got sick, but she still sent me recipes she found on the Internet.”

As their main courses arrived, the conversation shifted to lighter topics. Amy shared stories about her boys' latest schemes, while Stephanie recounted Lily's most recent negotiations for extended privileges. Matt and Lynda laughed at the similarities between their grandchildren's personalities.

"Eddie built a Lego hospital after I told him about the wildlife center," Amy said, spearing a piece of salmon. "Complete with different sections for different types of animals."

"Lily announced she's going to be a veterinarian like her grandfather," Stephanie added. "She's already started a notebook where she records observations about every animal she encounters."

"Your grandchildren sound lovely," Lynda said warmly.

"Actually," Stephanie said, exchanging a glance with Amy, "I was thinking about bringing them for a visit in a few weeks. Maybe all the children could meet?"

Matt blinked in surprise. In a short space of time, they'd gone from introducing their daughters to each other, to having a family get-together in Sapphire Bay.

"That would be wonderful," Amy said enthusiastically. "The boys have been asking when they can see the wolfdog puppies in person instead of just in photos."

Stephanie grinned at Matt and Lynda. "With all four grandchildren together, you'll have your hands full at the animal shelter."

Matt looked at Lynda. She returned his bemused glance with one of her own. Their daughters weren't just tolerating this blending of families; they were actively encouraging it.

After their main course, they enjoyed hot apple crumble with vanilla ice cream for dessert.

“Do you know what strikes me?” Amy said to her mom and Matt. “You complement each other beautifully. Mom becomes more adventurous around you, Matt. And from what Stephanie’s said, you seem different when you’re with her, Matt.”

Stephanie nodded in agreement. “It’s true. Dad’s been more like his old self but somehow better.”

Lynda’s hand found Matt’s under the table, her fingers intertwining with his. The simple touch grounded him, and made the moment feel both surreal and perfectly real.

“I think,” Stephanie continued, “that we should try to make this a regular thing. I know it’s not easy flying to Montana with a family, but if we plan ahead, you might be able to buy cheaper tickets. The kids could get to know each other, and we could all...”

“Build something together,” Amy finished with a smile.

Stephanie nodded. “Exactly. Not that we want to add any pressure onto your relationship or anything,” Stephanie said to Matt and Lynda. “But it’d be nice to catch up regularly.”

Lynda looked at Amy and Stephanie. “Are you sure you haven’t met each other before? You’re more alike than I imagined.”

Amy laughed. “That’s Mom’s way of saying we’re bossy.”

Stephanie waved away Amy’s comment. “Don’t worry. Dad says the same thing

about me.” With a grin at Lynda, Stephanie scooped a mound of ice cream onto her spoon. “Tell us about the house you saw. Dad said you were going to make an offer, Lynda.”

After hearing about the house, they got ready to leave the restaurant.

As he helped Lynda put on her jacket, Matt watched Stephanie and Amy exchange phone numbers and make plans to coordinate their children’s visit.

The ease with which they’d accepted each other, the genuine warmth in their interactions, gave him hope he hadn’t dared to feel.

Outside the restaurant, under the glow of the streetlights, Amy surprised him by pulling him into a brief hug.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “For making my mother smile again. For helping her remember who she is beneath the weight of what happened with Dad.”

Matt nodded. “And thank you for welcoming me into your life,” he replied, meaning every word.

After he’d said goodbye to Lynda and Amy, he walked to his truck with Stephanie beside him.

“That went better than I hoped,” she said softly.

“Better than I dreamed,” Matt agreed, watching Lynda and Amy walk ahead of them, their heads bent together in quiet conversation.

“Dad?” Stephanie touched his arm, making him stop and look at her. “I like Lynda. I like them both. And Mom would like them too.”

The unexpected mention of Maria brought tears to Matt's eyes. "I think she would, too," he managed to say.

Standing in the parking lot, watching Lynda laugh at something Amy whispered to her, Matt felt the last of his reservations dissolve. This wasn't just about him and Lynda anymore. It was about building something larger—a family that honored the past while embracing the future.

And that future felt not just possible but inevitable.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Matt stood in his empty kitchen, still wearing the same clothes he'd worn to dinner.

The silence inside his home seemed to press against the walls.

Stephanie had driven back home twenty minutes ago, and the house felt cavernous without the conversation and laughter that had filled his truck on the ride home.

The evening had been perfect—better than perfect.

Watching Stephanie and Amy connect so naturally, and seeing Lynda's face light up as their daughters made plans for the grandchildren to meet, felt like they were building something real and lasting together.

It should have left him content, peaceful, and ready for a good night's sleep.

Instead, restlessness crawled under his skin like an itch he couldn't scratch.

Matt loosened his collar and wandered into the living room, switching on the lamp beside his reading chair.

A veterinary journal lay open on the side table where he'd left it that morning, an article about wildlife rehabilitation techniques half-finished.

He picked it up, trying to focus on the words, but his mind kept drifting back to the dinner.

The look on Amy's face when she thanked him for making her mother smile again

was special.

The easy warmth in Stephanie's voice when she'd said her mom would like Lynda had affected him deeply.

And when both daughters were organizing when their children could meet, it made him think that having a blended family was already a foregone conclusion.

He set the journal aside and rubbed his temples. Everything was falling into place so smoothly that it felt almost surreal. After fifteen years of careful solitude, of keeping his heart safely locked away, life was suddenly offering him everything he hadn't dared to want.

So why did he feel like he was standing on the edge of a cliff?

Matt got up and paced to the window that overlooked the lake.

Moonlight silvered the water's surface, and he could see the faint lights of houses scattered along the far shore.

Somewhere out there, Lynda was probably getting ready for bed, maybe talking to Amy about the evening.

The thought made him smile despite feeling uneasy.

He tried to work out what was bothering him.

Was he afraid of moving too fast? They'd been careful about that, taking their time and letting their relationship develop naturally.

Was he worried about disappointing Lynda in some way?

That seemed unlikely after tonight. The connection between their families had been immediate and genuine.

It could be the magnitude of what was happening.

For so long, his life had been predictable, contained, and manageable.

He'd had his work, Stephanie, and the occasional fishing trip or dinner with friends.

It was safe and predictable. And now everything was expanding, becoming complex and wonderful and terrifying all at once.

Matt walked to his workshop, a converted spare bedroom where he kept his carving tools and wood supplies. For the last few days, he'd been working on a new piece. It was a mother deer and her fawn. He'd spotted them near the clinic last week and had quickly taken some photos with his phone.

The partially carved basswood sat on his workbench, waiting for him to define the delicate features of the fawn's face.

Picking up his smallest knife, he settled onto his stool, trying to lose himself in the familiar rhythm of shaping the wood.

But his hands felt clumsy. After a few minutes, he set the knife down, frustrated.

Even this refuge, this quiet practice that usually calmed his mind, couldn't touch whatever was churning inside him.

The house felt too small and too empty at the same time.

Matt glanced at the clock on the workshop wall.

It was nearly midnight. It was too late to call anyone, too early to give up on sleep entirely.

He considered making a cup of coffee, taking a shower, and reading in bed. None of those options appealed to him.

What he really wanted was to talk to Lynda, to hear her voice, and share this strange feeling of standing on the threshold of something immense. But Amy was staying with her, and they wouldn't appreciate being woken by his late phone call.

Instead, he thought about the wolfdog puppies. They'd be sleeping now, curled together in their warm enclosure at the shelter. The thought of them growing into healthy, thriving animals usually made him happy.

Tonight, it left him feeling worried.

Matt changed into jeans and a sweatshirt, grabbed his keys and medical bag from the kitchen counter, and headed out.

Carol had mentioned that Baker had been favoring his left front paw yesterday, and it wouldn't hurt to take a look.

The drive would clear his head, and maybe by the time he got home, this restless energy would have settled into something manageable.

The streets of Sapphire Bay were deserted.

The streetlights created pools of yellow light in the darkness.

Matt drove slowly, windows down, letting the cool night air wash over him.

The familiar route to the shelter was soothing—past the general store, the elementary school, and the park where the farmers market set up every Saturday.

He'd made this drive hundreds of times over the years in all kinds of weather and circumstances.

Emergency calls in the middle of winter storms, routine visits on sunny spring mornings, and late-night checks when animals were sick or injured.

The shelter had become a second home, a place where his skills mattered, and his presence could make a difference.

As he turned onto Maple Street, Matt realized that's what he needed tonight—to feel useful, to connect with the work that had brought meaning to his life and, more recently, had brought Lynda into it.

The puppies represented everything good that had happened in the past few weeks.

Their survival, their growth, the community support they'd generated, and his relationship with Lynda were all wrapped around five rapidly growing wolfdogs.

The animal shelter came into view, and Matt stopped his truck in the parking lot. He sat for a moment, breathing in the night air. Already, he felt calmer, more centered. This had been the right choice.

But as he stepped out of his vehicle, something made him pause. The air smelled wrong—acrid, sharp, like burning plastic. And there was something else, something that made his stomach clench with sudden dread.

A faint orange glow was visible through the trees that bordered the shelter's back lot.

Matt's medical bag hit the gravel as he ran toward the building, his heart hammering against his ribs. The smell grew stronger with each step, and now he could hear it too—the sinister crackle of flames consuming everything in their path.

The shelter was on fire.

Matt's hands shook as he fumbled for his phone, dialing 911 while calculating how much time he might have, how many animals were inside, and what equipment he'd need to get them out safely.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Fire at the Sapphire Bay Animal Shelter on Maple Street," Matt said, his voice surprisingly steady despite the chaos in his chest. "I'm going in to get the animals out."

"Sir, please wait for the fire department?—"

But Matt was already running toward the building, toward the sounds of terrified animals and the glow that was growing brighter by the second. The restless energy that had worried him changed into fierce determination.

Whatever was about to be lost, he wouldn't let it happen without a fight.

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Matt turned his key in the lock and threw open the shelter's front door. The familiar lobby looked alien in the flickering orange light, shadows dancing wildly across walls he'd walked past thousands of times.

The sound hit him next—terrified barking, yowling, and whimpering cut through him like a physical blow. Every animal in the building was awake and panicked, their cries echoing off the smoke-filled corridors.

Matt pulled his sweatshirt up over his nose and mouth, squinting through the smoke to orient himself. The fire was concentrated in the back of the building where the large dog kennels were housed, and where the wolfdog puppies slept.

There was no time to think. He had to get the animals out of the shelter.

He ran toward the cat rooms first. It was closest to the exit and housed the most vulnerable animals.

Five adult cats and a litter of kittens were there, and their carriers were stacked near the door for easy transport.

Matt grabbed two carriers at once, stuffing terrified cats inside with movements that were more urgent than gentle.

"It's okay," he croaked to a gray tabby who hissed as he lifted her. "I've got you."

The smoke was getting thicker. Matt made two trips into the parking lot, leaving the crates as far away from the building as he dared.

His lungs burned with each breath, but he couldn't stop.

The kittens went in last, their tiny mews barely audible over the roar of flames that was growing louder by the minute.

Next were the dogs in the front kennels. A beagle named Buddy, two terrier mixes, and an elderly golden retriever. Matt pulled them out, clipping leashes to their collars and urging them to his truck. As fast as he could, he tied their leads to the trailer hitch and raced back inside the shelter.

Each trip back into the building was harder than the last. The smoke was now so dense that it made it nearly impossible to see. Matt felt his way along the familiar walls, counting doorways and kennel gates by memory. His throat felt raw, and his eyes burned so badly he could barely keep them open.

The heat was intense as he reached the back corridor where the large kennels were housed. Flames licked along the ceiling, eating through electrical conduits and wooden support beams. In the farthest kennel, huddled together in terror, were the five wolfdog puppies.

Baker and Rainier were pressed against the kennel door, whimpering. Helena and Granite cowered in the back corner. And Star—tiny, fragile Star—was frozen in the center of the kennel, her golden eyes wide with fear, her body trembling so violently Matt could see it even through the smoke.

“Come on, babies,” Matt called, fumbling with the latch. His hands were shaking from adrenaline and smoke inhalation, making the simple mechanism seem impossibly complex. “We need to go. Now.”

Baker and Rainier bolted past him the moment the gate opened. Helena and Granite followed more reluctantly, but they followed. Star didn't move.

Matt lunged forward and scooped up the paralyzed puppy, tucking her against his chest as he ran after her siblings. Behind him, he heard the ominous crack of timber beginning to fail.

The four larger puppies had scattered when they reached the lobby. Matt left Star in his truck and spent precious minutes herding her siblings, grabbing them one by one and loading them into the vehicle. His vision was starting to blur from smoke inhalation, and his legs felt unsteady.

But he couldn't stop. Not yet.

There were still animals in the building. Mrs. Chen's ancient cat, Whiskers, who'd been boarding while she visited her daughter. The rabbit that some kid had surrendered yesterday. An injured hawk that was recovering from a wing fracture.

Matt made two more trips, his movements becoming increasingly unsteady. The heat was overwhelming now, and the smoke was so thick he was navigating purely by touch. When he finally emerged with the last animal—Whiskers, who'd been hiding under a desk—his legs gave out.

He collapsed beside his truck, gasping for clean air, Whiskers clutched against his chest. The sirens were getting closer, but they were still too far away. Matt's vision was darkening at the edges, and his chest felt like it was filled with broken glass.

With the last of his strength, he managed to get Whiskers into a cat carrier and secure it in the truck bed. The wolfdog puppies were whimpering in the cab, pressed together for comfort.

Matt fell to the ground and closed his eyes. The heat from the building was intense, even in the parking lot. Windows exploded, and somewhere in the distance, the fire trucks' horns and sirens cut through the night air.

The last thing he remembered was the sound of heavy boots running across gravel and urgent voices calling his name. Then there was nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

The shrill ring of Lynda's phone jolted her out of a deep sleep. She fumbled for it on the nightstand, squinting at the display. It was half past one in the morning. Carol's name glowed on the screen, and Lynda's heart immediately began racing. Emergency calls at this hour never brought good news.

"Carol?" Lynda's voice was thick with sleep and growing dread.

"Lynda, thank goodness you answered. There's been a fire at the shelter." Carol's voice was strained, barely controlled. "Matt's at the hospital in Kalispell. He got all the animals out, but he's hurt. You need to come."

The words hit Lynda like a physical blow. She sat up abruptly, her mind struggling to process what she was hearing. "How badly hurt?"

"He has some burns, but the doctors are more worried about his lungs. His daughter's on her way here, but she's still at least half an hour away. The animals are all safe. Every single one. But the building..." Carol's voice cracked. "It's gone, Lynda. Everything's gone."

Lynda was already out of bed, reaching for clothes with shaking hands. "Which hospital was Matt taken to?"

"Logan Health Medical Center. I called Sarah, and she's looking after the animals with the other volunteers. Matt got them out of the shelter, but she'll check them for smoke inhalation."

Lynda was grateful for Sarah's help. "Thanks for calling. Are you okay?"

“I’m just shocked,” Carol told her. “The police couldn’t contact Stephanie, so they called me. I followed the ambulance to Kalispell in my truck to make sure Matt had someone with him. It’s been a stressful night.”

Lynda grabbed a jacket and her car keys. “Matt will appreciate you being there. I’ll drive to the hospital and meet you there.”

“Be careful on the road,” Carol warned. “Matt’s being looked after.”

“I will,” Lynda promised. She ended the call and stood frozen in her darkened bedroom, working through what Carol had told her. Matt was injured, the shelter was destroyed, and the wolfdog puppies and the other animals they were looking after were traumatized and homeless.

A soft knock at her door interrupted her paralysis. Kathleen and Amy were standing in the hallway.

“Mom?” Amy’s voice was concerned. “We heard the phone. Is everything okay?”

“No,” Lynda said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Nothing’s okay.”

Kathleen came into the room and hugged her. “Tell us what you need.”

While Amy got ready to take Lynda to Kalispell, Kathleen made her a cup of coffee and offered her some words of wisdom. Before Lynda knew it, she was sitting in the passenger seat of her car, heading toward the hospital.

The drive to Kalispell passed in a blur of headlights and worried conversation. Amy gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, periodically glancing at Lynda with concern.

Lynda stared through the passenger window at the dark landscape rushing past, her mind cycling through worst-case scenarios.

How badly was Matt hurt? Were the animals really all safe, or was Carol trying to spare her? And the shelter—years of community effort, thousands of dollars in donations and improvements, and all the plans for the wildlife rehabilitation center were gone.

When they arrived at the emergency department, it was busy despite the early hour. Lynda rushed to the reception desk, her heart pounding.

“I’m looking for Matt Reynolds,” she said breathlessly. “He was brought in from a fire?—”

“Are you family?” the receptionist asked.

Lynda hesitated for a fraction of a second. “I’m Dr. Lynda Morth. I work with him at the veterinary clinic.”

“Room 7. He’s stable, but they’re still evaluating him for smoke inhalation.”

Lynda hurried down the corridor with Amy close behind her. Through the partly open door of Room 7, she could see Matt propped up in bed with an oxygen mask covering his nose and mouth. His face was streaked with soot, his hair singed, and angry red burns covered his forearms.

But his eyes were alert, and when he saw her, relief flooded his features.

“You shouldn’t have come,” he said, his voice hoarse and muffled by the mask as a nurse checked his vitals. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lynda said, moving to his bedside. She wanted to touch him, to reassure herself that he was okay, but his hands were wrapped in gauze. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been breathing campfire smoke for hours,” Matt admitted. “But I’m fine. More importantly, all the animals got out. Even Whiskers—you remember Mrs. Chen’s cat? She was hiding under Carol’s desk, but I found her.”

Even injured and exhausted, his first concern was for the animals he’d saved. Lynda felt tears prick her eyes. “Matt, you could have died in there.”

“But I didn’t,” he said. “And neither did they. That’s what matters.”

A doctor entered the room with a clipboard in her hand. “Hi, Mr. Reynolds. I’m Ceire O’Leary, a consultant with the hospital. How are you feeling?”

Matt moved the oxygen mask away from his mouth. “A little sore.”

“We can give you something for that,” the doctor said as she made some notes on his chart.

When she was finished, she looked at Matt.

“We’d like to keep you here for a few days.

Your oxygen levels are improving, but we want to monitor you for signs of delayed respiratory distress.

The burns on your arms are second-degree but should heal well with the proper care.
”

Lynda moved closer to Matt's bed. "Does he need to go to a burn center?"

Ceire shook her head. "His burns aren't life-threatening.

As long as Matt's lungs respond to the treatment we're giving him, he'll be okay here.

The outpatient clinic in Sapphire Bay will provide any follow-up care after Matt's discharged.

"She smiled at Matt. "We'll find you a bed on a ward soon. It'll be a little quieter than here."

After the doctor left, Matt pulled off his oxygen mask despite the nurse's protest. "Lynda, you need to know that the puppies are traumatized. Star especially. She wouldn't leave her kennel when the fire started.

I had to carry her out. They're going to need specialized care, somewhere quiet and secure. "

"We'll figure it out," Lynda said, though privately she wondered how they would. "Right now, you need to focus on getting better."

"The building?" Matt asked quietly.

Lynda couldn't bring herself to answer, but her expression told him everything he needed to know.

Half an hour later, while Stephanie sat with her dad in his room, Lynda was in a family room with Carol. Amy had gone to get coffee, leaving the two women alone to discuss the fire.

“I’ve been the shelter manager for eight years,” Carol said, staring at her hands.

“I’ve seen floods, power outages, and budget crises.

But this...” She shook her head. “The inspector will be there later today, but the fire chief thinks the fire started in the electrical wiring by the back kennels. It was original to the building and probably sixty years old.”

“Was anything able to be saved?” Lynda asked, though she dreaded the answer.

“It was a total loss. The roof collapsed about ten minutes after the fire department arrived. If Matt hadn’t gotten there when he did.

...” Carol’s voice trailed off. “By the time I got the call from the police, it was already too late to save the building. But somehow, Matt managed to get every single animal out. Seventeen lives were saved because he couldn’t sleep and decided to check on the puppies. ”

Lynda closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what could have been lost. “Where are the animals now?”

“Scattered across town. Some are at Matt’s clinic, and some are at the emergency vet in Polson.

A few of the healthier ones are with foster families who answered the emergency calls.

But Lynda...” Carol leaned forward, her expression grave.

“The wolfdog puppies can’t be housed with regular domestic animals.

They need specialized facilities, and trained handlers.

And with Matt injured and the shelter gone, I don't know how we're going to manage their care. ”

The reality of their situation began to sink in.

The insurance money might cover rebuilding the shelter, but that would take months, maybe years.

The wildlife rehabilitation center they'd dreamed of creating seemed like an impossible fantasy now.

And the wolfdog puppies, the animals that had brought her and Matt together, were traumatized.

“What about the grants we applied for?” Lynda asked weakly. “Do you think the funders will allow us to access that money?”

Carol's expression answered before she spoke.

“The Wildcare Foundation isn't going to fund a rehabilitation center that doesn't exist. And even if we could rebuild the shelter, it would take a long time.

By then, the puppies will be adults, and the community support might have moved on to other causes. ”

Lynda felt the weight of defeat settling on her shoulders.

Everything they'd worked for, everything they'd dreamed of building together, had gone up in smoke.

The partnership with the shelter had given her a new purpose in life.

She'd dreamed of a better future, but it all seemed impossibly fragile now.

Amy returned with three takeout cups of coffee. Taking one look at her mom's face, she sat down without speaking. Placing a gentle hand on Lynda's shoulder, she offered her silent support in the face of what felt like insurmountable obstacles.

In the distance, Lynda heard the faint sounds of people talking and machines humming. Someone yelled, and the drum of pounding feet echoed along a corridor. It was a reminder of how close they'd come to losing everything, including the man who meant the world to her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

By nine o'clock, Lynda's phone began buzzing with voicemail messages and texts while she sat in the hospital chair beside Matt's bed. Despite his pain medication, Matt was tossing and turning and groaning in his sleep.

With a tired smile for Stephanie, she left the room and headed into the corridor. News of the fire must have spread through Sapphire Bay like ripples across the lake.

Amy was in the family room, so Lynda joined her daughter and answered the next call. It was from Brenda at the clinic.

"I heard about the fire," Brenda said. "How's Matt? What can I do to help?"

Before Lynda could fully answer, another call came in from Mayor Wilson, then one from Brooke at Sweet Treats, and then Mabel at the general store. Everyone offered their help, asked about Matt, and wanted to know what the community could do.

"Mom," Amy said softly, looking up from her phone. "My social media is blowing up. Someone posted about the fire on the community's Facebook page. There are already forty-three comments offering help."

Lynda felt overwhelmed by the outpouring of support but also deeply touched.

Stephanie walked into the family room and spoke to Lynda. "Dad wants to see you."

Lynda hurried into his room. The oxygen mask that Matt had been wearing was gone, and he looked exhausted.

“Is that your phone that was buzzing?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“Half the town is calling,” Lynda said, smoothing his blanket unnecessarily. “Word travels fast here.”

“Too fast,” Matt said with a weak smile. “By noon, the story will probably have me fighting off bears while rescuing endangered eagles.”

A soft knock interrupted them. Carol appeared in the doorway, followed by Kathleen.

“We don’t want to disturb you,” Kathleen said apologetically, “but we had to check on Matt and see what we could do to help.”

Carol moved to the foot of the bed, her expression still shell-shocked from the night’s events. “Matt, thank goodness you’re okay. The whole town is talking about what you did.”

“How are the animals this morning?” Matt asked, attempting to sit up straighter.

“That’s partly why we’re here,” Kathleen said.

“The community response has been incredible. We’ve set up a temporary housing network.

Mabel’s daughters are looking after four of the smaller dogs.

The emergency vet in Polson took the injured hawk and the rabbit.

Mrs. Chen came to get Whiskers an hour ago.

She cried when she heard you’d saved her cat. ”

Carol pulled out her phone and showed them a photo.

“Look at this—the principal of the local high school arrived at the clinic this morning with food, blankets, and medical equipment they’d somehow acquired.

And Ben Thompson from The Christmas Tree Farm started a GoFundMe page.

It’s already raised over three thousand dollars. ”

Lynda stared at the screen in amazement. “Three thousand dollars? Since when?”

“Since about four o’clock this morning,” Carol replied. “Ben posted the link with photos of the fire and called it ‘Rebuilding Hope: Sapphire Bay Animal Shelter Recovery Fund.’ People have been sharing it all morning.”

A commotion in the hallway caught their attention. Through the open door, Lynda saw a small group approaching. It was her friend Isabel, followed by Tommy and his granddad.

“Tommy?” Matt called out weakly as the group entered. “What are you doing here?”

Tommy stepped forward with the kind of serious determination only a ten-year-old could muster. “Dr. Matt, Granddad let me call my teacher as soon as we heard about the fire. Mrs. Peterson is letting our whole class do a special project to raise money for the new shelter.”

Frank, Tommy’s granddad, smiled apologetically. “He insisted we come to see you.”

“What kind of fundraiser?” Lynda asked, charmed despite her exhaustion.

Tommy pulled a carefully folded paper from his pocket.

“We’re doing a wolf awareness campaign. Everyone in my class is going to research different facts about wolves and wolf conservation, and people can sponsor us for each fact we learn.

Plus, we’re making wolf bookmarks to sell, and my teacher said we can have a bake sale with wolf-themed cookies. ”

Lynda felt tears prick her eyes. This child, who’d been so excited about their wildlife rehabilitation plans, was refusing to let the dream die.

“Tommy, that’s wonderful,” Matt said, his voice thick with emotion. “But you don’t have to help fundraise.”

“Yes, I do,” Tommy said with the firmness of absolute conviction. “You and Dr. Morth were going to teach me about taking care of wild animals. The fire can’t stop that. We just have to build it back better.”

Kathleen stepped forward, her eyes bright with purpose.

“Which brings me to my contribution. I have a large sunroom in my house that I’m remodeling.

It’s not being used at the moment, but it’s climate-controlled, secure, and quiet.

I want to offer it as temporary housing for the wolfdog puppies until we can figure out a permanent solution. ”

Lynda’s mouth fell open. “Kathleen, that’s incredibly generous, but they’re not house pets. They need specialized?—”

“I know,” Kathleen interrupted gently. “But I’m very good friends with a wonderful

exotic animal expert.

I'm sure she'll help me set everything up, and I have a large fenced yard where we can create an outdoor exercise area.

It's not perfect, but it's better than keeping them at the clinic in cages. "

Tears filled Lynda's eyes. "I'd love to help."

Frank nodded. "And Patrick and I can help with any construction needed for the outdoor areas."

The room had fallen silent except for the steady beep of Matt's heart monitor. All of these wonderful people were rallying around a cause that had seemed hopeless just hours ago.

"There's more," Isabel said quietly. "I thought I'd use the bookstore as a collection point for donations. We can coordinate supply drives, and I've already reached out to other animal shelters in the region to see what resources they can share."

Carol's phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. "It's from Mayor Wilson. I'll be back in a minute."

When she returned a few minutes later, Carol's expression was a mixture of excitement and disbelief.

"The mayor wants to fast-track the permitting process for the shelter and the rehabilitation center. And he says the business association is prepared to make this their major community project for the year."

Lynda sank back in her chair, overwhelmed by the rapid mobilization happening

around them.

“I don’t understand,” she said softly. “Why is everyone doing this? The insurance will eventually cover rebuilding a basic shelter, but all of these extras—the wildlife rehabilitation center, the specialized habitats...”

Kathleen smiled. “Because it’s not just about the animals. It’s about having something special that makes our town different. Something that makes people proud to live here.”

Matt reached for Lynda’s hand, his fingers still weak but warm. “Do you see now?” he asked quietly. “This isn’t just our dream anymore. It belongs to everyone.”

Lynda looked around the hospital room filled with people who’d become family, who were refusing to let tragedy end their story. She thought about her earlier despair, and her fear that they wouldn’t have the resources to rebuild the shelter and create a new rehabilitation center.

But they weren’t rebuilding from nothing. They were rebuilding with everything—with a community that had embraced her, with friends who’d become family, with a man who’d risked his life to save the animals.

A nurse came into the room and raised her eyebrows. “I know you all want to make sure Matt’s okay, but he can only have two visitors at a time. You’re welcome to use the family room while you wait.”

Frank looked at Isabel and then touched his grandson’s shoulder. “That’s our cue to leave. Say goodbye to Dr. Matt and Dr. Morth. We’ll catch up with them again when they’re back in Sapphire Bay.”

Tommy’s gaze settled on Matt. “I hope you’re feeling better soon, Dr. Matt.”

“Thank you, Tommy. I’ll see you at my clinic when I get back to work.”

With a happy wave, Tommy, Isabel, and his granddad left the room.

The nurse looked pointedly at the rest of Matt’s visitors.

Kathleen smiled. “I guess that’s me, too. Do you want a ride back to Sapphire Bay, Carol?”

“No, thanks. I drove here in my car.”

“In that case,” Kathleen replied. “I’ll see you in Sapphire Bay.”

After Carol and Kathleen left, Matt turned to Lynda. “Go home and get some rest. Stephanie said she’ll stay with me.”

Lynda shook her head. “I can’t?—”

“Yes, you can,” Matt insisted. “I’m being looked after here. Besides, the wolfdog puppies need you.”

“I’ll drive you home,” Amy offered from the doorway. “You’ll feel a hundred percent better after you’ve had a shower and a nap.”

Lynda sighed. “All right. I’ll go home, but I’ll be back this afternoon if Stephanie wants a break.” With a gentle hug, she said goodbye to Matt. “Remember to do what the doctors and nurses tell you.”

“I will,” Matt promised. “Don’t worry about the shelter. We’ll make it even better than it used to be.”

Lynda kissed his cheek. “I know we will.” And after saying goodbye to Stephanie, Lynda left the hospital with Amy. It had been a long night, but for Matt, the road to recovery would be even longer.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Matt sat hunched over his desk in the clinic office.

He should have been reviewing patient files, but he was listening to the sound of his veterinary practice operating around him.

From the examination rooms down the hall, he could hear Lynda's voice giving instructions to Sarah, the steady hum of equipment, and the occasional bark or meow from patients.

It was both comforting and maddening to be so close yet unable to help.

"You're supposed to be at home resting," Stephanie said from the doorway, carrying a steaming mug of tea. She'd been furious when Patrick had dropped Matt off that morning, despite his protests that he was perfectly fine to be at the clinic.

"I am resting," Matt replied, though they both knew he'd been straining to hear every conversation from the examination rooms. "I'm just keeping an eye on things from a distance. Lynda shouldn't have to handle everything alone."

Stephanie set the mug on his desk and frowned.

"Dad, you have second-degree burns on your arms and smoke damage to your lungs. Dr. Hilary said you need at least another week of complete rest before you can even think about returning to work. That means staying at home, not sitting in your office pretending to do paperwork."

Matt sighed. Zac Hilary was his friend, and as a friend, he'd expected him to be a

little more lenient when it came to letting him return to work.

“Dr. Hilary doesn’t understand that spring is our busiest season,” Matt countered, then immediately broke into a coughing fit that proved Stephanie’s point more effectively than any argument could have.

When the spasm passed, Stephanie handed him the tea with raised eyebrows. “Chamomile with honey. Lynda said it would help with the throat irritation.”

Matt accepted the mug. “How is Lynda managing?” he asked, unable to keep the worry from his voice. She’d offered to work in his clinic until he was back on his feet, but he was worried she was doing too much.

“Better than you are,” Stephanie said pointedly.

“Sarah says Lynda’s handled six appointments this morning, including a complicated surgery on a dog who ate a tennis ball.

She’s also fielded about twenty phone calls from people wanting to help with the shelter rebuild and coordinated with Carol about the temporary animal housing arrangements. ”

Matt closed his eyes, feeling useless. “I should be helping with all of that.”

“You should be healing,” Stephanie corrected. “Dad, you saved seventeen lives four nights ago. You’re allowed to take a few days to recover from being a hero.”

“I’m not a hero,” Matt said quietly. “I just did what anyone would have done.”

Stephanie sat in the chair across from his desk, her expression growing serious. “Dad, we need to talk. Really talk. You’ve been putting on this brave face since the fire, but

I can see you're struggling with something."

Matt met his daughter's eyes and felt his carefully maintained composure begin to crack. Stephanie had always been able to see through him, even as a child. "I'm fine, sweetheart. Just tired."

"No, you're not." Stephanie's voice was gentle but firm. "You're scared. I can see it every time you hear an animal make a noise or someone mention the rebuilding plans. What's really bothering you?"

For a long moment, Matt said nothing, sipping his tea and trying to organize thoughts that felt scattered and raw. Finally, he set the mug down and rubbed his face with his hands. They still smelled faintly of smoke despite being washed many times.

"I keep thinking I've ruined everything," he admitted quietly. "Not just the shelter, but... everything else too."

Stephanie frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Lynda came here to spend time with her friends," Matt said, the words coming slowly.

"And then she met me. She sold her business, bought a house, and made plans for a rehabilitation center in Sapphire Bay. Then, in one night, everything was gone. What if she realizes this was all a mistake? What if she decides Sapphire Bay is too chaotic, too unpredictable, too... much?"

Stephanie stared at him for a moment, then shook her head with a mixture of exasperation and affection. "Dad, are you serious?"

"I'm completely serious," Matt said defensively. "She could be working in a calm,

peaceful practice in Denver. Regular hours, no midnight emergencies, no buildings burning down around her. Why would she choose this chaos instead?"

Stephanie stood up and walked to the office window that overlooked the clinic parking lot. "Dad, come here. I want to show you something."

"Stephanie, I'm supposed to be resting?—"

"You're already not resting by being here instead of at home," she pointed out. "Just come look."

Matt reluctantly got up from behind his desk and immediately felt lightheaded. Stephanie steadied him as they moved to the window. When they were there, she dropped her gaze to the parking lot below.

"What do you see?" she asked.

Matt looked down and saw Lynda's car. Beside it were several other vehicles he recognized—Carol's truck, Kathleen's SUV, and what looked like Mayor Wilson's sedan.

"I see vehicles," he said, confused.

"You see commitment," Stephanie corrected.

"Dad, Lynda hasn't left. She hasn't packed up and run back to Denver.

Instead, she's taken over your practice, organized the animal rescue efforts, and from what I've heard, she's been sleeping on your couch to be closer to the animals that need round-the-clock care. "

Matt felt something tight in his chest begin to loosen. “She’s been sleeping at the clinic?”

“Sarah told me she found Lynda here at five o’clock yesterday morning, hand-feeding one of the kittens that wasn’t eating.” Stephanie guided him back to his chair, making sure he sat down before continuing. “Does that sound like someone who’s looking for an excuse to leave?”

“But the fire changed everything,” Matt protested weakly. “Our plans, the rehabilitation center, the expansion?—”

“No,” Stephanie interrupted, settling into the chair across from him again.

“The fire changed the timeline. It didn’t change the dream, and it certainly didn’t change how Lynda feels about you.

” She leaned forward in her chair, her expression earnest. “Dad, I’ve watched you and Lynda together.

I’ve seen how she looks at you, how you look at her.

That’s not the kind of connection that disappears because of one crisis. ”

Matt was quiet for a long moment, processing his daughter’s words. “I just don’t want her to feel trapped here because of obligations or guilt about the animals.”

“Then ask her,” Stephanie said. “But Dad, I think you’re projecting your fears onto her. You’re scared because you’ve finally found someone who makes you happy again, and you’re terrified of losing that happiness.”

Matt sighed. “You should have been a psychologist.”

Stephanie smiled. “I learned everything about relationships from watching you and Mom. You two weathered plenty of storms together. There were financial struggles when you were starting the practice, Mom’s health issues, and her cancer diagnosis.

You never gave up on each other, even when things looked impossible. ”

“That was different,” Matt said softly. “We were married. We’d made vows.”

“Love doesn’t need a marriage certificate to be real,” Stephanie replied. “And from what I’ve seen, you and Lynda are already committed to each other in all the ways that matter. She’s not going anywhere, Dad. She bought a house here, remember? She’s planning to stay.”

Matt felt tears prick his eyes. “I love her, Stephanie. More than I thought I could love anyone again.”

“I know,” Stephanie said gently. “And she loves you, too. Anyone can see that. The question is, are you going to let fear rule your life, or are you going to trust in what you’ve built together?”

A soft knock at the office door interrupted them. Lynda appeared in the doorway, still wearing scrubs and with her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. She looked tired but radiant, like someone who’d found her purpose.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said, “but I wanted to check on Matt before my next appointment. Brenda said you’ve been here for two hours. Aren’t you supposed to be at home resting?”

Matt met her eyes and saw nothing but warmth, concern, and the kind of deep affection that couldn’t be faked or forced. Stephanie was right—this wasn’t the face of someone looking for an escape route.

“I’m much better,” he said, meaning it for the first time since the fire.

Lynda smiled, and the last of Matt’s fears began to dissolve.

“That’s great because we have a rehabilitation center to plan, and I’ll need my partner back on his feet soon.

” She walked toward him and kissed him gently on the lips.

“Just don’t overdo anything. You can be incredibly stubborn sometimes. ”

“Don’t worry,” Stephanie told Lynda. “Dad and I have just been discussing his workload.”

Lynda grinned. “It sounds like you’ve got everything under control. In case you’re interested, Mrs. Peterson brought in some chocolate-covered donuts from Kathleen’s café. They’d make a delicious snack.”

Stephanie looked at her dad’s hopeful expression. “Okay, but only one. I’ll get it for you.”

“Take your time,” Matt told her. “I’d like to read a few reports before I leave.”

Stephanie checked her watch and sighed. “I’ll give you fifteen minutes, and then I’m taking you home.”

Matt was thankful she’d given him any extra time at the clinic. “It’s a deal.”

Lynda grinned. “And I have to see a pregnant cat who’s started eating socks. Enjoy the donuts.”

After Lynda and Stephanie left his office, Matt sat quietly for several minutes, processing everything that had happened. He thought about what Lynda had said—she'd called him her partner, not only in work but in everything that mattered. Those words had meant more to him than she realized.

With a heartfelt sigh, he picked up a report and knew they'd be okay. But as he sat there, his gaze fell to his left hand, to the gold band that had circled his ring finger for nearly thirty years. The ring that had become as much a part of him as breathing.

Leaving the folder on his desk, Matt slowly twisted the wedding band. It came off easily—perhaps too easily. He'd lost a little weight over the years, and his hands had grown thinner. He held the ring in his palm, studying the worn gold that had once been bright and new.

“I need to talk to you, Maria,” he said quietly to the empty office, his voice barely above a whisper. “I think it's time.”

He closed his eyes, and for a moment, he could almost feel her presence in the room—that gentle strength that had sustained him through so many years.

“You told me I shouldn't spend my life alone,” he continued, his thumb running over the smooth surface of the ring. “You made me promise that I'd find happiness again. I fought you on that conversation, remember? I couldn't imagine loving anyone the way I loved you.”

Matt opened his eyes and looked down at the ring again. “But you were right. You always were. This isn't the same as what we had—it's different. But it's real, and it's good.”

He could almost hear Maria's voice in his mind, that gentle teasing tone she'd use when she was trying to make him see reason. She'd probably tell him he was being

stubborn, that he'd already waited too long.

"Lynda makes me want to try again," he admitted. "She makes me remember what it feels like to look forward to tomorrow instead of just getting through today. I know you'd want that for me."

Matt opened his desk drawer and carefully placed the wedding ring inside, next to a small photo of Maria that he kept there. His finger felt strange without the familiar weight but also somehow lighter.

"I'm not forgetting you," he said softly, touching the photo. "I could never forget you. But I think it's time to make room for someone new. Time to stop holding onto the past so tightly that I can't reach for the future."

For the first time in fifteen years, Matt was ready to move forward. Not away from Maria's memory, but toward something new, something that honored what he'd lost and what he might find.

He closed the drawer gently and picked up his tea, feeling a sense of peace settle over him. Sometime in the future, he'd tell Lynda how he felt and take the next step into whatever was waiting for them.

A month later...

Lynda stepped back to admire the antique oak bookshelf sitting against the living room wall of her new house. The afternoon sunlight streamed through the bay window, making the wood grain glow. She could already imagine her favorite novels filling the shelves.

“That looks perfect there,” Kathleen said, wiping dust from her hands with a dish towel. She’d been helping Lynda arrange furniture all morning, despite Lynda’s protests that she could manage on her own.

Isabel emerged from the kitchen carrying a tray with three glasses of iced tea. “The movers did a good job. Everything arrived in perfect condition, and they were so careful with your grandmother’s china cabinet.”

“I was terrified something would happen to it during the move,” Lynda admitted, accepting a glass gratefully. “It’s been in our family for over a century.”

The three women settled on Lynda’s newly arranged sofa, surrounded by half-unpacked boxes and the comfortable chaos of a move in progress. Through the open windows, they could hear the gentle lapping of the lake and the distant sound of children playing in a neighbor’s yard.

“This house suits you perfectly,” Kathleen said as she looked around the spacious living room. “It has so much character, and that view of the lake is spectacular.”

Lynda followed her gaze to the large windows that framed Flathead Lake. “I still

can't believe how much my home in Denver sold for. The market there has exploded in the last two years."

"How much extra did your house sell for?" Isabel asked curiously.

"Almost seventy thousand over my asking price," Lynda said, still amazed by her good fortune. "There was a bidding war between three families. The realtor said properties in my neighborhood are selling within days of being listed."

Kathleen's eyebrows rose. "That's incredible. What will you do with the extra money?"

Lynda set down her iced tea, her expression growing thoughtful.

"I want to put it toward the wildlife rehabilitation center. With the insurance money covering the basic shelter rebuild, this could fund the specialized facilities we dreamed of. We could have proper isolation units for different species, a flight training area for raptors, and maybe an even bigger educational center."

"Matt must be thrilled," Isabel said with a smile.

"He doesn't know yet," Lynda replied, feeling a flutter of excitement at the thought of telling him. "He's investing a lot of his own money into the center, too, but this will make a huge difference."

Kathleen's cell phone pinged. With a frown, she read the text. "It's from Susan. She said she's just accepted a catering contract for a last-minute event and can't fly here next week. She wants to know if it's okay to come in late January."

Isabel sighed. "I was looking forward to seeing her. I hope she's okay."

“I called her last week,” Lynda told her friends. “She’s feeling a little overwhelmed with all the events she’s booked. I think she’d like to retire, but finding someone who wants to buy a catering company is hard at the moment.”

Isabel leaned forward. “If everyone’s going to be in Sapphire Bay in late January, let’s book the dates now. It’ll give Susan something to look forward to.”

Lynda nodded. “I’ll be here.”

“So will I,” Kathleen added. “I’ll let her know that we’re looking forward to seeing her in January.” With a few quick taps of her fingertips, Kathleen sent the message. She smiled when Susan replied. “She sent a bunch of hearts back to us.”

Isabel took a sip of her tea. “Since we’re talking about being too busy, how are things going at the clinic, Lynda?”

“I’m working as many hours as I can, but we’re still busy without Matt,” Lynda said with a tired but satisfied smile.

“He’s finally accepted that he needs to rest and recover properly.

But he still tries to sneak into the office when he thinks I’m not looking.

Everything else is going well. The temporary animal housing system is working, and the wolfdog puppies are thriving at Kathleen’s place. ”

“They’re adorable,” Kathleen said with a smile. “Whenever I’m there, Star follows me around like a little shadow, and the others have turned my backyard into their playground. Patrick’s been amazing. He’s built climbing frames and all kinds of equipment for the pups.”

Isabel's eyes sparkled with mischief. "And how are things with Patrick? Are you still friends or is there something more going on?"

Kathleen blushed. "He's been very helpful with the house renovations and the puppy situation. And yes, we're still friends."

"Friends who have dinner together every night and go for long walks by the lake," Lynda teased gently.

"We enjoy each other's company," Kathleen said with dignity, though her smile gave her away. "At our age, there's something to be said for taking things slowly."

Lynda nodded. "I'll second that. Although I wonder if we let our past relationships make us too cautious."

Isabel rubbed Lynda's arm. "Ray was a toad. I don't blame you for being cautious after what happened. But there's also something to be said for not wasting time when you find someone special," she pointed out, and then immediately looked like she regretted the words.

Lynda caught the subtle change in her friend's expression. "That isn't the look of someone who's super-cautious. What's happened?"

Isabel bit her bottom lip. "I wasn't going to say anything for a few days, but I have some news."

Isabel looked too happy for it to be bad news. Lynda glanced at Kathleen, wondering if she knew what was going on.

"Frank and I had a picnic by the lake last night," Isabel continued, her eyes sparkling with joy. "And he... well, he asked me to marry him."

The words hung in the air for a moment before Lynda and Kathleen erupted in excitement.

“Isabel, that’s wonderful!” Lynda exclaimed, reaching over to hug her friend.

“Tell us everything!” Kathleen added as she wrapped her arms around Isabel and Lynda.

Isabel laughed, tears gathering in her eyes.

“It wasn’t exactly romantic—we were eating leftovers from the night before.

Tommy was at a friend’s house, so it was lovely and peaceful.

Frank said he’d been thinking about everything that’s happened and how precious time is.

He doesn’t want to waste another year being friends.

He wants us to build a life together, to spend every waking moment enjoying each other’s company. ”

“What did you say?” Lynda asked, although the glow on Isabel’s face had already provided the answer.

“I said yes.” Isabel held her hand over her heart. “I was so excited that I hardly slept last night. Frank is an amazing man and, as corny as it sounds, I can’t wait to be his wife.”

“It isn’t corny,” Kathleen told her. “It’s sweet. It doesn’t matter how old you are. Love is love. When are you getting married?”

Isabel shrugged. “We haven’t set a date, but we’ll probably wait until the weather gets a little warmer. We don’t want a big wedding. A simple ceremony with our friends will be perfect.”

“A Sapphire Bay wedding,” Kathleen said with a sigh. “That sounds wonderful. You could have the ceremony by the lake, or in the garden at my new house once the renovations are finished.”

Lynda tapped her chin. “There’s a boutique in Bozeman that has the most wonderful wedding dresses and evening gowns. We could take Isabel there to look for something amazing to wear.”

“I love that you’re both planning my wedding,” Isabel said with a laugh.

“And I definitely want to be somewhere near the lake when we get married. But we haven’t made any other plans.

All I know is that Sapphire Bay and the people who live here are special to us.

We want to pay tribute to everyone who’s welcomed us into their lives. ”

A warmth spread through Lynda’s chest at Isabel’s words. The same feeling had been growing in her own heart—the sense that Sapphire Bay wasn’t just a place she’d moved to, but a place where she truly belonged.

“To new beginnings,” Lynda said, raising her iced tea glass in a toast.

“To love finding us when we least expect it,” Kathleen added, joining the toast.

“And to friendship that sees us through everything,” Isabel concluded, her voice thick with emotion.

As they clinked glasses, Lynda looked at these two remarkable women who'd become such an important part of her life. A year ago, she could never have imagined sitting in her own home in Montana, surrounded by friends who felt like family, and planning a future filled with such hope and possibility.

With a sigh, she realized that life had a way of leading you exactly where you needed to be—even when you thought you were completely lost.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Five months later...

Matt stood in the main corridor of the new Paws of Hope Animal Shelter and Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, still amazed that it was real.

The facility stretched out before him like something from a dream.

Large examination rooms, state-of-the-art surgical suites, and specialized housing units had been designed for everything from tiny songbirds to large raptors.

“I can’t believe we’re actually here,” Lynda said softly from beside him. Her voice was filled with wonder as she gazed through the large windows that overlooked the nearly completed wolfdog habitat.

Matt followed her gaze to where Star and her four siblings were exploring their new permanent home.

It was a sprawling enclosure that perfectly balanced their wild heritage with the educational mission of the center.

The habitat featured natural rock formations, a small stream, and plenty of space for the adolescent wolfdogs to roam and explore.

“Patrick and his team have worked miracles,” Matt replied as he watched the construction workers finish the visitor walkway that would allow guests to observe the animals without disturbing them. “Without them, we’d still be looking at another year of construction.”

The decision to use prefabricated modules had been brilliant.

Each unit was custom-built for specific wildlife needs, then transported and assembled on-site by the same crew that had constructed the tiny homes at the old steamboat museum.

Patrick Devlin's expertise in modular construction had proven invaluable, and his dedication to the project had gone far beyond professional obligation.

"Mom would have loved this," Stephanie said, appearing at Matt's elbow with her children in tow. She'd driven up from Missoula for the open house, bringing Lily and Ethan to see the facility they'd heard so much about.

"She would have," Matt agreed, his throat tightening slightly. "She always said we needed better facilities for wildlife cases."

Lily pressed her face against the glass partition that separated them from a recovering great horned owl. "Grandpa, when will she be able to fly again?"

"In another week or two," Matt replied, moving to stand behind his granddaughter. "Her wing fracture is healing beautifully, thanks to the specialized care we can provide here."

Ethan frowned. "How do you keep the animal houses warm?"

Lynda crouched down to his level, her face lighting up with the enthusiasm she always showed when discussing their work.

"Each enclosure has its own climate system. See those vents up there? They can create everything from desert conditions for certain reptiles to the cool, moist environment that frogs and other amphibians need."

The sound of approaching voices drew Matt's attention to the entrance. Members of the community were beginning to arrive for the open house. Mayor Wilson led the way, followed by Carol, Brenda, and what looked like half of Sapphire Bay.

"The place is incredible," Mayor Wilson announced, his voice carrying the pride of someone who'd championed the project from the beginning. "This facility is one of the best in Montana for wildlife conservation. I've already had inquiries from other states about partnering with us."

Carol bustled over, carrying a clipboard and wearing the slightly frazzled expression of someone coordinating a major event. "Matt, the local news crew wants to interview you in about ten minutes. And the representative from the state wildlife department would like a tour of the raptor facilities."

"Of course," Matt said, though part of him was reluctant to leave Lynda's side. They'd worked so hard to reach this moment, and he wanted to savor it with her.

As if reading his thoughts, Lynda squeezed his arm gently. "Go do your interviews. I'll handle the technical tours. We can meet up later."

The next hour passed in a whirlwind of handshakes, photographs, and detailed explanations of the center's capabilities.

Matt described the same features repeatedly—the surgical suite that rivaled any human hospital, the quarantine facilities that could handle everything from rabies exposure to exotic diseases, and the educational classroom where school groups would learn about wildlife conservation.

Through it all, he was acutely aware of the small velvet box in his jacket pocket.

He'd been carrying it for three weeks, waiting for the perfect moment to propose to

Lynda.

Tonight felt right. They were surrounded by everything they'd built together, with the community celebrating their shared vision.

But every time he thought he'd found a quiet moment, someone else approached with questions or congratulations.

"Matt!" Brenda appeared at his elbow, her eyes bright with excitement. "Pastor John is here, and he'd like to give a blessing for the facility. I asked Lynda if she wanted to say something before John spoke, but she asked if you could do it."

Matt glanced around the crowded main corridor, taking in the faces of people who'd supported them through the fire and the months of rebuilding.

Tommy stood near the wolfdog habitat with Frank and Isabel, his notebook out as he documented everything for what had become an ongoing school project.

Kathleen and Patrick were examining the volunteer coordination center; their heads bent together in quiet conversation.

Amy had arrived that morning and was deep in discussion with Stephanie.

"All right," Matt said, accepting the small microphone Brenda handed him. "Let's gather everyone together."

It took several minutes to move everyone into the main corridor.

"Three months ago," he began, his voice carrying clearly through the space, "we stood in the ashes of what we thought was the end of everything we'd worked for.

The old shelter was gone, and with it, years of community effort and hope. ”

He paused, his eyes finding Lynda in the crowd. She stood near the wolfdog habitat, Star visible behind her in the new enclosure. The sight of them together—the woman who’d changed his life and the small creature they’d saved together—nearly made him lose his composure.

“What we discovered,” Matt continued, “is that buildings can burn, but dreams that are shared by an entire community are fireproof. What you see around you tonight isn’t only an animal shelter and wildlife rehabilitation center.

It’s proof that when people come together with a common purpose, there’s no obstacle too great to overcome. ”

Applause filled the corridor, and Matt waited for it to subside before continuing.

“This facility exists because of all of you. Tommy, who refused to let his wolf education project die with the fire. Kathleen Armstrong, who opened her home to five wolfdog puppies and made it work. Isabel Stewart, who coordinated supply drives and reminded us that books and learning are just as important as bandages and medicine. And Patrick Devlin, whose construction expertise turned our timeline from impossible to miraculous.”

There was more applause as Patrick ducked his head modestly while Kathleen beamed with pride beside him.

“Carol, who never stopped believing we could rebuild better than before. Brenda, who kept everything running when I was too stubborn to stay in bed and recover properly. Mayor Wilson, who cut through red tape faster than I thought possible. And Dr. Lynda Morth...”

Matt's voice caught slightly as he looked at her again. "Who could have returned to her successful practice in Denver after the fire, but chose instead to stay and help us build something extraordinary."

The applause this time was thunderous, and Matt saw Lynda's cheeks flush with emotion.

"Tonight, we're not just celebrating a building," Matt concluded. "We're celebrating what happens when a community decides that hope is worth fighting for."

Pastor John stepped forward then, a gentle smile on his face. "If I may," he said, "I'd like to offer a blessing for this remarkable place and the work that will be done here."

The crowd grew quiet as Pastor John raised his hands.

"Lord, we ask your blessing on this place of healing and hope. May the hands that work here be guided by wisdom and compassion. May the animals that find refuge here be restored to health and freedom. And may this center serve as a reminder that in caring for the least of your creatures, we care for all of creation. Amen."

"Amen," the crowd echoed, and Matt felt a profound sense of completion wash over him.

As people walked to different parts of the building for refreshments and individual tours, Matt caught sight of large snowflakes falling outside the windows. The timing felt perfect—crisp white snow falling on their winter miracle.

He made his way toward Lynda, his hand instinctively moving to the ring box in his pocket. She was standing alone now, watching Star and her siblings settle into their new home, and the expression on her face was one of pure contentment.

This was it. This was the moment he'd been waiting for.

But just as he reached her side, Carol appeared again with the state wildlife representative in tow, eager to discuss funding opportunities for expansion. Matt stifled a groan of frustration and forced a smile.

The perfect moment would have to wait just a little longer.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:25 am

Lynda watched as the last of the visitors disappeared into the snowy night, their voices carrying across the parking lot as families bundled into cars and headed home.

The new Paws of Hope Center fell quiet around her, settling into the peaceful hush that only came when the day's excitement was over.

"That went better than I'd hoped," Lynda said, turning to Matt as Carol locked the main entrance behind the departing news crew. The afternoon had been a whirlwind of tours, interviews, and enthusiastic questions from community members eager to see the center come to life.

Matt nodded, but he seemed distracted. His gaze connected with Lynda's with an intensity that made her pulse quicken. "The support has been incredible," he added. "Did you see Tommy's face when he got to feed the baby raccoons? I think we've created a future wildlife biologist."

Lynda laughed. "Or at least ensured he'll volunteer here every weekend for the next ten years." Tommy had carefully listened to them as they'd explained how to look after baby raccoons. "Frank and Isabel looked so proud as they watched him."

"Speaking of which." Matt glanced at Carol and Brenda, who were picking up empty refreshment platters, "Would you mind staying a bit longer, Lynda? I'd like to walk through the facility one more time while it's quiet. Just the two of us."

Something in his voice made Lynda look at him more closely. There was a nervous energy about him that she'd noticed throughout the afternoon, as if he had something important on his mind but couldn't find the right moment to share it.

“Of course,” she said. “I’d love that. It’s hard to appreciate everything we’ve done when the center’s full of people.”

Carol approached them, jingling her keys. “You two don’t need to clean up. Brenda and I can handle the rest. Just make sure to set the alarm when you leave.”

“Are you sure?” Lynda asked, feeling guilty about leaving them with the work.

“Absolutely,” Brenda chimed in, already stacking empty cups. “You’ve both done enough hosting for one day. Go enjoy your facility.”

After Lynda and Matt left the main entrance, the center felt completely different.

Without the crowds and conversation, Lynda could hear the subtle sounds that would become the heartbeat of the center—the gentle humming of climate control systems, the soft rustling of animals settling for the night, and the distant howl of wind around the building’s carefully designed acoustics.

“It’s amazing how different it feels when it’s just us,” Lynda said softly as they walked slowly down the main corridor.

Through the observation windows, she could see their current patients.

There was a great horned owl that Lily had been so fascinated with, a family of orphaned fox kits, and several songbirds recovering from various injuries.

“This is how I imagined it,” Matt said, his hands clasped behind his back as they strolled. “Quiet and peaceful, a place where healing can happen without stress or chaos.”

They paused at each enclosure, discussing the animals’ progress and the treatments planned for the coming week. Lynda enjoyed discussing the animals with Matt.

They'd learned to work together and use their different strengths to complement each other.

"When the surgical suite is completely finished, it'll be fantastic," Lynda said as they passed the gleaming operating room. "When I think about some of the procedures we attempted in the old shelter with inadequate equipment..."

"We saved lives with what we had," Matt reminded her. "But now we can save even more."

They made their way gradually toward the back of the facility, where the wolfdog habitat stretched out beneath the large windows. The enclosure was beautifully lit with subtle landscape lighting, allowing visitors to see the animals without disturbing their natural rhythms.

Star was curled up on a raised platform near the viewing area, her siblings scattered around the spacious enclosure. At six months old, they'd grown into magnificent creatures. They had the intelligence and loyalty of domestic dogs, with the wild grace of their wolf ancestry.

"Look at her," Lynda whispered, pointing to Star. "Do you remember how tiny she was? How we didn't think she'd make it through that first night?"

Matt stood beside her at the observation window, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body. "I remember thinking that if we could save her, we could save anything. She was our proof of concept, in a way."

Lynda nodded. "And now she's thriving in a facility we never could have dreamed of back then." Star's ears twitched at the sound of their voices. "It feels like a miracle, Matt. All of it."

When Lynda turned to look at Matt, he was watching her instead of the animals, his

expression tender and intense in the soft lighting.

“Lynda,” he said quietly, his voice slightly hoarse. “I need to tell you something.”

The seriousness in his tone made her heart skip a beat. “What is it?”

Matt took a deep breath, as if gathering courage. “When the fire happened, I thought we’d lost everything. Not just the shelter, but... us. I was terrified that you’d realize you’d made a mistake coming here, that you’d go back to Denver, and I’d never see you again.”

“Matt—” she started, but he held up a gentle hand.

“Let me finish,” he said with a shaky smile.

“You could have left. You had every reason to leave. I’m sure the new owner of your clinic would have taken you back as a vet in a heartbeat.

You had a comfortable life in Denver and a successful career.

All of it was waiting for you. But you stayed.

You stayed and worked eighteen-hour days and slept on my office couch.

You helped me rebuild not just the shelter but my faith in the future. ”

Tears pricked Lynda’s eyes as she watched a multitude of emotions cross Matt’s handsome face.

“You’ve given me back pieces of myself I thought were lost forever,” Matt continued.

“You’ve made me remember what it feels like to dream big, to take risks, to believe that tomorrow can be better than today.

But more than that, you’ve made me remember what it feels like to love someone so completely that life without them is impossible to imagine. ”

Lynda’s breath caught as Matt reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. Her hands flew to her mouth as he dropped to one knee right there in front of the wolfdog enclosure, surrounded by everything they’d built together.

Matt opened the box, revealing a beautiful solitaire diamond ring. It sparkled like captured starlight and took Lynda’s breath away.

“Lynda Morth,” Matt said, his voice thick with emotion. “Will you marry me and build the rest of this adventure with me?”

For a moment, Lynda couldn’t speak. The tears that had been threatening finally spilled over as she looked down at this incredible man. He’d given her a second chance at love, a purpose, and a new place to call home.

“Yes,” she whispered, then louder, “Yes, of course, yes!”

Matt’s face broke into a grin as he slipped the ring onto Lynda’s finger. It fit perfectly, as if it had been made just for her. When he stood and pulled her into his arms, Lynda felt like every broken piece of her heart had finally been made whole.

Their kiss was gentle and deep, a promise of all the tomorrows they’d share. And just as they broke apart, something magical happened—Star lifted her head and let out a soft, melodic howl that seemed to echo with joy.

The sound triggered responses from around the center. The great horned owl gave a gentle hoot, the fox kits chattered excitedly, and even the songbirds rustled in their

enclosures as if celebrating along with them.

“I think they approve,” Matt said, laughing through his tears as he held Lynda close.

“They should,” Lynda replied, looking around at the facility that represented everything they’d built together. “This is where our story began. With Star, with hope, and with the belief that broken things can be made beautiful again.”

Outside the windows, snow continued to fall in the darkness, blanketing everything in pristine white. But inside the Paws of Hope Center, surrounded by the animals they’d saved and the dreams they’d made real, Lynda had never felt more certain that she was exactly where she belonged.

She was home. She was loved. And she was ready for whatever adventures lay ahead.

THE END