



# Taming the Grumpy Hockey Player

**Author:** *Gianna Ward*

**Category:** Sport

**Description:** I used to despise this grumpy hockey star with a shattered image...

Now the banters fire, and he is scoring straight to my heart.

My rule when it came to Logan Mitchell: stay far, far away.

Now he's the face of my shelter's Adopt-a-Player campaign and I'm supposed to survive weeks around him without losing my mind.

Turns out, beneath the gruff, all-hockey exterior, Logan has a sweet side.

Especially when it comes to a certain rescue dog at my shelter.

The more I see past the headlines and into the man himself, the harder it is to remember why I swore to keep my distance.

Planning the campaign over late nights becomes an excuse.

The banter turns into something deep.

My own arguments fall apart, and I start to fall for him.

It all started as a way to fix his image.

Now with the press spinning their own story, he might end up wrecking mine.

Taming the Grumpy Hockey Player, a sweet enemies to lovers romance, full of sizzling chemistry without the explicit heat.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

## Chapter 1

Lucy

The Pine Harbor Community Center hums with energy, a lively blend of laughter, chatter, and the scuffle of hurried footsteps filling its halls. Today, it's not just the regular hustle of yoga classes, knitting groups, and hockey practices; it's also the site of the Paws for Love adoption event—the highlight of my month.

I weave through clusters of people—mostly kids begging their parents to let them adopt a dog or a cat—with a practiced smile and a clipboard clutched in my hands. The makeshift adoption station teems with wagging tails and delighted squeals, a whirlwind of happy chaos that warms my heart. The faint scent of popcorn from the snack table mixes with the warm, earthy smell of hay from the kitten pens. It's perfect, even if my feet already ache from running around.

“Lucy!” Kate’s voice calls from across the room. She’s at the kitten station, her red curls bouncing as she waves me over. “We’ve got a kitten escape artist! Mr. Whiskers keeps sneaking out of his pen and into the puppy section. Can you bring over the carrier before he causes a riot?”

“On it,” I shout back, darting toward our supply table. I’m halfway there when I hear it—the telltale clink clink clink of hockey sticks striking the rink. My heart drops, and my gaze flies to the large double doors leading to the ice arena.

Sure enough, there he is.

Logan Mitchell, Pine Harbor's very own brooding bad boy of hockey, steps through the doors with a presence impossible to ignore.

He steps through the doors, his imposing frame cutting an effortlessly commanding figure. Logan's dark, wavy hair peeks out from under his team cap, and his hazel eyes sweep the room with the precision of a sniper. He's tall—easily over six feet—and built like he was carved from stone. His jawline is sharp enough to cut glass, and the faint scruff along his chin only adds to his rugged appeal. Even in casual sweats, he looks every bit the professional athlete he is—though the permanent scowl he wears makes him about as approachable as a cactus.

"Excuse me," Logan growls, his voice carrying just enough gravel to turn heads as he approaches the information table near the arena entrance. "Why is this setup blocking the arena access?"

I'm already walking toward him, my clipboard now a makeshift shield. "Good morning to you too, sunshine," I say brightly, stopping just short of his towering frame. "It's not blocking anything. People can still get through."

Logan glances at the swarm of kids and dogs around the entrance, his eyes narrowing slightly. "This setup is disorganized. My team has practice in fifteen minutes, and we're going to end up dodging leashes and tripping over kittens."

I raise an eyebrow, resisting the urge to cross my arms. "And your practice couldn't possibly wait? These animals are looking for forever homes. I'm sure your puck-slapping can hold off for a worthy cause."

He folds his arms across his chest, his biceps straining against his jacket. "I'm not here to debate with you, Hart. Move the table."

The audacity.

“Listen, Mitchell,” I say, stepping closer and lowering my voice so the spectators don’t get a front-row seat to our clash. “This event was booked weeks ago. If your team can’t navigate around a couple of tables and adoptable kittens, maybe you’re not as coordinated as everyone thinks.”

Logan’s jaw tightens briefly, his hazel eyes meeting mine with an intensity that’s impossible to decipher. A faint trace of his cologne—warm cedar mingled with crisp citrus—drifts into the air, but I force myself to refocus on the conversation instead of the unexpected detail. I hate that it’s unexpectedly pleasant, catching me off guard just like him. I’m almost certain I’ve won this round when a voice pipes up behind him.

“Mom, look! A puppy!”

A little girl darts between Logan and me, her eyes wide with excitement as she points at Bella, one of the shelter’s puppies. Logan steps back instinctively, making space for her, and the faintest flicker of softness crosses his face. He doesn’t say anything, but the way his gaze lingers on the child’s joy is...unexpected.

“Fine,” he mutters, his voice tight but not as sharp. “But if one of my players trips over a leash, we’re moving everything.”

“Noted,” I reply, plastering on a saccharine smile as he turns and stalks back toward the rink. His broad shoulders disappear through the double doors, leaving a faint trail of tension in the air.

Kate sidles up beside me, her red curls framing a mischievous grin, her eyes sparkling like she’s just uncovered the juiciest secret in Pine Harbor. “Wow, that was a masterclass in tension.”

“Oh, stop,” I say, though my cheeks warm under her knowing gaze. “He’s

intolerable.”

“Intolerable or intriguing?” Kate wiggles her eyebrows. “You two have this whole enemies-to-lovers thing brewing, and I am here for it.”

I roll my eyes, but the thought lingers. There’s nothing intriguing about Logan Mitchell...except maybe the way he looks at you like he’s trying to figure out your next move. Or how he’s always composed, even when irritated. Or...

No. Focus, Lucy.

I take a deep breath and shake off the lingering thoughts about Logan. There’s still a full day ahead of me, and I can’t afford to let one grumpy hockey player derail everything. I scan the room, noting the steady stream of visitors wandering between the pet pens and adoption tables. Kids giggle as kittens playfully swat at dangling toys, and a couple leans in close to discuss adopting a Labrador mix with soulful eyes. The atmosphere here is my sanctuary—busy, yes, but filled with hope and possibility. It’s why I love what I do.

The day wears on, the adoption event in full swing. Between coordinating volunteers, soothing nervous pets, and chatting with potential adopters, I barely have a moment to breathe. Still, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t catch myself glancing at the rink doors a few too many times.

By mid-afternoon, Emma—Logan’s sister and one of my shelter colleagues—arrives to lend a hand. She’s become one of my closest friends at the shelter, always ready to step in with practical solutions and a calming presence that balances out my occasional chaos. Her brown hair is pulled into a no-nonsense ponytail, and she’s already rolling up her sleeves when she spots me.

“So,” she begins, her tone casual as she organizes paperwork on the table. “I heard

Logan had words with you this morning.”

“Words?” I snort. “More like a grumpy monologue about how we’re ruining his precious hockey practice.”

Emma hides a smile. “He’s...not great at first impressions.”

“Or second ones,” I mutter, earning a laugh from her.

Emma’s loyalty to her brother runs deep, and while I know she’s only half-defending him, I decide to steer the conversation toward safer ground to avoid diving into family dynamics. “How’s Lewis doing?” I ask, referring to one of our shelter dogs she’s been fostering.

“He’s a sweetheart,” Emma says, her face lighting up. “If I didn’t already have my hands full, I’d keep him.”

As we chat, a ping on my phone draws my attention. It’s an email notification from Coach Turner, the Timberwolves’ head coach. The subject line reads: Proposal for Collaboration.

Curious, I open the email and skim the contents. My eyebrows rise as I read about the "Adopt-a-Player" campaign—a partnership between the Timberwolves and Cozy Paws to pair players with adoptable pets for promotional purposes. The idea is intriguing, but it also comes with the risk of stirring up even more tension with Logan. The campaign is meant to boost community engagement and visibility for both the shelter and the team.

“Interesting,” I murmur, my mind already racing. This could be huge for the shelter, but the thought of working with the Timberwolves also brings an uncomfortable twist to my stomach. More exposure to Logan Mitchell’s gruff attitude wasn’t exactly on

my wish list after today's clash. Still, I can't shake the notion that the campaign's potential outweighs my irritation.

"What's interesting?" Emma asks, peering over my shoulder.

I show her the email, and her face brightens. "That's a great idea! Logan's good with animals, you know."

"Good at scowling at them, maybe," I quip, though Emma's words stick with me. Could Logan actually pull off being the face of a campaign like this? More importantly, could I?

As the day winds down, Kate joins me at the supply table, where I'm folding leftover adoption brochures.

"You've been quiet," she says, nudging me with her elbow. "That email got you thinking, didn't it?"

"It's...complicated," I admit. "On one hand, it could be amazing for the shelter. But on the other...Logan Mitchell."

I chew my lip, glancing at the adoption brochures I've been folding. "It's not just today—he's always been like this. Every time we've crossed paths, it's the same thing: gruff, impatient, like everyone's wasting his time. He doesn't even try to hide it."

Kate leans her chin on her hand, smirking. "Sounds like he's made quite an impression."

"Oh, he has," I reply, rolling my eyes. "There was that time at the charity gala when he brushed past me and nearly knocked the donation table over. Did he apologize?"

Nope. Just muttered something about being in a hurry and left. And last summer, when we had the town cleanup day, he showed up late and acted like he was doing us all a favor by being there."

Kate's eyes sparkle with amusement. "You've got a whole highlight reel of grievances, huh?"

I sigh, realizing how much space he's taken up in my head. "It's not like I go looking for reasons to dislike him. He just makes it...easy."

Kate grins. "That's not a reason to say no. If anything, it's all the more reason to dive in. Imagine the endless sparring sessions—you'd be in your element."

I groan. "You're insufferable."

"And you're overthinking. Just give it a chance. Who knows? Logan might surprise you."

The idea is laughable, yet as I pack up the event supplies and head home, the email's words replay in my mind, stirring a mix of excitement and unease. What if this campaign could be the breakthrough the shelter needs? What if working with Logan proves I've underestimated him...or worse, overestimated my patience? Maybe there's more to Logan Mitchell than his gruff exterior. Or maybe he's exactly what he seems: a headache waiting to happen.

Either way, I can't deny the pull of possibility. This campaign could change everything—for the shelter, for the community, and maybe even for me.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

### Chapter 2

#### Logan

A buzz of voices fills the Pine Harbor Community Center's meeting room, blending with the scrape of chairs and the faint aroma of coffee to set a tone of lively anticipation. The room's usual decor of motivational posters and hockey team memorabilia seems brighter under the fluorescent lights. Pine Harbor's influential figures—coaches, local leaders, and a few players—mingle in a loose circle, clutching coffee cups and murmuring about the latest town happenings. Outside the large windows, the glow from nearby shops and lampposts adds to the small-town charm, a reminder that Pine Harbor thrives on connection and community spirit.

I lean against the back wall, my arms crossed, scanning the room. Meetings like this aren't usually my thing. I'd rather be on the ice or anywhere else, really, but Coach Turner made it clear attendance was non-negotiable. My gaze flickers to the mayor, a short man with a booming voice, currently laughing heartily with Mark. Meanwhile, Coach Turner is arranging some notes at the head of the room, his expression as unreadable as always.

Mark sidles up beside me, his easy grin already in place. "You look like you're planning your escape."

"Not planning," I mutter. "Just regretting."

Mark chuckles and nudges my shoulder. "Relax, Logan. This could be good for the team."

I don't bother responding. My teammate's optimism is his default setting, and while it's mostly harmless, it's not contagious. Not for me, anyway.

"All right, everyone," Coach Turner calls, his deep voice cutting through the chatter. He's not the type to shout, but he doesn't need to. His presence commands attention. The room quiets almost instantly as everyone turns toward him.

"Thanks for coming," Coach begins, scanning the group with the same intensity he uses during a pre-game pep talk. "As you know, the Timberwolves are more than just a hockey team. We're part of this community, and it's our responsibility to give back."

There's a murmur of agreement, and Mayor Collins nods enthusiastically. I stay quiet, letting my focus drift to the window, where the faint glow of the ice rink lights bleeds into the evening sky.

Coach continues. "To that end, I want to introduce an initiative we've been exploring: the 'Adopt-a-Player' campaign." He pauses, letting the title sink in. "The idea is simple. Each player would be paired with an adoptable pet from Cozy Paws Animal Shelter. We'll promote the campaign through social media and local events, encouraging adoptions while fostering stronger community connections. Of course, this is still in the works, and we'll need to iron out the details with Lucy Hart, the shelter manager, before moving forward."

I lean slightly against the wall, muttering under my breath, "Why do we even need this? The team's doing fine without posing with pets."

Mark snickers beside me, but Coach's sharp glance cuts through the room, and I force myself to focus.

"This is a win-win opportunity," Coach says, his tone firm. "The shelter gains

visibility, and we strengthen our ties with Pine Harbor. But more than that, it's a chance for each of you to show another side of yourselves."

The mayor stands, his smile wide and confident. "I couldn't agree more. Pine Harbor thrives on these kinds of collaborations. Bringing together two beloved institutions—the Timberwolves and Cozy Paws—is exactly the kind of initiative that makes this town special."

Mark, ever the extrovert, raises his hand. "So, how does it work? Do we get to pick our pet, or are we assigned one? Because I've got my eye on that golden retriever I saw last week."

The room laughs, and even I can't suppress a small smirk. Leave it to Mark to inject humor into a discussion.

Coach shakes his head, though a ghost of a smile crosses his face. "The logistics are still being worked out, but we'll coordinate with Lucy Hart, the shelter manager, to ensure everything runs smoothly."

Lucy Hart. Her name settles in my mind like a pebble dropped into a still pond, creating ripples of curiosity and frustration that spread through my thoughts, tugging at questions I'm not ready to face. The first time I met her, she was scolding me—politely, but firmly—for accidentally knocking over a display table during a community event. Her green eyes had flashed with determination and a spark of mischief as she hastily rearranged the toppled materials, all while explaining the importance of that fundraiser in a tone so cheerful it bordered on teasing.

"You know," she had said, flashing a smile that made her dimples show, "next time, try not to take the entire table down with you. We're trying to raise money, not demolish the place."

I'd muttered a half-hearted apology, feeling like a bull in a china shop under her bright, unflinching gaze. As I walked away, still rattled, her voice carried after me: "Just don't trip over anything else, okay?" It wasn't mocking—it was sassy, warm, and somehow encouraging all at once. That mix of kindness and unrelenting optimism still sticks with me, no matter how much I try to shake it off.

I've only interacted with her a handful of times, and most of those encounters were more sparks than synergy. She's...different. Passionate. Relentlessly cheerful. Sunshine wrapped in sarcasm, a combination I'm not entirely sure how to handle. And, if I'm being honest, not someone I expected to collaborate with.

"Logan?" Coach's voice breaks through my thoughts. I blink, realizing the room is looking at me.

"What?"

"What do you think?" Coach repeats, his gaze steady. "You've been quiet."

I straighten, feeling the weight of their eyes. What I really want to say is that this is stupid. That it's a waste of time. PR is a waste of time. The media spins things however they want, and I'm always the bad guy—especially since my last breakup. My ex was so good at making people believe her charity outlook was all real, and of course, by default, that made me look like the total opposite. But I can't say any of that. Instead, I keep my voice flat and ask, "How's this going to work without turning us into a joke? I'm not sure people come to games hoping to see their hockey players walking puppies. What happens if it backfires?"

"That's exactly why we're discussing it now," Coach says. "To iron out potential issues before we move forward. But remember, Logan, this isn't just about the team. It's about making a difference."

His words hang in the air, and I nod reluctantly. The room's attention shifts as someone else raises a question, but my thoughts linger. Making a difference sounds good in theory, but I can't shake the nagging doubt that this is more complicated than it seems. Last time I tried to give back, the tabloids twisted it into a spectacle, making it hard to trust that this won't end the same way. Maybe it's because I've tried to make a difference before, and it's blown up in my face. The tabloids spun my past mistakes into a narrative that painted me as reckless, and it's hard to trust that people will see past that. This campaign—tying my name to the shelter and putting myself out there—feels like stepping into the spotlight again, but with no guarantee it won't burn me all over.

As the meeting progresses, my focus drifts again. I think about the last time I saw Lucy. It was earlier today, during her adoption event. She'd been in her element, surrounded by kids and animals, her energy lighting up the room. She's...different from me in every way. Where I'm guarded, she's open. Where I'm focused on avoiding the past, she seems determined to embrace every moment. That contrast should irritate me, and sometimes it does. But there's also something about her...her ability to make people feel seen, even when she's rushing from task to task, that lingers in my mind longer than it should.

Mark's elbow nudges me out of my thoughts, and I blink, refocusing on the chatter of the room. "You okay?" he whispers, his grin faint but knowing.

For a moment, I just nod, letting the sound of shuffling papers and low voices ground me. The faint smell of coffee mingles with the distant hum of the ice machines.

"You were staring off into space," he adds, his tone light. "Thinking about your new furry friend?"

"More like thinking about how this whole thing could go sideways," I mutter, but it's not the whole truth. Part of my distraction is Lucy. Her name, her energy, and what it

means to work with someone so opposite to me.

I give him a flat look, and he grins. “Lighten up, Logan. This could be good for you. Dogs don’t care about your reputation. They just want you to throw a ball.”

“And cats?” I ask dryly.

“They’ll ignore you unless you have food. Perfect match, really.”

Despite myself, I chuckle. Mark has a way of cutting through the tension, and for a moment, I let myself relax.

By the time the meeting wraps up, the “Adopt-a-Player” campaign is no longer just an idea. The room feels lighter, the hum of conversation now tinged with excitement and purpose as attendees discuss potential matches and logistics. It’s a budding plan, one that hinges on finalizing details with Lucy and the shelter. As everyone begins to leave, I linger near the back, watching Coach as he finishes a conversation with Mayor Collins and then makes his way toward me. There’s a determined look on his face, the kind that tells me I’m not escaping this meeting without a few pointed words.

“Logan, a word?” Coach’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. He gestures for me to follow him into the quiet corner of the room.

“What’s up?” I ask, crossing my arms as he closes the door behind us.

Coach’s gaze is steady, his tone low but firm. “I want this to work, Logan. And I need you on board—not just halfway. All in. This campaign is about more than just the team or the shelter; it’s about showing people who we are, who you are.”

“I get it,” I reply, but my voice comes out more defensive than I intend.

“Do you?” Coach leans forward slightly. “Look, I know the media hasn’t been kind. I’ve seen the headlines, too. But this is a chance to change that narrative. People love a redemption story, Logan, and I know you have it in you to give them one. But you’re going to have to let them see it.”

His words land heavier than I want to admit, pressing against the stubborn wall I’ve built around myself. For a moment, I just stand there, jaw tight, letting the silence do the talking. Finally, I exhale sharply and mutter, “I’ll try, but don’t expect miracles,” I mutter, a flicker of uncertainty tugging at the edges of my voice. Letting people down isn’t something I’m eager to relive.

“Good,” he says, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “And smooth things over with Lucy. You’ll need her trust if this is going to work.”

As I leave the room, Coach’s words echo in my mind. Trust. Redemption. For the first time, I feel the weight of what’s ahead—and the possibilities it could bring.

“Hey,” Mark says, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “You coming?”

“In a minute,” I reply. He shrugs and heads out, leaving me alone in the quieting room.

A message notification buzzes on my phone. I pull it out, frowning at the screen. It’s from one of our sponsors, expressing interest in the campaign and suggesting it could boost not only the shelter but also the Timberwolves’ image.

I tuck the phone back into my pocket, my thoughts swirling. The idea of working with Lucy...it’s not exactly comfortable, but maybe that’s the point. Facing her relentless optimism might be exactly what I need to push past my own walls and figure out if there’s more to this than discomfort. Maybe stepping out of my comfort zone is what I need, even if it means facing her relentless optimism head-on.

As I head toward the exit, I can't help but wonder what's in store. For the team. For the shelter. For me.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

### Chapter 3

Lucy

M orning sunlight streams through the windows of Cozy Paws Animal Shelter, casting golden streaks across the linoleum floor and bringing a gentle warmth to the bustling space. The shelter is a blend of organized chaos and comforting charm—rows of neatly labeled kennels line the walls, their occupants wagging tails or curling into cozy naps. The scent of clean hay and faint lavender from the diffuser wafts through the air, masking the occasional whiff of wet fur. In one corner, a playful calico kitten bats at a hanging feather toy, while across the room, a lazy hound stretches luxuriously in its pen.

I stand near the play area, surrounded by cheerful barks and the occasional meow, yet my mind is far from the lively scene. My clipboard—a trusted ally during chaotic adoption events—is clutched against my chest as if it holds answers to the million questions swirling in my head.

The “Adopt-a-Player” campaign. It’s been a day since I got that email, and I still can’t decide if it’s genius or a potential train wreck. What if it’s too much pressure for the shelter staff? Or worse, what if Logan’s gruff demeanor alienates the very community we’re trying to engage? The opportunity for the shelter is huge—greater visibility, increased adoptions, and, possibly, funding for the much-needed expansion we’ve been dreaming about. But partnering with the Timberwolves also means partnering with Logan Mitchell. And that’s where my resolve wavers.

"Lucy?" Emma’s voice breaks through my thoughts, soft but firm. She’s perched on a

stool at the reception desk, sorting through paperwork. "You've been staring into space for a solid five minutes. Are you okay?"

I shake myself free from my musings, offering her a quick smile. "Yeah, just...thinking."

Her raised eyebrow tells me she's not buying it. Emma's always been the quieter, more pragmatic foil to my whirlwind personality, someone who keeps things grounded when my ideas threaten to spiral out of control. Her sharp eye and steady patience have saved more than one adoption event from turning into complete chaos.

"Is it about the Timberwolves thing?" she asks, sliding off the stool and crossing her arms.

"Maybe." I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "It's a big deal, Emma. This could help so many animals, but it's also a lot to take on. And...Logan."

Her lips twitch into a knowing smile.

"Logan's not so bad, you know."

"He's grumpy," I counter, earning a laugh from her. "And stubborn. And...just so...Logan."

"Sounds like someone's been thinking about him a lot," she teases, nudging my shoulder as she walks past.

I roll my eyes, though a blush creeps up my neck. Before I can retort, the familiar jingle of the front door opening grabs my attention. Coach Turner strides in, his presence as commanding as ever. He's dressed in his usual Timberwolves polo, clipboard in hand, looking every bit the organized leader of a professional team.

"Lucy," he greets with a nod. "Thanks for agreeing to meet on such short notice."

"Of course," I reply, stepping forward. "I'm curious to hear more about this campaign."

We settle into the shelter's small conference room, the walls lined with photos of past adoptions. Coach Turner wastes no time diving into the details.

"The idea is simple," he begins. "Each player is paired with a shelter pet. We'll promote their stories through social media, events, and local press. The goal is to encourage adoptions while fostering a stronger connection between the team and the community."

I nod, scribbling notes even as my mind races. "It's ambitious," I admit. "But if it works, it could be incredible for both the team and the shelter. Have you spoken to the players about it?"

"Not all of them yet," Coach admits. "But the initial response has been positive. I believe in this idea, Lucy. And I believe in what you're doing here. This shelter is a cornerstone of Pine Harbor, and I want to help it thrive."

His sincerity is palpable, and I can't help but feel a swell of hope. Still, one name lingers in my mind.

"And Logan?" I ask carefully, trying to keep my tone neutral, though a flicker of irritation rises unbidden. He's been a thorn in my side for as long as I can remember—a walking storm cloud who somehow manages to bring a chill into every room he enters. But then there's that other side of him, the one I've caught glimpses of when he thought no one was looking. Moments when his guard drops, like the time I caught him gently calming a skittish puppy at an event, speaking to it in a low, soothing voice. It's in those brief, unguarded instances that he seems more human

than headline. It's frustrating to admit, but there's more to Logan Mitchell than I'd like to acknowledge.

Coach's expression doesn't change, but there's a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Logan's...adjusting to the idea. He's not as opposed as you might think. Give him time."

I'm not sure what to make of that, but I decide not to press further. Instead, I focus on the logistics, asking questions about timelines, promotional strategies, and the roles each of us would play. By the time our meeting ends, I've filled several pages of notes, and my mind feels a little clearer.

Back in the main area of the shelter, I find Kate sprawled on the floor with a pack of puppies climbing all over her. She's laughing as one particularly bold pup licks her face, her red curls a mess.

"This," she declares, holding up the squirming pup, "is the best therapy money can't buy."

I can't help but laugh as I sit beside her, the puppies immediately swarming me. "You're not wrong," I say, scratching behind the ears of a little brown-and-white fluffball. "But I need more than puppy cuddles right now. I need advice."

Kate's eyes light up with mischief. "Wait a second, is this about that Timberwolves thing everyone's been buzzing about? Spill!"

"Yeah." I recount my conversation with Coach Turner, including his subtle hints about Logan. "What do you think?"

Kate doesn't hesitate. "I think you should do it. This is huge, Lucy. Imagine how many animals could find homes because of this campaign. Plus, it's a chance to show

the town how amazing you are at running this place. You're basically the shelter's sunshine-powered engine."

I roll my eyes, but her words tug at something deep inside me. "What about Logan? You know he'll find a way to make it difficult."

Kate grins, unabashed. "Difficult, maybe. Impossible? No. He might be a grump, but even grumps have their moments. Maybe you'll even get to see a softer side of him."

I snort. "Logan? Soft? That would be the day."

"I know," I say, my fingers stalling on the puppy's fur. "But it's also a lot of work. And what if it doesn't go well? What if Logan and I can't make it work?"

"Then you figure it out," Kate says simply. "You've handled tougher things before. And who knows? Maybe Logan will surprise you."

I snort. "That would be a first."

Later that evening, I sit at my desk, staring at the notes from my meeting with Coach Turner. The faint hum of the shelter's heater blends with the lingering scent of lavender, a calming backdrop to the otherwise still night. The details of the campaign swirl in my mind, but it's Logan's name that sticks like a thorn. I keep replaying Coach's words—his assurances that Logan's not as opposed as I might think. Could it be true? Could Logan Mitchell, professional grouch, actually care about something more than hockey and his reputation? It's hard to imagine, but there's a part of me that wonders if his gruff exterior is a shield, hiding something deeper. What if he's just as unsure of himself as I am of him?

The shelter is quiet now, the animals settled in for the night. It's my favorite time to work, free from distractions. But tonight, I can't focus.

I glance at a framed photo on my desk—me and my dad at a Timberwolves game, years ago. He'd been a die-hard fan, and his love for the team had been infectious. I remember how his eyes would light up when he talked about the players, not just as athletes but as people who inspired the community.

"What would you do, Dad?" I whisper. The photo, of course, doesn't answer, but it does remind me of what's at stake. This isn't just about me or Logan. It's about the animals, the shelter, and the community my dad loved so much.

With a deep breath, I pick up my phone and draft an email to Coach Turner.

I'm in.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

### Chapter 4

#### Logan

The sharp scrape of skates cutting across the ice echoes through the arena, a rhythm etched into me since childhood. I move with the Timberwolves, every glide and turn precise, every movement timed to perfection. The ice arena at Pine Harbor Community Center hums with focused energy, our drills running like clockwork. The sounds of puck slaps against sticks and the occasional shout from Coach Turner echo in the cavernous space. It feels good—natural—to be here, to let my body take over while my mind clears.

Or, at least, tries to.

Even as I move through the motions, the "Adopt-a-Player" campaign looms in the back of my mind. Between the practice and logistics, I'm constantly thinking about what this partnership means—not just for the team and the shelter, but for me. It's more than just handing out some flyers or posing for a few pictures. This campaign could shift how people see me. It could change the story that's been told about me for years. But it's also a responsibility, one I'm not sure I'm ready to shoulder.

"Logan, your timing's off," Coach calls from the sidelines. His sharp tone yanks me from my thoughts.

I tighten my grip on the stick, skating back into position. "Got it."

"Hey," Ryan says as we line up for another drill, nudging my shoulder. "Everything

okay? You're skating like your mind's somewhere else."

"Just thinking," I mutter, not looking at him.

Ryan grins. "Dangerous territory for you, Mitchell. Let me guess... is it the campaign? Or are you finally admitting you're intimidated by the new rookie?"

I shoot him a flat look, and he laughs, skating ahead. Mark joins in on the ribbing as we complete another round of passing drills, his humor lightening the mood.

It's moments like these that remind me why I stick around, even when things get tough. These guys—Ryan, Mark, and the rest of the team—are more than just coworkers. They're the closest thing to family I've got outside of Emma. And maybe that's why this campaign feels like more than just another PR move. It's not just my image on the line. It's theirs too.

After practice, I'm barely out of the locker room when Coach corners me in the hallway.

"You have somewhere to be," he says, his tone making it clear this isn't a suggestion.

I raise an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"The shelter arranged for you to meet Lewis today. He's the dog they've paired you with for the campaign."

I glance at my watch, debating whether I can come up with an excuse. But Coach's expression tells me I'd better not try.

"Fine," I mutter, hating how easily I cave. "Where am I going?"



Because why not? Sure, let's add 'dog bonding' to the growing list of things I never asked for. I shove my gear into my bag with more force than necessary, irritation bubbling under my skin. Of course, I have to be the one to sell this PR fluff to the town. Why not pick one of the guys who actually likes dogs? Or better yet, someone who likes talking to people in general? I sling the bag over my shoulder and follow Coach's directions begrudgingly, already dreading whatever awkward interaction awaits me. I didn't sign up to be Pine Harbor's poster boy for pets. But no, Coach insists I have to play nice for the sake of 'community ties.'

My steps are heavy as I head to the car, the weight of the day—of the campaign—pressing down harder than my equipment bag. If this backfires, it's going to be my name in the headlines again, not anyone else's.

The park is quieter than I expect, the late afternoon sun casting a golden glow over the playground and picnic tables. Pine Harbor Park has a cozy charm—its winding paths are bordered by lush greenery, and the small pond at its center sparkles under the light. There's a gazebo off to the side, decked out with twinkling fairy lights left over from the last community event. A group of kids chases each other near the swings while an older couple sits on a bench feeding ducks.

I spot Lucy standing near a fenced dog run, clipboard in hand, her attention focused on a scrappy black-and-white dog bouncing at the end of its leash. Lewis is medium-sized, with a sleek coat that gleams in the sunlight, black patches scattered over a white base like an abstract painting. His floppy ears perk up at every sound, and his dark eyes, filled with curiosity and energy, seem to miss nothing. There's an eager bounce in his step, as if the world is his playground and every moment is an adventure waiting to be had.

As I approach, Lewis—full of energy—notices me immediately. His floppy ears perk up, and his dark eyes, bright with curiosity, lock onto me before he lets out an excited bark, his tail wagging like a propeller. Lucy glances up, her expression shifting from

neutral to...something else. Not quite annoyance, but close.

“Mitchell,” she says, her voice clipped but polite. “You’re late.”

“Didn’t know this was a timed event,” I reply, stuffing my hands into my jacket pockets. Lewis strains against his leash, clearly eager to close the distance between us.

Lucy sighs, kneeling to scratch behind his ears. “Well, he’s been waiting for you. Haven’t you, Lewis?”

The dog’s enthusiastic response makes me chuckle despite myself. I crouch down, holding out a hand, and Lewis immediately bounds over, sniffing me with unabashed curiosity before licking my fingers. His energy is infectious, and for a moment, I forget to keep my guard up.

“Looks like he likes you,” Lucy says, watching the interaction closely. There’s a hint of surprise in her voice, as if she expected this to go poorly.

“What’s not to like?” I shoot back, scratching under Lewis’s chin. The dog’s tail wags harder, and I feel the faintest tug at something inside me. It’s been a long time since anyone—or anything—looked at me with such unfiltered trust.

Lucy doesn’t respond immediately, and when I glance up, I catch her watching me with an expression I can’t quite read. It’s gone in an instant, replaced by her usual brisk professionalism.

“He’s got a lot of energy,” she says. “But he’s smart. Quick to pick up on commands. I think he’ll be a good match for you.”

“We’ll see,” I say, standing. Lewis circles my legs, his leash tangling slightly before

Lucy steps in to untangle it.

“Just give it a chance, Logan,” she says, her tone softer than I expect. “It could turn out better than you think.”

“Before you head out, there are a few things you need to know about Lewis,” Lucy says, her clipboard still in hand. Her tone shifts to something between professional and patient, like she’s about to give a lecture.

I fold my arms, leaning against the fence as she starts rattling off information. “He eats twice a day—morning and evening—and he’s on a specific brand of food. I’ve already sent the details to your email.”

“Of course you have,” I mutter, earning a quick glare from her.

“Potty breaks are frequent for now because we’re still reinforcing his training,” she continues. “And he’ll need walks to burn off all that energy. He loves fetch, so that’s a good way to tire him out.”

Lewis sits at her feet, wagging his tail as if he’s proud of the detailed report she’s giving. I glance at him, then back at her. “Anything else? Should I be writing this down?”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” she replies, her tone sweet but with an edge. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and flips to another page on her clipboard.

She pauses, her brow furrowing. “Wait... his bed. I think I forgot it at the shelter.”

Her face flushes, and she looks genuinely distressed, biting her bottom lip. It’s... cute. Attractive, cute. Not that I’d ever admit that. I push the thought aside because it’s Lucy—she’s not that kind of material in my mind. “I’m so sorry. I wanted this to

go smoothly, and I...”

“It’s fine,” I cut in, surprising both of us. “We’ll figure it out.”

“But—” she starts.

“Really, it’s not a big deal,” I say, keeping my tone calm. “I’m sure Lewis can survive one night without a fancy dog bed.”

She hesitates, clearly unconvinced, and I can see the concern etched across her face. It’s a rare crack in her usual confident exterior, and something about it catches me off guard. Lucy Hart, the relentless optimist, genuinely worried about making my life harder? That’s new.

“I can swing by the shelter tomorrow and grab it,” I add, bending down to ruffle Lewis’s ears. “He doesn’t seem too bothered about it.”

Lewis responds by wagging his tail so hard his entire body wiggles, clearly agreeing with my assessment. Lucy still looks unsure, but she nods slowly.

“I just wanted everything to go smoothly,” she says quietly, more to herself than to me. “You didn’t ask for this campaign, and I didn’t want to make it harder.”

“Lucy,” I say, standing to meet her gaze. “It’s fine. Really. If anything, it gives us something to hassle the sponsors about—‘dog bed emergencies’ might make for good PR.”

Her lips twitch, and for a second, I think she might actually laugh. “I don’t think ‘emergency dog bed delivery’ is the type of PR we’re aiming for.”

“Maybe not,” I say with a shrug. “But Lewis seems pretty adaptable. And so am I,

apparently.”

She gives me a long look, her shoulders relaxing just a little. “Thanks, Logan.”

The words are simple, but they land heavier than I expect. I give her a nod, feeling the corners of my mouth tug upward just slightly. Before the moment can stretch too long, Lewis barks, pulling our attention back to him. He tugs on his leash, his tail wagging furiously as if to remind us that he’s still here and ready for whatever adventure comes next.

Later that evening, as I settle onto my couch with a sigh, Lewis sprawled out on the floor beside me, my mind drifts back to the park. The way Lucy had looked genuinely uncomfortable, almost embarrassed, when she realized she’d forgotten the meds and bed—it was disarming. I’ve only ever seen her so put-together, always ready with a smile or a snappy comeback. Seeing her falter, even for a moment, was...humanizing.

And the way she’d been so concerned about making things difficult for me—it didn’t feel like an act. It felt real. Honest.

I glance down at Lewis, who’s now snoring softly, one paw twitching like he’s dreaming. “Looks like it’s you and me, buddy,” I mutter, scratching behind his ears. “Think she’s always this worried about everyone, or are we special?”

Lewis doesn’t answer, obviously, but his tail gives a faint wag in his sleep, like he’s agreeing with me.

Leaning back, I let out a long breath. The day didn’t go how I expected, but it wasn’t all bad. Lewis settled in better than I thought he would, and working with Lucy—though not without its challenges—didn’t feel as impossible as it had this morning.

As my eyes drift toward the window, the faint glow of the town's streetlights spilling into the room, I realize something strange: I'm not dreading tomorrow. Sure, I'm still skeptical about this whole campaign, but there's a part of me—however small—that's curious to see where it goes. And that's a feeling I haven't had in a long time.

A few days later, I find myself sprawled on my couch, the apartment silent except for the hum of the fridge and the occasional creak of the old floorboards. Lewis, who had started the week sleeping near the door, has somehow managed to sneak onto the couch beside me, his head resting against my thigh.

I should push him off. I really should. Instead, my hand moves absently to scratch behind his ears as I scroll through my phone. He lets out a contented sigh, and I roll my eyes.

"You're getting comfortable, huh?" I mutter.

Lewis doesn't bother responding, just stretches a little more, like he owns the place.

Before I know it, I've picked up the chew toy lying nearby and toss it across the room. Lewis is off the couch in a flash, bounding after it with a kind of joy I don't quite understand but find myself watching anyway.

I shake my head, but when he trots back, tail wagging, I toss the toy again.

I don't think about what this means. About what Lucy would say if she saw me like this. About how easy it's been to let this dog in when I swore I wouldn't.

Instead, I just lean back against the couch, watching as Lewis drops the toy at my feet, ready for another round.

### Chapter 5

Lucy

The Pine Harbor Community Center is alive with color and energy. Bright banners featuring adorable shelter animals flutter near the entrance. Strings of fairy lights loop along the railing, twinkling even in the daylight. Tables covered with cheerful checkered tablecloths are arranged neatly in rows, each boasting everything from homemade baked goods to shelter brochures. The scent of cinnamon rolls from Kate's table drifts through the air, mingling faintly with the lingering hint of fresh paint.

I stand at the center of the action, clipboard in hand, as volunteers bustle around me. It's organized chaos—my kind of chaos—but there's an undercurrent of nerves humming through me. This event is a big deal for the shelter, for the Timberwolves, and, apparently, for Logan Mitchell.

My stomach flutters at the thought, but I shove it aside. "Focus, Lucy," I mutter to myself, scanning my to-do list. This isn't the time to dwell on my overly complicated feelings about Pine Harbor's resident broody hockey star.

Kate appears at my side, balancing a tray of cupcakes that somehow match the banners perfectly. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes sparkle with the satisfaction of someone whose aesthetic vision has come to life. "See? Coordination is an art," she says with a playful wink. Of course, they do—Kate's aesthetic radar is infallible.

"You're in full control mode," she says, her tone teasing. "Have you even stopped to

breathe today?"

"Breathing's overrated," I reply with a smirk. "These tables aren't going to set themselves up."

Kate sets down the cupcakes, brushing an invisible speck of icing from her sleeve. "You've got this. Everyone's buzzing about how great this event is. You should enjoy it a little."

I glance around, taking in the festive atmosphere. Kids are already swarming the craft station, a group of seniors is inspecting the raffle prizes, and the Timberwolves' logo is proudly displayed on a banner behind the main stage. The small-town spirit is tangible, wrapping around the event like a warm hug.

Still, my gaze keeps drifting toward the entrance, where I know Logan will make his grand appearance any minute now. My nerves twist, half from anticipation and half from the uncertainty of what to expect. Would he bring that same guarded energy, or would I catch another rare glimpse of the man he hides so well?

When he does arrive, it's not exactly grand...but it's effective. Logan walks in with Lewis trotting happily beside him, the dog's leash in one hand and what looks like a bag of dog treats in the other. His face is set in a straight, almost severe expression, making it impossible to tell if he outright hates this campaign or if brooding is just his natural state. And yet, for all his gruffness, Logan's clearly made an effort—his Timberwolves jacket is clean and crisp, his dark jeans fit perfectly, and his hair is just tousled enough to look effortless.

But it's the way he interacts with Lewis that catches my attention. The dog barks happily, pulling slightly on the leash to greet a group of kids, and Logan kneels to calm him, his voice low and steady.



"Good boy," he murmurs, scratching behind Lewis's ears. The kids giggle as Logan hands one of them a treat to give to the dog, and I catch a glimpse of something I don't expect: Logan smiling.

The sight is disarming, and for a moment, I forget what I'm supposed to be doing. Kate nudges me with her elbow, a knowing grin on her face.

"Earth to Lucy," she says. "You're staring."

"I am not," I reply quickly, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks.

Kate's grin widens. "Sure, you're not."

The event unfolds beautifully. Logan's presence draws a steady crowd, and his interactions with Lewis are a hit. At one point, a shy little boy approaches hesitantly, clutching his mom's hand. Logan kneels to Lewis's level, handing the boy a treat to give to the dog. "He's friendly," Logan says gently, his voice softer than I've ever heard it. The boy's face lights up as Lewis wags his tail and takes the treat delicately. Logan glances up with a rare smile, the kind that seems to melt his usual stoic demeanor. It's a small moment, but it draws a collective 'aww' from the onlookers and leaves me momentarily breathless. Parents snap photos of their kids petting the dog, and a few teenagers hover nearby, clearly impressed by Logan's status as a local celebrity.

Logan and I find ourselves sorting through a pile of raffle tickets at the main table. As we both reach for one at the same time, our hands brush, sending a sudden jolt through me. Goosebumps prickle along my arms, and I immediately blame the chill of the AC kicking on at that exact moment. Logan, however, pulls his hand back quickly, his jaw tightening ever so slightly. I barely have time to process what just happened before he clears his throat and mutters, "Seriously," holding up a ticket with nearly illegible scrawl. "Is this supposed to say Sarah or Sasquatch?"

"Definitely Sasquatch," I reply, biting back a grin. "Maybe it's a new fundraising demographic we didn't consider."

Logan's mouth quirks into a half-smile, and the sight catches me off guard. It's fleeting, but it's there—a glimpse of the man behind the brooding exterior. Together, we manage to untangle the ticket mess, our teamwork seamless despite the banter.

Just as we finish, Mayor Collins joins me near the raffle table, his usual charismatic smile in place. "This is quite the turnout," he says. "And I have to say, you and Logan make quite the team."

I laugh nervously, brushing off his comment. "It's all about the animals."

"Of course," he replies, though his knowing tone makes my stomach flip. "Still, the synergy is undeniable. The crowd loves it."

As he walks away, I find myself glancing toward Logan again. He's talking to a reporter now, his hand resting lightly on Lewis's head. The sight sends a strange mix of pride and unease through me. This is what we wanted—visibility, connection, progress. So why does it feel so complicated?

Kate corners me near the coffee stand later, her eyes twinkling with mischief as she stirs her coffee with exaggerated focus. "So," she says, dragging out the word, "what's going on with you and Mr. Broody over there?" "The mayor's not wrong, you know. You and Logan do have good chemistry."

"It's not chemistry," I insist, pouring cream into my cup. "It's...logistics. Professionalism. Coordination."

Kate raises an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. Sure. Keep telling yourself that."

I groan, pressing the heels of my hands to my temples. "Even if there was something—and I'm not saying there is—it's not a good idea."

"Why not?" she asks, genuinely curious.

"Because it's messy," I say, gesturing vaguely. "He's Logan Mitchell. Grumpy, guarded, and...kind of infuriating."

Kate tilts her head. "And?"

"And," I add reluctantly, "he's also...surprising. In ways I didn't expect."

Kate smiles. "There it is."

I glare at her, but she just pats my shoulder and walks away, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

The sun is beginning to set when the event reaches its peak. Logan and I find ourselves near the main stage, preparing to announce the raffle winners. The crowd's energy hums like electricity, their eager chatter filling the air. My heart races, a mix of anticipation and the strange, undeniable awareness of sharing this moment with Logan. I steal a glance at him, wondering if he feels the same current of expectation that seems to bind us in this instant. The crowd has gathered, and there's an air of excitement buzzing around us.

"Ready?" I ask, glancing up at him.

Logan smirks. "Are you?"

I roll my eyes, but I can't help the small smile tugging at my lips. "Let's just get through this without scaring anyone off."

The announcements go off without a hitch, though there's a moment of unscripted hilarity when Lewis decides to "help" by barking every time Logan speaks into the microphone. The crowd eats it up, and even Logan's stoic demeanor cracks as he laughs along.

As we step off the stage, a reporter snaps a photo of the two of us laughing, Lewis standing proudly between us. The moment feels light, unguarded, and...right. But as the flash fades, reality creeps back in, and I can't help but wonder what stories that photo will spark.

By the time the event wraps up, I'm exhausted but exhilarated. The turnout exceeded expectations, the shelter received a wave of donations, and the Timberwolves' involvement brought in an entirely new audience.

As I finish packing the last brochures, my gaze drifts to the glass doors at the far end of the community center. There, through the fading light, I spot Logan. He's standing by a car—Emma's, I realize—helping her load boxes into the trunk. He's quiet and methodical, easily lifting heavy crates while Emma chatters away, her laughter carrying faintly through the glass. Logan doesn't seem to mind her endless commentary. In fact, I catch a small, fleeting smile tugging at his lips as he adjusts the last box in the trunk.

Something in the scene tugs at me, making me pause mid-motion. Logan Mitchell, the grumpy, guarded hockey star who's spent most of this campaign begrudgingly following orders, looks so at ease in this moment. There's no performance, no pretense—just a man helping his sister without a second thought.

I swallow hard, a strange warmth blooming in my chest. Maybe he's not as bad as I've told myself he is. Maybe today wasn't just about putting on a show for the cameras or the town. There's a sincerity in his actions, a quiet kindness that feels at odds with the prickly exterior he's so good at maintaining.

It's disarming, really. And unsettling.

My thoughts race as I watch him close the trunk and pat Emma on the shoulder, his expression softening briefly before he turns to walk back toward the center. I quickly look away, pretending to busy myself with folding a tablecloth, but my mind is buzzing.

Why does this matter so much? Why does he matter so much?

It's not like I've never worked with difficult people before. I've managed volunteers who were more stubborn than mules and board members who couldn't agree on the color of the shelter walls. But Logan... he's different. And for the first time, I find myself wondering if there's more to him than the guarded, reluctant persona he shows the world. If there's more to this partnership than just a campaign.

The thought is equal parts exhilarating and terrifying.

Shaking my head, I push the feelings down, telling myself it's just the exhaustion talking. But as I load the last box into the storage closet and turn out the lights, I can't quite shake the image of Logan outside, the way he'd looked so unguarded, so genuine.

Maybe I've been wrong about him. Maybe.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

### Chapter 6

#### Logan

Lewis wakes me up the same way every morning: a wet nose nudging my hand, followed by an enthusiastic paw on my chest that leaves no room for negotiation. I groan, cracking one eye open, and find him sitting beside the bed, tail wagging like I've just promised him a lifetime supply of treats.

"You're relentless," I mutter, my voice gravelly with sleep. "Five more minutes."

Lewis tilts his head, as if considering my request, before barking once—sharp and insistent.

"Fine, fine. I'm up," I say, pushing myself upright. The room is chilly, but Lewis doesn't care. He's already heading for the door, glancing back at me like he's reminding me to hurry up.

By the time I've thrown on sweats and a hoodie, Lewis is practically vibrating with excitement, his tail wagging so hard it blurs and his paws bouncing as if the sheer energy coursing through him can't be contained. We step outside into the crisp morning air, the quiet of Pine Harbor still lingering before the town wakes up. The routine is simple. We walk through the neighborhood, stop at the park for him to sniff every tree and bush, and then head back home for breakfast. But somehow, it's become a steady reminder to pause and breathe in the midst of everything.

I never thought I'd be the kind of guy who needed a dog, let alone one that bounces

through life like everything is a grand adventure. But Lewis has a way of making even the mundane moments feel lighter, like he's dragging me out of my own head whether I like it or not. And, admittedly, I don't hate it.

When I'm on the road for games, Emma watches him. She's always happy to help, her voice bright when I call to check in. "Lewis is a dream, Logan," she'll say. "He even helped me bake cookies yesterday. Well, sort of."

The first time I left him with her, I told myself it was just practical. I couldn't take him with me, and she was the obvious choice. But halfway through that trip, I caught myself missing him—the way he'd sit at my feet while I watched game footage, the way he'd nudge me with his nose when he wanted attention. It's ridiculous, really. Missing a dog? But then again, Lewis isn't just a dog. He's the one constant in a life that often feels anything but steady, reminding me that maybe I'm not as alone as I think. He's...something more. A companion. A buffer between me and the noise in my own head.

When I get home after those trips, the way he greets me—spinning in circles, tail wagging so hard it looks like it might detach—makes me wonder how I ever thought I didn't need this in my life.

It's after practice one afternoon when I find myself alone with Lewis in the community center lounge. Most of the team has cleared out, but I stayed behind to review some notes from Coach. Now, it's just me, Lewis, and the faint hum of the vending machine in the corner.

I sit on a bench, Lewis flopped down beside me, his head resting on my lap, the weight of it steady and warm, his fur soft beneath my fingertips. My hand moves absently over his ears, the repetitive motion soothing.

"You know, buddy," I say quietly, "I don't know why you like me so much." Lewis's

ears twitch, and I let out a humorless laugh. “I mean, I’m not exactly the most lovable guy. Grumpy, they call me. Or worse. But you? You just...show up. Like none of it matters.”

He sighs, a contented sound, and I shake my head. “I wish people were more like you. They’d see past the mistakes. Past the headlines. But no. Once a screw-up, always a screw-up, right?”

The words hang in the air, heavier than I’d intended, as if I’d peeled back a layer of myself I wasn’t ready to share. The vulnerability feels foreign, uncomfortable, but somehow, in Lewis’s quiet presence, it feels safe enough to linger. I’m not used to saying this stuff out loud, even to a dog. But there’s something about Lewis’s quiet, unwavering presence that makes it easier.

“You think they’ll ever let me be someone else?” I ask, more to myself than to him. Lewis lifts his head slightly, his big, trusting eyes meeting mine, and for a moment, the weight in my chest feels a little lighter.

“You’re really good at that,” a voice says, startling me. I look up to see Lucy standing in the doorway, her green eyes wide but not judgmental.

I straighten, my hand freezing mid-scratch on Lewis’s head. “How long have you been there?”

She steps inside, her expression soft. “Long enough. But don’t worry, I’m not here to eavesdrop. I just came to grab some supplies.”

I nod, trying to act like it doesn’t bother me that she overheard any of that. “Didn’t realize I had an audience.”

Lucy smiles, that sunshine-filled smile that always throws me off balance. “Lewis



really is a great listener. You're lucky to have him."

Her words are simple, but there's something in her tone—gentle yet knowing—that feels understanding, like she sees more than I want her to. Her gaze lingers briefly, warm and unintrusive, before she turns away, leaving me with the unsettling feeling of being truly seen. She doesn't push, though. Doesn't ask questions or make comments. She just grabs the supplies she needs and heads for the door.

"See you at the next meeting," she says over her shoulder, her voice light.

"Yeah," I reply, my tone gruff but not unkind.

When she's gone, I lean back against the bench, staring down at Lewis. "Well," I mutter, "that was...unexpected."

Lewis wags his tail, as if he agrees.

Later that evening, as I sit on my couch with Lewis sprawled out beside me, I can't shake the encounter with Lucy. The way she looked at me—not with pity, but with quiet insight—it's like she saw through the walls I've spent years building. And instead of pointing them out or trying to tear them down, she just...let me be. It's unsettling and oddly comforting all at once. She'd walked in on a moment I'd normally keep buried, and instead of making it awkward or teasing me, she'd just...been there. Present. Understanding.

I've never met someone like her before. Someone who doesn't pry but somehow still sees more than they should. It's disarming, honestly. And maybe that's why it sticks with me.

For all her sunshine and sarcasm, Lucy Hart isn't naive. She's not blind to the rough edges people carry. But instead of judging them for it, she just seems to...accept it.

I glance at Lewis, who's snoring softly now. "What do you think, bud?" I ask, my voice quiet. "Maybe she's not so bad."

Lewis's tail thumps once against the cushion, and I laugh, shaking my head.

Yeah. Maybe she's not so bad after all.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

### Chapter 7

Lucy

The rhythmic hum of the shelter fills the air. The shuffle of paws against tiled floors echoes alongside the occasional bark or meow, while the gentle chatter of volunteers coordinating their tasks adds a comforting backdrop. I'm in the supply room, organizing a new shipment of pet food, but my mind isn't on inventory. It's on Logan.

"Ugh," I mutter to myself, shoving a bag of kibble onto the shelf with more force than necessary. Why can't I stop replaying yesterday's conversation in my head? The way he stiffened when he realized I'd overheard him talking to Lewis. The way he looked so... human.

I'm not used to seeing that side of him—the vulnerability that slipped through for just a moment. It caught me off guard, leaving me both curious and unsettled, as if I'd glimpsed a part of him he hadn't meant to show anyone. Usually, Logan is all gruffness and sharp edges, like a fortress determined to keep everyone out. But yesterday, for a fleeting moment, I saw a crack in the armor. And instead of feeling satisfaction at catching him off guard, I feel guilty.

I've been so quick to judge him. To write him off as the typical broody athlete with a chip on his shoulder. And sure, he's given me plenty of reasons to think that—the sarcasm, the reluctance, the way he's always one step away from rolling his eyes at everything. But maybe... maybe I haven't been entirely fair. I assumed he was all sarcasm and reluctance, but now I'm starting to see glimpses of something else—a

man who's more than just his mistakes, who's trying, even if he doesn't always know how to show it.

The thought gnaws at me as I move through the shelter, checking in with the volunteers and making sure the animals are settled. My "sunshine" personality doesn't sit well with the idea that I might have been anything less than kind. Did I dismiss him too quickly? Was I too focused on my own assumptions to really see him?

I shake my head, trying to push the thoughts aside. But they're persistent, like a pebble in my shoe that I can't quite shake out.

Later, I sit at my desk, scrolling through social media posts for the campaign. The buzz around Logan and Lewis has been overwhelming, with posts and shares flooding in like wildfire. Comments flood the posts, a mix of praise and skepticism.

"It's nice to see Logan Mitchell doing something positive for a change." "Is this just another PR stunt?" "Lewis is adorable! Maybe Logan's not as grumpy as he seems." "Don't be fooled. Guys like him don't change."

The last comment makes my stomach twist. I know how harsh people can be online, but seeing it directed at Logan feels... different. I think back to his words from yesterday, the frustration in his voice as he talked to Lewis about being judged for his past. It's one thing to hear about someone's struggles; it's another to see them play out in real time.

I wonder how much weight he carries because of those comments—the constant reminder of mistakes he's worked to leave behind. How many times has he tried to move forward, only to have people pull him back into the shadow of his past? How many times he's had to prove himself, only for people to cling to the worst version of him. It's no wonder he's so guarded.

“What are you thinking, Lucy?” I murmur to myself, rubbing my temples. My frustration shifts from Logan to myself. Why didn’t I see this sooner? Why was I so quick to assume the worst?

The afternoon brings another campaign meeting at the community center. I’m running late, juggling a stack of flyers and a clipboard as I rush into the room. The volunteers are already bustling about, setting up for tomorrow’s event. And there, in the middle of it all, is Logan.

He’s crouched next to Lewis, scratching the dog’s ears as he calmly directs a group of volunteers carrying supplies. There’s an ease to his movements, a quiet confidence that’s entirely unforced. When one of the volunteers stumbles under the weight of a box, Logan is on his feet in an instant, taking the load without hesitation.

“Careful,” he says, his voice gruff but not unkind. “Don’t throw your back out.”

The volunteer laughs nervously, muttering a thank-you, and Logan nods before resuming his work with Lewis.

I linger near the door, watching him, a mix of curiosity and unease twisting in my chest. He seems so different from the man I thought I knew, and the quiet strength in his actions catches me off guard. He’s different today. More at ease. More... himself? I’m not sure. But the way he handles Lewis, the way he steps in without being asked, the way he’s quietly taking charge without demanding attention—it’s not what I expected.

“Lucy?” one of the volunteers calls, snapping me out of my thoughts. I force a smile and step forward, but the image of Logan with Lewis stays with me.

That night, I sit on my porch, a cup of tea cradled in my hands. The street is quiet, the faint hum of cicadas filling the air. My mind drifts back to Logan, to the way he

looked today, so unguarded and... kind.

I don't know why it's sticking with me. It shouldn't matter. He's just a partner in this campaign, someone I have to work with to achieve our shared goals. That's all.

Except, deep down, I know it's not all. There's something about him that's starting to get under my skin, and it's driving me crazy. I don't want to feel this way—like the walls I've built to keep people like him out are crumbling, leaving me vulnerable in a way that scares me more than I'm willing to admit. I don't want to look at him and see someone worth knowing, worth understanding. It's easier to keep him in the box I'd already put him in—grumpy, guarded, frustratingly difficult.

But today made that impossible. Because today, I saw something else.

I sigh, setting my tea aside and leaning back in my chair. “What are you doing, Lucy?” I whisper to the night.

There's no answer, of course. Just the soft rustle of leaves and the distant chirp of crickets. But as I sit there, staring at the stars, I feel something shift. Maybe it's time to stop holding onto assumptions. After all, I've seen it time and again with the animals here—the ones who arrive scared and defensive, often mislabeled as unlovable, are usually the ones with the biggest hearts. Why couldn't the same be true for him? Maybe it's time to give Logan the benefit of the doubt. Because if there's one thing I've learned from this shelter, it's that sometimes, the ones who seem the hardest to reach are the ones who need compassion the most.

I don't know what this means for us, for the campaign, for anything. But for the first time, I'm willing to find out.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

### Chapter 8

#### Logan

The first light of dawn filters through the large windows of the Pine Harbor Community Center, casting a soft golden glow over the empty ice rink. The silence is almost meditative, broken only by the distant hum of the HVAC system. I stand at the edge of the rink, my breath fogging faintly in the chill air, and let my gaze drift across the space.

The stillness of the rink before the world wakes up feels almost sacred, like a blank slate waiting to be written on. It's a place where the noise of life fades, leaving only clarity and the faint whisper of endless possibilities. No noise, no expectations. Just me, the rink, and a lingering sense of possibility. The cool air carries a faint metallic tang from the ice, and the faint scuff marks from countless skates seem to hold stories of past victories and defeats. It's the kind of quiet that makes you think about the things you usually try to ignore. And lately, I've been thinking about a lot.

Lucy, for one.

She's a puzzle I can't quite solve—a whirlwind of contradictions that keeps me guessing. One moment she's all light and laughter, lifting everyone around her, and the next, she's throwing sharp, pointed comments that reveal just how much she sees beneath the surface. It's both frustrating and fascinating, and it's left me questioning if I've underestimated her. Every time I think I've got her figured out—her relentless optimism, her passion for the shelter, her ability to make everyone feel like they matter—she throws me off with something unexpected. A sharp comment, a knowing

smile, or, worse, a moment of kindness that hits too close to home.

And then there's Lewis. The dog is a force of nature, somehow both calming and chaotic in equal measure. He's become a fixture in my life, whether I'm ready to admit it or not. His unwavering loyalty and boundless energy are starting to feel like the constants I've been missing.

"You're here early," a familiar voice says, breaking my train of thought. I glance over to see Mark stepping onto the ice in sneakers, a bottle of water in one hand and his ever-present grin in place.

"Could say the same about you," I reply, leaning on my stick.

Mark shrugs. "Sometimes the rink's the best place to clear your head. Though from the look on your face, I'd say you're not doing much clearing."

"Just thinking," I mutter.

"About the dog? Or about Lucy?" His grin widens when I glare at him. "Come on, man. It's obvious. You're a lot less grumpy these days, and I'm pretty sure it's not just because of Lewis."

"Drop it, Mark," I say, but there's no bite in my tone. Mark claps me on the shoulder before heading off, his laughter echoing as he disappears into the hallway.

With a sigh, I step away from the rink and head to the small café attached to the community center. The smell of freshly brewed coffee greets me as I push open the door, and I spot Emma sitting at a corner table, waving me over.

Emma glances up as I slide into the seat across from her, a latte in hand and a book propped open in front of her. She's already halfway through it, her relaxed posture



giving away her contentment. “Well, look who decided to join the early crowd,” she teases, closing the book and setting it aside.

“Interesting choice,” I say, nodding at the book with a curious glance. “What are you reading?”

She holds up the cover, a romance novel with a cheerful-looking couple and a dog on the front. I raise an eyebrow, and she grins.

“It’s research,” she says. “You’d be surprised how much you can learn about people from stories like these.”

“If you say so,” I mutter, but there’s no heat behind it. Emma’s always had a way of finding meaning in places I’d never think to look.

She sets the book down and studies me for a moment, her expression softening. “How’s it going with Lewis?”

“He’s...a handful,” I admit. “But a good one.”

Emma’s smile widens. “And the campaign?”

I hesitate, swirling my coffee idly. “It’s fine. Lucy’s good at what she does.”

“And you?” she presses. “How are you handling it?”

“I’m figuring it out,” I say finally, glancing out the window. “It’s...different. But maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

Emma studies me for a moment longer, then nods. “You’re changing, Logan. For the better.”

Her words linger in my mind as I leave the café, Lewis's leash in hand, stirring something unfamiliar in my chest. Am I really changing? And if I am, is it for the better, like she said? The thought both grounds me and unsettles me, pushing me to question what I want to become.

Later that afternoon, I'm at the park with Lewis, tossing a tennis ball while he bounds after it like his life depends on it. The sky is overcast, the air heavy with the promise of rain, but for now, the weather holds.

As I toss the ball again, a passerby stops to watch. "That's Lewis, right?" she asks, smiling. "I saw him on the shelter's page. He's adorable!"

"Yeah, that's him," I reply, a little awkwardly.

"And you must be Logan," she adds. "The hockey player? It's great what you're doing for the shelter. Really inspiring."

I mumble a thanks, not sure how to handle the praise, and the woman walks away with a wave. Lewis, oblivious to the exchange, returns with the ball, tail wagging.

Lucy shows up just as Lewis brings the ball back for the third time, her bright presence contrasting with the dull sky. Her hair is slightly tousled by the breeze, and she hugs an umbrella to her chest, her gaze soft and focused as if she's already reading the moment. She's carrying an umbrella and a bag of treats, her smile warm despite the cool breeze.

"Thought I'd find you here," she says, handing me the bag. "Bribery for the star of the campaign."

"For Lewis or me?" I ask, smirking.

“Depends on who behaves better,” she quips, her eyes sparkling with humor. She kneels to scratch behind Lewis’s ears, and he rewards her with an enthusiastic lick.

We fall into an easy rhythm, walking the park paths while Lewis trots ahead, his tail wagging happily. The conversation flows, lighter than usual but with an undercurrent of something deeper.

The first drops catch us off guard, a light sprinkle tapping gently on the leaves before transforming into a sudden downpour. The air fills with the sharp, earthy scent of rain, and the world around us blurs as water streams from the branches above. The sound of rain hitting the leaves is almost deafening, mingling with Lewis’s surprised bark as he looks skyward, shaking off the first few drops. We break into a jog, darting for the gazebo near the pond just as the rain intensifies. By the time we reach cover, we’re both soaked, and Lewis is a dripping, gleeful mess. He shakes himself vigorously, sending a spray of water flying in every direction.

I can’t help but laugh, the sound escaping me before I realize how ridiculous we must look. “Well, that escalated quickly,” I say, running a hand through my damp hair.

Lucy laughs too, setting her umbrella down on the gazebo bench with a soft thud, its surface dripping from the rain. “I should’ve known better than to trust the forecast,” she says, leaning against the railing and looking out at the pond. The ripples of raindrops dance across the surface, the world muted but somehow alive with the rhythm of the storm.

“I kind of like the rain,” she admits. “It makes everything feel...cleaner. Like a fresh start. My dad used to say that, actually. Whenever it rained, he’d take me out to the porch with a blanket and hot chocolate and say, ‘Lucy, this is nature’s way of giving us a do-over.’ It stuck with me, I guess.”

I nod, looking out at the rippling water. “I guess I could use one of those,” I admit,

the words heavier than they should be. All the missteps, the regrets I've carried for years, feel like they're pressing against my chest, begging for a way to be erased, or at least rewritten.

Her gaze sharpens, curiosity mingling with concern. "A fresh start?"

"Yeah," I say, the words coming more easily than I expect. "I've made mistakes. Big ones. And for a long time, I thought the best thing I could do was keep my head down and focus on hockey. But now..."

"Now?" she prompts gently.

I glance at her, then at Lewis, who's lying at our feet, his eyes half-closed. "Now I'm starting to think maybe there's more to life than that. Maybe I can...do more. Be more."

Lucy doesn't say anything right away, but her expression softens, and when she speaks, her voice is quiet but steady. "I think you're already doing that, Logan. And you don't have to do it alone."

That night, back at my apartment, I replay the conversation in my head, turning over Lucy's words like a puzzle piece that almost fits but not quite. Her belief in me felt genuine, her quiet confidence unnerving in a way I can't ignore. It's been a long time since someone looked at me and saw potential, not just a hockey player or a screw-up, and it's stirring something I'm not sure I'm ready to face. Lucy's words echo, carrying more weight than I'm used to. She's right—I'm not alone. Not with Lewis. Not with the team. And maybe, not with her.

I sit on the floor, leaning against the couch as Lewis curls up beside me. The room is quiet except for the faint patter of rain against the windows. I reach down to scratch behind his ears, and he lets out a contented sigh.

“You’re a good dog, Lewis,” I murmur. “Better than I deserve.”

Lewis thumps his tail once, as if to disagree.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:30 am*

### Chapter 9

#### Lucy

The shelter hums with life, the kind of joyful chaos that always leaves me both exhilarated and exhausted. The faint scent of lavender mingles with the earthy aroma of pet food, while the distant sound of soft paws against the tiled floor adds to the lively atmosphere. A family of four is in one corner, laughing as a fluffy tabby weaves between their feet. Near the counter, a young couple is deep in conversation with Emma about adopting a bonded pair of dachshunds. And then there's Lewis, our unofficial mascot, sprawled out in the middle of the main walkway, his tail wagging lazily as visitors stop to pet him. Today, he's fresh from a grooming session—his black and white coat gleaming and his collar newly polished, making him look like the perfect poster pup for the shelter. He's a hit—not just with the shelter guests, but with the community as a whole.

“You're stealing the spotlight, Lewis,” I mutter, leaning down to scratch behind his ears. He thumps his tail harder, grinning up at me with that lopsided doggy smile that melts even the hardest hearts.

The light atmosphere dims as I overhear a hushed conversation near the reception desk. Two women, regular visitors who volunteer occasionally, are whispering in low tones.

“Did you see the article about Logan Mitchell?” one of them says, her voice carrying despite her efforts to keep it discreet. “It's all about him and his ex. She's claiming he was never around and cared more about his career than her. But then again, wasn't

she the one posting their private moments for likes?”

My stomach sinks. I’ve heard whispers about Logan’s past before—bits and pieces of scandal and heartache that painted him as reckless and untrustworthy. Hearing it again, though, stirs something different—a gnawing doubt tangled with a sense of unfairness. I’ve seen him in moments that don’t fit this narrative: patient, kind, quietly thoughtful. Could I have been wrong about him all along, or is there more to his story than anyone realizes? I’ve always brushed them off, preferring to judge him by what I’ve seen firsthand. But now, with his name back in the headlines, I know the chatter will only grow louder.

Later, I’m at the local café, nursing a cappuccino and trying to shake off the unease that’s been gnawing at me since this morning. Kate slides into the seat across from me, her oversized purse bumping the table as she settles in.

“You look like you’re about to fight someone,” she says, eyeing me over her latte. “What’s going on?”

I sigh, swirling the foam in my cup. “It’s Logan. Or, more specifically, Logan and his ex. There’s an article making the rounds, and people are already talking.”

Kate’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh, the infamous ex strikes again? Let me guess—she’s rehashing the same story, twisting things to make Logan look bad, right?”

“It’s not funny,” I snap, but my annoyance fades as quickly as it appeared. Kate’s teasing is her way of trying to lighten the mood, and I can’t fault her for that.

She leans forward, her expression softening. “Okay, tell me. What’s bothering you? Is it the rumors? Or is it...him?”

“Both,” I admit, setting my cup down with a sigh. “I hate that people are so quick to

judge him based on half-truths and gossip. But at the same time...I don't know. Maybe there's some truth to it. What if I'm wrong about him?"

Kate studies me for a moment, then smirks. "You know what I think? I think you're scared because you actually like him." She raises a teasing eyebrow. "Didn't you swear up and down that you couldn't stand him? And yet here we are. Funny how that works, isn't it?"

"That's ridiculous," I scoff, but my voice lacks conviction.

"Is it?" she challenges. "You light up every time you talk about him, Lucy. And don't think I haven't noticed how much time you've been spending together."

I shake my head, laughing softly despite myself. "You always have to push, don't you?"

"And you're in denial," she shoots back. "Look, I'm not saying you need to rush into anything. But maybe...give him a chance. Talk to him about the rumors. See what he has to say."

I take Kate's advice—reluctantly—and find Logan at the community center later that afternoon. He's in the gym, working with a group of kids on their skating techniques. Watching him with them is unexpectedly disarming. He crouches to tie a kid's loose skate, offering a quiet reassurance that they'll get the hang of the drill soon. He's patient when one of them stumbles, offering a quick grin and a joke about how even pros take a fall now and then. It earns a chorus of laughter, and for a moment, he seems completely at ease, like this is where he belongs. It's a side of him I don't see often, and it's...compelling.

When the lesson wraps up, I approach him as the kids file out, chattering excitedly.



“Got a minute?” I ask, trying to keep my tone neutral.

Logan wipes the sweat from his brow with a towel, nodding. “What’s up?”

I hesitate, unsure how to broach the subject. Finally, I just rip off the bandage. “There’s an article going around about you. About...your past.”

His expression tightens, and for a moment, I think he’s going to walk away. But then he sighs, dropping the towel onto the bench. “Let me guess. The ex?”

I nod. “People are talking, Logan. And I know it’s none of my business, but...I thought you should know.”

He leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. Oh, great. Strong arms. Fantastic. My brain, apparently, has decided that now is the time to notice that. I shake the thought away immediately—first of all, I do not like him. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself. And second, we are talking about something serious here, not fantasizing about—ugh, never mind. I refocus as he exhales, tension tightening his jaw. “It’s not exactly new. The media’s been dragging that story out for years. Half of it’s not even true.”

“Then why don’t you correct them?” I ask, crossing my arms. “If it’s not true, shouldn’t people know what really happened?”

He shrugs, his gaze fixed on the floor. “What’s the point? People believe what they want to believe. Fighting it just makes it worse.”

“That’s a pretty defeatist attitude,” I say, and he looks up sharply, his eyes meeting mine.

“What do you want me to say, Lucy? That I’m perfect? That I’ve never screwed up?

I'm not. But this? The stuff with my ex? Most of that wasn't even about me. She made a career out of our breakup. She sold our story to tabloids like it was some kind of reality show plotline. And somehow, I became the villain."

I blink, taken aback by the raw frustration in his voice. He looks at me, his eyes filled with something close to exhaustion. "I'm not saying I was perfect. I wasn't around as much as I should've been—hockey had me traveling constantly. But she knew that going in. She...twisted everything, made it all public. It was humiliating. I didn't even know how to fight back."

His honesty catches me off guard, and for a moment, I don't know how to respond. The vulnerability in his words stirs something in me—a mix of empathy and guilt for how quickly I once judged him. I see now how much weight he carries, not just from the rumors, but from the unfair expectations people have placed on him. It makes me wonder how often he's had to stand alone against it all. Finally, I say, "I don't think anyone expects you to be perfect. But maybe...letting people see the real you isn't such a bad thing."

Logan studies me for a long moment, then nods. "I'll think about it."

That evening, I'm back at the shelter, going over adoption records with Emma. She's sitting cross-legged on the floor, a clipboard balanced on her knee.

"You've been quiet," she says, glancing up at me. "Is this about that stuff going around about Logan?"

"Just...Logan," I admit, sitting back in my chair. "The stuff about his ex is all over the place, and people are quick to believe the worst. But the more I get to know him, the more I feel like there's more to him than what people say."

Emma smiles. "You're right. He's not the kind of person who lets people in easily,

but when he does? It's worth it." Her words linger with me, nudging a realization I've been avoiding. Logan's guardedness isn't a wall meant to shut people out—it's a shield built over time, layer by layer, to protect himself. And the more I think about it, the more I understand why Emma's faith in him feels so steady—it's based on seeing the person he is, not the image others have painted.

Her words give me a lot to think about as I finish my work for the day. By the time I lock up the shelter, the sun is setting, casting the town in shades of gold and amber.

Sitting on my porch later that evening, I sip a cup of tea and watch the moon rise. The cool night air is soothing, but my thoughts are anything but. Logan's words from earlier replay in my mind, along with Emma's advice and Kate's teasing.

My phone buzzes, pulling me from my thoughts. It's a text from Logan. My heart skips slightly, a mix of curiosity and anticipation taking hold as I unlock my phone to read his message.

Thanks for the talk today. I appreciate it.

Simple, but it leaves my heart doing a strange little flip in my chest. I type out a response, then hesitate, deleting it. Finally, I settle on something casual.

Anytime. Let me know if you want to talk more.

As I set my phone down, I can't help but smile. Whatever this is between us, it's growing. And for the first time in a long time, I'm not scared to see where it might lead.

### Chapter 10

Logan

The Pine Harbor Community Center hums with its usual energy—a low buzz of overlapping lives, punctuated by faint laughter and muted conversations. The sound of kids laughing from the skating rink echoes faintly, mingling with the shuffle of feet and muted conversations in the hallways. I should feel grounded here—I usually do—but today the air feels different, heavier somehow.

I catch snippets of conversation as I walk toward the gym. My name isn't mentioned outright, but it's clear enough what they're talking about. A woman's voice filters through the din, sharp with intrigue.

"Did you hear she's back in town? His ex...can you imagine how awkward that must be?"

"You'd think she'd let it go by now," someone else replies. "Wasn't she the one who aired all their dirty laundry in the first place?"

My jaw tightens, but I keep walking, my feet heavier with each step. It's not worth engaging. It's not like anything I say would change the narrative people have already written in their heads. Still, the words sting, each syllable a reminder of mistakes I'd rather forget.

In the gym, the team's already gathered, their banter loud and carefree. Mark waves me over, his grin as wide as ever.

“You look like you’ve been chewing on nails,” he says, clapping me on the back. “What’s got you in a twist this time?”

“Nothing,” I mutter, dropping my bag onto the bench.

Mark isn’t convinced, but he doesn’t push. Instead, he leans back and grins. “This reminds me of my neighbor’s cat—it’s convinced it’s a ninja, but it face-plants every time.” He mimics a cat leaping and crashing, complete with exaggerated sound effects.

Despite myself, I laugh. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously effective,” he counters with a wink. And he’s not wrong. The absurdity of his story chips away at my tension, replacing it with a fleeting moment of levity. He’s good at that—making the world feel a little less heavy with humor that’s just this side of ridiculous. Still, the thought lingers in the back of my mind like a shadow that refuses to fade.

After practice, Mark ropes me into grabbing lunch at a small diner near the edge of town. The smell of fried food and fresh coffee hits me like a warm embrace as soon as we step inside. The diner is a blend of Pine Harbor’s charm and nostalgia, with checkered tablecloths and faded photos of local events lining the walls. We slide into a booth by the window, where the afternoon light filters through lace curtains, casting patterns onto the table. The hum of chatter and the clink of cutlery form a comforting backdrop.

“So,” Mark says around a mouthful of fries, “are you going to tell me what’s been eating at you, or do I have to guess? And don’t try to play it cool—I’ve got a good memory, you know. Last time we talked, you were all about Lucy and Lewis. So, what gives?”

“It’s nothing,” I reply automatically, but Mark gives me a look that says he’s not buying it.

“Come on, man. Spill. Is it the campaign? The dog? Lucy?” He waggles his eyebrows at the last one, and I roll my eyes.

“It’s my ex,” I admit after a long pause. “She’s back in town, apparently.”

Mark lets out a low whistle. “Yikes. That’s...less fun than Lucy. What’s she doing here?”

“No idea,” I say, poking at my burger. “But people are already talking, and I...I hate it. Every time I feel like I’m making progress, something like this happens, and it’s like I’m right back where I started.”

Mark leans back, studying me with uncharacteristic seriousness. “Look, man, you can’t control what people say. And yeah, maybe your ex did a number on your reputation, but that doesn’t define you. What you’re doing now is what matters. People notice, even if they don’t always say it.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Mark’s right, but it’s easier said than done.

When I get back to my apartment, Lewis greets me with his usual enthusiasm, bounding to the door and wagging his tail like I’ve been gone for weeks instead of hours. I drop to one knee, scratching behind his ears and letting his unconditional joy wash over me.

“Hey, buddy,” I murmur. “You ever feel like you’re running uphill and sliding back down all at once?”

Lewis tilts his head, his eyes bright and curious. I chuckle softly, shaking my head.

“Didn’t think so. Must be nice to live in the moment.”

Lewis paws at my knee, his leash clutched in his mouth like he’s making a formal request. I sigh, unable to resist the hopeful look in his eyes. “Alright, alright, I get it. Walk time.” I grab his leash and clip it on, and he practically dances by the door, wagging his tail like we’re headed on the greatest adventure of all time.

The fresh air hits us as we step outside, and Lewis bounds ahead, his nose to the ground, sniffing every blade of grass and lamppost like it’s his personal mission. The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across the sidewalks, painting the town in warm hues. As we pass the park, Lewis tugs eagerly on the leash, guiding me toward a bench where I spot Lucy. She’s sitting with a notebook in her lap, a faraway look in her eyes.

She looks up as we approach, her face lighting up in a way that makes my chest ache in the best possible way.

“Fancy meeting you here,” she says, setting her notebook aside.

“Lewis insisted,” I reply, gesturing at the dog. He wags his tail, clearly delighted to see her.

“Smart dog,” she says, ruffling Lewis’s ears as he nudges her hand. “He’s a good listener too, I bet.”

I chuckle lightly, sitting down beside her. “Maybe better than me most days. He’s got that ‘wise old soul’ thing going on.”

She smiles, and for a moment, we just sit in the comfortable quiet of the park. Finally, I break the silence. “Have you ever thought about what brought you here? How you ended up doing what you love?”

Lucy tilts her head, clearly intrigued. “All the time. Cozy Paws started out as a way to honor my dad—he loved animals, always said they brought out the best in people. But over time, it became my thing. I guess I realized how much joy it brings me to connect people with pets who need them. It’s not just about the animals; it’s about the way they change lives.”

Her passion lights up her face, and I can’t help but admire her. “That’s incredible,” I say, meaning it. “For me, hockey was kind of an escape at first. My parents signed me up because I had too much energy and no idea where to put it. But somewhere along the line, it became my anchor. There’s something about being on the ice that makes everything else fade away.”

“And now?” she asks, her voice softer. “Does it still feel like that?”

I hesitate, then nod. “Most days, yeah. But it’s different now. Before, it was all about winning, about proving myself. Lately, it’s been more about the connections—the teammates, the community. That’s what keeps me going.”

“Funny how things shift,” she muses. “What used to be about survival turns into something deeper.”

I glance at her, and for a second, it feels like we’re talking about more than hockey and the shelter. “Yeah. Deeper.”

Back at my apartment, the weight on my chest feels a little lighter. Lewis curls up beside me on the couch, his head pressed warmly against my side. The rhythmic sound of his soft breathing fills the quiet room, grounding me. Outside, the darkening sky is streaked with shades of orange and purple, a quiet reminder that even the longest days come to an end. Lucy’s words replay in my mind, steady and insistent, like an anchor holding me in place as I let my thoughts drift.



My phone buzzes, breaking the quiet. I glance at the screen and freeze. It's a message from my ex.

We need to talk. Can we meet?

I stare at the words, emotions swirling—anger, fear, curiosity—but one rises above the rest: resolve. I don't know what she wants, but for the first time, I feel ready to face it—to face her. Whatever this meeting brings, I know one thing for sure: it won't define me. Not anymore.

### Chapter 11

#### Lucy

The camera clicks, capturing another perfect moment between Mark and his adoptable dog, Bella. Photography has always been one of my favorite hobbies, a creative outlet that lets me capture the world in ways words can't. Combining that passion with the shelter's mission and this campaign makes the experience all the more rewarding. I glance at the screen, adjusting the angle for better lighting, and signal for the next player to step into the makeshift studio we've set up at the Pine Harbor Community Center. The air buzzes with energy, laughter from the team mingling with the occasional bark from Lewis, who has fully embraced his role as mascot and mischief-maker.

Logan steps forward next, his usual stoic expression slightly softened by Lewis's excited wagging. I can't help but smile at the contrast—this gruff hockey player completely disarmed by a dog who adores him.

"Alright, Logan," I say, adjusting the props around them. "Just act natural. Like you haven't been bribing Lewis with treats all day."

"I don't need to bribe him," Logan retorts, kneeling beside Lewis. "He just likes me better than you."

"Keep telling yourself that," I quip, snapping a few shots. Logan's smirk deepens, and for a second, I catch myself noticing the way the corners of his mouth lift just enough to soften his usually serious face. There's a steadiness in his eyes, a quiet

confidence that wasn't there before, and it strikes me how much posing with Lewis reflects that softer, genuine side of him. It's a new layer to someone I'd thought I had pegged, and it's nice. Familiar, even.

As the shoot continues, I catch Logan stealing a glance at the social media post template I've been working on. His face darkens for a moment, the hesitation clear in the slight furrow of his brow. The whispers about his ex, the lingering judgment—they're still weighing on him.

"Everything okay?" I ask quietly once the session wraps.

Logan nods, but it's half-hearted. "Just wondering how this whole campaign's going to play out. What happens if the focus shifts? If my past overshadows all of this?"

"It won't," I say firmly. "Because this isn't about your past. It's about who you are now. And trust me, that's what people care about."

For a moment, I want to push further—to ask about the burdens he carries and the ways they've shaped him. But the room is bustling with people, and I know this isn't the time. Logan wouldn't open up in a crowd like this, and I have my hands full with the campaign. Still, I can't help but hope there will be a quieter moment soon, a time when we can talk without distractions and dig a little deeper into what's behind his guarded exterior.

Logan looks at me, something vulnerable flickering in his eyes. "Thanks, Lucy. I mean it."

Later that day, I find myself at the open-air market, soaking in the crisp autumn air and the scent of fresh bread and flowers. My mind keeps circling back to Logan—his guardedness, quiet strength, and how Lewis draws out a side of him I didn't expect. It's overwhelming to process.

“You’re doing that thing again,” a familiar voice says.

I turn to see Logan standing a few feet away, a paper bag in one hand and Lewis at his side. The dog wags his tail, clearly thrilled to see me.

“What thing?” I ask, trying to play it cool.

“The thing where you overthink everything and make it look like you’re plotting a world takeover,” he teases. “Step one: buy all the pastries?”

I laugh, the tension in my chest easing. “You caught me. World domination requires carbs.”

“Well, good luck,” he says, holding up his bag. “I’ve already cleared out half the bakery.”

Lewis happily trots between us as we stroll through the market. Teasing and banter flow easily, but before long, the mood shifts.

As we wander through the market, Logan suddenly speaks up, his voice quieter than usual. “You know, this campaign... it’s been bringing up some stuff I’d rather forget.”

Logan exhales, his gaze drifting to Lewis, who’s eagerly tugging his leash toward a stall with freshly baked biscuits. “It’s not the campaign itself. It’s the visibility. This whole thing—posting pictures, sharing stories—it’s fine in theory, but it stirs up memories of how things went south before.”

I tilt my head, curious. “South how?”

He hesitates, then meets my eyes. “My ex. She turned everything we did into

content—every date, every moment, it all became part of her image. She spun this whole ‘power couple’ narrative online, but it wasn’t real. It was all for her followers, her sponsorships. And when it ended, she used it against me. Twisted everything to make herself look better.”

“That’s awful,” I say, genuinely appalled. “Like she used you as a stepping stone.”

Logan nods, his jaw tight. “Pretty much. And now, with this campaign, I can’t help but worry. What if this gets twisted too? What if the focus isn’t on the shelter or the team, but on whatever baggage I bring to the table?”

I stop walking and face him. “Logan, this campaign isn’t about her. It’s about you, the team, and these incredible animals. You’re not the same person you were back then, and you don’t owe anyone the version of you they think they know.”

He looks at me, something raw and grateful in his expression. “Thanks, Lucy. That means more than you know.”

The community center feels quieter this evening, the hum of activity giving way to focused preparation for our next event. Logan and I are spread out at one of the long tables, going over the logistics. It’s surprising how well we’ve settled into this rhythm—ideas flowing naturally, disagreements handled with an ease I never would have expected.

At one point, I catch Logan watching me as I jot down notes. “What?” I ask, glancing up.

He shrugs, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Nothing. Just...you’re really good at this. Bringing people together. Making all of this work.”

“It’s not just me,” I reply. “You’ve been doing a pretty good job yourself.”

“Maybe we make a good team,” he says.

“Maybe we do,” I agree softly, my heart fluttering at the warmth in his voice.

Later, as I sit on my porch with a cup of tea, I replay the day’s events in my mind. The market, the community center, the quiet moments with Logan...all of it feels like pieces of a puzzle clicking into place. I catch myself lingering on the way he opened up today, his voice quiet but steady as he talked about his past. There’s something about him—the guardedness, the unexpected humor, and that steady presence—that draws me in more than I’d like to admit.

A flicker of doubt creeps in as I wonder if I’m reading too much into things. It feels ridiculous to even entertain the thought of...well, liking him. But then I think of the way he looked at me earlier, raw and honest, and the way he’s been with Lewis—so patient and genuine. Those aren’t the actions of someone pretending. Maybe, just maybe, there’s more to this than I’m willing to let myself believe.

I shake my head, a quiet laugh escaping at my tendency to overthink. It’s too soon to make anything of it, and I have enough on my plate without adding more complications. Still, the thought lingers, warm and fragile. For the first time in a long while, I let myself imagine what could be—not just for the shelter or the campaign, but for us.

It’s a fragile hope, but it’s there. And for now, that’s enough.

### Chapter 12

Logan

The café is unusually quiet for a Saturday morning, the soft clinking of cups and the low hum of conversation blending seamlessly with the comforting aroma of fresh coffee. The air smells faintly of cinnamon and nutmeg, a reminder that fall has fully settled over Pine Harbor. I chose this place because it feels neutral—safe. A park bench or the community center might have felt too personal. Here, the noise and the bustle act as a barrier, an easy excuse if I need an exit.

I'm early, of course. Sitting near the window, I watch the orange and gold leaves blow across the street, an unsteady rhythm to their fall. The memory of her text flashes in my mind: Can we meet? I think we should talk. A year ago, I'd have dodged this meeting entirely. Now, I know there's no moving forward until I've faced what's behind me.

The door swings open, and there she is—Jess. As polished and poised as I remember, her every movement rehearsed and deliberate. Her caramel-colored hair falls in loose waves over a camel coat that screams designer. She scans the room, and when her eyes land on me, she smiles. It's the same practiced smile that used to captivate me, but now it feels like a facade.

"Logan," she says, sliding into the seat across from me without waiting for an invitation. "Thanks for meeting me."

"Didn't think avoiding this forever would work," I reply evenly, leaning back in my

chair. My voice is calm, controlled, but there's a slight edge that even I can hear.

She offers a tight laugh, the kind that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I deserve that."

Silence stretches between us, heavy and taut. I'm not rushing to fill it. She glances down at her coffee cup, her fingers tracing the edge of the lid. "I've been thinking a lot about how things ended," she begins. "I wasn't fair to you."

I arch an eyebrow, skepticism curling in my chest. "Fair isn't exactly the word I'd use."

Her cheeks flush slightly, but she presses on. "I know I made mistakes. I got caught up in everything—the followers, the sponsors, the... image. I twisted things to fit the narrative I wanted, and it wasn't fair to you. I'm sorry, Logan. I really am."

The words hang in the air, and for a moment, I don't know how to respond. Part of me wants to accept the apology, to let it be enough. But another part of me—the part that lived through the fallout of her actions—can't let it slide so easily.

"You didn't just make mistakes, Jess," I say, my voice steady. "You turned our lives into a product. You took things that should have been private and sold them to the highest bidder. And when it ended, you made sure I looked like the villain so you could keep the sympathy points."

Her eyes widen slightly, but she doesn't interrupt. For once, she's letting me talk.

"I lost more than just you when it all fell apart," I continue. "My reputation, my privacy... even my love for the game took a hit. Do you have any idea what it's like to walk into a room and feel like everyone's already decided who you are?"

Her gaze drops, and for the first time, her polished veneer cracks. "I didn't think



about how it would affect you,” she admits softly. “I was selfish, Logan. And I can’t change that. But I do regret it.”

I nod slowly, letting her words sink in. “I appreciate the apology. But I’m not the guy you left behind. I’ve moved on, Jess. And I’m not interested in reopening old wounds.”

She looks up, her expression a mixture of relief and disappointment. “I understand. I just... I needed to say it.”

The conversation ends there. I stand, nodding politely, before heading outside. The crisp air feels sharper, more vibrant, like a quiet promise of relief. The past is a heavy thing to carry, but as I watch the sunlight break through the clouds, I feel a little lighter. Maybe closure doesn’t erase scars, but it can make them easier to bear.

Lewis greets me at the door as if I’ve been gone for days—his tail wagging so hard, his whole body sways with it. I can’t help but laugh, crouching down to ruffle his ears.

“Miss me, buddy?” I ask, grabbing his leash from the hook by the door. He answers by nudging the leash toward me with his nose.

We head to the park, the familiar crunch of leaves underfoot grounding me. Lewis bounds ahead, chasing stray leaves with the determination of a hunter on a mission. Watching him, it’s impossible not to feel a little of his unbridled joy rub off on me.

As we near the community center, I spot Mark and Ryan tossing a ball back and forth. Lewis, ever the opportunist, decides he wants in on the game and barrels toward them, barking enthusiastically.

“Well, if it isn’t the star of the campaign,” Mark calls, scooping up Lewis and holding

him like a trophy. “I meant the dog, not you, Mitchell.”

“Funny,” I deadpan, though I can’t help the small smile tugging at my lips.

Ryan smirks. “You know, Logan, this whole campaign thing has been good for you. You’re actually tolerable now. Maybe we should’ve gotten you a dog years ago.”

“Or maybe it’s not the dog,” Mark adds, waggling his eyebrows. “Maybe it’s Lucy.”

I roll my eyes, but my chest tightens. “You guys have too much free time.”

“Just admit it,” Ryan presses. “You like her.”

“Drop it,” I warn, but my tone lacks heat. Because the truth is, they’re not wrong.

The sponsorship meeting at the community center is more successful than I expected. Lucy is in her element, her passion and enthusiasm lighting up the room as she presents updates and future plans. Her voice carries a natural authority, but there’s a warmth to it that makes people listen. The way she speaks, like every word is charged with purpose, draws me in. It’s not just what she’s saying—it’s the way she makes you believe in something bigger than yourself. I can’t help but admire how she balances professionalism with compassion, speaking as if every word is meant to inspire action. She’s not just the woman running this campaign; she’s the driving force behind it. And maybe, if I’m honest, she’s become a driving force for me too. That thought lingers, leaving me both intrigued and unsettled.

“Logan, do you have anything to add?” she asks, turning to me with that bright, expectant smile.

“Just that Lewis is carrying the whole campaign,” I say, earning a laugh from the group.

Lucy rolls her eyes, but there's warmth in her expression. "Well, if anyone deserves the credit, it's definitely him."

The meeting wraps up, and as we're gathering materials, Lucy glances at me. "You know, for someone who claims to hate this kind of stuff, you're pretty good at it."

"Don't let it go to your head," I reply, smirking. "But thanks."

She grins, and for a moment, the chaos of the day fades. It's just the two of us, and I can't help but think about how easy it is to be around her. How much I look forward to these moments.

That night, as I toss a ball for Lewis in the living room, my mind drifts back to the day. The meeting, the park, the way Lucy's eyes light up when she talks about something she cares about. I don't know when it happened, but somewhere along the line, she's become more than just a colleague. More than just the woman running the shelter.

Lewis drops the ball at my feet, looking up at me expectantly. "What do you think, bud?" I ask, scratching his head. "Is this a terrible idea?"

He barks once, tail wagging, and I laugh. "Yeah, I thought so."

As I settle onto the couch, Lewis curling up beside me, I let the thought linger. Maybe it's not such a terrible idea after all.

### Chapter 13

Lucy

The Pine Harbor Community Center hums with life. Volunteers hustle between stations, arranging tables, checking donation forms, and hanging banners that read: Adopt, Support, Inspire. The warm, sweet scent of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies mingles with the crisp autumn air drifting through the open doors. The energy buzzes with anticipation and determination, making the room feel alive.

I glance at the checklist in my hand, mentally crossing off items. Everything is running smoothly, yet my nerves buzz like static electricity. This event is more than a fundraiser—it's a test of Pine Harbor's support for the campaign and our mission. If we can rally the town tonight, the momentum could carry us through the next stages.

"Lucy, stop fidgeting," Kate teases, appearing at my side with a tray of coffee cups balanced precariously in her hands. "Everything's perfect, as usual. You've got this."

"Easy for you to say," I reply, taking a cup and sipping gratefully. "You're not the one standing in front of half the town tonight."

"True," she says with a wink. "But you're the queen of Pine Harbor, remember? They already love you."

I roll my eyes but smile despite myself. Kate always knows how to lighten the mood.

Across the room, Logan leans against a table, casually tossing a ball for Lewis, who

gleefully bounds after it. The laughter of nearby kids blends with the cheerful atmosphere, lightening the moment. Logan glances up, his eyes meeting mine briefly, and there's a steadiness in his gaze that settles some of my nerves. It's strange—how his presence has shifted from a source of tension to something grounding.

The sound of a microphone crackling brings me back to the moment. Mayor Collins stands on the small stage at the front of the room, commanding attention with his usual charismatic energy.

“Good evening, Pine Harbor,” he begins, his booming voice cutting through the chatter. “We’re here tonight because of two incredible initiatives: supporting our beloved Timberwolves and ensuring that every animal at Cozy Paws finds a loving home. And we have two people to thank for bringing this vision to life.”

The crowd erupts into applause as he gestures toward Logan and me. Heat rushes to my cheeks, but I force myself to smile and wave. Logan, ever composed, nods politely from his spot, though I catch the faintest smirk tugging at his lips.

Mayor Collins continues, extolling the virtues of community and collaboration, before inviting me to the stage. My stomach flips as I step forward, the spotlight suddenly too bright and too focused. But as I grip the microphone, I remember why I’m here.

“Thank you, Mayor Collins, and thank you, Pine Harbor,” I begin, scanning the sea of faces. “This campaign is about more than fundraising and adoption; it’s about building a community that cares. Let me share one story that illustrates why this campaign matters so much.”

I pause, letting the room settle before continuing. “Max, one of our longest shelter residents, came to Cozy Paws as a stray, underweight and skittish around people. For months, he watched other animals leave with their new families while he stayed

behind, overlooked because of his age and timid nature. But one day, Mrs. Harrington visited the shelter. She had recently lost her husband and was looking for companionship. The moment she saw Max, something clicked. She knelt by his kennel, whispering soft words, and Max—usually wary of strangers—inched closer until he rested his head on her hand. That was it. They’ve been inseparable ever since. Mrs. Harrington told me last week that Max has brought joy back into her home, and she can’t imagine life without him.”

I see nods and smiles ripple through the crowd, and when I glance toward Logan, his expression is unreadable but intent. It’s as if he’s absorbing every word, and for a brief moment, I wonder if he’s thinking about his own second chances.

After the address, the room bursts back into motion. Conversations hum, and the energy feels electric. Logan approaches, his hands shoved into his pockets, his broad shoulders cutting a confident silhouette against the bustling crowd. Lewis trots faithfully at his side, his tail wagging as if he’s part of the celebration. Logan’s usual stoicism seems lighter, more approachable, and as he stops in front of me, there’s a calmness in his eyes that draws me in. It’s not just his appearance that captivates me—the way he carries himself, steady and assured, holds an undeniable magnetism.

“Nice speech,” he says, his voice low but sincere.

“Thanks,” I reply, my heartbeat steadying now that the spotlight is off. “You’re not bad at working the crowd yourself.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Working the crowd?”

“You know, throwing the ball for Lewis, charming the kids. It’s practically a PR campaign of its own.”

A slow smile spreads across his face, one that makes my chest feel unreasonably

tight. “Just doing my part,” he says, and there’s a warmth in his tone that wasn’t there before.

The evening shifts into a quieter rhythm as people begin to trickle out. Kate corners me near the refreshment table, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

“So,” she says, drawing out the word. “Logan was definitely looking at you like you hung the moon during your speech.”

“Stop,” I groan, but the blush creeping up my neck gives me away.

“I’m just saying,” she continues, undeterred. “The chemistry is there. Everyone sees it.”

“Everyone?”

“Okay, maybe just me and a few people standing nearby,” she admits with a grin. “But it’s undeniable.”

Before I can respond, Emma joins us, her expression more serious. “Lucy, you handled tonight beautifully. And Logan...” She hesitates, choosing her words carefully. “He’s not as guarded as he used to be. I think a lot of that is because of you.”

Her words settle over me, heavy with meaning. It’s one thing to hear teasing from Kate, but Emma’s observation feels different. It feels real.

The celebration spills out into the Town Square, where strings of lights cast a soft glow over the cobblestone streets. The faint sound of a violinist busking in the corner adds a charming melody to the laughter and clinking of glasses. The autumn air is crisp, tinged with the earthy scent of fallen leaves. Logan and I find a quiet corner

near the fountain, the din of laughter and conversation fading into the background.

“Do you ever stop saving the world?” Logan asks, his tone light but curious.

“Not really,” I admit with a laugh. “There’s always something to do.”

“You’re good at it, you know. Bringing people together,” he says, his voice softening.

The compliment catches me off guard, and I glance at him, searching for a hint of sarcasm. But his expression is open, earnest.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice quieter now. “That means a lot.”

For a moment, neither of us speaks. The silence feels charged, like the moment before a storm. Then Logan leans closer, his hand brushing a strand of hair from my face.

“Lucy,” he begins, his voice rough around the edges, “I?”

The words hang in the air, unfinished, as his gaze dips briefly to my lips. My breath catches, the world narrowing to the space between us. He’s so close, I can see the flecks of green in his hazel eyes, the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw. My heart races, each beat louder than the sounds of the celebration fading around us. There’s something unspoken in the way he looks at me—a quiet intensity that makes my heart flutter and my breath hitch.

Then, without warning, he leans in. When his lips meet mine, it’s soft and searching at first, as though he’s testing if this moment is real. My skin warms, and the tension that’s been building between us for weeks dissolves in an instant. But it’s not tentative for long. The kiss deepens, a spark igniting into warmth that spreads between us. His hand slides gently to the back of my neck, anchoring me as



everything else fades away. I feel his steady presence, his warmth, and it's as though the world has shifted beneath my feet.

When we finally pull apart, the charged silence lingers, the world tilting on a new axis. My skin tingles where his hand brushed my neck, and my heart races as though trying to catch up with the reality of what just happened. For a moment, neither of us speaks, the words tangled in the unspoken emotions between us. I'm breathless, my cheeks flushed. Logan's eyes search mine, his expression a mix of vulnerability and certainty.

"I guess we make a pretty good team," he says, his voice low and rough around the edges, a hint of a faint curve lifting the corner of his mouth.

I laugh softly, my heart full and unsteady all at once. "Maybe we do."

Later, as I sit on my porch with a cup of tea, the events of the evening replay in my mind. The speech, the laughter, the kiss... all of it feels surreal, like a dream I don't want to wake from. The memory of Logan's hand brushing my cheek, the warmth of his lips, lingers with a vividness that sends a shiver down my spine. The way his steady presence grounded me, offering a quiet reassurance, even in that fleeting moment, leaves me feeling both exhilarated and unsteady.

But more than the kiss, it's the way he looked at me—as if I mattered in ways I never expected—that keeps playing in my mind. The vulnerability in his eyes, the quiet intensity, it's all etched into my thoughts like an imprint I can't shake. My heart feels lighter, fuller, and yet there's a twinge of nervous energy coursing through me, a feeling of standing at the edge of something vast and unknowable.

For the first time in a long while, I let myself imagine a future not just for the shelter or the campaign, but for us. It's not without its uncertainties, but the thought feels impossibly bright, like a light breaking through the fog. It's a fragile hope, but it's

there, blooming gently in the quiet night. And it's beautiful.

### Chapter 14

Logan

S unlight filters through the blinds, spilling golden streaks across the room. For a moment, everything feels still—peaceful even. Lewis is sprawled out at the foot of the bed, snoring softly, his paws twitching like he’s chasing something in his dreams. It’s such a Lewis thing—throwing himself into even his dreams with boundless enthusiasm. Watching him, I feel a quiet gratitude for the uncomplicated joy he’s brought into my life. It’s the kind of calm I’ve come to appreciate, the kind that makes the noise in my head feel a little quieter.

But then, the memory of the kiss creeps in.

It’s been replaying in my mind ever since it happened. The way Lucy looked at me—like I wasn’t the guy everyone whispered about. Her touch, warm and unflinching. The way her laughter seemed to melt into the moment, as if it belonged there. It’s all stuck on a loop. And as much as I want to stay in that memory, reality pulls me back, sharper and heavier.

The campaign. The team. Jess.

Rolling out of bed, I rub my face and try to push the thoughts aside. Lewis stretches with a dramatic yawn, his tail thumping against the mattress before he hops down to follow me into the kitchen. His unshakable enthusiasm is infectious, even when I’m not in the mood for it.

“Hungry, huh?” I mutter, grabbing his food. He wags his tail like I’ve just offered him a five-star meal, looking up at me with those big, trusting eyes.

If only life were that simple.

The sharp sound of skates cutting across the ice fills the arena, mingling with the rhythmic slap of pucks against the boards. Practice is in full swing, Coach Turner’s voice booming over the noise like a cannon. The rink is usually where I find clarity, where the cold air sharpens my focus and the sound of skates cutting the ice drowns out everything else. It’s like stepping into a space where nothing exists but the rhythm of movement and the echo of effort. But today, my thoughts are scattered, fragmented by too many competing voices in my head.

Jess is back in town, and the whispers about her have already started circling. I overheard them in the hallway before practice—fragments of sentences, her name wrapped up in speculation and judgment. It’s not just her return that bothers me; it’s what it drags with it. The headlines. The assumptions. The idea that no matter what I do now, I’m still the guy who couldn’t get his life together.

“Mitchell!” Coach’s voice snaps me back. He’s glaring from the sideline. “Eyes up, focus. You’re skating like your head’s in the clouds.”

“Got it,” I reply, forcing myself to reset. I push harder, faster, skating like I can outrun the weight in my chest. It works—for a while.

When practice finally wraps up, I’m drenched in sweat but feeling no closer to clarity. The usual locker room banter swirls around me, but I keep to myself, methodically untying my skates. Mark, of course, notices.

"Everything alright?" he asks, leaning against the locker across from me. His tone is light, but there’s a flicker of concern in his eyes.

“Yeah, just tired,” I reply. It’s not entirely a lie, but it’s not the whole truth either.

Mark raises an eyebrow but doesn’t push. “Well, try not to psych yourself out. You’ve got this.”

I nod, grateful for his confidence, even if I’m not sure I share it.

The community center is quieter today, the usual buzz replaced by the steady rhythm of preparation. Lucy and I are set up in one of the smaller conference rooms, laptops and notes scattered across the table. Lewis is curled up under the table, snoring softly, a peaceful counterpoint to the tension in my chest—a reminder of how much simpler life could be if I could see things through his eyes, always finding joy in the smallest moments.

“Alright,” Lucy says, scrolling through a draft post. “We’ve got player profiles, adoption success stories, and a solid social media schedule. But we still need something more personal. Something that shows the heart behind this.”

I hesitate. “What about Lewis? A story about how he’s settled in, what he’s brought to my life?”

Lucy’s eyes light up. “That’s perfect. A feature on you and Lewis. Your bond, his journey, what it means for the campaign.”

The idea feels...exposed. I’ve spent so much time guarding the parts of me that feel real, that letting people see them now feels risky. “What if people just see it as another PR stunt?” I ask, my voice quieter than I intended.

Lucy looks at me, her expression steady. “Then we make it real. People respond to authenticity, Logan. You don’t have to be perfect; you just have to be honest.”

Her confidence in me is disarming. It's not just her words—it's the way she says them, like she genuinely believes I'm capable of this. For a moment, I let myself believe it too.

"Alright," I say finally. "But if this backfires, I'm holding you responsible."

She grins, that spark of mischief I've come to associate with her lighting up her face. "Deal."

The sponsor meeting is more formal than I'd like, the kind of setting that usually makes me want to run for the nearest exit. But Lucy's in her element, her energy filling the room as she lays out the campaign's progress and next steps. She speaks with a mix of passion and professionalism that draws everyone in, and I find myself watching her more than the presentation.

When she finishes, there's a round of polite applause, and all eyes turn to me. I clear my throat, suddenly wishing I'd prepared more.

"Uh, yeah," I begin, "so one idea we've been working on is a community hockey clinic. The team could host kids from around town, teach them some skills, and maybe incorporate the shelter—like a meet-and-greet with the adoptable animals."

The sponsors exchange intrigued looks, and one of them nods. "That's a strong angle. It ties everything together."

Lucy's beaming at me, and for the first time, I feel like I'm not completely out of my depth. Maybe I can do this after all.

The air is crisp as Lucy and I walk to the parking lot, the faint crunch of leaves underfoot mingling with the distant hum of passing cars. The evening sky is a tapestry of warm oranges and deep purples, a serene backdrop that contrasts with the

nervous energy still buzzing in my chest. Lewis trots happily between us, occasionally pausing to sniff at the earthy autumn scents, his tail wagging like a metronome of contentment. The sunset casts long shadows across the pavement, painting everything in hues of orange and gold.

“You handled that well,” Lucy says, nudging me with her elbow. “The clinic idea was genius.”

“Thanks,” I reply, my tone light. “But don’t let it go to your head. I’m still new to this whole ‘community engagement’ thing.”

She laughs, and the sound feels warmer than the autumn air. For a moment, it’s just us and the easy rhythm of the walk, and I can almost forget the noise that’s been haunting me all day.

But then Lewis grabs the end of Lucy’s scarf and starts tugging, his tail wagging like he’s just discovered the world’s greatest game. His eyes sparkle with mischief, and he lets out a playful growl, as if inviting us to join in the fun. Lucy bursts out laughing, her cheeks flushed as she tries to wrestle the scarf back, while I can’t help but grin at the sheer joy radiating from both of them.

“Lewis!” Lucy yelps, trying to wrestle the scarf back. “You little thief!”

I laugh, stepping in to help. “Looks like someone’s taking his ‘mascot’ duties a little too seriously.”

We manage to free the scarf, and Lucy shakes her head, still laughing. “He’s lucky he’s cute.”

“Must be a theme,” I tease, earning an exaggerated eye-roll and a playful shove.

That night, as I sit on the couch with Lewis curled up beside me, I can't help but replay the day. The weight of the day's events lingers in my chest, but so does something lighter—something hopeful. The meeting was a step forward, but it's more than that. It's Lucy. It's the way she sees me, not as the guy tangled up in whispers and headlines, but as someone capable of more. Her faith in me feels like an anchor, keeping me steady even when the noise threatens to pull me under. For the first time, I feel like the version of myself I want to be isn't so far out of reach. It's terrifying and exhilarating all at once. The meeting, the walk, Lucy's confidence in me—it all feels like progress. Like maybe, for the first time in a long while, I'm moving forward.

My phone buzzes with a text from Lucy: Dinner sometime soon? Brainstorming session?

I smile, typing out a quick reply before glancing at Lewis. "What do you think, buddy? Am I in over my head?"

Lewis thumps his tail in response, and I chuckle. "Yeah, me too."

But maybe, just maybe, this isn't such a bad idea after all.



### Chapter 15

Lucy

The steady hum of Cozy Paws shelters me as I run through the morning's tasks. Sunlight streams through the wide windows, casting golden squares across the tile floor that seem to glow against the pale tiles. The warmth of the sunlight enhances the room's colors, making the bright blues of the animal beds and the soft greens of the walls feel more alive and welcoming. The back kennels echo with the excited barks of dogs, a vibrant contrast to the soft, rhythmic purring of contented cats in their cozy corners. It's a symphony of life and energy that pulses through the shelter, grounding me in its steady rhythm. Amid the noise and movement, I find a sense of focus, a reprieve from the whirlwind of emotions tugging at the edges of my thoughts.

I lean against the counter, glancing at the clipboard in my hand. New volunteer schedules, food inventory... and the unexpected arrival of a stray dog this morning. He's a small thing—a wiry terrier mix with a scrappy coat and wary eyes that dart around the room, as if he's sizing up every corner for an escape route. His tiny body trembles slightly, and it's impossible not to notice how his scruffy ears perk up at the faintest sound, a mix of curiosity and caution. His tagless collar offered no clues, and while his tail wags cautiously when I approach, his posture screams distrust.

I crouch in front of his crate, holding out a small treat. "Hey there, buddy," I murmur. He eyes the treat, then me, before inching forward to take it. "Good boy. We'll figure this out, I promise."

He reminds me of some of the animals we've had over the years—frightened,

uncertain, but resilient. As I watch him chew, his thin frame shaking slightly, a pang of something deeper twists in my chest. Maybe it's because his wide, searching eyes remind me of how I felt after Dad died. Untethered. Alone. And as much as I hate to admit it, it's also how I feel about Logan.

The thought catches me off guard, and I stand abruptly, brushing imaginary dust off my jeans. It's ridiculous to compare him to a stray, yet I can't help but feel a flicker of recognition in his wary eyes—a reflection of my own guarded heart, protecting itself from wounds that haven't fully healed. Logan is confident, capable, and so self-assured it's infuriating. But beneath all that strength, I've seen glimpses of something more—vulnerability, maybe. A need to prove himself. And lately, I can't stop wondering if I'm a little like this dog, keeping my walls up to protect myself from something I can't control.

Dad's absence has been the backdrop of my life for so long that I rarely think about how it shaped me. But in the quiet moments, it hits me like a wave—the emptiness he left behind and the way it forced me to grow up too quickly. It's like a shadow that never fully fades, shaping every decision I make, every fear I carry. And now, with Logan, I can feel the same old fear creeping in, whispering that letting someone in only means risking that loss all over again. But when I do, it's always tied to this feeling: the ache of losing someone and the fear of it happening again. It's why I've always kept people at a distance, why I throw myself into the shelter. And now, with Logan... I don't know. I'm scared of what might happen if I let myself care too much.

By mid-afternoon, I've made some progress. The terrier, who I've dubbed Scrappy for now, has a full belly and a cozy blanket in his crate. I've also set up a missing pet alert and contacted local vets to see if anyone's reported him missing. As I type out the details, a sense of satisfaction settles over me. This is what I'm good at—fixing things, solving problems, taking care of those who can't take care of themselves.

It's a stark contrast to how I feel about Logan. There's no clear path forward, no easy answers. Just a tangle of emotions I'm not ready to untangle. But as I glance at Scrappy, I wonder if maybe there's something to be learned here. Trust takes time. Healing takes time. And maybe that's okay.

By the time I leave the shelter for a quick coffee break, the crisp autumn air has turned colder, a hint of winter creeping in. I sip my latte, scrolling through updates for the campaign. Logan and Lewis's feature story has been scheduled for posting tomorrow, and I can't help but smile at the thought of how far both of them have come. Logan's transformation has been gradual, but it's undeniable.

I pause, staring at the screen. Is that part of why I'm drawn to him? His ability to grow, to adapt, to embrace something new even when it scares him? And then there's the other part—the way his presence steadies me, the way his rare smiles feel like little victories, the way he looks at me like he sees something I don't.

But there's a risk in all this. If I fall for Logan—really fall—and he leaves, what then? It's not just the campaign that could crumble; it's the sense of control I've fought so hard to build since Dad's death. The fear lingers, a gnawing ache that whispers I'll never quite be enough to make someone stay. The thought tightens my chest, the weight of it pressing down until I force myself to take a deep breath. I shake it off, refocusing on the work in front of me. There's too much at stake to let emotions cloud my judgment, even if part of me longs to believe he'd never walk away.

Kate stops by the shelter late in the afternoon, her usual energy lighting up the room. She carries a bag of takeout and sets it on the counter with a flourish. "Emergency rations for my favorite shelter manager," she announces.

I laugh despite myself. "Thanks, Kate. You're a lifesaver."

She studies me closely, her playful grin softening. “Okay, spill. You’ve got that look—like your brain is stuck in overdrive. Campaign stress? Or is this about a certain tall, brooding hockey player?”

“Do I have to pick one?” I reply, trying to deflect, but Kate isn’t having it.

“Lucy, you’ve been running yourself ragged for weeks. Take a breath. What’s really going on?”

I sigh, leaning against the counter. “Kate, Logan and I... kissed.” The words tumble out before I can stop them, and I immediately glance at her face for a reaction.

Her eyes widen, and she practically squeals, clapping her hands together. “No way! You and Logan? Finally! Okay, spill everything. When? Where? Was it good?”

“Kate,” I groan, though a small smile tugs at my lips. “It just... happened. It was after the rally, in the middle of all the excitement. And yes, it was... really good.”

“I knew it!” she exclaims, her excitement bubbling over. “That man has been looking at you like you hung the moon for weeks. So, what now?”

I shrug, the weight of uncertainty settling over me. “That’s the thing. I don’t know. What if this... thing between us ruins everything we’ve worked for? And what if he decides Pine Harbor isn’t enough for him? What if he leaves?”

Kate’s expression softens, her eyebrows drawing together slightly and her hand resting briefly on mine, as if to steady me. “Lucy, you’ve built something incredible here, but it’s not all on your shoulders. Logan’s not your dad, and you’re not that little girl waiting for someone to come back. You’re stronger than that, and he’d be an idiot to walk away from you.”

Her words hit me harder than I expect, and I blink back the sudden sting of tears. “You really think so?”

Kate grins, nudging me with her elbow. “I know so. And if he’s smart enough to see what’s right in front of him, he’ll stick around. But even if he doesn’t, you’ll be okay. You always are.”

The shelter is quiet as I lock up for the night, the animals settled into their routines. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see a text from Logan: So, we haven’t set a time for our dinner yet. How about tomorrow? Brainstorming session?

A smile tugs at my lips as I type back a quick reply: Sounds good. Usual spot?

His response is immediate: Can’t wait.

As I step outside, the cool air wraps around me, sharp and bracing, carrying with it the faint scent of damp leaves and distant woodsmoke. The horizon glows with the soft, amber light of the setting sun, casting long shadows that stretch across the parking lot. Gravel crunches beneath my boots with each step, the sound grounding me in the moment. For the first time in a long while, I feel like I’m standing on solid ground. I don’t have all the answers, but maybe I don’t need them right now. Maybe it’s enough to take things one step at a time, to let trust build and see where it leads.

And as I walk to my car, the thought of tomorrow’s dinner fills me with something I haven’t felt in years: hope.

### Chapter 16

Logan

The locker room buzzes with energy, the roar of the crowd still ringing faintly in my ears. The sharp smell of sweat mixes with the faint chill lingering from the rink, a sensory reminder of the game's intensity. Tonight's game was intense, every shift and shot feeling like another step forward—not just for the team, but for me. The crowd's cheers were deafening, a mixture of stomping feet and jubilant shouts that reverberated through the ice, fueling every move. Even now, adrenaline hums beneath my skin, but my thoughts are split, lingering somewhere else. Somewhere off the ice.

Lucy.

The memory of last night's dinner with her sneaks in again, uninvited but not unwelcome. I can't stop replaying the way she leaned forward, eyes sparkling as she described the shelter's plans, or how her laugh seemed to fill the room with warmth. It wasn't just about what we talked about—it was about the way she made everything feel lighter, easier, as if being with her made all the noise in my head fade away. It wasn't just the campaign plans or the brainstorming that stuck with me. It was her. The way she lit up talking about the shelter's success, how her laugh softened the room's edges, how she made me forget, even briefly, the weight of expectations I've carried for so long. Being around her feels easy in a way I hadn't expected. Maybe too easy.

"Mitchell! Stop zoning out and join the party," Mark's voice cuts through the noise,

followed by a balled-up towel that smacks my shoulder. He's grinning, his energy infectious.

I shoot him a glare, but there's no heat behind it. "Yeah, yeah," I mutter, grabbing the towel and tossing it back. It lands near his feet, and he laughs before diving back into a story with Ryan about one of the plays.

As the locker room revelry continues, I pack up my gear, the noise fading into the background. Tonight's game was a win—on paper, in the crowd's eyes, and even for the team's morale. But there's something else stirring, a feeling I'm not quite ready to name. As much as I try to keep my focus on hockey and the campaign, Lucy's smile keeps pulling me back.

The Pine Harbor Ice Arena was electric tonight, the kind of game you dream about. Every pass and every shot felt sharper. Each cheer from the crowd grew louder, like the entire town was alive with the game. My skates cut into the ice with precision, the chill biting at my face as I drove forward. The sound of sticks clashing and bodies hitting the boards blended into a rhythm that's become second nature over the years.

I glanced toward the stands at one point, and there she was. Lucy. She was bundled in a coat, her cheeks pink from the cold, her eyes following every move on the ice. Something about knowing she was there made me push harder, skate faster. I don't know if it's because I wanted to impress her or because her presence felt like a quiet vote of confidence, but when I set up the game-winning assist, the satisfaction hit differently. It wasn't just about the team or the fans. It was about her seeing me—all of me—in my element.

By the time the final buzzer sounded, the weight in my chest had lifted, replaced by something lighter. As I skated off, I caught her clapping, her smile bright enough to cut through the rink's chill. It's strange, the things you notice when someone starts to matter.

The community center is packed for the post-game reception. The air hums with conversation, punctuated by the clinking of glasses and the occasional laugh. The scent of catered finger foods and freshly brewed coffee fills the space, mingling with the faint metallic tang of hockey gear lingering from the game. It's the kind of event I used to dread—small talk, sponsors, all eyes on me. But tonight feels different. Lighter.

Lewis stays close to my side, his wagging tail drawing attention from kids and adults alike. He pauses every so often to nuzzle into an outstretched hand or lick a child's fingers, eliciting giggles and delighted smiles, his warmth spreading through the crowd like ripples in water. He's become as much a part of the campaign as Lucy or me, a four-legged ambassador who makes the room feel less overwhelming. A fan stops me as I make my way through the crowd, clapping me on the back with an enthusiastic, "Great game tonight, Mitchell!"

I nod, offering a polite "Thanks" and a small smile. These interactions used to feel like a performance, a role I had to play to keep up appearances. But now, they feel more natural. I'm not sure if it's the campaign, Lewis, or Lucy's influence, but something's shifted. I'm starting to feel like myself again.

Across the room, Lucy's surrounded by a group of sponsors and volunteers. She's animated as she talks, her hands moving expressively, her laugh cutting through the chatter like music. Even from a distance, she commands the space—not in the calculated way Jess used to, with her rehearsed smiles and carefully curated charm, but with a genuine energy that feels effortless and sincere. Lucy's warmth isn't about impressing anyone; it's about connecting, making everyone in her orbit feel seen and valued. She's not performing. She's just being Lucy. And it's impossible not to watch her.

Mark sidles up beside me, balancing a plate of appetizers. "She's good, isn't she?" he says, following my gaze.



“Yeah,” I admit, unable to tear my eyes away. “She is.”

Mark grins knowingly, nudging me with his elbow. “You’ve got it bad, Mitchell.”

“Shut up,” I mutter, but my tone is light. Because he’s not wrong.

When the crowd starts to thin, I finally make my way over to Lucy. She’s mid-conversation with Mayor Collins, her face glowing with the kind of excitement that only comes from talking about something you love. When she sees me, her smile softens, shifting from professional to something warmer. Something just for me.

“Logan,” she greets, her tone light but welcoming. “Good game tonight.”

“Thanks,” I reply, slipping my hands into my pockets. “You weren’t too hard on the refs, were you?”

She laughs, and the sound makes something inside me loosen. “Not this time. But only because they actually called a decent game.”

The mayor excuses himself, leaving us in a quiet bubble amid the fading hum of the room. For a moment, neither of us speaks. The weight of the day, the game, and this connection between us hangs in the air.

“You were incredible tonight,” she says finally, her voice softer, more sincere. “The way you’re connecting with the team, the community... it’s amazing to watch.”

I shrug, the compliment landing heavier than she probably intended. “Just trying to keep up with you,” I say, and the faint blush that colors her cheeks feels like a small victory.

Before I can say more, Lewis nudges her hand, drawing her attention. She crouches

to pet him, her fingers ruffling his fur. “You’re lucky to have him,” she says, looking up at me. “He’s pretty special.”

“Yeah,” I agree, my gaze steady on hers. “He is.”

The moment stretches, the noise around us fading as our eyes lock. My breath catches, my chest tightening in a way that’s both thrilling and unnerving. There’s something magnetic in her gaze, something that feels like a quiet challenge and a gentle reassurance all at once, pulling me closer despite the noise in my head telling me to step back. It’s like the rest of the world doesn’t exist, just the two of us in this shared space. But then someone calls her name, breaking the spell. She stands, brushing her hair behind her ear.

“I should... get back to mingling,” she says, her tone reluctant.

“Yeah. Me too,” I reply, even though walking away is the last thing I want to do.

The night air is cool as I walk home with Lewis, the stars scattered across the sky like pieces of a puzzle. My thoughts drift back to Lucy—the way she looked at me, the way she makes me feel like I’m more than the sum of my mistakes. I’ve been trying to keep things professional, to focus on the campaign and the team, but it’s getting harder to ignore what’s right in front of me.

Lewis barks, snapping me out of my thoughts. He nudges my leg with his nose, his tail wagging like he knows something I don’t. I crouch down, scratching behind his ears. “What do you think, buddy? Am I crazy for thinking this could actually work?”

He barks again, his enthusiasm infectious. I chuckle, shaking my head. “Yeah, me too.”

As we climb the steps to my apartment, the weight I’ve been carrying feels just a

little lighter. For the first time in years, I'm not just looking forward to tomorrow. I'm looking forward to her. It's not just about her smile or the way she lights up a room—it's the way she's helped me see myself differently. With Lucy, it's like the weight of my past isn't as heavy, like I'm allowed to hope for more than what I've settled for. And that hope, fragile as it feels, is enough to keep me moving forward.

### Chapter 17

Lucy

The morning sun streams through the shelter's front windows, casting warm golden patches on the tile floor and illuminating the cheerful mural of animals along the far wall. Cozy Paws hums with its usual energy—volunteers chatting, the occasional bark from the play area, and the soft purring of contented cats nestled in their beds. It's the kind of day that usually steadies me, reminding me of why I do this. But today, the knot in my stomach won't untangle.

I glance at my tablet again, the headline pulling my attention back despite my better judgment: "Shelter Manager Leverages Star Player's Redemption Arc for Campaign Gains." My grip tightens on the edges of the tablet, my pulse skipping slightly as the words seem to throb on the screen, taunting me. A sharp breath escapes before I realize I'm holding it, my chest tightening under the weight of implication. The words seem to pulse on the screen, mocking me.

The article's content should be a win. It highlights the success of the "Adopt-a-Player" campaign, celebrating the community's involvement, the Timberwolves' contribution, and the surge in adoptions. On the surface, it's exactly the kind of publicity we've been working for. But then the tone shifts, focusing on Logan's redemption story and framing me as the opportunist pulling the strings. "A savvy shelter manager capitalizing on a star athlete's public transformation..." The accusation is subtle but unmistakable.

I minimize the screen, setting the tablet down with more force than necessary. My

fingers tighten around the clipboard I've been pretending to review, and the familiar hum of the shelter fades into the background. I've worked too hard, poured too much of myself into Cozy Paws, for anyone to think it's built on anything other than love and determination.

I shift my weight, my fingers tapping against the clipboard in a rhythm that betrays my tension. Just as my eyes dart toward the doorway, a mixture of frustration and vulnerability etched across my face. "Lucy, you okay?" Emma's voice pulls me back to the present. She's standing in the doorway with a bag of treats for the dogs, her brows knitting together in concern.

"Fine," I reply too quickly, forcing a smile. "Just... busy."

Emma tilts her head, unconvinced, but she doesn't press. "Well, these should keep the pups happy for a while," she says, lifting the bag with a smile. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks, Emma," I say, my voice softer. As she disappears down the hall, I glance back at the tablet, the headline still flashing in my mind.

The bell above the door jingles, and I look up to see Logan walking in, Lewis bounding at his side. Logan's Timberwolves hoodie hangs loosely over his broad shoulders, his hair slightly tousled as if he'd been absently running his hands through it. My stomach does a subtle flip at the sight of him, a reminder of how his presence seems to anchor and unnerve me all at once. He scans the room, his sharp gaze softening when it lands on me.

"Hey," he greets, his voice gruff but warm. He crouches to ruffle Lewis's ears, the dog's tail wagging furiously. "Figured we could go over the logistics for the adoption event."

I swallow hard, forcing a smile. “Sure. Let’s grab a table.”

We settle at a desk near the front, papers spread between us. Logan’s focus is on the flyers and volunteer schedules, but I can’t concentrate. The article’s words press against my thoughts, growing heavier with each passing minute. Finally, I blurt it out.

“Have you seen the article?”

Logan looks up, his brows furrowing. “Which one?”

I pull up the page on my tablet and slide it across the table. He scans the screen, his jaw tightening as his eyes move over the text. When he finishes, he sets the tablet down with a sharp exhale.

“That’s a load of crap,” he mutters. “You’re not leveraging anything.”

I shrug, the weight of his frustration pressing against my own. “Maybe not intentionally, but?—”

“Stop,” he interrupts, his tone sharper than I’ve ever heard it. “You’re not using me, Lucy. You’re doing this for the shelter, for the animals. Anyone who knows you can see that.”

“But what about the people who don’t know me?” I counter, my voice rising slightly. “What about the ones who read this and think?—”

“Who cares what they think?” Logan snaps, standing abruptly. Lewis flinches at the motion, and Logan immediately crouches to rub the dog’s head. “Sorry, buddy,” he murmurs before straightening and looking at me again. His tone is calmer now but no less intense. “Why are you letting this get to you?”

“Because it’s not just about me,” I say, my voice quieter. “It’s about the shelter. If people think this campaign is built on something fake, it could ruin everything.”

Logan runs a hand through his hair, his fingers threading through the strands in a deliberate motion, as if searching for the right words to bridge the growing tension in the room. His shoulders tense, a visible sign of the weight he’s carrying. “Lucy, the people who matter know the truth. Don’t let some hack journalist make you doubt yourself.”

His words linger, heavy with sincerity, but the tension in my chest doesn’t ease. “I just... I need some time to think,” I say finally, standing and moving toward the back door.

Logan watches me for a moment, his jaw working like he’s holding back more words. Finally, he nods. “Alright.”

He clips Lewis’s leash to his collar and heads for the door. Just before stepping out, he pauses, his back to me. “For what it’s worth, Lucy... you’re doing something amazing here. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

And then he’s gone, leaving me standing in the middle of the shelter, the article open on the desk and my thoughts more tangled than ever.

That evening, I curl up on the couch with a mug of tea, the tablet balanced precariously on my lap. Against my better judgment, I’ve ventured into the article’s comment section, and it’s a mixed bag of opinions.

“Logan’s come a long way. It’s good to see him doing something meaningful.”

“Typical small-town manager riding a celebrity’s coattails. She probably planned the whole thing just to get close to him.”

The second comment cuts deeper than I want to admit. My fingers tighten around the mug, the warmth seeping into my palms as I try to push the words out of my mind. But they linger, feeding the doubts already gnawing at the edges of my confidence.

I set the tablet aside and lean back, staring at the ceiling. My chest feels heavy, as though the weight of the shelter's future is pressing down on me. The article's implications might be baseless, but they've planted a seed of uncertainty I can't ignore.

For the first time in years, doubt creeps in, whispering that maybe I've taken on more than I can handle. And that thought terrifies me.

But then I think of Logan's parting words, the quiet conviction in his voice as he told me I was doing something amazing. I hold onto that, fragile as it feels, and let it steady me. Tomorrow is another day, and I'll find a way forward—for the shelter, for the animals, and maybe, just maybe, for me.



### Chapter 18

Logan

The sun dips low in the sky, bathing the outdoor rink in soft golden light. The faint sound of skates slicing through the ice echoes across the expanse, mingling with the cool bite of the air against my skin. My skates slice through the ice as I chase the puck, the crisp air biting at my face. Mark and Ryan are on the ice with me, their shouts echoing across the quiet expanse. This is where I feel free, where everything else falls away. Usually. Today, the weight of the past week clings to me, heavy and persistent.

“Come on, Mitchell!” Mark yells, his stick slamming against the ice as he intercepts my pass. “What is this, peewee hockey?”

Ryan skates past, smirking. “He’s in his head again. Probably thinking about Lucy.”

I grit my teeth, driving the puck toward the net with enough force to send it flying past Ryan and into the goal. The sharp thwack reverberates in the still air, and Ryan throws his hands up in mock surrender. Mark skates over, resting on his stick with an infuriating grin, his breath visible in the crisp air as he tilts his head, an eyebrow arched in playful challenge.

“You’re not denying it,” Mark points out, his tone teasing but curious. “What’s the deal, man? You’ve been... distracted.”

“It’s nothing,” I mutter, but my tone is unconvincing, even to me.

Mark raises an eyebrow. “Nothing, huh? Because ever since Lucy came into the picture, you’ve been... I don’t know, tolerable? Like, almost human.”

Ryan snickers, skating in circles around us. I’d roll my eyes if they weren’t frustratingly close to the truth.

“It’s not her,” I insist, though the words feel hollow. “It’s everything else. The media, the scrutiny... it’s a lot.”

Mark’s grin fades, replaced by something more serious. “You’re letting it mess with your head. Don’t. You’ve got something good going with her. Don’t screw it up because of a few headlines.”

I’m about to snap back, but his words hit harder than I’d like to admit. He’s right—I’ve let my frustration boil over, and Lucy’s taken the brunt of it. That’s on me. I need to fix this.

Back home, Lewis greets me with his usual enthusiasm, bounding to the door like I’ve been gone for days, his paws skittering excitedly across the hardwood floor. I crouch to rub behind his ears, his wagging tail an instant comfort.

“Hey, buddy,” I murmur. “What would I do without you?”

He responds with a playful bark, nudging his nose against my hand. I chuckle, heading to the couch and pulling out my phone. I’ve been avoiding the latest round of articles, but the lingering doubt from Lucy’s reaction at the shelter won’t let me stay in the dark. Scrolling through the headlines, I’m met with the same mix of praise and skepticism. The words sting less than they used to, but the thought of Lucy’s name being dragged through the mud makes my blood boil.

Lewis paws at my leg, breaking me out of my thoughts. I look down at him, his wide,

trusting eyes staring back. “You’re right,” I say, scratching behind his ears. “Time to stop sulking and fix this.”

The rink is quiet when I arrive, the sharp glow of the overhead lights reflecting off the freshly resurfaced ice. The faint hum of the overhead lights fills the space, mingling with the sharp scent of chilled air, creating an atmosphere both serene and electrifying. Lucy stands at the edge, her hands tucked into her coat pockets. She’s staring out at the rink, her profile illuminated by the soft light. My chest tightens at the sight of her—calm, steady, but carrying an air of guardedness I put there.

She hears the scrape of my skates and turns, her expression unreadable but her eyes flicker with something—a mix of hesitation and curiosity—as if she’s bracing for whatever comes next. “Logan,” she says, her voice neutral. “What’s on your mind?”

I come to a stop a few feet away, the words I’ve been rehearsing suddenly feeling inadequate. “Thanks for meeting me,” I start. “I owe you an apology. For snapping at you. For letting my frustration spill over. None of that was fair to you.”

Her expression softens slightly, but she stays quiet, waiting for me to continue.

“The press, the scrutiny... I’m used to it. I’ve been dealing with it for years. But this time, it’s not just about me. It’s about you, the campaign, everything we’re building. And I hate that it’s affecting you because of my past.”

Lucy looks down, her gloved hands gripping the edge of the barrier as if searching for stability, her shoulders faintly trembling with the weight of her unspoken fears. “It’s not just about the press, Logan,” she says quietly. “It’s about how we face it. Together.”

The word hits me harder than I expect: together. It’s not something I’ve let myself believe in for a long time, but with her, it feels like the only way forward.

“I don’t want to lose this,” I admit, my voice steady. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Lucy’s eyes widen slightly, her breath catching. For a moment, I think I’ve said too much. But then she steps closer, her gaze locked on mine. “I don’t want to lose this either,” she says softly. “But I need to know you’re in this. Not just for the campaign, but for... us.”

“I am,” I say without hesitation. “Lucy, I’m all in. And I’ll do whatever it takes to prove that to you.”

We sit side by side on a wooden bench at the edge of the rink, the cold seeping through our coats but neither of us moving. Lucy looks down at her hands, her voice trembling slightly as she speaks.

“I’ve always been afraid of people leaving,” she confesses. “After my dad died, it felt like everything fell apart. I’ve spent so much time building walls, trying to protect myself from ever feeling that kind of loss again.”

Her words settle over me like a weight, and before I can think, I reach for her hand, wrapping my fingers around hers. “I’m not going anywhere,” I say firmly. “I can’t promise I’ll always get it right, but I’ll be here. For you. For us.”

Her eyes glisten as she looks at me, a small, tentative smile breaking through her vulnerability, and it strikes me how much courage it takes for her to share this with me. My chest tightens with a mix of admiration and resolve, the weight of her trust grounding me in the moment. “Thank you,” she whispers, her fingers tightening around mine.

The weight between us shifts, replaced by something lighter, something steady. For the first time, it feels like we’re on the same page, moving forward together.

As we walk back to our cars, the tension from earlier feels like a distant memory. The night is crisp, the stars scattered across the sky like tiny beacons. I glance at Lucy, her cheeks flushed from the cold, and an idea strikes me.

“By the way,” I say casually, “I’ve got something planned for the adoption event. A little surprise.”

Her eyes narrow, curiosity lighting up her face. “Should I be worried?”

I grin. “Not at all. Just trust me.”

Her laughter follows me as we part ways, the sound lingering in the air like a promise. It fills the quiet night, threading warmth into the crisp air, and for the first time in years, it feels like hope—a hope tied to her, to us. And for the first time in a long time, I feel like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.

### Chapter 19

Lucy

The Pine Harbor Community Center is alive with energy. Conversation buzzes like electricity, punctuated by bursts of laughter and the occasional enthusiastic bark. Brightly colored banners hang from the rafters, each featuring a Timberwolves player posing with their campaign dog. Tables line the walls, piled with adoption forms, campaign T-shirts, mugs emblazoned with Lewis's face, and Cozy Paws pamphlets. The air is rich with the scent of popcorn and freshly baked cookies, courtesy of the concession stand run by local volunteers.

I weave through the crowd with a clipboard in hand, answering questions, checking in with volunteers, and trying to keep a mental list of everything that still needs attention. My heart swells as I take it all in: the smiling families, the excited dogs, and the players—these tough, towering hockey stars—kneeling down to meet potential adopters with warmth and patience.

"Lucy!" Kate's voice cuts through the noise, and I spot her waving at me from behind the merchandise table. Her grin is wide, her energy infectious.

"What's up?" I ask, stepping over to her.

Kate gestures toward the nearly empty racks of shirts and tote bags. "We're almost sold out. And don't even get me started on the Lewis mugs. People are obsessed."

I can't help but smile. "That's great news."

"It is," she agrees, but her smirk turns mischievous. "And you're going to tell me it's not because of a certain grumpy hockey player being a total natural at this?"

I roll my eyes, though my cheeks warm. "It's the whole campaign, Kate. It's everyone's effort."

"Uh-huh," she teases, but thankfully, she lets it drop when someone approaches to buy the last small-sized T-shirt. I'm about to step away when a burst of laughter draws my attention to the center of the room.

Logan is surrounded by a group of kids, his easy grin softening his usually intense demeanor. He crouches to ruffle Lewis's fur, tossing a treat into the air with a playful flick of his wrist. Lewis leaps up to catch it, his tail wagging furiously as the kids cheer and clap. Logan's movements are natural, his laughter blending effortlessly with the crowd's excitement, a side of him I rarely get to see. Logan tosses a treat into the air, and Lewis leaps up to catch it, earning cheers and applause. Logan's easy smile catches me off guard, as it always does. There's something about the way it softens his sharp features, making him look boyish and completely unguarded for just a moment, and it stirs something in me that I can't quite name. He looks completely at ease—a stark contrast to the reserved man I first met. The way he's grown into this role is remarkable.

As I watch, a young woman steps forward, resting a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Mr. Mitchell," she says, her voice steady. "We're interested in adopting Lewis. He seems like such a wonderful dog."

My stomach twists as I see Logan's polite smile falter for just a moment. He reaches down to scratch Lewis behind the ears, his fingers moving absently through the dog's fur. "Lewis is a great dog," he says evenly, though his voice has a tightness to it. "He'd be lucky to have a family like yours."

I step in before the conversation can go any further. "Hi there," I say with a warm smile. "Why don't I walk you through the adoption process at the main table?"

The woman nods graciously, and I guide her and her daughter away, giving Logan some breathing room. When I return, he's crouched next to Lewis, his hand resting on the dog's head. The look in his eyes is enough to stop me in my tracks.

"Thanks for that," he mutters without looking up.

"You're welcome," I reply softly, sitting down on the bench beside him. "Logan, it's okay to admit you don't want to let him go."

He lets out a soft laugh, shaking his head. "It's not that simple, Lucy. I know this campaign is about finding homes for these dogs, but... he's more than just a dog to me now. He's family."

I place a hand on his arm, and he finally meets my gaze. "Then keep him," I say simply. "Lewis deserves a home where he's loved. And it's clear that's with you."

For a moment, he doesn't say anything. Then he nods, a small, almost imperceptible smile tugging at his lips. "You're right."

As the event winds down, the excitement in the room turns into a warm buzz of satisfaction. Families leave with adoption forms in hand, sponsors chat with volunteers, and the Timberwolves players wrap up their duties with good-natured grins. Mayor Collins takes the stage, his voice booming over the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank each and every one of you for making today such a success. This campaign has brought out the best in Pine Harbor, and it's all thanks to the hard work of Cozy Paws and the Timberwolves. Let's give them a round of applause!"



The room erupts into cheers and clapping, and I feel a swell of pride as I glance around. But the moment isn't over yet. Mayor Collins turns to Logan, gesturing for him to join him on stage.

Logan hesitates for only a second before stepping forward, Lewis trotting faithfully at his side. His shoulders are squared, but there's a subtle tension in his movements, as if he's bracing himself for the attention. The leash tightens briefly in his hand, and he exhales quietly, grounding himself before meeting the crowd's expectant gazes. The crowd quiets as he takes the microphone, his usually stoic expression softening.

"Uh, thanks, Mayor," he begins, his voice steady but unpolished. "I'm not great at speeches, but I just want to say thank you. To the team, to Cozy Paws, and especially to Lucy." His eyes find mine in the crowd, and the sincerity in his gaze makes my chest tighten. "None of this would've been possible without her. Her dedication and passion are what brought this campaign to life."

The applause is deafening, but Logan holds up a hand to quiet the crowd. "And one more thing," he says, his voice softening as he looks down at Lewis, his fingers brushing lightly against the dog's fur, centering himself before continuing.. "I've decided to keep this guy. He's part of the family now."

The cheers that follow are even louder, and I can't help the tears that prick at the corners of my eyes. Logan glances at me again, a small, genuine smile tugging at his lips. It's a moment I'll never forget.

As the crowd begins to thin, Logan finds me near the back of the room, where I'm packing up leftover pamphlets. His presence is a steadying force, his voice low and deliberate as he says, "Hey."

"Hey," I reply, looking up at him.

"I need to talk to you about something," he says, his tone serious but not unkind.  
"Alone."

My heart skips a beat, but I nod. "Okay. Let me just finish up here."

As he walks away, the weight of his words lingers. Whatever he wants to say, I know it's important. And as I watch him go, Lewis trailing happily at his side, I feel a flicker of something I haven't felt in years: the possibility that this might just be the beginning of something extraordinary.

### Chapter 20

Logan

The festive hum of Pine Harbor Town Square surrounds us, a living, breathing energy that feels like the town itself is celebrating. String lights crisscross above, casting a warm glow over the cobblestone streets. Booths from the day's adoption event are still up, their colorful banners fluttering gently in the cool evening breeze. The air smells faintly of caramel popcorn and spiced cider, mingling with the crispness of autumn. As I walk beside Lucy, a coffee in hand, the warmth of the cup against my palm is a small comfort against the cool night air. Her laughter rings out, clear and bright, cutting through the background noise and embedding itself in my chest.

The whole day has felt surreal—like the kind of moment you know will stay with you long after it's gone. But tonight isn't just about celebrating the success of the event. It's about finally saying the words I've been holding back.

"I still can't believe how well it went," Lucy says, her eyes sparkling as she looks over the square. "We hit every goal, the sponsors are happy, and Lewis stole the show."

I smirk, sipping my coffee. "He's a natural. Not every dog has star power."

She laughs, and the sound settles deep, a comforting warmth against the cool night air. "I'll admit, I was a little nervous about today. The logistics, the press, the turnout... it all felt so big. But seeing those families leave with their new pets? That

made everything worth it.”

“You should be proud,” I say, my voice quieter now. “What you’ve done with the shelter, the campaign... it’s not just impressive. It’s inspiring.”

Lucy’s steps falter slightly, her cheeks flushing in the dim light. Her lips curve into a soft smile, but she shifts her clipboard nervously between her hands. “It wasn’t just me. You’ve been a big part of this. More than you realize.”

Her words land somewhere deep, an anchor in the middle of the swirling thoughts I’ve been wrestling with for weeks. She’s giving me too much credit, but hearing it from her makes me want to believe it. Makes me want to be better.

“Come on,” she says, tugging gently at my arm. “Let’s sit for a minute.”

We find a bench near the fountain, its gentle trickling a soft backdrop to the bustling energy of the square. Kids’ laughter drifts through the air, and somewhere nearby, a street performer strums a guitar. The faint scent of roasted chestnuts lingers, blending with the cool night breeze. But none of it registers fully because Lucy is beside me, her presence filling the space like nothing else matters.

“I’ve been meaning to say something,” I start, my voice low. The words feel heavy, but they’ve been waiting too long to stay unsaid. Lucy turns to face me, her expression open and curious, her full attention settling on me. The light from the string lights dances in her eyes, making them seem impossibly warm.

“What’s on your mind?” she asks softly.

I take a deep breath, the cold air stinging my lungs. “When this campaign started, I thought it was just another way to fix my image. Something to check off the list and move on from. But somewhere along the way, it became about more than that.”

Her expression shifts, the curiosity giving way to something deeper—encouragement, maybe even hope.

“You changed that for me,” I continue, the words tumbling out now. “You made me see things differently. About the team, about this town... about myself.”

Her lips part slightly, but she doesn’t interrupt. Her steady gaze feels like both a safety net and a challenge.

“I don’t know how to say this without screwing it up,” I admit, running a hand through my hair. “But you mean more to me than just a partner in this campaign. You mean... everything. And I’m not saying that because of what happened today or because of how easy you make this all look. I’m saying it because you’ve become the most important person in my life.”

The silence that follows is charged and fragile, stretching between us like a tightrope. My chest feels too tight, my pulse too loud in my ears. I wonder if I’ve gone too far, said too much. But then Lucy’s hand covers mine, her touch warm and grounding.

“Logan,” she says, her voice trembling slightly. Her lips press together for a moment, and her gaze dips to our hands. “I’ve been trying to figure this out too. And if I’m honest, I’ve been scared. Scared of how much I care about you and how much this could change everything. But hearing you say that... I can’t keep pretending I don’t feel the same.”

Her cheeks flush as she looks down at our hands, her thumb brushing lightly against mine. “You’re right. This started as a partnership, but it’s become so much more. And the thought of losing this—losing you... terrifies me.”

I turn her hand over, lacing my fingers with hers. “You’re not going to lose me,” I say firmly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

For a moment, the world narrows to just us. The noise of the square fades, replaced by the faint strumming of a street performer's guitar in the distance. The cool evening air brushes against my skin, sharper after the warmth of her touch. Her hand feels soft and steady against mine, grounding me as my pulse thrums in my ears, matching the rhythm of this shared, unspoken connection. Lucy leans in, her eyes searching mine, and I meet her halfway. When our lips meet, it's soft and searching at first, a tentative step into something new. But it deepens quickly, a spark igniting into a steady flame. Her hand comes up to rest lightly against my chest, her warmth and soft touch anchoring me in the moment. I'm certain she can feel the steady, rhythmic thrum of my heartbeat, each beat aligning with hers in a silent, shared connection.

When we finally pull back, her eyes are bright, her expression a mix of joy and uncertainty. "What happens now?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I smile, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "We figure it out. Together."

The walk back to my apartment is quiet, the cool night air sharp against my skin but doing little to calm the thoughts racing in my mind. Every step is laced with the memory of her—her laugh, her smile, the way she looked at me when I told her how I felt. It's like the whole world has shifted, and for the first time in a long time, it feels like it's moving in the right direction.

Before heading home, I stop by the community center to grab Lewis. He'd spent the evening lounging in a quiet corner with Emma, away from the chaos of the event. Now, as I step through the door, his tail starts wagging furiously, and he bounds over, his whole body vibrating with excitement.

"Hey, buddy," I say, crouching down to ruffle his ears. "Miss me?"

He barks softly, his tail thumping against the floor. Grabbing his leash, I clip it on, and we step out into the quiet streets. The crunch of gravel underfoot grounds me as

we walk through the park, the stars scattered like diamonds above us. Lewis trots beside me, occasionally stopping to sniff a patch of grass or inspect a tree.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see Coach's name on the screen. My stomach tightens slightly as I answer. "Hey, Coach."

"Mitchell," he says, his tone brisk but not unkind. "You've been making great strides lately. Really solid work."

"Thanks," I reply, unsure where this is going.

"Listen, I've got something in the works," he continues. "An opportunity that could be big for you. We'll talk details tomorrow, but I wanted to give you a heads-up."

"What kind of opportunity?" I ask, curiosity and apprehension swirling in equal measure.

"Let's just say it's something that could take your career to the next level," he says cryptically. "Get some rest. We'll go over everything in the morning."

As the call ends, I slip my phone back into my pocket, my thoughts racing. Whatever Coach has planned, it's clear that it's a big deal. But as I glance down at Lewis trotting happily beside me, my thoughts drift back to Lucy. To us.

When I reach my apartment, the quiet of the night settles around me. I pause on the front steps, looking up at the star-scattered sky. For the first time in years, I'm not just looking forward to tomorrow. I'm hopeful for it.

The stars above feel like tiny beacons, reflecting the possibility I feel deep in my chest—for my career, for this town, for Lucy. I've come a long way since this all started, and for the first time, I'm not just moving forward. I'm building something

worth staying for.



### Chapter 21

Logan

The Pine Harbor Ice Arena is alive with the kind of energy that can't be replicated. The championship game. It's more than just another match—it's a culmination of everything this team, this town, and I have fought for. The crowd roars, a deafening wave of sound, every cheer and chant echoing off the rafters like a collective heartbeat. The Timberwolves jerseys blur together in a sea of red and blue, their colors reflecting the pride and passion of Pine Harbor. Tonight, it's not just about the game. It's about proving that we've earned this moment.

I step onto the ice, and the sharp scrape of my skates grounds me, a satisfying sound that feels like a promise of control amid the chaos of the game. The cold bites at my face, but it's a familiar kind of sting—a reminder that I'm exactly where I need to be. My heart pounds in time with the fans stomping in the stands, their excitement fueling the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

As the puck drops, everything else fades. The opening shifts are fast and brutal, both teams testing each other with relentless intensity. Every play is a battle, every pass a calculated risk. The boards shake with the impact of bodies colliding, and the sharp crack of sticks against the puck reverberates through the arena. This is what I live for—the chaos, the grit, the precision of it all.

Midway through the first period, I glance at the stands during a quick stoppage. And there she is—Lucy. She's standing in the front row, bundled in her green scarf, her hands clasped tightly like she's willing the game to go our way. Her eyes meet mine

for a brief second, and even from here, I can see her smile. It's enough to send a warmth through me that has nothing to do with the game. For her, I'll leave everything on the ice.

By the second period, the score is tied 2-2. The game is tight, every shift pushing us closer to the edge. I'm battling in the corner for the puck, my body braced against a defender pressing me hard against the boards. The weight of him doesn't matter; I dig in, pivoting to shield the puck before firing it up the ice to Mark. He's ready. His slap shot cuts through the air like a bullet, slamming into the back of the net.

The crowd explodes, their cheers washing over me in a tidal wave of sound that reverberates through my chest, heightening my adrenaline with every vibration. Mark skates by, grinning as he slaps my stick. "That's how we do it, Mitchell!"

I grin back, my chest heaving as I catch my breath. "Let's keep it up," I shout, already preparing for the next shift.

The final period is nothing short of chaos. My muscles burn, my lungs ache, and the weight of the game presses down on me with every shift. With less than two minutes left, the score is tied again, 3-3. The opposing team pulls their goalie, leaving the net empty as they push for a last-minute goal. The pressure is suffocating, but I've trained for moments like this. My focus narrows to the puck, the ice, and the players around me.

The puck ricochets off the boards, landing near my stick. I grab it and skate hard, my legs screaming as I push past defenders. The empty net looms ahead, and time seems to slow as I wind up my shot. My stick connects cleanly, and the puck slides across the ice, curving just slightly before it hits the mark.

Goal.

The arena erupts into pandemonium. The goal horn blares, and my teammates swarm me, their sticks clattering against mine in celebration. The final buzzer sounds, and just like that, we've done it. We've won.

The trophy presentation feels like a dream. The silver cup glints under the arena lights as our captain lifts it high, the crowd's cheers deafening. When the microphone is passed to me, I take a deep breath, the weight of the moment settling over me.

"I just want to say thank you," I begin, my voice carrying over the noise. "To my teammates, for giving everything they had tonight. To the fans, for always having our backs. And to this community, for showing us what it means to be part of something bigger than ourselves."

The crowd roars, but I hold up a hand, signaling for quiet. My gaze drifts to the front row, where Lucy stands with her hands pressed together, her eyes shining.

"There's someone else I need to thank," I continue, my voice steady but full of emotion. "Lucy Hart. This campaign started as a way to give back, to rebuild. But it became so much more because of her. Lucy, you've shown me what real courage and compassion look like. You believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, and you reminded me that it's never too late to be the person you want to be. So thank you—for everything."

The crowd erupts again, but all I see is her. Lucy's face is flushed, her expression a mix of surprise and something deeper. I step off the ice as the celebration continues, weaving through the throngs of fans and players until I reach her.

"Logan," she says, her voice barely audible over the noise. "That was..."

"True," I finish for her, reaching for her hand. "Every word."

Her eyes search mine, and for a moment, the world around us fades. “You really mean it?” she asks, her voice trembling slightly.

“I do,” I say, my voice firm. “Lucy, you’ve changed everything for me. And I’m not just talking about the campaign.”

She bites her lip, her hand tightening around mine. “You’ve changed everything for me too,” she whispers.

And then, without hesitation, I close the distance between us. The kiss is soft but filled with quiet intensity, a promise of everything we’ve built and everything yet to come. The noise of the arena fades into the background, replaced by the steady thrum of my heartbeat and the warmth of her lips against mine.

As the celebration winds down, I walk Lucy to her car, her hand resting lightly on my arm. The cool night air is crisp, the stars scattered across the sky like diamonds. The weight of the game, the season, and everything we’ve overcome feels lighter now, replaced by the quiet certainty of what lies ahead.

“Thank you for tonight,” she says softly, her gaze lingering on mine.

“I should be thanking you,” I reply, my voice warm. “But we’re not done yet. There’s still more to figure out.”

She tilts her head, curiosity sparking in her eyes. “Like what?”

I smile, leaning in just enough to brush a stray hair from her cheek. “Like how I’m going to convince you to keep changing my life.”

Her laughter is soft, her eyes bright as she steps closer. “I think you’re doing just fine so far.”

The stars above seem to burn brighter as we part ways, and as I drive home, a single thought settles in my mind. Whatever comes next, I'm ready for it—as long as she's by my side.

### Chapter 22

Lucy

The knock at my door is soft but sure, followed by the telltale thump of an excited tail wagging against wood. I already know who it is before I even reach the door. My heart skips a beat as I swing it open to find Logan standing there, Lewis trotting happily at his side. Logan's dressed casually in jeans and a flannel shirt, but it's the bouquet of wildflowers in his hand that steals my breath. Vibrant colors—yellows, purples, and whites—spill from his grasp, as imperfectly perfect as he is.

“Morning,” he says, his voice low and warm. There's a softness in his eyes, a vulnerability that makes me want to step closer.

“Morning,” I reply, my cheeks already warming. “Wildflowers? Did you pick these yourself?”

He shrugs, the faintest smile tugging at his lips. “Maybe. Thought they'd suit you better than roses.”

I take the bouquet from him, brushing my fingers lightly against his as I do. The flowers smell fresh, earthy, and alive. “Thank you, Logan. They're beautiful.”

“So are you,” he says softly, his gaze holding mine just long enough to make my pulse race.

Lewis nudges my leg, breaking the moment as he barks once, as if to say, “Don't

forget about me!” I laugh and reach down to scratch behind his ears, grateful for the distraction.

“Come on,” I say, stepping aside to let them in. “Coffee’s on.”

We settle on the porch with steaming mugs, the morning air crisp and filled with the sounds of Pine Harbor slowly waking up. The leaves rustle in the breeze, and the scent of freshly brewed coffee mingles with the wildflowers resting on the table between us. Lewis sprawls at our feet, his contentment mirroring the quiet ease that’s settled over us.

Logan takes a sip of his coffee, his gaze drifting over the yard before landing back on me. “I’ve been thinking about what’s next,” he starts, his tone careful but steady.

“Oh?” I prompt, my heart fluttering at the way his brow furrows in thought.

“For the campaign, for the team, for me.” He pauses, his eyes searching mine. “For us.”

The words hang between us, and I feel their weight, their promise. “What are you thinking?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He sets his mug down, leaning forward slightly. “I want to stay here, Lucy. Pine Harbor feels like home now, and it’s not just because of the team or the campaign. It’s because of you.”

My breath catches. “Logan…”

“Let me finish,” he says, his voice steady, a small, tender smile curving his lips. “You’ve shown me what it means to be part of something real—something worth fighting for. You make this place feel like home, Lucy. I want to build a future here,

with you at the center of it all. If you'll let me."

Tears prick my eyes, but I blink them back, not wanting to miss a second of the sincerity etched into his face. "Of course," I manage, my voice thick with emotion. "I'd be crazy not to."

His grin is boyish and unguarded, and it makes my heart ache in the best way. "Good," he says, leaning back in his chair. "Because I've got some plans I want to share with you later. But first, there's something I need to do."

Before I can ask what he means, he stands and offers me his hand. "Come on. Trust me."

The Town Square is buzzing with activity when we arrive, vendors setting up stalls and families milling about. Logan's grip on my hand is firm yet gentle, a quiet reassurance that steadies the fluttering nerves in my chest. Lewis trots happily beside us, his leash slack as he takes in the sights and smells.

"What are we doing here?" I ask as Logan leads me toward the fountain at the square's center.

"You'll see," he replies, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Just trust me."

A small crowd has gathered, their murmurs growing louder as Logan steps forward. I glance around, confused, until I notice the mayor standing nearby, a plaque in his hands.

"Logan, what is this?" I whisper, my heart pounding.

He turns to me, his expression soft but serious. "It's something I've been planning for a while. Something I hope will mean as much to you as it does to me."



The mayor steps up, addressing the crowd. “Thank you all for being here today. We’re here to celebrate not just the success of the Timberwolves and their incredible community campaign, but also the legacy of someone who has inspired so much of what we’ve accomplished.” She looks at me, her smile warm. “Lucy Hart, this is for you.”

He hands the plaque to Logan, who turns it so I can read the inscription:

In Loving Memory of Coach Michael Hart

A Legacy of Compassion, Leadership, and Community

Dedicated by the Pine Harbor Timberwolves and Friends

Tears spill over before I can stop them, and I press a hand to my mouth, overwhelmed. “Logan...”

“Your dad’s legacy is what brought us here,” he says, his voice steady but thick with emotion. “It’s what inspired this campaign, what inspired you. And now, it’ll inspire this community for years to come.”

I throw my arms around him, not caring about the crowd or the cameras. “Thank you,” I whisper against his shoulder. “This means the world.”

He pulls back just enough to meet my eyes. “You mean the world to me, Lucy.”

As the crowd disperses, Logan and I walk hand in hand through the Town Square, Lewis trotting contentedly between us. The sun is setting, casting a warm golden glow over the cobblestone streets and painting the sky in shades of orange and pink.

“So, what’s next?” I ask, glancing up at him.

He smiles, squeezing my hand. “Whatever we want. Together.”

I lean my head against his shoulder, letting the peace of the moment wash over me. For the first time in a long while, the future doesn’t feel uncertain or daunting. It feels full of promise, of hope, of love.

As we reach the edge of the square, Lewis pauses to sniff at a patch of flowers, his tail wagging lazily. Logan chuckles, looking down at him with fondness. “He’s going to love this new chapter as much as we will.”

“You mean his happily-ever-after?” I tease, nudging him playfully.

“Something like that,” he replies, his grin widening. “Though I’d say it’s our happily-ever-after too.”

And as we walk into the twilight, the three of us together, I know he’s right. This is just the beginning—of a life built on love, trust, and the kind of happiness that only comes when you finally find where you belong.

THE END.

Loved this book? Then get ready to fall for My Brother’s Grumpy Best Friend!

Here’s a quick peek at what’s waiting for you:

A grumpy hockey player and his best friend’s sassy little sister are stuck sharing a house.

Their long-standing rivalry is about to get complicated.

She’s sunshine and stubbornness. He’s all gruff and guarded, but the more they clash,

the harder it is to ignore the sparks.

Yet one secret could ruin everything... Will he win her over, or will she shut him out for good?

[Click here now to grab your copy!](#)

Read chapter one on the very next page.

Because let's be honest— one book is never enough! Happy reading!

Eliza

It's not supposed to rain today. Pine Ridge weather is notoriously unpredictable, but this afternoon was supposed to be my one dry window to get the garden in order. I glance up at the sky, and sure enough, dark clouds roll in—thick and menacing, like a cosmic joke at my expense. Thunder rumbles low in the distance, giving me maybe thirty seconds before everything outside turns into a soggy mess.

Clutching two ceramic pots of freshly repotted tomatoes, I dash up the front steps of my new house—my house. Technically, it's a rental, but in my mind, it's already mine. A fresh start. A chance to breathe after everything I left behind. The pots wobble dangerously as I hit the slick welcome mat, my foot sliding out from under me.

I lurch forward, barely catching myself on the doorframe.

“Oof—hey, watch it!”

The voice is deep, sharp, and annoyingly familiar. I blink up and nearly drop the pots.

Jake Preston.

His name tumbles out in my head, sharp and disbelieving, like it doesn't belong here in my new life. In my house. The sight of him—the tousled dark hair, broad shoulders that take up far too much space—jolts me backward, almost sending the pots crashing to the ground. Of all the people in the world...

“What are you doing here?” I manage, my shock almost knocking me off balance again.

“What am I doing here?” His steel-blue eyes narrow, scanning me like I’m an intruder. “I think that’s my line. I live here.”

My stomach flips. I tighten my grip on the pots. “You don’t live here. I rented this place. My name’s on the lease.”

“No, it’s not.” His tone is flat, but his jaw tightens. He stares me down before finally adding, “When I got here, my lease was the one on file.”

The pots tilt dangerously again. Jake catches one with annoyingly quick reflexes, steadying it in my arms. For a second, I just stare at him—taller and broader than I remember from high school, looking far too comfortable in a place that’s supposed to be mine.

“Must be a mix-up with the property manager,” I mutter as the first fat raindrops start plunking down around us.

Jake huffs a breath, folding his arms across his chest. “Clearly.” He steps back, gesturing to the open door. “Well, go ahead. Bring your plants inside before they drown.”

I hesitate, but the rain’s already picking up. Muttering a quick “thanks,” I shuffle past him into the house, making an effort to stay as far from him as possible. Jake closes the door behind me with a solid thud that echoes in the empty space.

Inside, I set the pots on a side table and glance around the living room. The first thing that strikes me is the light—muted by the gloomy weather but still soft and welcoming. Big windows line the far wall, the kind that would flood the space with sunlight on a good day. The hardwood floors are scuffed but polished, and the soft

gray walls are clean and simple.

It's exactly how I remember it.

When I was younger, I used to pass this house on my way to the park, imagining myself living here someday. It felt like the kind of place that could belong to anyone, with its cheerful yellow shutters and the creak of the porch swing. A house that could be a home. My dream home.

But now, standing here with Jake Preston smirking at me from the doorway, the magic of the moment feels... complicated. Once upon a time, I had the biggest crush on him.

"What's with the luggage?" I ask, nodding toward the duffel bags and hockey gear piled near the couch.

Jake shrugs, leaning against the doorway like he owns the place. "I'm staying here for a month while my place in the city gets remodeled."

I blink, trying to process that. Jake Preston, Pine Ridge's most famous hockey export, still has ties to this sleepy little town?

"Wait—you're living here?" My voice comes out higher-pitched than I'd like, but I'm too thrown to care.

He arches an eyebrow, his smirk pure Jake. "That's what I just said."

"No, no, no." I shake my head. "This is supposed to be my place. I just moved back to Pine Ridge to get away from... everything. I signed a lease. I have plans. There's no way this house is big enough for the two of us."

"Well," Jake says, pulling out his phone, his posture maddeningly casual, "it looks

like you and I both got some bad information from the property manager.”

The mention of Ms. Hughes makes my face heat. She’d been so reassuring when I signed the lease—her friendly smile and meticulous notes had put me at ease.

“Ms. Hughes,” I say the second she picks up the phone. “There’s been some kind of mistake. Jake Preston is here, claiming he’s renting this house.”

Ms. Hughes sighs, her voice calm and measured. “I’m so sorry about this, Eliza. It seems there was a mix-up in the system. Both you and Jake were scheduled for the same property before I caught the error.”

“Jake,” I snap, covering the phone’s mouthpiece. “Are you seriously texting right now?”

He shrugs, tucking his phone back into his pocket. “Handling things.”

Back in the living room, a thought flickers through my mind, persistent and unwelcome. Max had really pushed me to take this rental—almost annoyingly so.

“It’s perfect for you, Eliza,” he’d said with that easy grin that always made everything sound like a done deal. “Quiet, cozy, and exactly what you need right now. Trust me.”

At the time, I hadn’t even realized the cottage was available. For years, I’d walked past it—the wraparound porch, the wide windows tucked behind a garden that always seemed to bloom brighter than anywhere else. As a kid, I used to press my nose against the fence, imagining myself living here. Tea on the porch swing, reading under the tree, tending a garden of my own—it had always felt like the kind of place where dreams could take root.

But now? The reality feels more like a joke at my expense. Could Max have known

Jake would be here? That this house wasn't quite mine to claim after all? I shake my head, trying to shove the thought aside. No way. Max wouldn't set me up like that... would he?

The laugh that bubbles out of me is humorless. Yeah, right. Jake Preston and I don't do peace. We do irritation, frustration, and the occasional silent standoff. If Max did have a hand in this, I'm going to kill him. And if Jake doesn't stop smirking, I might just kill him first. One thing is clear: this house isn't big enough for both of us, and peaceful cohabitation isn't in the cards.